VANUATU VALUES: A CHANGING SYMBIOSIS

by Robert Tonkinson

Vanuatu is no less culturally diverse than the rest of Melanesia and has in the era since European contact been subject to the same kinds of outside influence. Colonists, Christians and entrepreneurs have sought in various ways to transform traditional societies. This paper examines the changing sociopolitical significance of diversity, particularly the effects of Christianity and the dynamic nature of the resulting symbiosis of Christian and customary values in or on Vanuatu.

First, the nature of cultural differentiation in "traditional" Vanuatu societies is summarized. Despite considerable ethnocentrism and a high level of intergroup tension, there was also considerable communication and diffusion of new elements, such that trade in lore was as common as that in material goods. These were relatively mobile, flexible societies geared to cope adequately with fairly continuous diffusion via external contacts.

Secondly, some factors affecting the rapidity and success of the spread of Christianity are outlined, notably historical developments between first contacts with Europeans and Christianity's coming, the nature of the new faith and its purveyors, and certain characteristics of the traditional cultures.

Thirdly, the nature of the transformation wrought by Christianity is discussed with respect to its effects on diversity and on attitudes to cultural differentiation, and to indigenous reworkings of the new faith. The effect of Christianity on traditional values and attitudes to the past is also discussed. The major difference between Christian lore and that which was traditionally exchanged throughout the islands was the Christians' insistence that theirs was the *only* valid belief system. It was intended to replace all that preceded it, rather than be added onto existing systems. In fact, many continuities remained, but these elements were absorbed into Christianity. The new faith became a potent force in breaking down Melanesian cultural boundaries and creating new unities that went beyond the islands to parent churches overseas.

Fourthly, the revival of *kastom* (pidgin; "traditional culture, customs") and development of national identity are discussed, together with some problematic aspects of the modern symbiosis of Christian and "tradition-

al" values. The use of *kastom* to promote a sense of cultural distinctiveness has necessitated a sometimes difficult reevaluation of the pre-European past by ni-Vanuatu. The rise of *kastom* as a persuasive symbol of shared identity has involved a claiming back from Christianity some of the old cultural values it had usurped. Because of the inherent ambiguity and potential for divisiveness contained in *kastom,* its heuristic use in the development of laws, structures and policies is dangerous. For this reason, principles that are broadly Western and Christian will be paramount in the forging of the new nation and its acceptance into the world community. At the symbolic level, however, *kastom* will retain its prominent place in the national consciousness.

Cultural Differentiation Before Contact with Europeans

Vanuatu, with its eighty islands and more than one hundred languages, exhibited great diversity in sociocultural forms, with a strong underlay of elements linking it much more closely with the rest of Melanesia than with Polynesian cultures to the east. True, cultural traces of the passage of proto-Polynesians through this chain of islands some 3,500 years ago probably survived "in the form of pottery manufacture, tattooing motifs, certain forms of hereditary chieftainship, and perhaps some kinds of wood carving" (Bellwood 1978:48), but the so-called Lapita people who settled in Melanesia were absorbed by the prior settlers, and the few clearly Polynesian outlier communities in the southern islands resulted from relatively recent back-voyaging. These non-Melanesian influences have added some variety to an already highly developed diversity, but nowhere in Vanuatu does the melange approach the more even matching of Polynesian and Melanesian influences found in the Fijian Islands.

The atomistic, acephalous and small demographic scale of ni-Vanuatu communities, along with strongly held values supportive of conflict and competition among them, engendered considerable parochialism and ethnocentrism. The affirmation of ethnic boundaries over wider unities was especially noticeable in the interior regions of large islands, where outside influences were mediated, and muted, by groups that straddled the coastal and interior areas. But everywhere there was an equally strong impetus to marry out, to engage in exchange, to forge alliances and to seek equivalence as well as advantage through reciprocity. These pressures served to keep open channels to the outside world and thus counteract tendencies towards insularity and closure. The Melanesians have always looked beyond the diversity suggested by a multiplicity of cultural boundaries.

Throughout Melanesia there was, and is, a marked uniformity in indigenous notions about personal power: its inherent variability, its augmentation or diminution as subject to human action or neglect, and its close association with both esoteric knowledge and magical spells, charms, etc., that could be obtained by various means from knowledgeable others. A ubiquitous concern with the use of magic to promote socioeconomic welfare and the continuance of human, plant and animal fertility reflects basic Melanesian assumptions about the necessity for human intervention to increase power. Also, the near universality of belief in the ability of human and/or spiritual agents to cause illness and death by draining off power indicates that everywhere there was a negative side to concepts about power. Given these assumptions, it is understandable why Melanesians should have been receptive to the acquisition of alien cultural elements having the potential to affect power.

