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The Transformation of Hierarchy Following Christian Conversion in Vanuatu

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Abstract. In this paper, I use pig-killings as an entry for understanding the transformation that has taken place with respect to hierarchy and egalitarianism in Vanuatu. In the early 20th century accounts by John Layard there is a thorough description of the cosmological and spiritual meaning of pig-killings in the manly hierarchy of these islands. The entire society was consumed in a sacrificial cycle that each lasted for six years and involved the killing of many hundreds of pigs, the most valuable acting as substitutes for human beings. At the peak of the ritual, the greatest of men stood up on a stone platform and announced their increased status and thereby joined the ranks of the society of ancestors. Comparing this with the situation today, there is absolutely no build-up of super-human status in ceremonies. On the contrary, I argue that today, pigs are being killed, cows are being butchered and cooked, yams and taro are displayed and distributed in great quantities, and huge sums of money figure in bride price and ceremonial payments, but not for the purpose of gaining spiritual power. They merely express bilateral connections, and form a redistributive system of production. In a development linked to the introduction of Christianity, monetary value and colonial labour regimes, ceremonial life has made an almost unnoticeable turn against the former hierarchical order.

Keywords: Melanesia, Vanuatu, pig-killings, ritual values, cultural change

Introduction

As pointed out by several contributors to this special issue, it is a mistake to see hierarchy and egalitarianism in opposition, or at all as labels for classifying whole societies (see Kun-Hui and Gibson this issue; also Martin, this issue)¹. While, in a Dumontian perspective, hierarchy is a general concept for the ordering of social values, egalitarianism is one specific instance of such ordering wherein the value of equality ranks above and incorporates other values. If hierarchy is about ideology and values, then we also have to acknowledge that it is in a state of constant transformation. In ritual especially, there is always openness and potential for change, when alternative values may come to the surface. In this sense rituals are ideal arenas for both addressing ideological conflicts between values and, at the same time, trying to harness these conflicts. Furthermore, in every society there are many rituals, each of them potentially putting into play different values and each potentially upholding their own values as superior (see Robbins 2016). Rather than returning to the debates on the abstract logics of hierarchy, I will therefore examine here hierarchy in Vanuatu through the analysis of the changing forms of rituals of pig-sacrifice and wealth distribution.

Totalities, Ceremonial Wealth and Distribution

We have become accustomed to reading about the ways wealth is put on display and distributed in ceremonial ways in Melanesia (see Young 1971; Carrier and Carrier 1989; Barraud, de Coppet, Iteanu and Jamous 1994; Foster 1995; Bashkow 2006; Rio 2007). Here, wealth implies a specific notion of relationality and social integration. In the way that a prestation of wealth, according to Mauss, ‘keeps totality within view’ (see Dumont 1986, 194), ritual wealth becomes a technology of relationality, a machine for temporary part-whole interconnections, so to speak. We may in this context assert that the display and exchange of wealth is a particular form of infrastructure, a technology that connects, conveys or creates flows between different domains. Arguably, rituals of wealth distribution tend to be problematic since they momentarily construct a totality out of multiplicity, and furthermore specify that the portions of wealth should follow certain relations and not others. The display and distribution of wealth in a ritual orders values according to the ideology of the event. Ceremonial distributions of food in Vanuatu are such infrastructures: for guiding the flows of substance through the population, for rerouting past flows towards the future and for ending some flows while continuing others. Displays of wealth are wilfully assembled in order for people to grow, reconnect, reproduce, and it is through such displays, consumption or destruction of wealth that titles are transferred, alliances are made, and spirits are transformed from one form to the other. It is within wealth as man-made infrastructure that sociality flows. In this chapter I will specifically look at how ceremonies of pig-killings and food display in Vanuatu have been a stable feature of social life for the last century, but under radically changing ideological regimes.

¹ I am very grateful to Kun-Hui and Gibson for all their advice on this article. I am also grateful to Editor Laurent Dousset and two anonymous reviewers for a very thorough reading of the article and for raising many important points.

The point that I would like to make goes beyond the day-to-day shifts in ceremonial values or competition between them. I would like to focus on the larger transformations that have taken place in Vanuatu over a longer period of time, involving the influence of Christianity and colonialism on ceremonial practice. This requires a keener attention to the larger historical processes taking place within the ceremonial sphere. These are transformations that one cannot grasp by merely trusting one's short-term ethnographic observations.

