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The Good Lake, the Possible Sea:  
Ethics and Environment in Northern Vanuatu

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Jeffrey Wescott

Committee in charge:

Professor Joel Robbins, Chair  
Professor Paul K. Dayton  
Professor Richard Madsen  
Professor Steven M. Parish  
Professor Rupert Stasch

2012

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

## DEDICATION

For Melody, *tawa namuk tabe wun*

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I observe with great sadness the fact that my research, today and going forward, is without the extraordinary insight of Professor Donald Tuzin, a valued mentor and friend who passed away while I was in the field. During my very last day in San Diego before departing to the field, Don and I discussed fieldwork, Margaret Mead, and film at Bongiorno's in Solana Beach. Among the many words of advice he offered to me that

day, there was one thing about which he was most insistent: “Never lose your sense of wonder.” I won’t ever forget that.

My experience as a fellow in the IGERT program at Scripps Institution of Oceanography will always inform my conceptions of what is possible in interdisciplinary research. I am grateful to Sarah Mesnick at Southwest Fisheries Science Center for her guidance in the application phase, and to Dr. Nancy Knowlton for selecting me as the program’s anthropological “guinea pig.” Without the extraordinary support and advice of Penny Dockry Houston, the IGERT program’s Administrative Manager, I would still be hatching an ill-advised scheme to kayak my way from San Diego to Vanuatu. Penny found room for me in the program beyond my initial two-year stint, and it was through her kind assistance that I was able to complete my research.

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Ralph Regenvanu served as Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre during the early phase of my fieldwork. The road to Gaua would have been unthinkable without were it not for Ralph’s advice and clear guidance with respect to research procedures. It

was Kirk Huffman at the Australian Museum, Sydney who first alerted me to the possibility of Gaua, not only as a viable research site but as a community of kind and remarkable people. Professor Thorgeir Storesund Kolshus at the University of Oslo helped to set the Banks Islands context for my own work, and linguist extraordinaire Hans Schmidt provided me with his field materials on the Nume language, so essential to my entry into the East Gaua community. Mrs. Anne Naupa, Chief Librarian at Vanuatu's National Library, helpfully uncovered Gaua's presence in print for me on many occasions.

Chief Victor Wetias aided my transition into the Gauan community, and was a valued collaborator and cultural mentor. As my mind worked to learn about this remarkable place, the rest of me was well cared for by my family in the village of Aver. Papa John-Nape and Veve Rosion transformed me from stranger to kin before my first Gaua sunset, and Fred Mala, Filé Bruno, and Rina Rovot looked after me like a brother. My house in Aver stood about 30 meters from the most respected kastom man on Gaua. To Martin Womaras, and to his family, I offer a heartfelt *Varean velap sur savasav dul, ma na ve wun te kere kimi kel*. And to my dear friend, Father John Ashwin Wetelwur, I owe many a *wetsiqvat* of gratitude. Special thanks to Joses Togase for his keen insights into Gaua's environmental issues; to PCV Valerie Selden for helping me keep my head in the game early on; and, of course, to the people of Gaua—*tivönö*, *tavulun*, and everyone else—for their boundless generosity.

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My own possibility for the good life began with my parents, Neil and Diana Wescott. "Thanks" doesn't quite cut it in exchange for a lifetime of love and inspiration, so I'll leave it to the God of Loblaw's to convey my gratitude. And to my brother, Jason, I express two well-labeled hampers of my appreciation. At the other side of the house, Dolores and Ed Nastick have been tremendously supportive down the long road of my graduate career. To them and to Thomas College and Mary College I express my sincerest thanks for their kindness, but more so, for Melody.

Speaking of whom: OK, μμ...now what?

## VITA

- 1991 Bachelor of Arts, State University of New York, College at Fredonia
- 2001 Bachelor of Arts, State University of New York at Buffalo
- 2001-2003 Teaching Assistant, Department of Anthropology, University of California, San Diego
- 2003 Master of Arts, University of California, San Diego
- 2003-2005 Teaching Assistant, Eleanor Roosevelt College, University of California, San Diego
- 2005-2007 Fellow, Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship (IGERT), Scripps Institution of Oceanography
- 2012 Doctor of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Anthropology

Studies in Cultural Anthropology  
Professor Joel Robbins and Professor Donald Tuzin

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Good Lake, the Possible Sea:  
Ethics and Environment in Northern Vanuatu

by

Jeffrey Wescott

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Joel Robbins, Chair

People on the island of Gaua in northern Vanuatu have witnessed a series of demographic transformations over the past one hundred years, from Anglican mission-driven resettlement to more recent regional migrations from nearby islands. The distinctions which organized social life in Gaua's past have given way to a new division between indigenous landowning families and various communities of non-indigenous "renters," people from elsewhere permanently settled in the island's east. *Kastom*, the category of worldviews and associated practices regarded as autochthonous, has provided indigenous Gauans with a sense of cultural-historical continuity in the face of such extensive change. This dissertation examines two interrelated fields of action and experience—ethics and human-environment interaction—to address questions of how *kastom* provides continuity and how it is challenged by the exigencies of contemporary life in a small subsistence society in insular Melanesia.

Indigenous Gauans describe ethical capacities and responsibilities particular to them as kastom persons—as “persons of the place” who trace local tribal connections to land and to each other. They perceive shared human-ontological traits of situational risk and frailty as catalysts for ethical responsibility, fulfilled through expressions of care made possible through productive subsistence work. Situational vulnerabilities are moments of possibility for creating and maintaining social relations, producing meaningful futures for self and others, and affirming identities as autochthonous persons with unique moral attributes. Recent changes to subsistence regimes, owing to such factors as NGO-led conservation initiatives, shifting climatological patterns, and the introduction of new fishing technologies, have motivated concerns about another type of vulnerability—that of local ecologies to anthropogenic disturbance. Discourses of ecological vulnerability, disseminated by external agencies and locally transformed, tend to reduce Gaua’s residents to uniform statuses of “stakeholder” or “vulnerable subject.” These discourses and their associated practices erase ethically relevant distinctions among persons with respect to the productive capacities and responsibilities comprehended as kastom. For indigenous Gauans, kastom emerges as the precarious space for possibility—the locus of struggle for cultural-historical continuity in a changing social and ecological landscape.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Cyclone Funa's mind was its own. In January 2008, people on the island of Gaua in the Pacific nation of Vanuatu spent weeks removing debris from their storm-damaged gardens and repairing the roofs of houses which only days before had provided reliable security from the nearly constant rain. Other storms announce themselves, my Gauan interlocutors observed. Two days before a storm's arrival, frigatebirds (*mantoda*) darken Gaua's skies with their enormous wings as they fly south from their familiar mid-summer perch further north in the Banks Islands. The northeast morning sky turns a light milky red, "like the blood of fish" as one woman told me. The wind shifts from *undu* to *togola*—from a southeasterly to a northerly origin, bringing oppressive humidity and, this time of year, heavy rains. With Cyclone Funa, none of this happened. The storm displayed the quality of *matev*, a capriciousness and cunning typical of *human* activity. Even Cyclone Uma, the most devastating tropical storm in collective Gauan memory, announced its intentions through the usual ecological cues before landing in February 1987. I was told that Cyclone Funa was different because so much is different now—the seasonal winds, the migrations of birds, and even the ways Gauans think about their environment's once-predictable place in the human order.

