

13 Claiming a Place: Gender, Knowledge, and Authority as Emergent Properties

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1 Introduction

This chapter examines aspects of language use and gender ideologies in Vanuatu (located in the southwest Pacific). It also discusses local ideologies about authority and knowledge, two other important social attributes, and shows how all three are linked. It adds a historical dimension to their analysis which stresses the longitudinal dimension to the ways gender is interpreted and enacted today.¹

Three themes will be developed and subsequently drawn together. First, I will discuss evidence which suggests that in Vanuatu, gender *emerges* through relationships with people, perhaps in an even more fundamental sense than it emerges in the Western societies that are used more frequently as the basis for theorizing gender and language. I will adopt Marilyn Strathern's (1988) analysis of gender in Melanesia. She argues that in Melanesia as a whole, gender is understood as a trope of relationships with others, rather than as an opposition of different kinds (as it generally is in Western thought).

Second, I will take the position that relationships not only are negotiated in the here and now, but also carry historical baggage. Variationist sociolinguistics has shown us that synchronic variation often offers valuable insights into changes that have taken place in the past. This chapter builds on that tradition and links the historical record of how women and men have been talked about, to the way gender and sex roles are talked about now. I will try to show how historical factors influence synchronic manifestations of the emergence of gender. In particular, I will consider the significance that colonial, mission era, and current Western ideologies about gender have for the ways in which gender is talked about and which patterns of talk indirectly index (Ochs 1992) gender in Vanuatu today.

Third, I will show that gender is not the only social quality which is emergent in Vanuatu. Knowledge and authority also emerge through relationships, but

in relationships with the indigenous concept *ples* 'place'. For this, I will make use of Bob Rubinstein's ethnographic discussion of how knowledge, identity, and language are linked together on Malo. We will see that relationships with *ples* are highly gendered on Malo. As a result of this, claiming knowledge or authority is likewise gendered. I will suggest that this underlies the importance that linguistic strategies which express empathy play in the speech of women. Toward this end, I will adopt a distinction between empathy and sympathy that highlights the relative degree to which a person claims or suggests shared *experience of something*, and not just shared *feelings about it*.

I start with an anecdote that set me rethinking my overly simplistic assumptions about ideologies of gender in the community where I lived in northern Vanuatu. Some people from the coastal villages on western Malo, an island in the north of Vanuatu, had gone "on top" to one of the villages on the hill in order to attend a double wedding. I was visiting friends there after several years away, and they invited me to come along too. At the end of the day, Leipakoa,² the woman I was staying with, sent me down the hill in the company of her younger, 12-year-old daughter before all of the ceremonies were finished so we would get home before dark. As Elise and I set off we were joined by another child, Vira, from Elise's class at school, and the three of us raced the setting sun down the hill carrying bags of food from the wedding and the family's gardens. When we made it to the flat land by the coast again, Elise's friend turned off in another direction to go home and she and I walked alone together. She turned to me and said (in the local creole, Bislama), "Vira used to be a girl, but now he's a boy." I wasn't sure if I had heard her correctly, so I said, "What?" She repeated, "Vira used to be a girl, but now he's a boy." I was still unsure whether that was really what she had said, so I asked her to explain what it meant. She tried to oblige but (unlike me) she obviously found the comment itself perfectly transparent. What was peculiar to her was the need to explain it. He used to be a girl, and he used to be with the girls, but now he is a boy so he isn't with the girls so much any more.

In the following days, I reported this conversation to a number of adults (women and men). All of them knew who Elise was referring to and they all essentially gave me paraphrases of Elise's explanation: Vira had done things with the girls and in girls' fashion before, but not so much now. I was told, with good humor (but I also thought some amusement at my curiosity), that there just are some boys who do things girl-fashion, some into adulthood.

What's going on here? One could look at this story with Western eyes and apply various Western labels to a boy like Vira. Or we might be tempted to think that Vira belongs to a transgendered category like the ones found in many parts of Oceania, especially Polynesia. But in Vanuatu there is no lexically codified transgendered category of men like the *fakaleiti* in Tonga (Besnier, this volume) or the *mahu* in Hawaii.³ I explained to some of my adult friends that part of my confusion about how to interpret Elise's comments was because I know Malo is famous for its hermaphrodite pigs, and there is a specific lexical item for them. I wondered if it was possible that Vira was likewise intersexed.

They laughed this off, but they also failed to present an alternative term for a person who is culturally inter-gendered, as it were.

Instead, I think that there is another way to look at the significance of how Vira was talked about and how people talked to me about him during all of these exchanges, and this ties gender (in this case, what it is to be a boy or girl) more closely to vernacular, Ni-Vanuatu⁴ ideologies about gender. As with other chapters in this section of the Handbook, this provides us with a different cultural and linguistic context in which to evaluate and better understand the basis on which linguistic forms come to be seen as gendered behaviors.

2 Elaboration of Emergent Gender

In this section, I outline in more detail Strathern's (1988) arguments about the emergence of gender through personal relationships in Melanesia. I draw a distinction between thinking of gender as emergent and gender as being fluid, showing that gender may be tied quite closely to sex. Crucially, though, this is a superficial association between gender and sex, and following Strathern, it can be seen to be an artefact of what the most important relationships are in the culture.

Strathern's position is that gender is an emergent attribute in much of Melanesia, and that it emerges through an individual's same-sex and cross-sex interactions. Melanesian orthodoxy, she argues, "requires that gender differences must be made apparent, drawn out of what men and women do" (1988: 184). She contrasts the Melanesian perspective with Western social constructionist analyses of gender. She argues that, at the time of her writing, social constructionism continued to be characterized by an underlying essentialism, that is, the "Western orthodoxy that gender relations consist in the "social or cultural construction" of what already has differentiated form through the biological sexing of individuals" (1988: 184). Arguably, this has since changed. A useful aspect of Strathern's theoretical framework is that it highlights the fact that there are at least two ways of viewing social categories such as gender. They may be viewed as end results, that is, we can focus on the way they are at any given point in time, or they may be viewed as a synchronic process (Niko Besnier, personal communication). Strathern argues that ideologies about gender in Melanesia fall into the latter camp, and more recent constructionist and performative developments in the analysis of identity in Western literature have similarly shifted the focus from results to ideologies of process.⁵

This does not mean that at all times gender is more fluid and contestable in the region of Vanuatu where I worked than it is in, for instance, the New Zealand and United States cultures I have most first-hand familiarity with. Nor does it mean that the emergent categories are themselves any more or less fluid than elsewhere. On the contrary, once gendered bases for interaction begin to crystallize there are extremely strong normative pressures on people

to continue to engage in those practices that serve as clear social markers of gender boundaries. Though many customary practices which enforce physical separation of the sexes are falling into abeyance on Malo (such as proscriptions on women standing in front of their classificatory brothers (i.e. men treated as, and called, brothers), or wearing red in front of them, or using the same door of the house), there continues to be fairly rigid differentiation of the sexes in public spaces. So, when traveling between Malo and Santo, women and men generally sat in different places on the truck or boat (men, especially young men, often stood in the transports holding onto the roof of the cab, and they often sat on or in the covered prow of the boat).