A long-term comparison of the 'before and now' in Vanuatu is very difficult and can only be speculative. Not only is my own ethnography from the island of Ambrym based on a very limited case study of a specific region in North Ambrym, covering only a short period of time between 1995 and 2010, but also, a controlled comparison itself stops short since there is no ethnography available of the same villages from a century back. Anthropological fieldwork has been very limited in Vanuatu, and only since the sixties have there been deep studies of social life (see Allen 1981), after major social transformations had taken place. Building on interviews with people, details of genealogies and missionary accounts, we do know that massive changes took place in the 1920s due to depopulation, warfare and extensive plantation appropriation of land (see Rivers 1922; Frater 1922; Miller 1989; Rio & Eriksen 2013). Fortunately we have the exceptional ethnographically detailed works of Bernard Deacon (1934) and John Layard (1942) from the neighbouring island of Malekula from this early period. Because it is the more complete of the two, I will choose Layard's work here for going back a century for my comparison. Layard's ethnography also concerns the area closer to North Ambrym, culturally-speaking. I can merely suggest a very limited comparison of what Layard observed on the small island of Atchin in 1914 with what I have observed almost a century later on the neighbouring island of Ambrym in Vanuatu. This comparison will only address the specific meaning of ritual sacrifice and display of food for ceremonial exchange with respect to the end result of such a ceremonial event, to what is achieved, to who gains authority from it, and to how it produces relations. My point is that even though the killing of pigs is a stable component across both cases, the outcome in status is very different. But how can historical data from one region of the country be induced to illustrate a change in another region? I risk the stretch since the island of Atchin, off the coast of north-east Malekula, was tightly entangled with North Ambrym at that point in time. There were constant traffic and exchanges of food, pigs, titles and ritual insignia and inter-marriages across the sea, to the degree that I suggest that these societies were sociologically speaking comparable. Comparison, be it historic or ethnographic, is always partial, speculative and risky. But it is also a means to get a grip on the idea of historical change.

A Problem with Totality and Authority

There are many directions this study of historical change could take, but I will sketch only a few of them here. Being interested in accounts of wealth forms in anthropology more generally and the way people treat wealth, we may return to Pierre Clastres and his *Societies Against the State* (1989), based on his fieldwork in the sixties. In his experience, the Guarani of the Amazon had a very elaborate strategy towards wealth and its distribution. They were intensely preoccupied with it, and they kept telling him that the distribution of goods, women and words formed a basis for the government of all the things that mattered in society. This wealth (of

words, of women and of goods) formed their crucial infrastructure and the Amerindian chief had to constantly find ways to pass on this wealth to his group. Under circumstances of war or famine, the group would depend entirely on the chief to feed them. Here we find a comparative starting point for looking at the relation between group, wealth and chief. By thinking of the power of the chief as being the negation of accumulating wealth - since his job was to always distribute – the Guarani negated power itself and elaborated an egalitarian society that was explicitly “against the state”. They did not like ideas of social totalities and reacted against any figure that would represent the group as one. This point is reflected in the Guarani’s explicit discourse about One-ness as being evil. The Guarani chief said to Clastres (1989, 170): ‘[t]hings in their totality is One; and for us who did not desire it to be so, they are evil’.

According to the Guarani chief, the group-as-one only expresses the *imperfection* of the world. The idea of the One, or the ‘state’, brought up the idea that all the multiple things of the world could potentially be thought as *a togetherness of things*, things considered together as part of an estate or infrastructure project. But the Guarani considered this an imperfection since they valued singularity and multiplicity over togetherness. They saw the Oneness of wealth – as a form of totalising infrastructure - as being incomplete because it was *finite* – and that which was finite was also already accounted for, it was dead and over with. What the Guarani wanted was a world where things were *open* in their singularity and relationality, not bound to something else. This could also be read as if wealth that is accumulated is *bad* – since inside one-ness and a pile of wealth a thing or a person cannot hope to be complete. What is part of a whole cannot be whole at the same time. This led Clastres (1989, 217) to argue that when things come together as wealth or infrastructure or other forms of integrated totalities, they represent a state form that people do not want. They recognised this state form and, when necessary, came together as one, but they negated it categorically as a form of authority. They instead lived through the dispersion, distribution and consumption of wealth and would not let themselves be governed by it. When we consider such cases as the Guarani, we need to remember that they are historical cases, and that the statements such as the one made by the chief about the One as evil, possibly represented a particular stance towards historical forces that could be a reminiscing idea of the Inca Empire, of the totalising idea of Christianity or of the colonial state – or something else. In other words, their ideology against the state seems to have been the consequence of having experienced such a situation and having been able to escape it. It seems reasonable that the One-ness in question, as a social order or encompassing totality, was not what they wanted anymore *for historical reasons*.

We notice here the similarity with Strathern’s (1991) conceptualising of society in Melanesia. She objected to the notions of ‘totality’ and ‘whole’ as they were used in anthropological approaches, such as by Dumont or De Coppet, and noted that Melanesians were instead thinking of their ceremonies and rituals in terms of decomposition, dissolution, dismantling, disassembling and severance (1991, 76) and not as the creations of totalities; an ideological concern quite like that of the Guarani of the Amazon. But fragmentation was also very much in focus for larger parts of the world at this point in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Strathern warned against the dangers of such tempting comparisons, by saying that:

One should be as cautious as one is creative with the resonances between cultural fragmentation perceived in the world at large, specific analytical tactics such as deconstruction, and the discovery of relationships being indigenously conceptualized through images of dissolution. (1991,76)

Indigenous forms or concepts of dissolution might well be different from analytics of dissolution in the world at large. Whereas Western individualism still prefigured society as a pre-existing coherent, bounded entity, when thinking about dissolution, the Melanesians and other indigenous peoples like the Guarani would not feel right or well inside such a vision of a primordially-bounded society or form of authority. That is in a sense, the crystallisation of non-individualist, non-state society – from the Amazon to Melanesia and with many stops on the way in-between. Through distribution and dissolution of durable and nondurable things, those societies ritually take apart all those things which threaten to become authoritarian totalities – they distribute wealth, they resist unitary group formation, they diversify ancestor deities, they backstab big men, and indeed, they abhor the state. Such was Strathern's reading of Melanesia and Clastres's reading of Amazonia. In both worlds, people liberated themselves from the imperfection of the totality, although in different ways.