In the storm's wake, families gathered to help other families remove the trees that had been uprooted and dropped onto nearby houses. In one northeastern village, after men had sectioned a fallen oak tree with a chainsaw, a woman pointed to the cross-section and said to me, "You can tell how old the tree is by counting the rings.



Did you know that?” I replied that I did. She then asked me, “Are there machines in America that can read the ages of people? I do not know when I was born. That’s true of many people here.”

Having always taken such self-knowledge for granted, I asked the woman what she may gain by learning her true age. “We want to understand our place,” she replied.<sup>1</sup> “I understand my place when I’m looking after someone else. Just like now. I learn that I am kastom. A real kastom woman of Gaua. But I do not know if that is enough.” She explained: “When storms come to Gaua we think about who we must look after. Can we build them a house in the bush? Can we find food for them? It’s a lot of work—it’s very hard. These things are possible if we know things about ourselves,” the woman concluded. “If we know things about ourselves, if we know our place, we can show care to others. We have a ‘tomorrow’ (*‘Amaren’ namgid aben*).”

### **The argument**

My goal in this dissertation is to locate the ethical in the environmental—to examine how people in a small subsistence society in insular Melanesia link their interactions with the natural environment to conceptions of the good. A difficult history of disease and migration has profoundly shifted the cultural demography of the island of Gaua, forcing its communities to confront changes to the everyday practices by which they make their living. As a site for exploring the multiple currents of cultural and ecological change, Gaua is well-suited to the political-economic approaches that the preponderance of such studies has taken in recent years. Although they commonly reflect on their perceived isolation from broader regional and global systems, Gauans

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<sup>1</sup> In the original Nume: “Kama ve mörös te ker liñliñi ververe namma.”

nonetheless acknowledge the effects of those systems and their participation in them in shaping the futures of households and communities. Yet within this changing space which they plainly apprehend, embedded within multi-level relations of power, Gauans continue to find their daily interactions with marine and terrestrial resources to be ethical matters. Subsistence and its related practices and discourses are fields for social and ethical production, guiding interpersonal relations and authenticating indigenous identities in a shifting demographic landscape. Here ethics is about the production of possibility, the shaping of viable futures on local terms while interconnecting with a changing world and the novel opportunities and limits it brings. Environmental conservation initiatives implemented by state and non-governmental agencies are foremost among the transformations Gauans now confront and which they comprehend within the cultural and ethical orders they identify as indigenous and perceive as imperiled. This dissertation contributes to the broader research goals of ecological anthropology by placing ethics at the forefront of analysis.

This work is situated within the emergent field of anthropological ethics, by which I mean the study of ethics as a particular kind of cultural-descriptive enterprise. Only a decade ago, researchers entering the field of ethics found a limited number of publications in anthropology to inspire and inform their conceptual and analytical frameworks (e.g., Brandt 1954; Read 1967; Burridge 1969; Parish 1994; Howell 1996). It is more and more the course of expectation to find in the latest editions of anthropological journals at least one article examining the ethics of a community, or a review of a new anthology that takes “ordinary ethics” (Lambek 2010), moral reasoning (Sykes 2008), or the moral systems of an ethnographic region (e.g., Barker 2007) as its

focus. The proliferation of AAA (American Anthropological Association) sessions addressing the subject of ethics or morality (94 sessions in 2011) attests to the interest and excitement of this growing field, and intimates that there is more to learn about how people think, feel, act, and communicate within their variably stable conceptions of the good life. The present dilemma—a fortunate one—is carving out one’s own space within this growing and dynamic field.

By “ethics,” I mean the practices and related beliefs and discourses that mutually inform conceptions of the good life. I follow Douglas Rogers (2009) in understanding ethical practices to be “historically situated and [played] out in an often-competitive arena of partially discordant sensibilities” (11). The notion of ethics I adopt takes awareness of the presence of others, and obligations to others, as necessary elements. The collective “arena” where sensibilities alternately merge and conflict is a priority for this ethics: moral experience and self-fashioning are best comprehended not only as the dynamic processes of interpersonal encounters, but also as more or less shared ideas of what it means to live a life of well-being and positive orientation to the future.

For the people of Gaua with whom I lived for a total of fifteen months between 2007 and 2011, conceptions of the good life and regard for others coalesce in a broader concern for what is possible in life. Ethics in the Gaua context is about the disclosure and production of possibility, the shaping of a temporality in which ideas and desires of what can and ought to be in intra-personal and collective life can transpire. The everyday activities through which Gauans realize possibility are their interpersonal encounters—providing acts of care which transform distant “strangers” into familiar

“kin”—and their interactions with the environment, where the material production necessary to achieve interpersonal goals is secured. Otherness is essential to this ethics of possibility: for reasons I will examine in detail, ontological and cosmological conceptions of otherness in humans and in the environment guide the socially and ethically productive practices of the people of East Gaua who self-identify as indigenous “persons of the place” (*tivönö*, *manples*).

Much of the Gauan struggle for possibility is motivated by desires to maintain what they described to me as a “true” indigenous identity (*matev nam tivönö vidun*) within the flux and turmoil of cultural and environmental change. The opening account of Cyclone Funa’s arrival on Gaua reveals this struggle for such a valued sense of possibility. My interlocutor described self-knowledge as both the catalyst and the consequence of her other-regarding acts, and expressed her worry that the possibilities for her “understanding her place” as a *kastom* woman were predicated on how attuned she was to the vulnerabilities of others. The relation of possibility to others and otherness is captured by Vincent Crapanzano’s (2004) observation that “through the encounter with the other, one comes to an acknowledgement, a recuperation, in a somewhat different register, of oneself and one’s world” (12). On Gaua, the acknowledgement and recuperation of what is possible are part and parcel of everyday ethics.

Ethics is not the sole focus of my dissertation; it is rather the approach I take to exploring problems familiar to the field of ecological anthropology. I am not concerned with contesting political ecology’s ascendancy as anthropology’s preferred set of concepts and methods for investigating issues of human-environmental interaction. I

follow geographer Paul Robbins' (2004) assertion that "environmental change and ecological conditions are the products of political process" (11). However, if ecological anthropology takes as a primary goal an understanding of the motivations for human actions and discourses enacted in environmental contexts, then an approach based solely in political ecology is deficient. I take Gauans' ethical struggles with otherness and possibility as the conceptual (and even ontological) underpinning from which the political and economic dimensions of their environmental struggles can be analytically grasped. Gauans' encounters with their environment, from the increasingly human-like unpredictability of cyclones to meditations on what is knowable in human and non-human nature, attest to the pervasive ethical significance of their interactions with the natural world.