A common feature of Melanesian cultures was the high degree of geographical mobility in residential arrangements and local level interaction (Chapman 1969). Although for many people much wider movement was inhibited by rugged terrain, hostilities, fear of strangers, and language barriers, coastal peoples frequently looked to the sea as an avenue for external contact and reciprocity. A strong desire to gain advantage in local political arenas impelled men into sometimes long and risky voyages to obtain through trade exchange items, rituals and spells that promised enhancement of power and prestige. In this respect the Melanesians were pragmatists, willing to experiment with new as well as tried and tested materials and methods, ever hopeful of gaining some advantage over their equally industrious rivals. Individuals, kin-groups, communities and sometimes whole islands gained or lost reputations for the efficacy of their magic, rituals and sorcerers, on which bases they would be courted or avoided by others.

In the central islands of Vanuatu, interisland trade in specialized products was important, but even more so were exchanges of knowledge, ritual paraphernalia and wealth items (notably circle-tusked pigs) associated with the *nimanggi,* the public-graded society that was a dominant feature of the cultures: of the central and northern areas of the country (Codrington 1891; Deacon 1934). Grade-taking ceremonies, especially for the highest ranks, often attracted people from a wide area. The bonds of shared rank transcended those of kinship and coresidence as senior men journeyed to participate in ceremonials in which they had some proprietary interest (cf. Bedford 1973:17-20).

From the available literature on social organization in Vanuatu it seems that despite varying descent emphases in different regions, every-

where there was considerable recognition and utilization of both matrilineal and patrilineal pinciples in institutional structures and everyday behavior. As in New Guinea, exchange could well have been a more fundamental organizational principle than descent (cf. Forge 1972; McDowell 1980). Although most exchanges were doubtless kin-based and restricted in their social and geographical range, the demands of participation in the higher ranks of the graded society forced men to look beyond the local area to satisfy certain of their requirements. Even where the graded society was absent, the quest for power in these aggressively egalitarian societies motivated men to be receptive to potentially advantageous outside influences.

The Success of Christianity

Despite many early martyrdoms and setbacks as missionaries struggled to gain a secure foothold in Vanuatu, once these people were firmly established, the new faith spread rapidly and won over the great majority of the indigenous people. Since the beginning of this century, the only spectacular "backsliding" occurred on Tanna in the 1940s when large numbers of Christians deserted the faith in favor of the John Frum cargo cult. Since historical accounts of the process of conversion are relatively few and one-sided, it is impossible to say for certain why people became Christians. We do not know what ni-Vanuatu thought about it, except indirectly through missionaries' brief accounts.

The introduction of European diseases, trade goods, rifles and liquor via sandalwood buyers, labor recruiters and traders preceded the arrival of missionaries in most islands. The strong opposition encountered by some missionaries could well have stemmed from prior traumatic Melanesian encounters with Europeans, and the deaths of several Christians were allegedly motivated by revenge to balance earlier deaths at the hands of whites. But as Shineberg (1967:13) notes, the more numerous, mobile and affluent sandalwood traders got in first and thus raised the indigenous people's expectations concerning European wealth. Their desire for iron and other trade goods thus whetted, the Melanesians accepted the presence of missionaries as a potential source of this wealth, in the early years at least. In those areas where rifles had changed the technology of the feud and escalated the deathrate, the missionary presence may well have been welcomed with relief because of its insistence on peace.

The association in Melanesian minds of whites with superior power, which was no doubt primarily assessed on the basis of technology, and much later, on the weight of colonial authority, had much to do with

their acceptance of the Christian presence. In line with dominant traditional values, acquiescence to the superiority of European power also involved attempts by individuals and groups to gain access to it. Historical contingency, in the form of sheer luck, sometimes played a major role in early attempts by Christians to "prove" the superior power of their God. In southeast Ambrym, where I worked, the bearer of Christianity was a south Ambrymese man who had been converted while in Queensland. He met with strong initial opposition, but was quick to turn to Christianity's advantage his "miraculous" escape from death when fired on, allegedly at point-blank range, by an enraged local chief. His explanation that God's power protected him was widely accepted and gained him a solid core of devotees, and he never looked back.

Despite undoubted communication gaps, missionaries and their islander and local converts must have managed to convey to the local people some basic elements of the new faith, particularly those that were broadly congruent with indigenous values and understandings. Ideas of rewards and punishment, of reciprocity guaranteed as long as certain rules or procedures were faithfully adhered to, and of spiritual and/or human retribution. for persistent disregard of the rules, all accorded well with existing understandings. However, the notion of a reciprocation delayed until the next life was, in its reward aspect, neither traditional nor particularly satisfying (cf. Keesing 1967:96). Likewise, the notion that rewards in the afterlife depended principally on moral conduct in this world would have been nonsensical to a people who judged ritual efficacy mainly in terms of correct performance.