Given Strathern's precautions that these similar attitudes towards totalities should not be misunderstood as having anything to do with each other, we are left with the impression that they are different, but deeply human, attitudes. My only worry is this: what if the Amazonians and the Melanesians of the 1960s and 70s were concerned with deconstructing totalities *for historical reasons*? The colonial regimes of Germany, United Kingdom and France had already made their impressive appearances in the late 19th century. There had recently been a world war, and, at least in Melanesia, this left deep imprints with regards to the terrors of authoritarian states. World War II made a massive appearance in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (see White & Lindstrom 1989; Tabani 2010). The dark shadow of the state had also emerged on the horizon in other ways, through news of the Cold War and the Vietnam War, as well as news of all sorts of riots and liberation movements into the 1960s. The colonial presence also became more and more pointed into the 1970s. In Vanuatu it culminated in the overwhelmingly violent year of transformation from the colonial regime and into independence in 1979-80 (see Abong 2008; Tabani 2008). More recently the violent regime of Indonesia in West Papua also received a lot of attention in Melanesia, and so too has the RAMSI presence of Australian security forces in the Solomon Islands in the 1990s. Would it be unreasonable to suggest that these decades of both liberation and authoritarian re-appropriation have also created a particular attention towards totality, and especially the totality of the state? I do not mean the state only as a principle of government by the few over the many, by the centre over the periphery, and by the foreign officials over the indigenous, but as a larger imagery of a totalising presence that, in those decades, seemed to overshadow and dwarf all other, including very local, images of totality.

In the following, I will return to the era before the Second World War in order to catch a glimpse of ceremonial wealth and pig killings in north-central Vanuatu in that era when the state was perhaps not figuring so visibly on the horizon and when the church had not yet won the hearts and minds of the people. I will then contrast this ethnography with the island life

where I have done fieldwork from 1995 onwards, in a speculative comparison of ceremonial ideology.

The Ritual Hierarchy of Malekula and Ambrym

I will start with some glimpses into the situation of 1914 when John Layard did his fieldwork on the small island of Atchin just off the north-east coast of Malekula Island (Layard 1942). Layard described a horticulturalist system, where people grew vegetables, harvested fruits and nuts, fished and hunted and bred pigs. There were regional systems of exchange in the archipelago, especially between Malekula and Ambrym, trading in ritual apparel, pigs and valuables that related to a ritually-graded system of spiritual ranks: what has become known as ‘graded society’ or locally, *maki*. Layard described *maki* as an intricate, detailed and all-absorbing system of initiations. The candidates for the initiations consisted, in principle, of all the men in the group, and some were arranged for women also. For each rank, participants were seen to rise up to reach a more-than-human status. This was also reflected in the procedures of the rituals – in climbing ladders and killing pigs from each rung, stepping on to a raised platform, or raising up giant blocks of stone or massive standing slit-drums (see also Bonnemaïson 1997). When Layard was conducting his research, the whole society was implicated in these sacrificial cycles, each of which lasted for one generation and involved the killing of many hundred pigs, the most valuable featuring as substitutes for human beings. The *ghamal* or the ceremonial ground was explicitly called a place of sacrifice (1942, 61). The rituals revolved around a virtual journey from the land of the living (i.e. Malekula and the small islands off its north east coast), and to the land of the dead (inside the burning volcano on the neighbouring island of Ambrym). On the way there would be perils and challenges, and a ‘guardian ghost’ was the central figure for whom they had to kill the pigs, who would otherwise eat them instead. The guardian ghost was represented by the mother’s relatives in the ritual. This scary, devouring monster symbolised the ongoing exchanges and existential debts to the mother’s kin.

A key objective for the ritual cycle was to gain a sublime form of male power. Layard was very clear that male power was installed in the penis (Layard even mentions a renowned man called “His lordship the Holy Penis”!) through circumcision or incision and carefully contained in the sacred binding of a huge penis-wrapper. But this was only the external, visible proof that they were growing a ‘soul’ inside, as a form of spiritual strength. This growing of a soul seems to be a main preoccupation of the graded society. At the culmination of the ritual and as an announcement of their rebirth in the spiritual society, the men would shout out their new name and then mount the ritual altar stone where a fire was lit as an equivalent to the volcano. After this final part of the ritual, the men would go into seclusion for thirty days, similar to the seclusion of a new-born baby (they would be fed like a baby, for instance), and the women would mourn them for another six months. The men’s existence was now split between being man and spirit – achieved through the killing of great quantities of tusked boars and growing of the immortal soul. The spirits of the sacrificed boars passed over into the sacrificer so that his own spirit could take on eternal life. In these cases, the life of the men took on spiritual qualities and they could no longer be sharing the world of lesser men and women. These

qualities became fixed properties of their bodily person. They became dangerous, hot and poisonous for the men of lesser rank and women, and the rank-taking involved ‘climbing up’ the ritual ladders to stand above the rest of the men. Men of high rank represented differentiation taken to the extreme. In some parts of the archipelago, men of the highest ranks became completely secluded from social life and spent their last years in isolation, at the same time representing the larger society while being cast out of it.