In summary, the goals of my dissertation are to fill gaps of anthropological knowledge in the areas of ethics and environment. Firstly, I examine how otherness is integral to the ethical deliberations and experiences of a Melanesian community (cf. Stasch 2009). A focus on possibility as the temporal and motivating dimensions of ethics complements this concern for otherness. While otherness and possibility are recurring elements in anthropological ethics, their precise effects are infrequently explored in studies of embodied moral dispositions (e.g., Zigon 2010), processes of self-fashioning (e.g., Faubion 2011) or the ethical dimensions of sensory experience (e.g., Throop 2010). Secondly, I respond to a significant gap of knowledge as concerns ethical practice and experience in ecological anthropology. I explore the potential for an ecology that is neither apolitical nor ethically void by focusing on the intersubjective dimensions of the subsistence practices and conservation experiences of my

interlocutors. Lastly, this is the first ethnographic study of the island of Gaua since the decade before World War I. So much has changed on Gaua in the wake of depopulation, migration, and Vanuatu's independence that the social organizations and worldviews captured by early ethnographers bear little resemblance to what I witnessed in the near-present day. Notwithstanding, Gauans themselves are ultimately the rightful holders of their present as well as their past; it is my hope that they will find their own possibilities within these pages.

### **Recovering *dunamis* in *ēthiká***

While anthropological ethics grows apace, the discipline has yet to announce the arrival of possibility as a distinct field of inquiry through a published anthology or a journal special edition. The endeavor of cultivating a space for possibility in anthropology is not without potential points of departure. We may well begin by recognizing the creation of an obligation to receive in Marcel Mauss' (1990) structure of gift exchange as the marking out of a new space for possibility. The uncertainty of the outcome recovers what Pierre Bourdieu (1990:99) identifies as "the simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise" than expected by the "mechanical laws" of reciprocity. The immediate importance of these insights lies in the notion of the gift as the active reordering of temporality, rather than a mere disclosure of existing options for action.

More recently, Vincent Crapanzano (2004) pursues possibility through the human imagination, exploring its capacities for enablement and sense-making which Charles Taylor captures in his rendering of the social imaginary (Crapanzano 2004:7; Taylor 2002; see also Taylor 2004). Much of Crapanzano's thesis of imaginative

possibility pivots on his notion of “frontier,” the dimension of experience that “resists articulation—[even] disappears with articulation” (18). Contemplating the future, humans imaginatively “transcend (*dépasser*) the immediacy of the present instant in order to grasp a future that is at first indistinct” and that may transpire—or may not—as it comes into a “reflexive tension with the flow of articulate experience” (19). Jane Guyer (2009) approaches possibility similarly through an appraisal of its temporal horizons, and argues that conceptions of human possibility have provided anthropology with its “stable, recurrently amplifying center” through a succession of stages in the discipline’s growth (356). Guyer finds much of contemporary anthropological concern for human possibility as the work of opening “vistas” for liberation; but she affirms that the discipline’s singular contribution to uncovering horizons of possibility lies in the full expanse of its ethnographic worlds, including its classic canon (367).

“Possibility is an ethical stance, demanding courage,” Guyer observes. “It is [also] an aesthetic of coexistence, demanding discernment; it is also a vision of politics, demanding study and steadfastness” (2009:363). I am careful in the present context to interpret possibility in Guyer’s scheme as an object of study, not as a motivating trope for a politically engaged anthropology, which it surely is as well. Possibility as an “ethical stance” of courage brings us closer to conceiving of “frontier” and “horizon” as the productions of interpersonal experience. Michael Carrithers (2005) views anthropology as “a moral science of possibilities,” based in the observation that “everyone...is possessed of moral-cum-patience (a term which recognizes that we both do and are done by) and a moral sense which is informed by but never determined by the circumambient moral reasoning of others” (2005:434). Carrithers lays the

groundwork for an anthropology that sees possibility as a striving, one with a distinctly ethical cast. Human capacities for persuasion, rhetoric, and restraint constitute a “moral aesthetic” of possibility-making, calling to mind Crapanzano’s imaginative transcendence of the present and Guyers’ moments of ethical courage and relational discernment. Possibility is created as well as imagined; its conceptions of frontiers and interpersonal horizons reveal a temporal dimension which is yet underdeveloped in anthropological ethics.

One strategy for bringing possibility into anthropological ethics is to recover its latent or at best underemphasized presence in the field’s most favored theories and concepts. A comprehensive overview is well beyond the present scope; instead I briefly consider the ethical projects of two highly influential figures in anthropological ethics—Aristotle and Foucault. Introduced to the field primarily through the formative work of Michael Lambek (2000, 2008, 2010) and others (e.g., Widlock 2004; Mahmood 2005; Faubion 2010), Aristotelian virtue ethics explores the cultivation and application of the personal qualities most suitable to living a good life as it is locally conceived. As summarized elsewhere (e.g., Rorty 1980), one acts virtuously either through the proper exercise of reason or, if time-constrained and unable to deliberate on a course of action, through pre-reflective dispositions. Aristotle’s ethical person is guided by a properly developed character rather than rules or evaluations of the consequences of actions (Rorty 1980:2). The suite of virtuous dispositions coalesce in *phronesis*, which Lambek (2000) describes as the “continuous fine-tuning of our actions to suit our understanding of the context and circumstances in order to achieve the general aim of human flourishing” (316). This “general aim” is an everyday pursuit: it is the “ordinary ethics”



toward which Lambek means to direct anthropology's focus. He likens the ordinary to Aristotle's concept of *actuality*, "a life lived for itself" without specific aims and goals wherein the simple act of living is ethical in itself (2010:3).

Despite actuality's ostensible focus on the present, the ordinary ethics which Lambek intends for anthropology is not temporally bound. This ethics "recognizes human finitude but also hope [and] encompasses the inevitable cracks and ruptures in the actual and the ubiquity of responses to the ever-present limits of criteria and paradoxes of the human condition" (2010:4). Here Lambek crucially associates possibility with ethics in the Aristotelian scheme, but underplays possibility as an intentional, creative pursuit. In the *Prior Analytics* (1989), Aristotle identifies actuality as the first term in a dichotomy of possibility-as-fulfilled (*entelechia*) and as-unfulfilled (*dunamis*). He observes in the *Metaphysics* (1992) that "for any possibility (*dunamis*) to become real and not just possible, requires reason, and desire (*orexis*) or deliberate choice (*proairesis*)" (1048a). Possibility is a quality inherent to humans as it is to all things in the universe, and reason, desire, and choice are the distinctly human traits which transform unfulfilled *dunamis* into fulfilled *entelechia* in the realm of human activity. Viewing the Aristotelian picture as a whole, the same qualities are evident in the movement from *dunamis* to ethics, or *ēthiká*. Possibility attains an ethical cast when it ruptures the actual—things as they are—toward the reaffirmation of what is found to be virtuous and indicative of the good life. The virtuous person has the "productive disposition" to enact the "coming-into-being," to make possible what is both good and what is in one's own capacity to produce (*NE* 1140a1-1140a18). Aristotle situates this human capacity for the production of possibility—the movement of the potential into

the actual—“within the sphere of what can be otherwise.” Choice, as directed toward such an end, lies at the confluence of possibility and the good.