The possession by Christians of esoteric knowledge, and its intimate association in Melanesian cultures with power and status differentiation, did not in itself set them apart from other whites encountered by the indigenous people. The uniqueness of the Christians lay in their great willingness to impart this knowledge, and thus share with the Melanesians a considerable portion of it. The fact that the missionaries expected people to labor for the Church in return would have been perfectly acceptable. Knowledge given freely by people outside a narrow range of kin and friends would have been perceived as lacking value and therefore power. The establishment of schools and concerted attempts to bring literacy to the indigenous people so that they could read the Bible proved the sincerity of the Christians in wanting to communicate their esoteric knowledge.

In the traditional society, the mark of the "big-man" or chief was his achievement of a nodal position in local and regional information networks such that he could significantly monitor and influence the flow of

messages as well as material goods. He gained prestige by the selective use of socially usable knowledge but would never have told others all that he knew, because it was his reputed possession of unshared knowledge that differentiated him and made him "bigger" than others. As Lindstrom points out, esoteric knowledge is vital but its management is problematic: a person without secrets is without prestige, and a person with too many unshared secrets negates a fundamental imperative to exchange, so he too lacks prestige. Prestige, then, depends on the judicious husbandry of knowledge. It follows that missionaries would not have been expected to tell the whole story and that what they withheld contained the major secret of their greater wealth and power. Melanesians who in later years became involved in cargo cult activities often said as much when they accused missionaries of hiding that part of the Christian message that contained the key to the cargo. For a majority of ni-Vanuatu most of the time, however, the new faith appeared to offer sufficient promise to ensure their continuing adherence and support.

It may also be possible to account for the success of Christianity satisfactorily in terms of certain shared features of Melanesian social structures. Their receptivity to external forms undoubtedly predisposed men to view Christianity in pragmatic terms as a likely medium for increasing power and prestige. Lawrence (1964) has argued persuasively that the Melanesians' cosmic order was a predominantly physical realm, and their religion centered on reciprocal relationships conceived to exist among humans, gods and spirits. There was an undisguised materialism and anthropocentrism in the view that males had of their society's cosmic order and its utility to them in their largely individualistic strivings. The locus of power lay not in any supernatural realm but in the interaction between the environment and man, usually through the medium of spirits, with human activity as an essential ingredient of the mix that made power available; through the application of esoteric knowledge and intelligence, men could generate power while in a state of heightened receptivity to coresident spirit-beings. As Lawrence has shown, religion was for them a technology, a potent means for achieving patently secular socioeconomic ends. Individual self-interest predominated, even in many collective rituals and related activities such as food distribution (Barnes 1962; Brown 1962; Feil 1978).

While gathering data concerning what people could recall of the "traditional" religious life in southeast Ambrym, I was struck by the apparent lack of integration of the various elements and the complete absence of anything functionally analogous to the over-arching "Dreamtime" concept of the Australian Aborigines, which lends to their religion an internal

logic, consistency and strength. There was no congruency between southeast Ambrymese myths and rituals, very little among songs, and dances, and rituals, and no evidence that people saw any organic unity among the components they described. Guiart (1951) had concluded of north Ambrymese rituals that they lacked mythological validation and exhibited a high degree of secularization; I was led to the same assessment in the case of southeast Ambrym.

This lack of systematization I initially attributed to cultural loss and the effects of several decades of Christianity. But considering the openness of much of the rest of the social system, it is probable that the various components of the religious life had been quite loosely integrated. My data suggested that individual magical rites and communication with ancestral ghosts assumed far greater religious importance than collective rituals and appeals to mythic beings (cf. Deacon 1934). Individualism, pragmatism and materialism were dominant, but with the exception of certain sorcery acts, individual rituals were acts towards, and reactions to concerns of wider social groupings (Tonkinson 1968:34-35).

There was ample evidence that the southeast Ambrymese had been in prolonged contact with neighboring islands, such as Paama and Lopevi, and also that they had adopted the graded society from Malekula via west Ambrym not long before their first contact with Europeans. Their receptivity to innovations from elsewhere showed them to be typical Melanesians in this important respect. This willingness to borrow was congruent with the kind of flexibility and openness that has been reported for much of the region. Observers as far back as Codrington (1891) noted the lack of systematization in Melanesian worldviews and the willingness to borrow cultural elements. Lane (1965), discussing the religion of the people of south Pentecost, who have close links with north Ambrym, conceded that order may have existed in the religious system, but it was certainly not an explicit feature of what he observed; beliefs were not developed in precise and systematic detail, nor woven into any overall scheme. Brunton (1980:112) makes the same general points when he suggests that Melanesian religions are “weakly integrated, poorly elaborated in a number of sectors, and subject to a large degree of individual variation and a high rate of innovation and obsolescence.”