Or, to give another example, the family I was living with would set off from their home as a mixed-sex group, but by the time we reached the main road, men (including all but the very littlest boys) and women (and girls and the very littlest boys) would start to gravitate to different sides of the road. As we walked along the road and met other people going in the same direction, the group boundaries would become even more marked, so that by the time we reached our destination, men's and women's groups would often be walking too far away from each other to have a conversation across them. At the social event, women, girls, and babies would sit in one area, while men and boys would take up seats in another. If there were Western-style seats or a convenient log to sit on, these always went to men, while the women's group would sit on mats, usually in the shelter of a house. In public gatherings, whether it be customary events such as a wedding, or more contemporary events such as a school fundraiser, the principal public roles as speakers or comperes go to men.⁶

Superficially, then, it could seem that gender roles in Vanuatu are even more closely tied to biological sex than they are in New Zealand or the United States, but following Strathern's analysis of gender this should rather be seen as an artefact of the way relationships are generally defined. That is, gender emerges as a function of interactions in the culturally most important relationships, and these are very often direct indexes of sex, for example, sister, uncle, or mother. What the anecdote about Vira reminds us is a point that has become almost axiomatic in language and gender research since the 1990s, namely that gender is one of many identities that is constructed in the day-to-day practices of individuals interacting with (or avoiding) other individuals.

Strathern's position may seem very similar to social constructionist approaches to gender, or even (with its emphasis on the emergence of identity through practices that define relationships) to the more specific construct, the community of practice. It can be differentiated from both of these, though. Perhaps the clearest point of departure from a social constructionist view of gender is Strathern's claim that in Melanesian thought, the child is seen as ungendered, or androgynous; this is a direct consequence of the fact that maleness or femaleness emerges only through interactions with others (see also note 5). Becoming a woman happens in interactions with men, but also in interactions with other women and through participation in same-sex activities.

Strathern's analysis of gender in Melanesia is also distinct from the highly subjective and agentive approach to theorizing gender that underlies communities

of practice. This is because there are long-standing regional associations in Melanesia between specific interpersonal relationships and the role a person plays in formalized social exchanges of things of value. Here is one example of what I mean by this: the formalized exchanges bound up in a marriage help to consolidate the importance of certain relationships and individuals' roles in terms of those relationships. A woman marrying into a new family is seen as bringing with her items of great value, namely her future children, so this is reciprocated by an exchange of valuable material goods from her husband's classificatory brothers to her family. These are the kinds of relationships that Strathern is referring to. Gender emerges through father–daughter, wife–husband, sister–brother interactions and exchanges. So the relationships that are most important for the emergence of gender are characterized by a good deal of conventionalized behavior. In this respect, the picture Strathern paints differs from the community of practice, which in language and gender studies to date has stressed the agentiveness of the participants.

Given the orientation to gender in this social context, then, the anecdote about Vira does not so much illustrate that he was a gendered curiosity, bending or re-constructing his male identity, but rather it can be seen as an example illustrating how, as children, people have a good deal of latitude in determining how fast and which gender emerges through interactions with others. Vira's relationships as a younger child were with girls as a peer, therefore the gender emerging through such relationships could reasonably be described by Elise as "a girl." Social pressures that stress interactions and exchanges within the normative, social relationships that are conventionally linked to sex may mean that, by adulthood, most people will identify with the gender roles conventionally associated with one sex, but this will be the outcome of a lengthy engagement in same-sex and cross-sex activities or practices.

3 Knowledge and Authority as Emergent Properties: The Importance of *Ples*

Rubinstein's (1978, 1981) work on the social and linguistic construction of identity on Malo had a significant impact on Strathern's analysis of gender. This can be seen principally in Rubinstein's description of knowledge and authority which he characterizes as emergent qualities, too.

Rubinstein's doctoral thesis (1978) deals in detail with the processes by which people on Malo "place" themselves and construct an identity as being of or belonging to a particular place.⁷ Since placing oneself on Malo first and foremost involves establishing natal associations with land, this means that the process of placing self is a highly gendered notion to begin with. "[M]en stay on the land, women leave it" (Rubinstein 1978: 287), or in the words of a woman I was talking to in 1994, *ol gel oli nating* 'girls are nothing' – at least partly because they leave the land they were born on.

Bolton (1999) discusses the relationship between gender and *ples* 'place' in the wider context of Vanuatu, where women (as a group) are often described with metaphors that suggest the ease with which they can relocate from their home. Bolton notes that when a woman marries she becomes associated with her husband's natal *ples* and no longer with that of her brothers or father. This contrasts markedly with the situation for men, who always are associated with the *ples* of their fathers (even among those who have relocated to the towns). This was technically true on Malo, but in the village community I lived in I also found that the category of *woman nara aelan* "woman from another island" was highly salient. Hence, there, a woman retains a vestige of her own *ples*, yet gives birth to children who are clearly identified as of her husband's *ples*. One could say, therefore, that *ples* for men is a constant, while *ples* for women is not. (Besnier, this volume, also discusses linguistic consequences arising from problems associated with finding a "place".) To the extent that she remains *woman nara aelan* and also becomes so integral a part of her new community that she creates (through birth) *man ples*, I would want to say that *ples* for women is both partible and subject to re-creation.