The Classical Greek Era of which Aristotle is a dominant figure informs the work of Michel Foucault at several key moments of his intellectual project. In *The Order of Things* (1994), Foucault interrogates the assumptions underlying modern scientific and other forms of knowledge and their related discourses. He reimagines Plato’s and Aristotle’s notion of “episteme” to uncover the historical conditions of possibility for such knowledge which largely go unnoticed. The tacit assumptions of the episteme establish the conditions of possibility for human subjectivity as well; they in fact limit our very comprehension of subjectivity. Later in his career, Foucault attempts to recover suppressed possibilities for subjectivity by appealing to the ethical practices of the pre-Christian Classical Era. He grounds his ethics in the practices of the Athenian citizen; these are technologies (or techniques) of the self which carve out spaces for freedom from the pervasive coercions of power and its episteme (Foucault 1990; see also Davidson 1986; Faubion 2001).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben (1993) observes that “the being most proper to humankind is one’s own possibility or potentiality” (43). He finds that conditions for human possibility are established by regimes of *bio-politics*, political and epistemic forces which define “human” against that which is “nonhuman.” Contrary to Foucault’s assertion that the eighteenth century marked the beginning of “the production of a biopolitical body” by sovereign power, Agamben argues that in truth it extends to the Athenian *polis* of Aristotle (Edkins 2007:75). Martha C. Nussbaum (1986) observes that the slave in Aristotle’s polis is “deprived of choice, therefore of something essential for living well. A slave is a human being who does not live according to his own choice” (348). Although Nussbaum here identifies the slave as a “human being,” it seems plausible that one who lives deprived of choice can be said to be without possibility in Agamben’s sense.

The social history surrounding techniques of the self in Foucault’s Classical-Era-inspired ethics raises a problem. Possibility and choice are excluded from the lives of persons who are most in need of them for their liberating potential. I raise the matter not to suggest a limitation in Foucault’s ethics, but to reinforce anthropology’s capacity for destabilizing the episteme. Agamben’s historical correction alerts us to the need to interrogate epistemic assumptions *within ethnographic contexts*—the categories of possibility and non-possibility and how those distinctions are reproduced and contested.

Foucault's notion of self-fashioning and his four-fold schema of morality have been well-represented recently in anthropological ethics (e.g., Laidlaw 2002; Paxson 2004; Robbins 2004; Mahmood 2005). The imperatives of freedom which motivate Foucauldian ethics inform Naisargi N. Dave's (2010) examination of queer activism in India. Dave's analysis is guided by Foucault's apprehension that "the depth of [sovereign] power's penetration" leads to "a recognition of the depth of possibilities for transgression, critique, and creativity" (371). Her larger project is to understand activism as the nexus between "imaginative possibility" and the "moral imperative" of socially binding rules and conventions (374). Dave's activist interlocutors expand their possibilities for possibility within a hegemonic gendering episteme through liberating practices of the self.

Virtue ethics and technologies of the self offer the recovery of possibility in anthropological ethics. As with any conceptual or analytical apparatus, we know their effectiveness only through their application to ethnographic contexts. There is in my view, however, a potential disadvantage to situating Gauan ethics fully within either of these influential models: their conceptions of otherness are underdeveloped or at best insufficiently considered. How is self-love of the virtuous person, which is praiseworthy if it aims for the good of the community, constituted by otherness? Are encounters with otherness necessary for the proper development of phronesis in an intersubjective world? As for Foucault, he insists that "the care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others" (1997:287). Here Foucault appears to regard caring for others as supplementary to care of the self; in any event, he leaves open the question of how the

otherness of others is constitutive of freedom. Additionally, while one achieves self-mastery through “listening to the lessons of a master” (287), it is unclear what forms of otherness a master introduces to one’s ethical project.

Introducing otherness into anthropological ethics clarifies what I mean by “possibility.” Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson, two important figures in recent inquiries into the temporality of social processes (e.g., Hodges 2008), have inspired a conception of possibility as merely a replica of the real, an entity that mirrors that which is real yet has no existence of its own. For this reason, possibility is supplanted within these conceptual frameworks with *virtuality*, conditions for being which are as ontologically sound as the real but which have yet to become actualized in the world (Deleuze 1991:96). Deleuzian and Bergsonian conceptions of virtuality and possibility are well beyond any proper synopsis here; I introduce the notion of possibility’s emptiness to suggest the need to anchor it to firmer ontological ground in ethnographic analysis. Within anthropology, “the virtual” has been directed toward this end, described as “a new way, not only of thinking about possibilities...but of turning thought into ‘the real’” (Guyer 2009:365; Rabinow 2008). In this approach, I understand the virtual as the synthesis of *possibility*—states of affairs which may come about through certain conditions existing in the present, and *capacity*—the ability to effect particular states of affairs through action. I wish to retain the Deleuzian notion of the internal heterogeneity of present conditions—a “difference in itself” (Bell 2006:171) that allows for an emergent state of affairs unlike conditions as they appear in the present. In this dissertation, conditions in the world are apprehended as possibility by the moral imagination and acted upon by the varying capacities of ethical agents. What

motivates new ways of thinking about and realizing possibility is the presence of otherness.

Recall Crapanzano's observation that acknowledgement and recuperation of self and world "in a somewhat different register" come about through encounters with others. Anthropological ethics is deepened by focusing on the nature of the transition from one register to another, which for Crapanzano is the moment of possibility—engaging the "frontier" through appraisals of one's own experiences as a changed person, a process of self-appraisal richly examined elsewhere by Parish (2008). Others provide the frontiers of self-fashioning, virtuous development, and other processes of ethical becoming. It is more precise to say that *otherness* is that frontier: on Gaua, the moral imagination's encounters with otherness move possibility beyond a mere replica of the real and into one of multiple alternative futures. I accept the Deleuzian-Bergsonian claim that "possibility is itself a null process" (Ayache 2010:333). For this reason I comprehend Gauans' own conceptions of the possible within the framework of encounters with otherness, as such encounters take place within imaginings and acts that are culturally and historically informed (but not determined).

In ways that call to mind Crapanzano's "frontier," Rupert Stasch (2009) identifies the "affective, evaluative, or self-reflexive component to otherness" as an encounter with the strange. The encounter is a participation "in some sort of reflexive questioning, definition, or redefinition of one's familiar world-apprehending categories and one's sense of position in a categorical order" (15). Stasch describes "social otherness" as a variation of the foregoing encounter where the other is an "acting being" whose "consciousness is part of that being's otherness" (16). Self-evaluation, affect, and

the alterity of consciousness are all brought to bear in Gauan conceptions of otherness. It is the motivating core of an ethics which takes the encounter with the other as an opportunity to create possible futures. This process of possibility-making—of engaging through one’s capacities the conditions necessary for a certain kind a future to transpire—occurs in everyday social commerce with others, but also in Gauans’ interactions with their environment.

### **Old spaces in the “New Ecologies”**

Ecological (or environmental) anthropology is a well-established field in contrast to the relative infancy of anthropological ethics. While its history is too lengthy and diverse to examine here, an assessment of its current trends may well begin with the contributions to the Duke University Press series titled “New Ecologies of the Twenty-First Century.” Anthropology is one among several contributing disciplines to the series, which ranges from single-authored ethnographies to area- or issue-focused anthologies. The series editors explain their objectives:

We seek to join critical conversations in academic fields about nature, globalization, and culture with intellectual and political conversations in social movements and among other popular and expert groups about environment, place, and alternative socio-natural orders. Our objectives are to construct bridges among these theoretical and political developments in the disciplines and in nonacademic areas and to create synergies for thinking anew about the real promise of emergent ecologies. [Escobar and Rocheleau, in Biersack and Greenberg 2006: ix]

To date, there have been ten published volumes in the series, each joining “critical conversations” within the comprehensive scope outlined in the series statement.