From the foregoing, it should be clear that individuals had considerable freedom to choose whether or not to try new forms, and that once the Christians had established beachheads they were usually assured of at least a few people willing to give them a hearing and dabble in the new faith--if only to see if Christianity would make a difference. In this kind of society, any initial opposition by “big-men” or chiefs would not appear

to have been a decisive factor. In southeast Ambrym, despite strong initial opposition from some of the chiefs, it took little more than two decades for the culture area to go from "pagan" to close to one hundred percent nominal Christian In many other parts of Vanuatu, Christianity enjoyed a similarly rapid success.

Christianity and Social Transformation

The missionaries and their zealous converts set out to win Melanesian hearts and minds as much by emphasizing the sinfulness and shortcomings of the old way of life as by stressing the advantages of the promised new life. Many were certainly not averse to rough, direct methods to get the message across to those who appeared incapable or unwilling to heed it. But in the early years particularly, the Christians were at times the objects of physical violence in some areas (cf. Miller 1975). In all but a few interior areas on 'large islands such as Tanna, Santo, Malekula and Ambrym, Christianity triumphed throughout the archipelago. The Presbyterians (who remain by far the largest denomination) concentrated their efforts in the southern and central islands, agreeing to leave the north to the Anglicans (who now rank third). The Roman Catholics, predominantly French-speaking, began later (1887); they ignored the earlier Protestant agreement and established missions throughout the islands. Churches of Christ, Seventh Day Adventists and Apostolics followed later, and in the last two decades there has been a proliferation of other religious groups in Vanuatu.

The processes of rapid transformation of the pre-contact societies, a major facet of which was the revolution wrought by iron tools, were set in train by the European traders and labor recruiters, but these men had specific and immediate goals in their interaction with the Melanesians. They did not see themselves as social reformers, however barbaric they may have judged (and in turn, have been judged by) the indigenous peoples. It was the missionaries and their converts who mounted the first deliberate assaults aimed at transforming "traditional cultures." Different missionaries and churches varied in their attitudes to *kastom,* but most considered much of the Melanesian culture unacceptable. Their frequent revulsion and disgust are forcefully revealed in their diaries, as is their dogged determination to triumph over the forces of evil. Their tropologies of conversion, aimed at the home congregations whose physical and financial support they sought, were rich in metaphor and made much of the "light versus darkness," "soldiers of Christ going forth into battle," "rescue of the innocents" kinds of imagery (cf. Young 1980). The word of

God was delivered as an imperative, a replacement for rather than an adjunct to existing knowledge, and it carried with it the promise of rich rewards for compliance or hellfire and damnation as certain consequences of its rejection. The Melanesians were doubtless much more attracted by the material possibilities of the former than repelled or terrified by the latter.

So much was the fusion of natural and spiritual components of their cosmic order that many ni-Vanuatu converts continued to believe in, and react to, various kinds of coresident spirits whose activities either helped or hindered them. Likewise, the belief that other people may resort to sorcery also remained powerful. Today, trade in many different kinds of magical substances (for protection, fighting, sorcery, love-magic and antidotes) continues to thrive, in convincing demonstration of the constancy of "traditional" Melanesian notions about power.

Attacks by white and black Christians on all that was ungodly in the indigenous cultures struck at the very heart of the old way of life: polygyny, pig sacrifice, kava-drinking, singing and dancing, men's secret societies, "devil-worship" (i.e. ritual communication with spirit-beings), "idolatry" (any carved anthromorphic image was deemed an "idol"), physical violence, practices that degraded women and so on came under persistent heavy fire as typifying "heathenism" and the forces of evil. But the seeds of destruction of major social institutions, such as the graded society, had already been sown by labor recruiters, traders and other Europeans who preceded the missionaries into most islands.

Traditionally, the great game of climbing the grade-ladder to socioeconomic preeminence was played with finite resources and a predictable *modus operandi,* and the older men were apparently in complete control of the moves. The introduction of valued European material goods, via traders and returning plantation workers, in effect short-circuited the grade system. The returnees were predominantly young; they reentered their home communities with wealth and, perhaps more importantly, with esoteric knowledge--that which generates power. By both retention and judicious distribution of portions of their wealth, they achieved a level of prestige quite out of proportion for men of their age and grade-rank in the pre-contact society. Many either bought their way in high up the ladder or refused to participate at all. Their skills in pidgin and assumed sophistication in the ways of the whites assured them of a useful and prestigious role in societies that were suffering drastic, unforeseen. depopulation and change. In many coastal areas, it seems, disorganization bordering on chaos prevailed, and Melanesians faced with grave threats to their very survival would have ignored the old game and

looked instead to the repatriated sophisticates, whose presumed knowledge of the ways and strategies of the whites might well have been the key to the regaining of some kind of equilibrium.