But according to Rubinstein, *ples* is more than a property defining in-group membership. Rubinstein (1981: 142) observes that traditionally on Malo information or knowledge acquires authority in two ways: one is personalized, that is to say, "connected with a powerful individual and with his success"; the other is more objective, that is, it is seen to have "an external reality in a unified and thoroughly unquestioned social system" such as traditional *kastom* ('custom(ary)') knowledge. Either of these may be established through a claim to *ples*. A person may have authority to know or pass on information because it is information that is tied to that person's *kastom* family associations, particularly their family's special (*tapu*) places. However, a person may also establish authority to voice some knowledge by grounding it in detailed information about where they were and what they were doing when they learnt it, again linking the knowledge overtly to some specific *ples*. Having authority and knowledge in turn affords the possessor a degree of social power. Rubinstein notes that progressive changes to the meaning of *kastom* in the community on Malo (see also Bolton, forthcoming, ch. 1) has given rise to a situation where knowledge increasingly derives its authority from a personalized base, rather than the unquestioned social system. This shift means that authority and knowledge is becoming a little less stable, in the sense that it becomes appropriate to speak of lots of individual knowledges (1981: 148–9).

In this way we can see that Rubinstein's explanation of the dynamics of knowledge and authority on Malo stands as a counterpoint to Strathern's explanation of the dynamics of gender. Where Strathern argues that gender emerges through participation in same- and cross-sex relationships, Rubinstein argues that knowledge and authority emerge through the speaker's relationships with specific places. Both gender and authority, then, are properties that are open to negotiation and emerge as a consequence of tensions between what had customarily been the norm in a community and the changes wrought

by contact with other communities and/or contact with a supralocal culture of modernity (see also Besnier, Leap, Philips, this volume).

4 The Need for Special Linguistic Strategies for Claiming *Ples*

Clearly, though, if (natal) *ples* is stable and constant for men, while for women *ples* is partible, this creates rather different opportunities for placing oneself, establishing authority, and exercising power. I would argue that the whole business of placing oneself is a task that is more nuanced for a woman on Malo than it is for a man. A man can assert authority by invoking his family lineage and information about important landmarks or stories associated with a piece of land which place him as rightfully belonging there, while a woman once married and relocated cannot do this by such direct means. The task of placing herself (and hence asserting authority) socially must be addressed more indirectly. As the next two examples show, linguistic strategies are an important resource.

First, I begin with the story of Undu, because I think it illustrates well the differences in how women and men place themselves linguistically. I heard the story of Undu twice, from two different men.⁸ The younger man explicitly established his ownership of the story and the information he was passing on to the listeners by explaining his family relationship to Undu (he would use the kinship term *tawean* for Undu⁹), thereby invoking personal authority in Rubinstein's terms. However, a more interesting telling of the tale occurred the first time I heard the story of Undu. This was from an older man, as some of his extended family sat around in conversation after dinner one night. Undu's name came up and a visiting teenager, Bretian, identified him as someone who had died:

Bretian: *Be hem i ded, afta i lus no?*

Visi: *No.*

Miriam: *No, hem i stap.*

Papa: *No hem i stap. Oli daeva finis, oli kam . . .*

Lolan: *Hemia nao stret stori.*

Papa: *A, hem i stap long kenu. Wan fren blong hem i go antap long bus. Afta i kambak nao, i no gat . . .*

Bretian: But he died after he went missing, didn't he?

Visi: No.

Miriam: No, he's still around.

Papa: No, he's still around. They had gone diving, and they came . . .

Lolan: Here it is, the real story.

Papa: Ah, he was in his canoe. One of his friends went into the bush. Then when he came back, he was gone . . .

Among the corrections to Bretian, the family's father says, "No, he's still around" and begins the story. At this point, his daughter-in-law, Lolan, interjects "Here it is, the real story," before Papa proceeds with only the slightest pause ("Ah, he was in his canoe . . ."). Papa's knowledge of Undu's story and his ability to have it accepted as an authoritative account is partly due to personal factors (everyone present knows Papa is related to Undu, also his age and standing within the community imbue his telling with authority), but the account also derives its authority from the external acceptance throughout the community of the supernatural cause of Undu's disappearance (Undu's violation of *kastom*).

However, I am particularly interested in Lolan's small interjection. This can be interpreted as accomplishing two things. At the most obvious level, she is signposting and helping to establish Papa's authority in this matter (and by extension, I would argue, his knowledge and authority in other similar domains of information). In this, her behavior is similar to the role Ochs and Taylor (1995) show mothers playing in the White middle-class family dinners that they recorded. Ochs and Taylor characterized these activities as helping to construct a "father knows best" dynamic in the family. But this is not all.

4.1 *Supportiveness and the speaker's own authority*

What Lolan is doing here also seems to me to fit in with a larger pattern of women using language to help place their social selves on Malo. As a woman, and especially as a woman who has married in from an island a long way away (as opposed to an island which has historical ties to Malo), Lolan needs to find indirect means by which to place her self. She is a school teacher and is active in the local church, so she has some authority vested in what Rubinstein calls the externally "unified . . . social system." But within the family her identities as teacher and church-goer are de-accentuated, and therefore I would argue that the authority associated with these roles is less directly indexed in her interactions within the family.¹⁰ I interpret her overt tagging of Papa's story as an attempt to place her self as a member of the family. That is, she is establishing a share in or a claim to the authority associated with knowing stories that are part of that family's history and their more literal sense of place. Papa's story requires no imprimatur of authority from anyone else, and certainly not that of a younger woman who has married into his family, so it seems reasonable to suppose that at least part of the work that this small interjection is doing is to place Lolan in the family while using the frame of supporting someone else's conversational turn.

A second, similar example occurred in another family's after-dinner conversation. Talk turned to religion and Mesek began to reminisce about a trip he had made to a Buddhist temple in Japan. His wife, Leipakoa, provided supporting comments and interpretive paraphrases while Mesek explained

the layout of the temple and the custom that visitors try to wriggle through a hole in a stone pillar ("for luck," says Leipakoa). Leipakoa has clearly heard the story often before and must be nearly as familiar with the details as Mesek himself is, but after a short digression about whether Buddhists believe in heaven or reincarnation, Leipakoa says to Mesek, "*Afta yu go?* (And then did you go through it?)" ; Mesek says, "*Ye, mi mi go* (Yeah, I went through)" and gives some more orientation to the story. Leipakoa then asks, "*Be i naf blong hed blong yu i go insaed?* (But was there enough room for your head to go in?)" and in reply Mesek launches into the real drama of the story, telling me how he got stuck halfway through.

There are a number of things that Leipakoa may be doing in eliciting the story so carefully from Mesek. She might be wanting to keep a happy after-dinner conversation running as long as possible for her own enjoyment. She might be putting off a decision on who will do the dishes. She might be showing me how well-traveled members of her family are (not just visiting linguists go to exotic places). However, like Lolan with the story of Undu, I would suggest that one of the things Leipakoa is doing is using a supportive conversational mode (in this case, characterized by elicitation) to indirectly display knowledge that belongs to someone else. The experience was her husband's and takes its authority from the fact that Mesek can situate the experience in specific places and times, thus the authority of the story is most directly indexical to him. But Leipakoa can indirectly access that authority by acting as Mesek's muse, calling forth the story as it has been told before.