We should note here that Layard probably ignored other ritual societies that co-existed with the *maki* on Atchin. We know from Deacon’s accounts of south-west Malekula that several different and competing ritual arenas existed (Deacon 1934; see also Patterson 1981). Given my opening comments about different rituals also highlighting different values, we have to recognise that people in that period lived in a highly differentiated world. The values of one ritual meant little in another, and this also testifies to a diversity and multiplicity of values coexisting. It could be that the situation that Layard describes was an instance of one ritual complex taking over for all the others at this particular time and as an instrumental response to particular historical contingencies. It could be that massive depopulation from introduced illnesses, inter-tribal warfare and alienating plantation labour regimes caused people on these small islands to become fixated on the *maki* as rituals of the dead.

But how should we understand the situation of wealth, sacrifice and distribution at that point in time? What we might call wealth here consisted in a whole array of artefacts testifying to spiritual power. Pigs with elongated circular tusks were thought to be “daemonic” presences (Layard 1942, 269). The tusks figured as the visible manifestation of the spiritual quality of pigs, and were also used in masks and mortuary effigies to indicate their spiritual value. The pigs used in payments were of all sorts, each having a special meaning. The most valued pigs had elongated tusks, the two most important of which were those that had tusks that had grown full-circle and re-entered the jawbone, and those even more rare and valuable, with tusks that had completed their second round (see Guiart 1951, 19). Ordinarily, the most valuable pig used was the full-circle tusker, and it is said that it takes around 6–7 years to grow. The full-circle pig was the concluding sacrifice in all affairs, ending all payments in the *maki*, as well as in disputes and marriage payments.

The most valuable of the pigs were treated as superior beings – or at least with the intimacy and respect that one offers a sacrificial victim (see Layard 1942, 261). The pigs were the crucial ritual companions of men and as Layard (1942, 257) noted, ‘it is only through pig sacrifice that a man acquires a soul, and is capable of prolonging his existence in the next world’. But the assemblage of wealth also involved other half-material, half-spiritual things. The stone dolmens and wooden slit-drums, erected with intricate ritual procedures, were mounted as manifestations of ancestors and mythic heroes (1942, 18), and stone platforms dramatised a ritual presence of the land of the dead as transported to the village.

The cycle of rites comprising one instance of the *maki* lasted approximately a generation, and stone monuments were erected during each such performance. These monuments were never removed, and remained a perpetual memorial for those who set them up:

Each such performance is moreover distinguished from all others by some outstanding feature by means of which those taking part in it hope to eclipse in magnificence all previous performances, either by the acquirement of some new form of ritual or in the grandeur of the stones erected or, most impressive of all, by the number of boars sacrificed and by their value in terms of the elongation of their tusks. (Layard 1942, 16)

If we are to believe Layard, the whole material display of the *maki* articulated the presence of a *parallel society* – an overwhelmingly material presence that was nevertheless set up for the expression of a regime of spiritual forces. The stones and the killed pigs became entryways into the realm of the dead, and a way for the dead to enter into the life of the living. Wealth was the very infrastructure for the management of that transformation. The breeding of pigs, the taking of human life, the transport of huge stone slabs and tree sculptures, as well as the agriculture of yams and taro, were all directed into this domain of male initiation. When people ate they did so as a result of food being distributed after sacrifices. It seems as if the entire daily social life became absorbed into the ritual transformation of life and death, as material beings were transformed into spiritual beings, and as the outcome was the transformation of men into spiritual masculinities.

Pigs with elongated tusks, standing dolmens and drums, as well as the rest of the ritual assemblage of stuff (ochre, penis-sheaths, head bands, decorations, etc.), all involved careful attention to detail, procedures, regulations and taboos. Here, all the problems with totality and authority that Clastres talks about for Amerindians are irrelevant, it seems. In Malekula there was, on the contrary, a striving for ever more regulations and taboos, ever more spiritual power, and ever more intricate procedures for carrying out the rituals which approximated totality. This concerned also very specifically the attention to numbers and finiteness. For instance, the ritual cycle was initiated by first killing or destroying a hundred ants, then a hundred coconuts, then a hundred turtles, then a hundred dogs, then a hundred pigs, etcetera². However, it also concerned the absoluteness and overarching authority of the rules and regulations, as well as the flow of produce going uni-directionally towards the top of the hierarchical ladder and the world of spirits. All resources were heading into the feeding of spiritual forces, as well as into the freezing of material wealth – preferably in stone or wood. The materialised parallel society became the kind of regime of power that the Amerindian societies detested. It was not that the distribution to the spirits and ancestors was necessarily a ceding of power to a totality (a state form or authority), but the entire framing of the ceremonial cycle seems to have been absorbed in symbols of totality and encompassment – in the dangerous bodies of the great men themselves, their big penis sheaths, and their monumental standing stones and drums. It was not that this stood for a power to dictate or boss people around, but it stood for a power from above, enforced first and foremost through the power of taboo. There were endless strong taboos that segregated the world of men and women, taboos around what not to eat, and when not to have sex when involved in the *maki* (and that was always, it seems). The taboos were announced by the great men themselves, but the general impression is that the orders came