Whether the ex-Queenslanders were zealous Christians or fervently antiwhite in their attitudes and behaviors, ni-Vanuatu soon came to realize that continued resistance to the newcomers was futile in view of the great difference in power. The threat and periodic application of punishment, which took the form of bombardment of offending communities by French or British warships, did much to convince the Melanesians of the reality of "God's wrath." Besides, in view of the traumatic events that in many areas preceded Christianity, the donning of clothes and cessation of certain overt behaviors may have seemed a small price to pay for peace and the opportunity it offered for reorganizing what was left of the "old life." Any realistic appraisal of their situation would have led the indigenous people to accept the label of "convert" and acquiesce to the demands of the newcomers. It is most unlikely that people understood much of the theological content of the new faith; their interest lay in its materialistic possibilities rather than its theological detail. As Lane (1965:277) notes:

> The dissociation of Christians from aboriginal traditions does not involve rejection of aboriginal ideas as false or erroneous, but rather an acceptance of a system empirically demonstrated to be more practical in the contact situation . . . non-Christians adhere to their system not because they believe that it is more valid but because, assessing the contact situation differently, they believe that the older ways continue to offer a better solution to their problems.

The fact that at the time of the first official census in 1967 about one ni-Vanuatu in six identified themselves as following a *kastom* religion attests to a negative assessment of Christianity's exclusive claim to the truth about power. Many *kastom* believers are cargo cultists who abandoned Christianity in favor of a new "faith" more compatible with their perceptions concerning the road to wealth and self-respect.

Even among those who steadfastly remained Christian, there were significant continuities in their understandings. Behavior of some kinds can be effectively forbidden, but beliefs and values, those denizens of an individual's cosmic order, cannot. Their variability in the old society was maintained and augmented in the new. Whites inevitably occupied a major place in the new cosmic order that was fashioned from the old. The

missionaries tried to dichotomize the old and new, but they failed to negate prevailing conceptions about power.

The important point here is that in ridiculing and condemning "traditional" beliefs in spirits and ghosts as "savage superstitions" and the work of the devil, the Christians were in effect affirming that such powers indeed existed and impinged significantly on human affairs. The Melanesians would have been most interested to learn that there are ultimately superior and triumphant benevolent powers (i.e. the Holy Ghost) ranged against malevolent powers (i.e. the devil) in an uneven contest. This absolutist conception of clearly dichotomized good and evil powers flatly contradicted a fundamental Melanesian notion; namely, that power in itself is undifferentiated, but depending on the technologies applied to it by human or spiritual beings, it can have a wide range of effects, from positive to mortally negative.

The potential for people with the necessary esoteric knowledge to exploit these powers was considerable, whether or not the Christians were correct in claiming a clear demarcation between good and evil. If they could be safely tapped (a foregone conclusion in Melanesian understandings), both kinds of power would be socially useful, just like productive and destructive magic. In 1973, when southeast Ambrymese church leaders decided to mount an all-out attack on sorcery through an evangelical campaign, their strategy lay not in the denial of the reality and efficacy of sorcery power, but was instead phrased in terms of the inevitable triumph of the Holy Spirit, whose superior power, activated by prayers, confession and the destruction of magical objects, would render sorcery impotent (Tonkinson, n.d.a.). Furthermore, the wholly benevolent Holy Spirit could be indirectly destructive by turning the power of sorcery objects inwards upon their possessors, causing illness or death by backfire.

There were other important cultural continuities besides notions about power. Local languages have been maintained strongly, notwithstanding the universality in Vanuatu of pidgin, the national lingua franca. Despite the introduction of steel tools, basic subsistence strategies remained much the same, even after cash-cropping became an integral part of local economies. Shared notions about exchange and compensation persisted, however much the content and social contexts of exchanges were transformed. Kinship ideologies, and strongly supportive behaviors among kin and coresidents, have continued to figure significantly in village life and beyond. Arranged marriage, bridewealth payment, adoption and many other valued institutions have survived, some despite strong opposition from Christian leaders, and others with the blessing of the church if they were held to be compatible with Christian values.

As in the past, outward conformity to the new order masked great variability in personal beliefs. For want of understanding or inclination, many people remained nominal or "subsistence" Christians, whose emotional and spiritual commitment to the faith was marginal. Despite this, the work of the church increasingly assumed a central place in the social life of village communities, taking up the slack caused by cessation of major institutions such as the graded society and men's secret clubs. It was possible to be an "active Christian" in public life while maintaining private commitment to aspects of the past and to alternative avenues for enhancing personal power. A strong measure of at least outward conformity to Christianity was assured since in the church and mission schools the people saw obvious avenues to gain an understanding of the origins and nature of superior European power--and with understanding came the possibility of gaining access to it.