Reviewing these important and synergistic works, one finds a strong inclination toward the field of political ecology in anthologies (e.g., Biersack and Greenberg 2006; Dove et

al 2011) and ethnographies (e.g., West 2006, Escobar 2008) situated between “local” environmental crises and global political and economic forces. With a committed focus on environmental politics in evidence, it is not immediately clear how ethics may hope to find a viable space in the new, emergent ecologies.

We may attribute political economy’s primacy over ethics in ecological anthropology to factors such as its perceived practical advantages for research design and its development and privileged status in anthropology more generally. A more implicit motivation may be the uncritical stance that the political is ontologically prior to the ethical, an assumption which has not gone unchallenged (e.g., Evens 1999:6, 2005:55-6). The methodological prioritizing of political ecology is similarly problematic, as attempts to locate ethical experiences and motivations through preexisting political-economic frameworks threaten to reduce ethics to an epiphenomenon of power relations and global capitalistic processes. Finding a space for ethics in ecological anthropology does not require making the untenable move of excising the political from the ethnographic project, but directing the focus toward articulations between power and conceptions of the good within and across the multiple sites which the new ecologies take as “the field.”

The field’s own existing literature may suggest a way forward for an ethics-based approach. While Edvard Hviding (1996) situates his ethnography of Marovo (Solomon Islands) maritime practices and knowledge within a framework familiar to political ecology, he offers insight into indigenous conceptions of otherness and relationality and how these distinctly ethical concerns mutually inform subsistence and other economic activities. Arun Agrawal’s (2005) contribution to the “New Ecologies”

series examines subject-making within the contexts of historical and contemporary environmental politics in northern India. His critical explorations of the “environmental subject” involve notions of caring for the environment, and of the relationship between this ethical stance and the regulatory practices to which people commit in their environmental-political setting. Another contributor to the series, Paige West (2006), invokes Crapanzano’s notion of “hinterland” to describe how the Gimi of Papua New Guinea imaginatively produce space and the “pure possibility” it entails—how they “imagine each other and the forest, the past and the future” (151)—within the context of NGO-driven conservation projects.

As for its classic canon, ecological anthropology does well to avoid declaring its irrelevance, notwithstanding the evolving relations researchers have with concepts like “homeostasis” and “the sacred” (e.g., Dove et al 2011). Studies of human-nonhuman sociality (e.g., Brightman 1993; Descola 1994), systems of botanical and zoological classification (e.g., Karim 1981; Valeri 2000), and links between ritual and ecological processes (Rappaport 1984) evince the anthropological canon’s “potentially endless sources of ideas and provocations if we just work hard enough to tease them out” (Guyer 2009:362; see also Graeber 2007). As well there are themes of environmental ethics and values (e.g., Simmons 1993; Strang 1997), material well-being as the pan-cultural “master-value” (Casimir 2008), and imagined futures of lives lived within local environments (Tsing 2005; Kirsch 2006) which evidence more explicit articulations of the ecological and the ethical. The issue then is not whether ethics is a viable focus for ecological anthropology, but how it can contribute to the dominant research interests and goals which currently take political ecology as their guiding paradigm.



I examine Gaua as an environmental problem in two distinct but interrelated spaces: subsistence and conservation. The complex fusion of effects brought about by inter-island migrations and changing political, economic, and technological interactions with the wider world have transformed the ways in which this small subsistence society makes its living. Emergent practices and discourses of environmental conservation have arrived—rather late in comparison to other places in the region (e.g., West 2006 in Papua New Guinea; Lowe 2006 in Indonesia)—in the form of government-instituted fisheries laws and NGO-managed projects aimed at infusing local resource management regimes with Western ecological knowledge. Changes to local modes of subsistence, and the impositions of an incipient conservation-style ethics, challenge the political structure of a society which continues to recognize local chiefs as both arbiters of land disputes and authorities on all matters of cultural authenticity and propriety. Yet these are problems of ethics as well—of obligations to contribute to the well-being and viable futures of others through fishing, gardening, and copra production, and of maintaining cosmological distinctions in the face of conservation categories that erase such distinctions and reduce Gaua to an undifferentiated “stakeholder community.” An ethics which takes as its focus the possibilities of subsistence and conservation in the ongoing social lives of a community of people is worthy of (re)entry into the emergent ecologies of anthropology.

### **Into the “ethnographic vacuum”**

My first thoughts about possibility had little to do with local conceptions of ethics; rather they concerned Gaua’s viability as an ethnographic site. Gaua had long been a high-priority field project for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC), the

organization based in Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila, which works with foreign researchers and local fieldworkers to collect and archive ethnographic and archaeological data. Ralph Regenvanu, who was VCC Director during the early period of my fieldwork, described Gaua to me as “an ethnographic vacuum” compared to most of the other island communities throughout the archipelago. Regenvanu's metaphor conveyed to me both the long history of ethnographic neglect of the island and the loss of much of what Gauans had described for some time as “real kastom” (*stret kastom*), pre-colonial “tradition” as it is locally understood and often lamented in its present-day absence. Given the well-established narrative of precipitous cultural loss, and the VCC's serious commitment to an ethnography of Gaua both past and present, the possibilities for a project taking ethics and environment as its focus were initially uncertain.

Robert Henry Codrington conducted the first ethnographic and linguistic surveys of Gaua during his tenure with the Melanesian Mission on Norfolk Island between 1863 and 1887. His comprehensive surveys of the languages (1885) and cultural beliefs and practices (1881, 2005[1891]) of Banks Islands societies have provided a valuable cultural-historical context to present-day research in the region (e.g., Vienne 1984; Kolshus 1999, 2007; François 2005; Hess 2010).<sup>3</sup> In 1914, the English anthropologist and psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers published a two-volume compendium featuring ethnographic data from the Banks and other societies in insular Melanesia. The Swiss anthropologist Felix Speiser soon followed with *Two Years with*

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<sup>3</sup> The Banks Islands or Banks Group combine with the Torres Islands immediately to the north to comprise Vanuatu's TORBA Province.

*the Natives in the Western Pacific* (1913; see also 1996), providing rich data of Gaua's material culture including remarkable photos of the ritual houses (*gamel*, *nakamal*) of men's and women's secret societies. From the years before World War I to the mid-2000s, however, Gaua was mostly forgotten as a site for focused ethnographic study.<sup>4</sup> The lost history of ninety-plus years invoked in Regenvanu's metaphor was exacerbated by the cultural and human losses brought about by a staggering population decline.

I entered the community of East Gaua in February 2007, and purchased a house in the village of Aver, which with the adjacent village of Lembot totaled 124 persons and 23 households (in 2009). Aver is the home of Victor Wetias, the Paramount Chief of Gaua and my VCC collaborator, and of Martin Womaras, the octogenarian father of my adoptive Gauan mother and my richest source of information about Gaua's past.<sup>5</sup> As the work of collecting data with Chief Victor, Martin and others progressed I found my initial assumption that Gaua kastom was more or less a thing to be lost or recovered to be much too simplistic.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Exceptions to this lacuna of Gaua research include one-week visits by the British biologist John R. Baker in the mid-1920s and the British explorer Tom Harrisson in 1935 (accompanied by Baker's wife). See Kolshus 2007 (p. 37) for an account of the similar ethnographic history of nearby Mota.