² I note that in the now disappearing counting system of Ambrym languages big numbers are conceptualised as ‘bundles’, the smallest being the bundle of ten (*sanghul*). The number hundred is either *wingil besanghul mokor* (lit. full up of tens coming together in one) or it can *getlamlam geho mokor* (lit. big one comes together).

from the material assemblage itself – from the stone dolmens and wooden drums in the sense that they would not be efficient if the taboos were not upheld. For instance a ritual diet for men should be hard, dry-roasted yams so that men and effigies should be hard and stone-like (Layard 1942, 355, 406, 514).

Like in the case of the Huaulu of Indonesia that Valeri writes about in *The Forest of Taboos* (2000), this was a system that had no external source of power: no chief, government, or bureau to legitimate or enforce these mechanisms. Instead, Valeri suggests that the very process of subject formation by means of taboo is sufficient to create the system of power by which Huaulu lives are ruled. If so, then the Huaulu, and the Malekulans alike, collapse the whole process of the generation of subjects and power into the domain of taboo: a form of rule that is implemented by the need to follow the procedures and restrictions of materials and technologies. The taboo addresses what is immediately and materially at hand. If you break the taboo the wooden drum will break, or the yams will not harden underground. It is a form of power that exercises its government not by authority of one man over another, but perhaps *by materiality over man* and simultaneously also by the overcoming of the material in order to reach the spiritual. The spiritual world managed to install a material skeleton to its state form, so to speak, and this became the ultimate measure of the good, aesthetically, morally and practically. The people became overwhelmed by their own wealth and excess and began to submit to it as a form of hierarchical government.

But, perhaps, we are going ahead of ourselves. For, the *maki* was never interpreted in this way by Layard, and it is difficult for us today to assess the quality of the ritual cycle as an authoritarian totality. After all, in 1914 the imagery of taboo as an alternative state order was never articulated. But my point here is that it was after this date, only in the later rebellion against the *maki* monumental graded society, that this began to be formulated by the rising church movement and political reactions against the ritual system. And it is in the historical transformation of this system that the aspect of wealth becomes even more clearly articulated – when people rejected male greatness, wealth and taboo as a state form and sought another way of life.

After Ritual Hierarchy

Since 1914, this model of masculine differentiation and spirituality has become historically entangled with new processes and understandings of *equality* introduced to the region. The adherence to a life absorbed in taboos and the ritual society, as described by Layard, seemed to disintegrate and wither away in the next decades. Of course, egalitarian values are always a potential of any hierarchical system, and as hinted above, the multiplicity of ritual forms in pre-war Vanuatu also testifies to a form of alternation between ritual values. There was clearly the potential in pre-war Vanuatu for one ritual form to be overthrown by the other. But into the 19th century, this potential for levelling was also actively encouraged by the ever-larger presence of colonial personnel and practices in the region, traders, missionaries and colonial government officials. Very generally, we might say that commodity trade introduced new general-purpose money as a platform for the equalisation of various valuables and that this neutralised the restricted circulation of ritual valuables. Ritual valuables were moved out of

customary symbolic exchange contexts so as to be exchanged at markets in the new towns and in much frequented harbours (see also Carrier and Carrier 1989). Christianity introduced to the region ideas of moral equality before God, and ethical freedom to choose a ‘new life’ (Burrige 1960). This movement was strongly in opposition to what was now indigenously coined as ‘kastom’ (see Lindstrom and White 1993; Lindstrom 1990). ‘Kastom’ now became the gloss for attacking what I have described above as male graded society, since in Christianity there was a promise of liberation from the influence and control that people related to the customary taboo polity. Christian emphasis on moral choice and individual self, combined with plantation labour, merged with local customary understandings of a difference-based autonomy and wealth-based spirituality. The establishment of a colonial administration included forms of indirect rule that appointed local village administrative leaders, who ensured villages were clean, roads clear, grass cut, and schools, aid posts and cemeteries tidy. The plantations also had their own systems of coercive administrative ranks and forms of discipline. In short new state forms emerged, which included institutions and techniques for coercing people to work and follow the routinised life of the global citizen (see Wagner 1974; Lattas and Rio 2011). This was a new egalitarian model of moral equality that had its own coercive power and technologies of surveillance and control. The introduced model refigured differences within a unitary moral frame where every person should be equal before the law of government and the laws of God and the Bible (for comparison with PNG, see Robbins 2004). In the imagery given by John Layard, social order and law was given by taboos and tangible material structures and memorials. These new developments into the 1930s cut right across those social orders by banning what seemed to be superstitious and primitive idolatry and sacrifice, but also by disrupting social life itself through forcing new demographic structures, work migration and interfering in former exchange networks. Law was upheld by God and Empire first and foremost and mediated by plantation managers and newly-appointed colonial chiefs and assessors through a new form of pastoral power and leadership.