Contact with Europeans brought a sudden and unprecedented broadening of the cultural horizons of the indigenous people, which was accelerated by the Queensland labor trade and by the establishment of plantations whose demand for labor stimulated considerable local migration by able-bodied men. These experiences, plus the spread of pidgin, contributed greatly to a dramatic increase in people's awareness of cultural variation as well as shared cultural elements throughout Vanuatu. The diffusion of ideas and objects increased in momentum and geographical range, blunting the role of local parochialism while dramatizing the ethnic and socioeconomic gulf that separated Melanesians from the white masters who now dominated and exploited them.

In the case of the Christians, the missionaries privately believed in innate racial differences; their public profession was of a common humanity demonstrable in the sharing of one true faith and the attainment of unity in the body of Christ. Their active attempts to bridge the cultural gap made Christianity a very strong force in eroding ethnic boundaries and creating new bonds of "brotherhood." Not only did the new faith link ni-Vanuatu of different districts and islands and thus weaken the feared category of "stranger," it also bonded the Melanesians through their missionaries to home congregations overseas. Christianity was presented as a world faith, blind to skin color (despite the manifest "whiteness" of Jesus) and cultural difference, as long as people professed belief and behaved as Christians should. The gulf in attitudes and behaviors that separated missionaries from many other whites might have puzzled the Melanesian, especially in view of the considerable material wealth of many of the "heathen" whites. Whatever their puzzlement, however, Melanesians went to work for both categories of whites, expecting reciprocity of a material

kind from their plantation employers and hoping that rewards from the missionaries would be both material and spiritual.

One of the major consequences of Christianity was its generation of a new baseline in indigenous conceptions about time. In the pre-contact cosmic order, people recognized ecological time, the succession of the seasons; genealogical time, which spanned only a few generations and remained constant in depth; and mythological time, an era in the distant past: with no chronologically marked beginning or end (cf. Lawrence 1973:223-4). Notable events of the recent past were no longer gradually and easily absorbable into the mythological past, once a clear dichotomy between the pre- and post-Christian worlds was established in people's minds.

This dichotomy was both a moral and a sociological one. It solidified in a decidedly negative way Melanesian perceptions of what had been a dynamic and flexible culture. Brunton (personal communication) makes the important point that the effects of Christianity were always such as to rigidify people's notions about their pre-contact culture, and thus to develop in their minds an "uncustomary" attitude towards cultural variation. The early fundamentalist missionaries communicated their lack of tolerance for variation and a blanket condemnation of all things "traditional" to many of their local converts. With a clear baseline to work from, Christians could convey much more meaningfully dichotomies such as "light-darkness," "morality-immorality," "Christian-pagan," "civilized-savage" and "life-death." It was easier for the missionaries to adopt an absolute rather than selective view of the aboriginal past, especially since most had trouble sorting out "religious" from "secular" elements in the cultures that confronted them. While there must have been some syncretism and stress on shared values as part of the emphasis Christians placed on common humanity, the overwhelming impression gained by the Melanesians was that to look back was to peer into the darkness at their former depravity.

The Contemporary Symbiosis of Christianity and *Kastom*

As noted earlier, in a few areas of Vanuatu there were pockets of strong resistance to Christianity, and the stand-off between the two groups has continued into the present. Traditionalists in Santo, Tanna and elsewhere have maintained that Christianity contains neither the only nor the best truths, and they have continued to look to *kastom* as a road to power and material wealth. But they have also looked to the French government and to certain American capitalists, and have achieved a degree

of success through secular political maneuvering. Their claim to a monopoly on things *kastom*, as basic to their group identity and well-being, remained uncontested until the past decade when *kastom* began to gain favor in the opposing Christian camps.

The Christian majority in Vanuatu have long since come to terms with their religion and have given it a distinctive Melanesian stamp. In many cases local churchmen have turned a blind eye to practices that had been deemed un-Christian but were destined to persist: smoking, periodic drinking, premarital sex, bouts of physical marital strife, the use of magic, beliefs in non-Christian spirit-beings, observance of traditional taboos, and so on. Theirs was a fairly relaxed Christianity in most respects; it expected regular church attendance as well as physical and financial support for church-related activities, but otherwise placed few strong demands on its followers beyond observance of the Sabbath and an outward conformity to its principal values.

The granting of local autonomy to major Vanuatu churches by parent bodies overseas served to strengthen ni-Vanuatu claims to an indigenous kind of Christianity, one closely in tune with Melanesian lifestyles. The biggest church, that of the Presbyterians, became self-governing in 1948, and in the decades since there has been in most churches a steady replacement of overseas personnel with local people. Significantly, this major shift in responsibility began long before the Anglo-French colonial regimes made any similar moves. When the colonial powers finally began to demonstrate some genuine commitment to education and other forms of development, it was the British who led the way. Therefore, British educated ni-Vanuatu established the first political party, which was to develop into a nation-wide independence movement.