<sup>5</sup> "Paramount Chief" is the title by which Chief Victor is often referred to in East Gaua. In 2007, the chiefs of Gaua selected Victor as a "Gaua indigenous leader representative" or "kastom chief" of Aver and Lembot villages. In 2008 the Gaua Council of Chiefs appointed him as their representative in the Malvatumauri, the National Council of Chiefs of Vanuatu, for the islands of Gaua, Mere Lava, and Merig.

<sup>6</sup> I want to anticipate a potential reading of the VCC research objective, and the present dissertation, as "salvage ethnography" (Gruber 1959:6), the work of recording cultural practices to save them from extinction. The Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy (Section 2) states that "the people of Vanuatu recognise the importance of knowing, preserving and developing their kastom and history"; and that "kastom belongs to individuals, families, lineages and communities in Vanuatu. Any research on kastom must, in the first instance, respond to and respect the needs and desires of those people to whom the kastom belongs." The research agenda in Vanuatu is designed to meet the needs and objectives of the local communities to whom "kastom" or "culture" belong. Researchers do not undertake the collection of cultural knowledge, practices, and artifacts for the assumed intrinsic value of preservation alone.

My interlocutors described for me the demise of ritual grade-taking, and the loss of men's societies that met openly in villages and secretly in the bush (Speiser 1996; Codrington 2005). With these traces of a cultural past resigned to the margins of collective memory, indigenous East Gauans, or *tivönö* (persons of the place) in their Nume language, find certain ways of thinking and interpersonal relating as that which is properly "kastom." Persons who are *tivönö* make the most of their access to, and productive knowledge of, land and its resources to care for others—to establish relations, however enduring, based on generosity and respect. While occasionally invoking the "strong kastom" of ancestors as their guiding principle for right action in their everyday lives, it is Gaua's lake, Letes, which *tivönö* identify as their inspiration to meet certain socially productive ends. In our discussions, Letes emerged as a transcendent symbol of autochthonous ethical being within a changing and frequently frustrating human landscape. In the lake and in the everyday kastom of caring for others, I found early in my fieldwork the essential markers of reflexive indigenous identity from which to begin to reconstruct an ethics of Gaua.

Kastom was pivotal to my other intended research focus, Gauans' interactions with their environment. Shortly after I learned of Gaua's status as a high-priority ethnographic site, I read a project proposal submitted by the Vanuatu government's Environment Unit to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank. The stated goals of the project were to encourage, strengthen, and provide ongoing support for "community-based conservation initiatives" (VEU 2004:23). Gaua was one of three islands in Vanuatu chosen as a project site. In July and August 2006 I worked with project members to construct a biodiversity database at the VCC in Port

Vila. It was there that I first heard about Gaua's growing cultural divisions and their effects on potential local conservation efforts. The environment on Gaua is a cultural and ethical problem, a perceived disrespect for landowners' efforts to maintain a sustainable resource base in the face of growing indifference toward the socially productive capacities of fisheries, gardens, and forests. When I arrived on Gaua six months later, I found communities confronting other related issues, including a growing uneasiness that the reliable patterns of wind, sea, and seasonality were becoming increasingly difficult to follow. At the center of all of these problems of conservation, climate change, and cultural difference I found people expressing their desires to continue making a living for themselves and others and to secure a unique sense of local identity. *Kastom* in its singular role as the nexus of identity, practice, and conceptions of the good in *tivönö* life would serve as the departure point for my investigations of human-environment interactions.

In my opening account of Cyclone Funa and its aftermath, a woman observes that helping others is the obligation of "a real Gaua *kastom* woman" (*tawa tivönö vidun*). As has been documented elsewhere (e.g., McClancy 1983; Bonnemaïson 1994; Miles 1998; Bolton 2003), *kastom* as it is articulated throughout Melanesia is not easily contained within categories like "traditional" and "modern." Jonathan Friedman (2002) argues that many anthropologists misinterpret uses of the term *tradition* as signifying, even promoting, "the fixed, essentialized culturalist imprisonment of the 'other' in a local unchangeable world, the world of traditional anthropology" (302). The end result of such a view is that rather than comprehending how "different logics articulate with one another over time" in an ethnographic place (305), these anthropologists view

contemporary local practices as irretrievably “modern,” as impositions from elsewhere dissociated from any antecedent cultural logic (cf. Hviding 1996:29). On Gaua as elsewhere, *kastom* is the nexus of past, present, and future (cf. Lindstrom and White 1993) with a capacity for incorporating novel experiences and events into the flow of perceived continuity. The encompassing processes of *kastom* on Gaua are far from absolute, and reflexive anxieties about what we may term cultural authenticity persist. Yet during my time with them, people of Gaua revealed the many ways in which *kastom* is, among other things, the ethical power of possibility.

The Nume term which most closely captures the *tivönö* conception of possibility in its general sense is *wun*. I became aware of this term only through induction—after finding concrete practices of possibility in everyday Gauan life and subsequently searching for a connecting theme with my interlocutors. Practices of *wun*, many of which *tivönö* identify as *kastom*, constitute the greater part of this dissertation. As prelude to these investigations I consider here how *tivönö* come to terms with their perceptions of possibilities lost and gained as they recount signal moments in their collective history. These imaginings of Gaua’s possible worlds, of history as a continuing series of alternative paths, underscore broader cultural concerns.

### **Gaua’s possible worlds**

On my final research visit to Gaua I responded to earlier requests to bring with me a copy of the first Western cartographic depiction of the island (Figure 1.2). My interlocutors expressed this interest in our many conversations about their own theories of early visitors to the Banks region. I found three recurring responses to the question of who “found” Gaua and what significance this first contact has for Gauans in the present

day. The first response was one of apparent indifference to the first encounter with *waetman*, an indifference which my interlocutors attributed to their knowledge of pre-colonial encounters with societies to their far north which long preceded European contact. Archaeological evidence shows a thriving trade in obsidian beginning around the first century C. E. and lasting no more than 600 years. The trade network extended from Tikopia and Vanikoro in the Santa Cruz Group of the Solomon Islands southward through the Banks Islands and to points further south in present-day Vanuatu (Kirch 1991; Bedford 2006).<sup>7</sup> Gauans know well the history of trade in “black stone” (*vat wirwirig*) between Banks societies and visitors from the Santa Cruz Group. They identify families on Gaua who are descended from Tikopian mothers, and point to places along the northeastern shore where ancient trade took place. This group views European explorers as relative latecomers while not dismissing their first arrival as insignificant.