One might feel that this is placing undue emphasis on the act of speaking and the act of eliciting speech, but in presenting this analysis I again follow an emphasis on utterance that Rubinstein documents. People on Malo can reify words to an extreme. They explained to Rubinstein that words can be traded for other valuables such as pigs (1981: 152), so they are, in *kastom* thought, objective units. In other words, the indexicality between telling a tale and having social authority is similar to the relationship that exists between possessing and killing pigs and being wealthy.

What we seem to see here is a synchronic pattern in which women use a wide range of linguistic strategies in order to position themselves socially. While I have gone to effort to differentiate the Melanesian conceptualization of gender from others, I do not want to exoticize the situation overly. The end result has parallels in other cultures. Some of the sociolinguistic literature has claimed that women's sociolinguistic repertoire makes active use of a greater range of styles than men's (see Goodwin, this volume; Eckert 2000: 11, 19). In Rubinstein's terms, this might be glossed as indicating that a woman is making use of significantly different resources with which she can place her social self. Much as Eckert (2000) concluded about the high school girls she worked with, it appears that language is an important vehicle used by Malo women to place themselves, and that linguistic practices are especially important as a way of enabling a gendered self to emerge and be sustained.

5 Empathy and Gender

But I want to go further still. I want to characterize Lolan's and Leipakoa's strategies as expressions of empathy and I want to explore the importance of empathy in the expression of gender. In everyday parlance, "empathy" and "sympathy" are frequently used interchangeably; however, it is useful to differentiate them on the basis of the kind of subjective experience each involves. Wispé (1986: 316) distinguishes empathy from sympathy in the following way: empathy involves the speaker's experience of subjective qualities *in* the object of their empathy, whereas sympathy involves the speaker's experience of subjective qualities *about* it. Elsewhere, I have found it helpful to observe this distinction as a basis for understanding the distribution of the phrase "[I'm] sorry" that I recorded in Vanuatu (Meyerhoff 2000). Thus, empathy is fundamentally about claiming shared subjective experience, while sympathy involves a claim of shared orientation to or evaluation of an experience.

By making this distinction, Lolan and Leipakoa's strategies can be drawn into the fold of other expressions of empathy which seem to be more fundamentally grounded in concern for others. In other work, I have discussed the use and functions of linguistic variables that occur in spoken Bislama, specifically, the use of inclusive pronouns and the use of apology routines in everyday speech. Here, I will use them to explore the role of expressions of empathy in women's speech more broadly. This will enable us to see how empathy fits into the larger picture of knowledge, authority, and power, specifically, how these properties are claimed or indirectly indexed by linguistic means.

5.1 *Empathy at linguistic work: Use of inclusive pronouns*

Bislama is a typical Austronesian language in making a distinction in the first person plural between referents that include the addressee and referents that exclude the addressee. The Bislama forms are *yumi* (from English 'you [and] me') and *mifala* (from English 'me fellow[s]') respectively. I have found it useful to distinguish between a literal (truth-conditional) form of co-reference and what I have called a metaphorical form of co-reference (Meyerhoff 1998).¹¹ Thus, when a speaker says "*Bae yumi go nao?* (Shall we go now?)" and the addressee is one of the people who will leave, I would say this is a literal use of the inclusive pronoun. However, we also find in Bislama (and in several other languages that make this distinction) instances of *yumi* being used where the addressee is not, or could not have been, one of the people undertaking the event described. For instance, my landlord had been telling me about his former job in the regional health board, and he summed up his discussion saying, "*Be ol risej we yumi mekem . . .* (But the research that we [inclusive] conducted . . .)" when clearly it was not the case that I had participated in any of said research.

I argued (Meyerhoff 1998) that this metaphorical use of the inclusive indexes a perceived, salient, shared in-group membership. I show that I was addressed with this non-literal use of the inclusive pronoun most frequently by other women, and men only occasionally used the metaphorical inclusive with me. I suggested that this distribution of the variable reflected the generally high social salience of the intergroup boundary between the sexes. The apparent exceptions with male speakers occurred when one could point to evidence that some other in-group identity that we shared had become more salient in the conversation.

5.2 *Empathy at linguistic work: Saying “sorry”*

My discussion of the linguistic routine associated with apologies, “*Sore* ([I’m] sorry),” likewise focused on non-canonical uses of the form (Meyerhoff 1999, 2000). I examined a distributional difference in the use of *sore* to express empathetic concern rather than to express contrition for some social transgression. Although both men and women used it to apologize for a transgression, I only observed women using the form to express concern. So while a man (or woman) might say “*Mi sore tumas blong talem olsem long yu . . .* (I’m very sorry to say this to you),” I only noted women using *sore* to empathize with their interlocutor or the subject of discussion, for example:

Lisa: *Afta bebi i stap, ledaon gud*

Adelin: *Awe, sore!*

Lisa: And the baby stayed there [by itself] lying quietly

Adelin: Oh no!

5.3 *General functionality of empathy*

If we observe the distinction between empathy and sympathy outlined above, then both *sore* and the use of the inclusive pronoun when the addressee was not a literal co-participant or co-experiencer of an event can be seen as expressions of empathy. Both claim shared experience in subjective qualities, though interestingly, the two reverse the polarity of the term. When using *sore*, a speaker claims that she shares the subjective experience of her addressee; when she uses *yumi* she claims that the addressee shared her experience.

In my analysis of empathetic apologies (Meyerhoff 2000), I argued that the claim of shared knowledge inherent to an empathetic apology is extremely important for its distribution. Because a statement of empathy implies shared knowledge, and because knowledge (in my own culture, too) confers covert power or authority on the bearer, I suggested that the distribution of an empathetic strategy like *sore* was a way in which the users could index not only their role as caregivers and nurturers (which is part of macro-level ideologies

about gender), but could also imply personal authority at the micro-level where authority is not a quality directly associated with them in general ideologies about gender.

I believe this insight holds more generally. The discourse strategies I have shown Malo women using to frame or elicit stories from others provides a similar opportunity to indirectly associate themselves with knowledge, in those cases *ples*-specific knowledge that directly indexes the authority of the male speakers. As with an empathetic apology, these strategies manage to do this while ostensibly maintaining a posture of supportiveness and care.