The founders of the New Hebrides National Party (later renamed the Vanuaaku Pati) were practising Christians who in the course of their overseas training became highly sensitized to the iniquities of colonial domination of their homeland. They saw a vital need for the development of a distinctive national identity and a raised political consciousness concerning the weight of colonial oppression and paternalism. To achieve this, they needed a powerful symbol of shared values that would appeal to all ni-Vanuatu, uniting them by evoking their uniqueness.

Despite its preeminence; Christianity clearly would not do as a dominant symbol. For one thing, a sizeable minority of ni-Vanuatu did not profess belief in it, so its appeal was not universal. For another, there was not one but several different kinds of Christianity in active competition for people’s allegiance, and the major division between Anglophone Protes-

tants and Francophone Catholics meant that the new party would probably fail in. its appeal to members of the second largest church in the country. Faced with this dilemma, the leaders chose instead the notion of *kastom,* that body of distinctive non-European "traditional" cultural elements, as the focus in their quest for a national identity--to underpin the independence movement.

Kastom would have to simultaneously represent and transcend local and regional diversity if it was to successfully symbolize ni-Vanuatu unity. Unfortunately, Christianity's effect had been not only to rigidify indigenous nations about *kastom* and the past, but also to bind *kastom* more closely and inflexibly in place--to freeze it in space and time. As a result, it gave rise to notions that important surviving *kastom* should remain unshared and thus mark local ethnic and cultural boundaries rather than transcend them. While it is true that there has been a continuing diffusion of magical knowledge throughout Vanuatu, larger complexes such as rituals have remained closely identified with particular groups and areas, as anchors of local rather than national group identity. This highlights a major problem with *kastom* as a dominant unifying symbol: it is inherently divisive if treated at any level more analytical or literal than an undifferentiated and vague symbolic one.

Lindstrom, in a recent paper on the political reevaluation of tradition on Tanna, notes, "If shared custom defines national unity, unshared custom is able to define national separation." Because of the extent of cultural loss and of Melanesians' vagueness about the content of their "traditional" past, questions concerning *kastom* are inherently political, open to different claims by rival factions. The leaders of the fledgling independence movement, while cognizant of the suitability of *kastom* as a symbol of ni-Vanuatu unity, free of the taint of colonial domination, were no doubt also aware of its dangerous ambiguity. In the face of so much cultural diversity in Vanuatu, shared *kastom* was inadequate for underpinning a nationwide political structure capable of supporting a mass movement. The party leaders hoped that the *kastom* rallying cry would bring to their side both the *kastom*-based Nagriamel and John Frum movements and the Francophone ni-Vanuatu. However, they were not surprised when no such alliance materialized, since influential European commercial interests and the French Administration had labored hard to encourage the formation of an opposition coalition of Francophones and *kastom*-followers.

The party activists decided that they had the numbers to prevail despite this opposition, so while continuing to champion *kastom* and the need to revive and maintain it, they looked to the organizational strengths

of their churches. By exploiting existing church structures, they could bridge the rural/urban and educated/uneducated gaps so as to broaden and strengthen their political power base. The fact that several prominent party leaders were also Protestant clergy helped influence the churches to lend active support to the independence movement.

Among the organizers were men and women who had studied elsewhere in the Pacific and for whom the promotion of *kastom* was much more than just a catch-cry. They had come to appreciate its vital role. It provided indigenous peoples with a strong sense of the uniqueness of their cultural heritage while as a source of identity it seemed to owe nothing to European forms. In seeking to promote *kastom*, they realized that ni-Vanuatu Christians were faced with a drastic reevaluation of their "traditional" past. After decades of internalizing essentially negative values and attitudes about the time before Christianity, the people now had to adjust to the notion that not only was "tradition" not all bad, but some of it was an essential component of their shared identity as ni-Vanuatu.

Coming to terms with a new symbiosis of values drawn from past and present, "paganism" and Christianity, proved to be problematic for many ni-Vanuatu in the 1970s. Much of the problem lay in the party leadership's need to keep the *kastom* symbol as generalized and undifferentiated as possible. They hoped that the people would undergo a consciousness-raising experience through unquestioning acceptance of the message in the ideological spirit in which it was being promulgated. On the contrary, many people tried to grapple with it pragmatically, wondering which kinds of *kastom* they would have to embrace, where it would be obtained from if long lost among them, and what Western element they would have to abandon as a result of the swing to *kastom*. The result was considerable confusion and much debate, as I have detailed elsewhere (Tonkinson n.d.b:7-12). Many people were puzzled about the composition of the new symbiosis because their leaders had failed to make clear that some kinds of *kastom* would certainly not be resurrected; for example, that *kastom* could be morally evaluated as good or bad on the basis of whether or not it was held to contradict or undermine Christian values.