As a second response, some believed that Captain James Cook “found” Gaua, a point of view extrapolated from lessons taught in local schools that it was he who named the New Hebrides and the Banks Islands, the latter for the famed botanist who accompanied Cook to the South Pacific (Cook 1988). Cook’s journals show that he overlooked the entirety of the Banks Islands during his visit to the archipelago in July and August 1774. Several of my interlocutors nevertheless viewed Cook as a positive symbolic figure connecting Gaua to the rest of Vanuatu, a peculiar development in light

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<sup>7</sup> See also Blake et al 1972 for evidence of inter-island contact from genetic population studies; and see Kolshus 2007:293 for a journal entry by Codrington who in 1870 describes the arrival and three-week visit of 11 Tikopian canoes “in the Banks Islands area...feasting and trading.”

of evidence from maps depicting Cook's route that he may well have meant to exclude the Banks Islands entirely from the New Hebrides (Cook 1988: Fig. 66).<sup>8</sup>

Many who were aware of Cook's non-visit to their island identified the Portuguese explorer Pedro Fernández de Quirós as the first European to reach Gaua. They described his landing at Vir, the eastern village known in the present day as Kaska, and explained that Gaua was his (Spanish) expedition's first landing in Vanuatu, two days before its well-documented arrival at Espíritu Santo to the southwest (Markham 1872; de Munilla 1966; Jolly 2009).<sup>9</sup> The first map to feature the newly "discovered" island of "La Vírgen Maria" was produced by cartographer Manuel Godinho de Erédia, who based his work on the journals of the Quirós expedition (Kelly 1961:222). It is the Erédia map (Figure 1.2) which I presented to my Gauan interlocutors, and to those who identified Quirós as Gaua's first Western visitor I posed the question of the significance of this moment to all that transpired afterward.

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<sup>8</sup> A. Kippis (1924:209) observes that the islands "discovered in 1606, by that eminent navigator Quirós," are "the northern islands of this Archipelago" collectively named the New Hebrides by Cook. It is unclear whether these "northern islands" include Gaua, or whether this description extends northward only to Espíritu Santo.

<sup>9</sup> This local account of the Quirós expedition as the first to land on Gaua is historically accurate: the Gaua landing occurred on April 29, 1606, with the arrival at Big Bay in Espíritu Santo, which Quirós took to be "part of the Southern continent" (Camino 2005:35), on May 1.





**Figure 1.1:** The Erédia map (ca. 1613-1623), with Gaua as “Virgem<sup>as</sup>” (see magnified inset) marked directly to the north of Nova Gerusalem (present-day Espíritu Santo). Map photos by Jeffrey Wescott, taken from Cortesão and Mota (1960, folio 65r). Courtesy of Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

One of the recurring themes that emerged from our conversations is that the map united East and West Gaua into one undifferentiated entity called “Virgem<sup>as</sup>” or “Virgem Maria.” The island was once two distinct regions: East Gaua, known as Gog; and West Gaua, known as Lokon. It was only after Anglican missionaries from Mota arrived in the nineteenth century and “Motified” the name *Gog* to *Gaua* (and *Lokon* to *Lakona*) that the island was identifiable as a whole, with both sides eventually subsumed under the name “Gaua.” My interlocutors described the Erédia map to me as the initiating moment of that convergence, when socially and cosmologically relevant distinctions seemed to vanish at once. They imagine a time before demographic changes

shifted group identifications away from East/West toward the indigenous/non-indigenous distinction which predominates in present-day East Gaua.

There is another, more emotionally immediate theme in my interlocutors' responses to the Erédia map, one which concerns their senses of self defined not within island boundaries, but in the broader world. There was a current of self-effacement in our discussions, a resigned awareness that it was white Europeans who built and sailed massive ships and Americans who reached the moon. In these introspective moments, the possibilities of waetman are refracted inward to reveal the limits of "blakman" (cf. Bashkow 2006), even as my Gauan commentators are cognizant of the extraordinary histories of Pacific navigators. Yet when I asked whether life would be different had waetman never come to Gaua, views of the present became more positive. In our meticulous examinations of the Erédia map, my interlocutors alerted me to their fascination with Gaua's place in the development of the contemporary world. Connections with non-Oceanic others have expanded the tivönö category of *maram*, the visible and knowable world within which possible futures are imagined and produced. Alternative imaginings of Gaua incorporate technologies which facilitate existing practices rather than replace them entirely. This last point, of the ideal of maintaining kastom ways of life enhanced by technologies from elsewhere, is vital to the possible worlds my interlocutors imagine. They contrast their visions of what is possible and desirable for them on Gaua with their experiences of seeing firsthand the disintegrating effects of urban immersion in Port Vila and Honiara on family cohesion and a "happy life" (*es vemalakalak*). In the balance, western contact is an ambivalent moment for

Gauans, occasioning thoughts of a cultural autonomy predicated on possibilities imagined and produced by distant others.

The ambivalence with which Gauans view their history of contact is reiterated in their accounts of Christian life. While the history of missionization in insular Melanesia is well-documented and too extensive to recount here in any meaningful way, a brief overview of Gaua's Christian origins provides context to the contemporary attitudes to which I directed my questions about possible worlds. Although the 1606 Quirós expedition arrived in Oceania "infused with a missionary zeal that made them attempt to establish a Christian relationship with the indigenous peoples they encountered" (Camino 2005:42; see also Jolly 2009:34), two days was hardly time enough to secure Gaua's salvation. The Anglican Church first arrived on Gaua in 1855 in the person of Bishop George Selwyn, who landed briefly in Lokon before returning for an eastern landing later that same year (Montgomery 1908:81). From that opening moment in the recorded history of missionary presence we find a recurring theme in the descriptions of the people of East and West Gaua. They are observed to be uniquely "quarrelsome" (Montgomery 1908:82); "most horrible in their customs of all our Melanesians" (Wilson 1932:91); and they engage in "more fighting...than any other island of the [Banks] Group" (Fox 1958:141). With such a dismal reputation, the Melanesian Mission came to view Gaua's salvation as a uniquely difficult and rewarding endeavor for the intrepid missionary.

A survey of the literature reveals that while there was continuous internecine fighting in the first several decades of the church's efforts on Gaua (e.g., Armstrong 1900:68), progress as measured in the currency of schools, teachers, and baptized souls

continued on both sides of the island (Armstrong 1900:139; Fox 1958:141; Hilliard 1978:96). Edmund Qataru, a Melanesian-born Anglican trained on nearby Mota, established central schools to accommodate both West and East Gaua. He mediated peaceful relations between two warring tribal chiefs, Vagolo (or Vagal) and Nogonogo (Armstrong 1900:139, 181), whose names are well familiar throughout present-day Gaua. Accounts of the period between 1860 and 1880, during which R. H. Codrington served as Mission Headmaster, are remarkable for their optimistic views of what was possible through the work of “God’s Gentlemen” (Hilliard 1978).