Up to this point, this chapter has been concerned with providing details of the synchronic situation with respect to language and gender in Vanuatu. I have drawn parallels between the emergent quality of gender and the emergent quality of authority. Insofar as the latter also has a gendered dimension, I have made the case that the two are more than ontological parallels, they are in fact related. I have made a case for the apparent functionality of linguistic expressions of empathy in the context of Ni-Vanuatu beliefs about gender, knowledge, and authority, and the role of *ples* in Ni-Vanuatu *kastom*.

In the next section, I introduce historical data on the way gender has been perceived and more specifically, the way women have been represented since the colonial and missionary period in Vanuatu. The reason for doing this is so that we can consider the historical baggage that this (like every other) ideological system carries. Just as in the study of sound change, we consider synchronic variation to be a reflex of ongoing and historical processes, I try to draw some links between the synchronic and the diachronic conceptualization of gender identity in Vanuatu, and will discuss aspects of the tension between them, especially the tensions that may emerge for women.

6 A Diachronic Perspective on Gender in Vanuatu

We often spend considerable energy providing an account of the synchronic social and linguistic context of the variation observed in a speech community, but patterns of discourse (like the ones outlined here) do not emerge from a diachronic vacuum. Although research in language and gender is increasingly concerned with providing an accurate picture of the way in which gender is both reflected and constructed through verbal interactions and in discourses about gender, we sometimes fail to place the construction of gender in its full social and historical context (some exceptions to this are Inoue 1994; Cameron 1995; Romaine 1996; Pauwels 1998). In the Pacific, this may be because we do not have access to a detailed or stable record of the social context going back earlier than European contact. In order to consider the longitudinal context of the patterns of language and gender that we see in Vanuatu today, we are

limited to records since the eighteenth century. In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to this historical record and consider what it reveals about gender ideologies in Vanuatu when they are seen longitudinally. I then explore the extent to which these facts inform an analysis of the current situation.

6.1 *Early contact and representations*

Contact between the local, Ni-Vanuatu people and Europeans first occurred in the seventeenth century when various European explorers passed through the area. Longer-term contact was only established in the nineteenth century when traders and whalers set up stations in Vanuatu.¹² Shortly thereafter came the first missionaries, Marist, Presbyterian, and Anglican. In what follows, I consider how the Europeans perceived the sexes and how they tried to understand the gendering of social space and social routines in Vanuatu. I will focus mainly on their perceptions of women.

Forster (1996 [1778]: 164), traveling on Cook's second voyage, describes Ni-Vanuatu women in terms that were already shaping the broader European stereotypes of the Pacific. The Pacific societies were believed to reveal various stages in human development. Forster found Ni-Vanuatu women "deformed," they were generally "ill-favored, nay some are very ugly" (1996: 181). The most womanly aspects of their bodies are cartooned as odious, their breasts "flaccid and pendulous" (1996: 181). He noted that their social role seemed to be that of "pack-horses . . . for their indolent husbands," doing "all the most laborious drudgery in the plantations" (1996: 164). In marked contrast to this were his perception of Tahitian women. In Tahitian society women were "tall and beautiful" (1996: 179), "Venus of Medicis" (1996: 154) (needless to say, their breasts were "well proportioned" and "extremely feminine"). Forster clearly saw these differences in the women's appearance and their lifestyle as indicating Tahitian culture to have reached superior heights to that in Vanuatu (1996: 195). Jolly (1992a) points out that this means women played a particularly important role in shaping the social, political, and aesthetic evaluations early Anglo-Europeans made of Ni-Vanuatu.

The one positive thing Forster had to say about the socially subordinate position of women in Vanuatu was that he felt that this had obliged them to develop much keener intellects than the men around them, and also to better develop empathetic skills than men had (1996: 259).¹³ So apparently empathy (though it is unclear whether Forster would have meant it in the very specific sense that Wispé and I use it) or concern for others has been an overtly displayed quality for some time.

These skills appear to have been less evident to European colonists, and during the colonial era the nature of discourses about gender change tack. Jolly (1993) points out that this should be seen in terms of the gendered dimension of colonialism itself. Until recently, discourses of a colonial heritage tended to off-set such "masculine" traits of colonization as hierarchy, authority, and

control, against the tempering “feminine” qualities of sympathetic understanding, egalitarian relations, and flexibility (Jolly 1993: 109).

Jolly’s work is interesting because she not only documents how colonial women were the subjects of a larger (re)construction of a middle-class domestic aesthetic in the European mind, but she also shows how colonial women collaborated in actively constructing these new roles and models of femininity. She compares the writings of a missionary, Charlotte Geddie, and a colonist/adventurer, Beatrice Grimshaw, and demonstrates a pervasive maternalism at work in the early period of extended European/Ni-Vanuatu contact.

Geddie’s writings, for instance, exhibit a tension between two stances: her perception of racial difference between herself and Ni-Vanuatu women, and an in-group identity based on being of the same sex. Geddie resolves this by recasting her relationship with Ni-Vanuatu women as not being between a colonizer and the colonized. Instead, by invariably referring to the Ni-Vanuatu converts as the “girls,” the relationship is likened to a mother guiding and training her daughters in the arts and bearing appropriate to a middle-class woman. Mission women, all “aching hearts and cushioning bosoms” (Jolly 1993: 113), saw their role as rescuing Ni-Vanuatu women from a state of servitude in which they were perceived to exist at the time.

Similarly, Grimshaw’s writings show a deep ambivalence about her relationship with Ni-Vanuatu women. Although Grimshaw writes in overtly racist terms (which is not true of Geddie’s writing), like Geddie, Grimshaw casts herself as someone able to bring beauty and femininity to the betterment of Ni-Vanuatu women’s lives.

Geddie clearly operates within a masculinist ideology of colonialism, but Jolly points out (1993: 115) that she and Grimshaw effectively construct a relationship with local women that combines idealized masculine features, such as control of other and a control of an aesthetic and economic hierarchy, with aspects of an idealized femininity, such as an inherent sympathy with and for the women who are the objects of their attention. This dissonance was hardly the only one created by the situation, since the women missionaries’ own lives in the colonies and women’s lives in Europe at the time were far from being perfect models of the gendered ideals that so clearly colored Geddie’s and Grimshaw’s interactions with local women (Jolly 1991: 31).¹⁴ However, one thing that the missionary families did provide was a fairly consistent model of a world in which a dichotomous and natural gender division was assumed, and moreover one in which the most salient division of labors was, again, in the idealized dichotomy between the public and the domestic (Jolly 1991: 46) (a point I will return to shortly).