Many ni-Vanuatu did not appreciate that what their party was promoting was in fact *kastom*-within-Christianity. In this period, the movement's leaders were seeking the support of the major *kastom*-based regional movements, both of which had strong anti-Christian biases. It is thus not surprising that in promoting *kastom*, the party leaders left unstated the corollary that any *kastom* which conflicts with Christian values should not be revived. Everyone was aware of Christianity's central role

in devaluing and destroying a great deal of *kastom*, so it must have been perplexing to have political leaders who were also prominent clergy extolling *kastom* in unqualified terms.

Rather than attempt to "disambiguate" *kastom*, the leaders chose instead to affirm publicly the essential compatibility of both kinds of cultural elements. By the time that independence was granted, in mid-1980, this symbiosis had become so firmly entrenched in the collective consciousness that no ni-Vanuatu could possibly have failed to get the message. In the official platform of the Vanuaaku Pati, in the new constitution, in the myriad events leading up to and surrounding independence, *kastom* and Christianity were fused in the public imagination, The new nation's anthem and flag include elements of both and affirm that the alliance is fundamental to national identity.

As the new republic takes its place in the global arena, the emphasis given by its government to *kastom* will doubtless remain predominantly symbolic. Its utility will lie mainly in the validation of a distinctive ni-Vanuatu, Melanesian or "Pacific way," some of whose major component values are held to be "traditional," even though they may well owe much to Christian morality. Father Walter Lini, the nation's first Prime Minister, says, "We believe that small is beautiful, peace is powerful, respect is honorable, and that our traditional sense of community is both wise and practical for the people of Vanuatu" (1980-290).

Certainly, in the postcolonial era more attention and respect will be paid to *kastom* in matters of land, mechanisms for dispute settlement and compensation payment, chiefly authority, life crisis rites and other ceremonial activities. But the dangers inherent in the use of *kastom* are many and real, so "traditions future will depend very much on what value it is given by the Government of Vanuatu and other bodies like the church and education" (Lini 1980-285). It is thus most probable that in the drafting of new legislation and the creation of enduring political institutions and strategies, Vanuatu's leaders will utilize principles that are broadly Western and Christian.

The newly elected government is heavily Christian in composition: seven ordained ministers are members of the Representative Assembly; the chairman and vice-chairman are pastors, while three ordained ministers and four elders hold ministerial positions. The nation's motto is *"long God yumi stanap"* ("In God we stand"), and its self-identification is as a Christian country, regardless of the presence of non-Christian minority groups within it. Church and state are likely to remain closely allied in the foreseeable future, so the dominance of Christian values seems assured.

Despite the new stress on *kastom* and its reevaluation into much more positive terms, there has been no significant shift in the dominant values of the ni-Vanuatu. In the past, many of the values and attitudes that persisted from pre-European times merged with those of Christianity and became indistinguishable from them: norms of mutual support, sharing and cooperation among close kin and friends, small group solidarity, strong affection for children, a willingness to work hard when the occasion demanded, ideals of peace, harmony and balance between individuals and groups, and *so* on. The choice of *kastom* as rallying-cry can in no way be interpreted as some cold-blooded strategy of a cynical intellectual elite; theirs was a heartfelt move to claim back for *kastom* much that had once belonged to it before Christianity usurped many of its positive aspects and claimed them as its exclusive property. This process is part and parcel of a strongly felt need among colonized peoples to claim self-respect and national pride by restoring legitimacy and moral strength to their "traditional" cultures.

People have not begun to behave much differently, but their altered perceptions of their "traditional" past are according it a much larger share of the total *kastom*-Christian symbiosis. Just as the Christianity preached to them was a set of norms and ideals that were not in fact attained in much of the everyday behavior of the Europeans with whom the Melanesians were acquainted, so is their old culture capable of a much more positive assessment than whites have given it when it also is judged in terms of its ideals. Thus, the recent statement by a prominent ni-Vanuatu woman that "'traditionally we are peacemakers," a people who settled all disputes by *kastom* (Sope 1980:53), should be accorded at least the same status as a Christian commandment, since both express ideals whose achievement everywhere and at all times is impossible. Since "tradition" is such a heavily filtered artifact of the present, it matters very little whether or not those elements now attributed to the pre-contact past were in fact part of it; as long as the reevaluation is a positive one, ni-Vanuatu can draw satisfaction and pride from it.

The continued identification and revival of elements of *kastom* will serve to further solidify the new nation's identity. If the emphasis remains on unities that transcend regional diversity, the divisive potential of *kastom* unshared could remain dampened. Following the recent successful quelling of the Santo rebellion, the government is bound to continue the heavy stress on national unity, but with assurances that regional diversity will be taken care of by decentralization. With the removal of European *agitateurs* and the allaying of fears about major losses of local autonomy, there is good reason to believe that the Melanesian members of the

kastom-based Nagriamel movement will offer no further resistance to the government. The new respect for *kastom* should help ensure this.

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