Sacrifices for Distribution

Even though the *maki*'s role as an institution for transferring ancestral power from pigs to men has more or less disappeared today, people are still killing pigs at every important ceremony all across the Vanuatu islands. On Ambrym, all men must still kill pigs throughout life and provide them to their in-laws and their mother's relatives. Through these ceremonial sacrifices, they still uphold their own autonomy as a person free from the possibly devouring capacities of these relatives, in continuity with the devouring, monstrous ‘guardian ghost’ idea in the *maki* rituals described by Layard. However, we have to be open to the notion that what now appear as being ‘traditional’ ceremonial practices are hybrid social forms, which combine values from different registers of both old and new ideologies.

I will convey an example of how the ceremonial scene played out during my fieldwork in North Ambrym in 1999. It is chosen from among a great many ceremonies of this type in the area in the years of my fieldwork. A great man had died, and people were labouring for a hundred days for various ritual food sharing ceremonies. I take this as a typical event in the ceremonial life of North Ambrym, even though the scale of this particular event was larger, since it was the

ceremony of an influential chief who had gained a lot of fame and renown through being an Assessor for the colonial government. I chose the funeral of this renowned ‘*kastom* chief’, since it illuminates the contrast with Layard’s sacrificial ritual. The values and worldview of the ritual participants in 1914 were arguably very different from those of a ‘*kastom* chief’ in 1999.

On the day of the closing ceremony, a hundred days after the death of this influential chief, people readied themselves for the food distribution. The deceased’s brothers had assembled vast amounts of taro and yam, which were now on display outside his house. All the visitors from other villages had also brought yams, and the deceased’s agnates now set up one pile of yams and taro next to each of these piles made by the visitors. As the food distribution was about to begin, the brothers and sons of the deceased came dancing into the ceremonial ground. The elder brother, decorated with cycas-branches on his back, led the procession of dancers to the rhythm of a bamboo drum. Behind him came his four brothers dancing, and then a whole group of their sons entered, each carrying a huge yam. These immense yams, each probably up to two meters long and weighing around fifty kilos, were also decorated with cycas-branches. As these young men entered, each with their yam, brothers of the deceased stood up and clapped each yam with one hand and pronounced: ‘This yam is for in-law X’, and so on. Each recipient came forward to collect. The recipients were all senior men of Ambrym; each represented a hamlet that had some close relation to the chief. All male kin categories in other lineages were represented.

When the large yams had all been given away, brothers of the deceased began to distribute the numerous heaps of yams and taro. These contributions were so extensive that it was pointless for me to try to record all the relatives named. The gifts of food went to all kinds of named relatives of the chief, including his classificatory female kin, adding up to a great number of donations to most villages of North Ambrym (for a comparative list, see Patterson 1976, 337). The large yams were given to close male relatives, both to in-laws and most prominently to maternal relatives of the deceased, his mother’s brothers. But an important part of the yams in the food heaps were given to his classificatory daughters. The ceremonial focus slid away from the mother of the dead person and over to his daughters. The enormity of the food distribution demonstrated that the chief was a man who had much relationality, with several generations below him. These yams were not a return on something; they symbolised a freeing from previous relations and a pointing into new ones. In a sense they represented the giving away of the great man’s lineage capacity, distributing itself out in all directions to all other lineages, so that in the end each and every person on Ambrym was handed some tiny part of his distributed person. When the distribution of yams and taro concluded, two full-circle tusk pigs were killed, the first by one stroke from each of the men in the chief’s hamlet, the second by the deceased’s elder brother alone. This pig killing also ended the 100-day mortuary ceremony. The pigs were again handed to the chief’s relatives through mothers and daughters. Through this massive effort, the chief’s brothers had spread food around the whole of Ambrym, with the intention for it to be eaten, exchanged further or planted again.

In the marriage system of Ambrym, a man’s daughter marries his classificatory ‘mother’s brother’ (*mesong*), just as his son marries his classificatory ‘mother’ (*raheng*). By sharing food with classificatory daughters as much as classificatory mothers in these funeral sacrifices, there

is a doubling effect of spreading the contributions to larger parts for the kinship network. This maximising of distribution was very much in focus during these ceremonies during my fieldwork. There was very little attention paid to the spiritual journey of the dead or his or her status as becoming transferred to ancestorship. Instead, it was as if each sacrifice should be distributed and cut into such small pieces that every trace of them should be extinguished.

One can still observe ceremonies of exchange and pig-killings in north-central Vanuatu, but in contrast to the case of the initiation rituals a century ago described by Layard on Atchin and also figuring in the memory of people on Ambrym, there is no longer any accumulation of super-human status in ceremonies. On the contrary, I would argue, pigs are being killed, cows are being butchered and cooked, yams and taro in great quantities are being displayed and distributed and huge sums of money figure as bride price or ceremonial payment, but no longer for gaining spiritual power. They merely express and secure bilateral connections. Their intentionality has changed. The values of the *maki* hierarchy have been overtaken by the values of distribution, and this transformation itself is what is ritualised in these later ceremonies.