6.2 *Twentieth-century colonial representations*

As colonial contact took firmer hold in the area, the profile of the colonists became more diverse. Numbers of younger men arrived looking for economic

profit, and they also actively engaged with the cultures they encountered, attempting to impose their own conceptions of gender (and race) relations on the general and particular situations they found themselves in. Illuminating data on this is to be found in a lengthy record of correspondence between an Englishman identified as Asterisk and a close friend back in England at the start of the twentieth century (Lynch 1923). Asterisk's letters reveal a deep ambivalence about Ni-Vanuatu women. When referring to his partner (and soon to be mother of his child) he could write positively and even chide himself for his racism, as in "[she] is much cleaner than a good proportion of the white women I have 'met.' And yet six months ago I was lampooning her to you as a savage beast." Nonetheless, in the next sentence he goes on, "But do you think I could tolerate her in civilization? Not for a week" (Lynch 1923: 166–7). Even as he appears to grow fonder of the woman he dubs "Topsy" in his letters ("I miss her horribly now when she goes away"; Lynch 1923: 172), he continues to regularly call her a "savage" or "childish."

The whole process of "going native" for Europeans in the Pacific tended to be, and still very often is, a process that is both highly gendered and highly sexualized. To really "go native" often entailed acquiring local sexual partners, with an increase in prestige all round (Manderson and Jolly 1997 has much discussion related to this). Given the demographics of the White population in the Pacific and social constraints on women (both in the colonial period, and to a lesser extent today), this means that "going native" was very much more a male activity than a female activity. The increase in prestige that this affords has suggestive parallels with some of the issues I have already raised and shows that the relationship between gender, practice, knowledge, and authority is germane to more than just Ni-Vanuatu culture(s). By acquiring a specialized form of local knowledge, a European man increases his ability to speak with authority about what remains the unknowable to his confrères back home. For a Ni-Vanuatu woman, the relationship provides not only access to money and Western accessories, but potentially also a half-White child. If a woman's *ples* is partible partly by virtue of her ability to give birth to children belonging to some place other than her own natal *ples*, then this dynamic of the colonial social system introduces a further complication to traditional Ni-Vanuatu ideologies. What it means is that *ples* is not only tied up with ideologies about gender, but also with ideologies of race.

The dichotomy between male and female, and the sexualization or the infantilization of one half of that dichotomy, seem to be tropes of Europeans' own view of women as "damned whores or God's police" (Summers 1994) – that is, of their own preoccupations with and assumptions about gender – rather than an accurate representation of what was found. Webb (1995) makes it clear how pervasive this phenomenon was in the Pacific at the time. Photographs of Pacific themes were often posed or retouched in the studio to suit expectations about the subject matter "at home," posing women, for example, either in cozy family shots with their children or in poses suggesting sexual availability.

The point of this extended discussion of some of the sociohistorical dynamics of gender in Vanuatu is to make the case that when we consider how gender and language interact today we need to take into account that we are dealing with a tension between multiple ideologies, some indigenous, some external, and all of which carry some historical baggage. *Kastom* ways of knowing (including customary ways of knowing what constitutes a gendered person) play off against a Western, essentialized gender dichotomy that is explicitly identified with modern social values. *Kastom* ways of knowing also play off against competition for control in the public sphere, and yet as I have shown, the idealization of a public-private contrast itself arose from Western ideals about the family and the sexes (see also McElhinny 1997 on this supposed distinction). This means that it is all very well to evaluate discourse patterns against traditional Melanesian ideologies of gender, as I have attempted to do in the earlier parts of this chapter, but we also have to evaluate independent social forces. These introduce an element of change in the culture and in ideologies of power which intersect with the simultaneous reification of tradition.

Reflexes of the colonial idealization of gender roles and family roles continue to influence the way gender is talked about in Vanuatu today. These ideals did not come alone. A number of other concepts became salient in Melanesia following colonization and missionization, and some of these are entangled with gender ideologies in particularly salient ways. The complex and sometimes contradictory contrasts between modernity and tradition, and Christianity and *kastom*, that also emerged following European contact in Vanuatu intersect with an idealized opposition between manliness and womanliness in ways that sometimes shed further light on the way in which gender is tied up with the emergence of social authority or power. There is much to say on this (and much of it is expressed more thoughtfully in Bolton (forthcoming) than I can here), so my discussion will be somewhat superficial. The purposes of these brief comments, though, is to bring up-to-date the discussion of the impact of intercultural contact on the negotiation of and emergence of gender as a social category.

The gendered dimensions of the contrast between *skul* ('school', which refers to parochial education and church learning in general, as well as secular schools) on the one hand, and *kastom* and tradition on the other, are especially rich. Rhetoric about *skul* and *kastom* often takes on a Manichaean quality in Vanuatu discourse (Tabani 1999). In practice, the opposition between the two is by no means so neat; as Jolly (1992b) points out, *kastom* is a polysemous word. It can refer to specific practices (in which case it stands in opposition to Christianity) but it can also refer to an entire way of life, in which case it stands in opposition to the values of other cultures and groups (e.g. Western, European culture). Some of the attitudes toward customary ways of life that appeared in Geddie's writings have, however, become thoroughly integrated into Vanuatu social and political thought. It is now axiomatic in many quarters that the time before conversion, when Ni-Vanuatu lived according to *kastom* and *kastom* law, was a bad time, a time of darkness, and one of the aspects of

social life that most needed reorganizing was the role of women and men in the family.

As we saw, the relationship (and division of labor) between the sexes was an important criterion for defining a distinct post-Christian culture. The post-Christian ideal was a nuclear household with the father at the public head of the family, and a mother responsible for domestic work.¹⁵ However, despite mission rhetoric about the wretched lives of Vanuatu women pre-contact, the Western models of family life and the gender roles imposed with evangelism increased the workload of most women (see Philips, this volume). They generated new expectations about domesticity, mothering, and support of one's spouse, all of which were to be played out in more individualistic or private domains than had existed before (Jolly 1993; Ralston 1992).

