

Margaret C. Rodman, *Masters of Tradition: Consequences of Customary Land Tenure in Longana, Vanuatu*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987. Pp. 198, maps, tables, bibliography. Can\$21.95, US\$17.95.

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In this masterful account of economics and social change in Longana, Ambae Island, Vanuatu, Rodman elaborates on two persistent cultural illusions involved in islanders' perceptions of continuity and change. The first illusion, of economic autonomy, disguises the locality's articulation with the wider market system through local production of copra, the economics of which are outside of the villagers' control. The second illusion, that tradition is the coin of modern circumstances, masks emergent inequalities in wealth. These understandings are frameworks for meaningful action.

Masters of Tradition is based on three periods of intensive fieldwork; the focal area, Longana, is typical of much of village Vanuatu. Cash cropping, based on the "need" for money, has been melded with the native system of swidden agriculture, pig raising, and the men's graded society. Thus land, copra, and custom—the modern-day images of traditional things—remain salient themes in Vanuatu, as they had prior to 1980 in the colonial New Hebrides.

One of the many strengths of this book is that it involves a variety of analytic perspectives, including cultural symbolism, formal economics, and the phenomenology of place. Rodman suggests that the role of copra producers in Ambae is rooted in the experience of place, involving the lived-in nature of daily life, cultural notions of landedness, and the

meaning of heritage. To insiders, the powerful nature of accepted “illusions” - those of custom and autonomy - articulate with the experience of place. These ideas are briefly sketched out in the introduction, which also notes that the aim here is to describe “how customary land tenure allows a system of landholding to change while appearing to remain the same” (p. 3).

Such a question cannot be addressed without a working knowledge of the colonial history of Vanuatu and of Longana villagers’ notions about land. In chapters 2 and 3, Rodman shows how the colonial experience shaped feelings about alienated land. Despite the labor trade and land alienation, Rodman stresses the islanders’ roles as bargainers and activists, not passive reactors. Refusal to engage in the labor trade and the reclamation of alienated land no longer producing advantages are just two examples. Rodman shows how the colonial administration affected native societies, namely preserving portions of them while creating new and reinforcing old divisions that enhanced another illusion - this colonial one - that the unity of the territory required a colonial administration (p. 19). The introduction of coconut cash cropping in the 1930s is a major transition point in the story.

The relationship of land tenure to cultural change is covered extensively. Rodman notes that a Longanan’s “right to land is inalienable, but his claim to any particular piece of land can be won or lost through his actions” (p. 33). As such, principles of affiliation to land can be utilized for land acquisition through strategies aided by knowledge of lands, their histories, and their people. While people and land are intimately bound up in an inalienable way, lands and peoples’ actions and knowledge are also bound together.

The illusion of unchanging tradition is detailed in chapter 4 in a discussion of redistribution of land rights, over time, in response to changing circumstances. A map of some three hundred owned plots and a discussion of their size and ownership is featured. Creation of this was certainly a laborious task, but it has yielded a rich vein of data. Consequences of copra production are discussed, particularly in an account of the basis, in land ownership, of wealth inequalities. In the sample of plantations described by Rodman, the manner of land acquisition and size of holding are painstakingly detailed. Five percent of the sample population controls 31 percent of the total plantation land area. Copra production, in relation to wealth differentials and an emerging category of “rich peasants,” is detailed in chapter 5.

The illusion of autonomy is discussed in chapter 6. Native copra producers are responsive to the prices they are offered for their goods in

particular ways. Rodman discusses the chain of copra production, price changes through the 1970s and early 1980s, the roles of middlemen, and the manufacture, sale, and transport of copra. She finds that producers respond to increasing prices by maintaining or reducing production, because their agenda is to make copra on a cash-for-need basis. This reflects, she feels, the notion that the villagers do not produce copra for regular income, but for specially desired goods and services.

Certainly, as with any account, there are undeveloped areas. Two in particular come to mind. We could use more information on the traditional authority system so that the lived nature of the illusion of tradition could be more easily seen. Similarly, the relationship of copra production, wealth, and land inequality to the national political factions and present government situation seems potentially significant, but is undiscussed. But of course one cannot entirely fault a book for what it is not. What *Masters of Tradition* is, is a significant work, of immediate concern to those with an interest in the Pacific or in development. It is, too, a meticulous account of some of the ways in which people act to construct their own worlds so as to attempt to control their own lives.