The build-up to ceremonial prestations is characterised by people from far and near coming to contribute to the gigantic display of food heaps, to promote their relatedness, and on conclusion, to walk back home with shares of this communal prestation. In these ceremonies the total wealth of the society is put on display and then distributed to relatives, so that small pieces of meat along with small bills of money and raw and cooked food will be available all the way back to their own villages and households. In many of these ceremonies, men give introductory speeches where they say that this ceremony is the ‘bare essentials of kastom’, that it represents ‘strong kastom’, but that they as organisers have cut out all ideas of spirituality, male power or secret ritual knowledge: all the things considered evil and un-Christian. Such speeches do invariably recount kin as a central feature of the activity, and discredit all the aspects of what is now called ‘devil’ across Vanuatu – the spirits or ancestors.

The ‘bare essentials’ that remain of custom are the killing of pigs and distribution of food. By killing off the pigs during these ceremonies, for circumcision or death for example, they explain that they merely “register” the event in a catalogue of kinship relations. When circumcised boys kill pigs for selected mother’s brothers they thereby register them as ‘special’ mother’s brothers, and this form of registration is agreed to be a primary purpose of such ceremonies.

In summary, of these ritual events on Ambrym we can say that ceremonial wealth has been transformed in its capacity of being effective social infrastructure. Whereas wealth used to enable the shift from the spiritual power of pigs to masculine power, it is now instead capacitating a chart of kinship and shifts of present relations between kin into future ones, and sacrifice has almost become a bureaucratic event. But we also notice that the ultimate value is no longer the wealth or infrastructure in the form of a permanent material body or an encompassing social order. It is rather the value of communally constructing *and deconstructing* this infrastructure as a temporary celebration, as very much an ‘earthly’ observance, in my experience.

A century ago, the men of northern Vanuatu would stage sacrificial pig killings for the instalment of their superhuman powers. In the development linked to Christianity, monetary value and colonial labour regimes, ceremonial life has made an almost unnoticeable U-turn

against this former model of taboo as government. What remains from the former model is perhaps a vision of personal autonomy and denial of individual leadership, but this is now achieved through an overall value placed on equality and equalisation as against a totalising, encompassing order. In this society there can be no real big men or chiefs, no idea of permanent, material wealth, and paradoxically enough, no enduring concept of estate or community.

In the instance described a century ago by John Layard in Atchin, the killing and eating of pigs made possible the transformation into a different, sublimated society. The display of material wealth amounted to a permanent and enduring scene of ancestral society – massive blocks of stone, monumental standing drums, big penis-wrappers, entire racks of thousands of pigs' tusks. Men entered into that massive material scenario in order to achieve a higher spirituality. A century later on Ambrym, very similar wealth is mobilised, displayed and sacrificed but for an inverse purpose – to disarm hierarchy and society's spiritual alternate state. The material wealth assembled for ceremonies - the display of wealth through pigs, tusks, money or food - is still a revelation of, or a glimpse into a possible world where their human relations take a different form, but now established only in order to dismantle and decapitate the potential for government, domination and hierarchy that is assumed to come with such wealth. People instead distribute and consume wealth as small meals of food. They thereby, in my view at least, digest wealth as an immediately reproductive form, for creating equal persons without rank.

What these two descriptions separated by a century have in common is that they use immobility and objectification to establish relations. Participants can see themselves encompassed as a relation to something superior – but whereas in the first case they constructed this superior realm as a permanent material presence that was enforced and upheld through taboos, in the second they use these moments of objectification of wealth to continually and ceremonially purify themselves of the holistic form through its distribution, splitting up and taking apart. From being a road into the sublime spiritual world, the sacrifice of pigs is instead turned entirely toward the deletion of possible differentiation. Annihilation of material wealth, not for communicating with a world beyond, but instead for the reaffirmation of lateral, distributed and future relations with those who are now children. We can probably say more generally that people in Vanuatu today dislike any form of accumulation or enduring form of wealth, and this issue is constantly also surfacing in relation to corruption in national politics. If we imagine the potential of wealth as an authoritarian, governmental and disciplinary form, Vanuatu has become a society against the state. In a sense, they have traded in the state of 'kastom' for the post-colonial nation state. The nation-state is one in which subjects are formed primarily through formal schooling, corporate leadership, and other forms of discipline, and which provides a solid platform for the general value of distribution and equality. But what is taking place on the local level within the ceremonial system is also taking place in the nation state system through parliamentary action, taxation and bureaucracy.