This move to identify women's work with the domestic sphere was accompanied by a move to exclude them from the public. Thus, where aspects of *kastom* nevertheless have continued to be an important basis for the organization of social life in Vanuatu, the European ideologies about gender roles contribute to a destabilization of traditions or *kastom* that do not reflect the naturalized hierarchy of men and women. For example, matrilineal land rights and clan descent were the norm in various parts of Melanesia including parts of northern Vanuatu (Clark 1985) before contact.¹⁶ However, the importance of maternal descent lines for defining your *ples* in these regions continues to be weakened even today, and this (internal) destabilization of *kastom* may be justified in part by referring to biblical teaching (Jolly 1996). The late Grace Mera Molisa, poet, politician, and advocate of women's rights in Vanuatu, spoke forcefully about her feelings of being progressively robbed and disenfranchised by the weakening of the traditional social importance of women in the customarily matrilineal region from which she comes.

The situation of urban young people reveals further aspects of the tension between *kastom* and Western culture that are gendered. These tensions highlight the other meaning of *kastom*, namely the way it stands for indigenous, Ni-Vanuatu values and culture in contrast with external cultures. In an outstanding piece of ethnography, the Vanuatu Young People's Project (VYPP) shows how many urban young people distrust some of the colonial institutions of power and authority, such as the police, which for them are simply organs of oppression and harassment (Vanuatu Young People's Project n.d. [1998?]). For them, *kastom* is a necessary and desirable alternative to such institutions, and they speak of *kastom* practices as offering a viable code of conduct as they navigate the challenges of modernity in the capital city, Port Vila.

Yet it is clear that there is no simple return to an idealized (and equally essentialized) *kastom* past. There may be some attractions to *kastom* knowledge and *kastom* authority, but these have to be mediated through their experience of late modernity (Leap, this volume). For example, young women may have mixed feelings about *kastom*; it may offer value for some aspects of their social life, but conversely it may threaten others. As noted above, the notion of

kastom itself now reflects a synthetic, postcolonial set of values and may be interpreted as a codification of male power over women. As the VYPP observes, *kastom* may be interpreted as an expectation that a woman will stay with an abusive husband (or agree to an arranged marriage). Some of the young women interviewed in *Kilim Taem* understandably resist its control over this aspect of their lives.

However, they may not speak out very loudly against *kastom*, because such young women find themselves in a delicate philosophical and political situation. Not only is it possible that they will be seen as inconsistent (arguing for a strengthening of *kastom* in some domains of their lives and rebelling against it in others), but voicing a resistance to *kastom* may provide a justification for their further marginalization and silencing. Because adherence to *kastom* can be seen as an expression of Ni-Vanuatu identity (versus Western identities), women speaking up for women's and children's rights in families may be perceived as aligned too much with external value systems (such as Western feminism). This can in turn be transformed into a rationale for further excluding them from the processes and debates of nation-building.

In some senses, the vexed status of *kastom* for young people in Port Vila matches the complications that their lives introduce to their claim on a *ples*. Although many people in Vila continue to live in neighborhoods that have affiliations to a particular island, this is by no means always true. The road (both metaphorical and literal) back to their island may be hard to navigate (and this may be particularly true for young women; Eriksen 2000). Thus, again, we see how *ples* and gender may be tied together. Customary relationships to land and people are destabilized by the same sorts of social change, and the qualities that emerge from relationships with places and people are in turn further problematized.

6.3 *The place of Bislama in claiming ples*

Finally, I return to a linguistic matter. In this section of the chapter, I consider the role that the national creole, Bislama, plays for some people in the emergence of gender in Vanuatu today.

Many people (Ni-Vanuatu and external researchers) have observed that in the last decades of the twentieth century, there was an appreciable increase in the numbers of women using Bislama as the main medium of communication. It was unclear, however, how much of a direct effect (if any) this was having on the development of the language. Indirectly, it was clear that the increased use of Bislama as the basis for communication in the home was deepening the pool of first-language speakers of Bislama. Since this phenomenon was assumed to be more prevalent in towns than in villages, it was possible that distinct varieties of Bislama might be taking shape (one used in towns and one used in villages). This was the background to my research in Vanuatu in the first place.

On arriving in Vanuatu, however, I found that use of Bislama in the home was more widespread in the village community on Malo than I had been led to believe it might be. Formerly, it had been expected that when a woman married out of the area in which her first language was spoken, she would learn the language of her new home, and this language would be the backdrop to her children's home life. On Malo, I met a number of women whose experiences still followed this pattern, but I also met a number of women who spoke only (or principally) Bislama to their children. Here I will explore some possible motivations and the possible significance of this linguistic choice for the latter group of women.

First, they can be contrasted with the women who learnt the local vernacular, Tamambo. Two such women were older (with grown children and grandchildren) and had moved from central Vanuatu to Malo after meeting their husbands while working in Vila, and two were younger women (with school-age children). The younger women who regularly used Tamambo at home and who were trying hard to learn it both came from islands closer to Malo (one from west Ambae; one from south Santo), specifically linguistic regions where their first language shares a relatively large proportion of core vocabulary with Tamambo. Both women noted that this paved the way for them and made their task of learning Tamambo comparatively easy.

On the other hand, the women who used Bislama in their homes were all younger (their children were still at school; the oldest had a son finishing secondary school). They came from a wide range of home islands: some in central and southern Vanuatu; some from northern Vanuatu (like Malo). By comparing the two groups, it is clear that neither the age of the speaker nor the degree of linguistic relatedness between a woman's first language and her husband's can account for all the differences observed.

The second thing to consider, then, is the wider function and significance of Bislama in Vanuatu. Bislama is the only national language of Vanuatu (English and French are co-official languages). Its spread and use in the latter half of the twentieth century is tightly intertwined with the nationalist movement that led ultimately to independence. Historically, too, Bislama rings with moral and social connotations. It was originally the language of the migrant, internationalized labor force that left Vanuatu in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to work on plantations in Australia, Fiji, and elsewhere. For this reason, it was mainly, but not exclusively, a language of men, and for some time it remained a language learnt by men and associated with male activities, crystallizing in a less variable form with the participation of increasing numbers of people in the paid workforce and by its use on Radio Vanuatu (Bolton 2000). In short, Bislama has for most of its history been more or less strongly associated with movement and the fashioning of supralocal identity. These are the features indexed by the language; it is only to the extent that men in the past had freer access to movement and more frequent opportunities to associate themselves with supralocal interests that the language was in any sense a "men's" language.

One of the factors contributing to the increased use of Bislama by women in their homes on Malo is, I believe, the ongoing association between Bislama and movement and national identity. This is by no means the only factor contributing to its use, but other interpersonal factors are beyond the scope of this discussion. A woman who chooses to use Bislama with her children can in some ways be seen as pragmatically exploiting her outsider status, and foregrounding a claim to be a woman, not of her husband's very local *ples*, but of a *ples* that defines Vanuatu as a nation.