Due to their specific historical experience of a state form based on a system of taboos, spiritual masculinity, warfare, and differentiation, this is also what people still see wealth (and its accumulation) as a means to reestablish these prior forms of social organisation, and they thus perceive it to be evil. On the national level, people are also always sceptical of the way the

country is creating new wealth forms and new inequalities – through the construction of big resort hotels, or the arrival of international capitalists or church leaders seeking profit – and ideally people would have preferred to subject this domain to a ceremonial logic as well. In the capital of Port Vila, all ceremonies of national importance or in relation to agreements with other countries or businesses have an aspect of fulfilling this desire. After independence, Vanuatu set up a shadow government called the National Council of Chiefs or *Nagriamel*. Paradoxically, perhaps, this is not an organisation of aristocracy or ancestor cult. It is instead an organ that steps in to control the state order as well as relations between grassroots people who have conflicts, and to ensure that equality and justice is upheld and not overrun by new ‘masters’ – and neither new ritual orders or new managers in the colonial sense are allowed to emerge on the national scene. The national chiefs ensure peace, they settle conflicts, they guarantee that the ‘registration’ that occurs in ceremonies across the nation (like marriage, birth, death, circumcision) is properly upheld and they warrant, in a way, that its bureaucratic form is brought onto the level of the nation. These chiefs, for instance, set the standard bride price for the country. At all important moments of the nation-state’s events, they come onto the scene and kill pigs. For the instalment of a new parliament, a new president or prime minister or a new deal with a foreign country, they step forward and kill pigs in order to ‘register’ the event in the relational egalitarian cosmos of the nation state. Here we might see the contours of what leadership and bigmanship implies at the level of the modern Pacific nation. It is a bureaucratic institution that first and foremost keeps a register of events, statuses and rituals so that these can be kept within the egalitarian value of the Vanuatu post-colonial constitution.

Conclusion

Some more general comparative points can be made from these cases. We begin to see an argument that is formulated around a binary of wealth. On the one hand, we have a qualitative form, wherein the spiritual quality of the wealth is regulated by taboo. On the other hand, we have a quantitative wealth form, counted in numbers, and its efficacy for government also inheres in quantity. It offers itself to distribution and sharing and bureaucratic orders of accounting and registration. The first wealth form is what is being denied in Clastres’s case and in contemporary Vanuatu, since people do not want to submit to valuables with a spiritual quality and be integrated in an explicit social framing of ancestors or other forms of authority. We may suggest that in these cases there is a significant tension between value and forms of autonomy, since - as the Guarani chief pointed out - to live under a totality is to be incomplete. I suspect this form of articulation of egalitarianism – as that which undermines oneness and totalisation – runs through the modern era, from Guarani to Vanuatu at different times. According to this picture quantitative wealth becomes a particularly potent template for a universalised egalitarian value of distribution. Quantitative wealth negates totalisation because it comes in the form of one and one singular thing. In Vanuatuan ceremonies nowadays, every pig, every yam and every vatu bill has a tag on it indicating who it is being given to. Of course, quantitative wealth then also runs its own form of totalisation and government, which is the distributive formation itself, totalising persons and things into distributed singularities. I do not

mean to conclude that this quantitative wealth form present us with mono-ontology, spreading across the globe, but simply that idioms of distribution can be powerful in the face of authority in many different ways.

I believe there is an interesting continuity between the Austronesian speaking peoples of New Ireland, the Massim area and islands of Vanuatu grounded in their explicit attention towards the social as a process in need of reification, sacrifice and transformation. They have in common the making of material displays associated with ceremonial events, as well as a certain tendency towards building ceremonial displays of objects that call for destruction or dispersal, what Küchler (2002) calls a ‘sacrificial economy’, and they certainly have in common that the lengthiest, most elaborately-performed and most costly ceremonies relate to death. From this material we get a sense of how these islanders explicitly work instrumentally with ceremonial displays in order to express their attention towards such socially important issues as memory, loss, social replacement, and reproduction. In this sense we are looking at specific regional attitudes towards sacrifice, but we also tend to forget that what we see before us are societies with similar historical experiences and similar historical modes for responding to them– and especially focusing their Christian upbringing on the dangerous and totalitarian aspects of material displays, of state forms of government and customary forms of terror. It would seem that they have embraced certain liberatory aspects of the market economy, but have also seen the dangers inherent in allowing some men to appropriate the wealth generated by others.

However, we should perhaps also reset the bearings for what this region of ‘Melanesia’ stands for. We need to keep in mind that the region, along with other ‘ethnographic regions’, was an invention of the period of time when massive historical transformations were taking place in terms of war, anti-colonialism, emancipation for the indigenous, for women and for workers. The imagery constructed of these regions in modern anthropology have been the result of fieldwork undertaken in the 1960s and after, during the last dramatic decades of colonialism or in relation with the break with colonialism. No doubt, anthropologists have shared the anti-totalitarian sentiment that was of a global scale in those decades, perceiving, consciously or un-consciously, the authoritarian state as a dark shadow. Correspondingly, perhaps, we have carried out our descriptions and theorising inside an ideology of anti-state orders of distribution, equality, dividuality, reciprocity and freedom. This does not mean that what has been written about Melanesia was not actually about Melanesia. On the contrary, it was a very accurate picture of the region in those decades of anti-state and anti-wealth resentments. In this sense, anthropologists and informants have, after all, lived in the same world, despite claims to the contrary about radical difference as the methodological heuristic.

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