In sum, the associations between Bislama and movement and the choice by some *woman nara aelan* to use Bislama bring us back to my earlier point. They shed further light on women's task of having to (re)create a *ples* for themselves on marriage and the challenge of claiming authority. Bislama provides a linguistic constant for them that is perhaps analogous to the constant of *ples* that men have staying in their home village.

7 Conclusion

One of the main goals of this chapter has been to explore the ties between the way gender is understood and voiced in its historical and synchronic contexts. For gender, one could substitute any other social category, since what I have tried to demonstrate is a broader principle, namely that the synchronic indexing of a category such as gender in talk disguises aspects of how that category has been talked about over time.

I have suggested that when looking at language and gender in Vanuatu, the use of empathy is best seen in this light. Empathy can be a covert linguistic action allowing the speaker to indirectly establish some control over knowledge and stake some claim to *ples*, but the significance of both these concepts and the veiled way in which women often tap into them derive from historical notions of gender, not just current ones. What I have also tried to show is that both internal and external historical forces are part of the picture. This is particularly stark in Vanuatu, given its history of colonial contact, but must surely be equally true in any context.

Which leads me to my final point. This section of the Handbook has presented a series of local case-studies. However, I hope that in both its methodology and its unification of themes, this chapter has a more general relevance, beyond a description of language and gender in Vanuatu. Clearly, it would be extraordinary indeed to find that only in Vanuatu is there such a nuanced relationship between gender, language, social history, and the current social climate. Indeed, a number of the chapters in this volume attest to that. I suspect, too, that even the quintessentially Ni-Vanuatu concept of *ples* (and how it relates to the establishment of knowledge and authority) is of practical use for the analysis of gender elsewhere, and indeed Besnier (this volume) explores how contestations of and problems with defining place contribute to the dynamics

of gender and multilingualism in Tonga. Naturally, claims to authority and knowledge and the way these attributes feed ideologies of gender and the details of the power structures associated with them will differ from place to place. As we have seen, they have looked very different even at different periods in Vanuatu. But what may look more similar are the patterns relating power, place, authority, and gender through language.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Niko Besnier, Lissant Bolton, Atiqa Hachimi, Janet Holmes, Dorothy Jauncey, and the Advanced Sociolinguistics class in the MSc for Applied Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh for comments on and input to earlier drafts. My thanks also to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for funding my 1994–5 trip in the field (grant #5742), and to the people of Vanuatu, especially my ever-generous hosts on Malo for encouraging my curiosity and taking the time to teach me.
- 2 As always, I use pseudonyms for the people I worked with in Vanuatu.
- 3 *Fakaleiti*, as Besnier explains, literally means “in the manner of a lady”; *mahu* appears to be a reflex of a proto-Oceanic word meaning “gentle” (Robert Blust, personal communication). Hachimi and Besnier point out to me that I may be placing excessive weight on the presence or absence of a specific lexical item in writing off the category of transgendered individuals from Malo society. I take their point, but I do think that where a specific lexical item, such as *mahu*, does exist, we can assume a qualitative difference in the way the community thinks about such individuals compared to communities where there is no such lexicalization.
- 4 *Ni-Vanuatu* is the adjective form of *Vanuatu*.
- 5 However, my reading of (even) Butler, whose 1990 work is fundamental to the analysis of identity as a series of performative acts, takes the biological sexing of individuals as a basis in her discussion of the psychological processes and social acts contributing to identity formation.
- 6 Women would occasionally make an announcement in the public meeting after church. These were less formal and more spontaneous occasions, yet here too in general women remained at the edges or outside the church hall, while men took up places under the roof and on the benches.
- 7 For the record, Rubinstein does not characterize the sexes in the same way Strathern does. He describes them as being “complementary” and unequal in the social domain (1978: 286), but the hierarchy of male-over-female breaks down in the cosmic domain.
- 8 Undu went out diving and gathering shellfish with some friends and disappeared mysteriously while they weren’t looking. He had been heard to speak disrespectfully of a stone at the beach that had *kastom* power and so it was presumed he had been carried off by devils. He has been

- seen since then, but no-one can get close enough to talk to him.
- 9 *Tawean* is a kinship term that on Malo can pick out the (natal or classificatory) brother of the speaker's wife. It can also designate other relationships (discussed in Rubinstein 1978); in this case it indexes a relationship between men only, the speaker's great-grandfather.
- 10 Naturally there are contexts in which a woman (even *woman nara aelan*) has objective authority. When Lolan is at school, and especially for the two years she was principal at her school, the challenges of discursively constructing authority differ. An interesting case-study would consist in following someone like Lolan and examining coherent threads in how they manage their shifting authority.
- 11 I have no particular theory of metaphor in mind when I call it this, but rather intend it to stand for a generalized non-literal use of the pronoun.
- 12 Known then as the New Hebrides.
- 13 "[T]he constant acts of indelicacy, oppression, and inhumanity [against women]. . . , and the more delicate frame of their bodies, together with the finer and more irritable texture of their nerves, have contributed more towards the improvement and perfection of their intellectual faculties, than of those of the male . . . because their nerves are finer and more irritable; this makes them more inclined to imitation, and more quick in observing the properties and relations of things; their memory is more faithful in retaining them; and their faculties thereby become more capable of comparing them, and of abstracting general ideas from their perceptions. . . . Used implicitly to submit to the will of their males, they have been early taught to suppress the flights of passion; cooler reflexion, gentleness, and every method for obtaining the approbation, and for winning the good-will of others have taken their place, . . . all this may perhaps prepare [the race] for the first dawns of civilization" (1996: 259). Again, notice the crucial role women's roles and behaviors play in defining the progress of civilization.
- 14 Forster seems to have missed the dissonance between his attitudes to what he saw in Melanesia and the reality of his own culture. Though he was a fairly self-aware observer, he appears to have been blind to the parallels between the servitude of Ni-Vanuatu women and the lives of most women and men in Europe. Arguably, at that time the entire European lower class worked like "pack-horses" in a state of "laborious drudgery."
- 15 This kind of transformation occurred widely in the region. Dureau (1998) discusses a similar process by which Christianity transformed family relationships on Simbo (Solomon Islands), changing a woman's most salient relationship from that of someone's "sister" to someone's "wife."
- 16 Allen (1981) suggests that the male secret societies found in most of Vanuatu developed historically as a response to dominant matrilineal systems.

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