By 1881 unrest had resurfaced on Gaua, hastened by the introduction of firearms from labor ships and the resurgence of murder by poison arrow (Armstrong 1900:218; Fox 1958:141). Tom Harrisson observes (in 1935) that on an island devastated by depopulation from disease and warfare, “intermittent white visits and a native-run mission are worse than nothing, [worse] than full heathenism” (326). The first Gaua-born Anglican priest, Stephen Wetelwur, worked in vain in the 1930s and 1940s to revivify the promise of peace that had come to Gaua several decades earlier. As retired Anglican priest John Wetelwur writes of his father’s tenure, “those who knew Stephen say that his many years of effort, hard work, and miles traveling through jungles made very little impression on the people of Gaua” (John Wetelwur, personal journal, 2004). My older interlocutors recalled that it was not until the repopulation of Gaua beginning in the 1970s that the Anglican Church and others such as Seventh Day Adventist

recovered a Christian presence which many felt had disappeared entirely during a roughly sixty-year period of human and cultural loss.<sup>10</sup>

As I inquired about the worlds created and preempted by Christianity's arrival on Gaua, I came to recognize the folly of any attempt to understand Gauans as "Christians of Opportunity, who beneath a thin coating of Christianity remained the good ol' heathens that were worth a journey around the globe to take a closer look at" (Kolshus 2007:8; see also Robbins 2004; Barker 1992). Regardless, Anglican parishioners revealed to me the messy borders between church and *kastom* in their descriptions of what missionaries brought to Gaua, and what they believe was and was not already present (see Hess 2010:156 for identifications of church and *kastom* in Vanua Lava). They wondered if their ancestors, upon first hearing missionaries' stories of great floods and eventual days of reckoning and reclamation, identified their own island—and more specifically, their lake—as the site of these momentous events (see chapter 2). Gauans ascribe to their ancestors a peculiar form of cultural adoption (Robbins 2004:11) wherein external categories of understanding the world provided revelatory insights into local events while existing "kastom" categories persisted. The innovations of Christianity, as evidenced in Edmund Qataru's intrepid if impermanent efforts to bring peace to brutal tribal factionalism, is for present-day Gauans a positive moment of possibility. It provides an example of a past situation resolved only by appeal to notions of reconciliation brought from elsewhere.

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<sup>10</sup> The 2009 Vanuatu Census (p. 34) records the following self-identified religious affiliations on Gaua (2,491 total residents): Anglican: 1,742 (70.0%); Seventh Day Adventist: 164 (6.6%); Neil Thomas Ministries: 135 (5.4%); Assembly of God: 88 (3.5%); "Others": 328 (13.2%). Three respondents replied "customary beliefs." My interlocutors, including one who identified himself to census takers by this category, explained to me that Gauans understand "customary beliefs" to indicate the pre-Christian "heathen."

Contemporary identifications with a Christian Gaua are not free from ambivalence. Some view themselves not as Christians of Opportunity, but of Limit, bound by lurking anxieties that the perceived ease of coexistence and even correspondence between (Anglican) church and *kastom* is somehow a ruse, with an afterlife wandering the forest with other lost spirits as the ultimate price for insufficient sensitivity to their distinctions. Their ambivalence is not born of inhabiting a liminal space between *kastom* and the Church (*contra* Gourguechon 1977). It is a space set apart from all others as the distinctively Gauan problem of having to resolve, once and for all, any perceived discrepancies—and any discrepancies veiled as close congruence—between *kastom* and Church which threaten the undesired afterlife of lonely and meaningless wandering. These anxieties are exacerbated by family divisions brought about by competing views as to which church is most appropriate and beneficial to life on Gaua; for many, churches have become like political parties, forces of discord rather than unity. My interlocutors expressed to me their desires to “get it right,” to find upon reflection that in the usual course of everyday life, they have found possibilities for belonging to the wider community of believers beyond Gaua while maintaining a *kastom* identity that imparts a uniqueness to them within a shifting cultural landscape.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There is an important consequence in research terms to the intricate and often ambiguous relation between *kastom* and Christianity as expressed by my Gauan interlocutors, particularly as it affects my investigation of ethics. Christianity is surely something other than a “thin coating” applied to an enduring substrate of Gaua “tradition.” However, the objects of my investigation—interpersonal relations of care, notions of kin and community, and ethical orientations to contemporary environmental problems—were routinely identified as matters of *kastom* by the East Gauan *tivönö* who are the focus of my research. Any explicit reference to the influence of either *kastom* or Christian belief in a moral practice ought not to be construed as a dismissal of the potential influence of the other, nor of the multiple incursions and local transformations of ideas and practices that have constituted Gaua’s dynamic history, many of which I identify in subsequent chapters.

It must be noted that many first- and second-generation Gauans identify their native islands of Mere Lava, Merig, and Mota Lava as the true site of their kastom. They explained that while they continue to regard many of their contemporary practices in kastom terms, the authenticity of these practices feels illusory dissociated from their places of origin. Furthermore, they expressed resentment toward indigenous understandings of local kastom and “Church” (*jioj*) as in any way organically integrated. My non-indigenous interlocutors, Gauan residents who migrated from the nearby islands of Mere Lava, Mota Lava, and Merig, argued that if autochthonous kastom is by definition exclusive to “real Gauans” (*stret man Gaua*), then churches ought to provide a truly alternative measure of local belonging. From the tivönö perspective, the limits of belonging set by kastom are necessary measures to recover some essence of an encompassing cultural logic that once organized social relations, land access, and ordinary and esoteric practices, but which nearly vanished during the era of population decline from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.

While Western explorers and Christian missionaries contributed to the shaping of alternative worlds and new forms of ambivalence, depopulation’s legacy was one of intra-island disintegration and abject misery. Speiser’s (1922) assessment of the New Hebrides and Banks Islands identifies disease, an increase in cultural “decadence” by way of adultery, firearm use, and other transgressions, and the indirect effects of a general disrespect for local custom by Europeans as the principal factors contributing to the region’s precipitous population decline beginning in the late nineteenth century. Present-day Gauans attribute the decline to diseases such as malaria and other “fevers,” and to the intertribal warfare that reemerged with the introduction of firearms from

labor ships and continued until the migration of bush communities to the coast beginning in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> As horrible as the threat of disease was, it was the fear of violence and death from firearms and malevolent magic which prompted the exodus of indigenous families in the east and west shortly after World War II. This further decline of Gaua's numbers, my interlocutors observe, became the ultimate erasure of possibility. Opportunities for the recovery of communities and lost cultural practices following the era of disease were quelled by internal strife and the subsequent departures of households and entire villages. By 1950, Gaua's population had declined to one-sixth its 1910 estimate (see Table 1.1).

When the families that relocated to Santo and elsewhere in the archipelago returned to their native island beginning in the 1970s, they found communities of non-indigenous people who had secured land rights from a prominent southeastern landowner emerging in the abandoned areas in the east (see chapter 6). The fertile and abundant land of Gaua opened a new possible world for people of nearby Mere Lava and Merig who faced land pressures due to the growing populations of their own islands. Families from other islands also came to Gaua, some for land opportunities, others to join the households of their Gauan spouses. A cursory estimate from census data finds that roughly 45% of Gaua residents are non-indigenous (i.e. persons who are

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<sup>12</sup> Speiser identifies respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, and influenza as the probable causes of Melanesian deaths (1922:26-29).

Literature chronicling the history of the Queensland labor trade in the New Hebrides supports contemporary Gauan views that their island was unaffected in terms of population decline relative to elsewhere in the New Hebrides (e.g., per Armstrong, all islands in the Banks were affected except Gaua and Mota [1900:149]). East Gauans attribute the minimal effects of the labor trade on their side of the island to the shallow harbors at main population centers in comparison to the wide passages and deep bays of West Gaua (but see Giles 1968 for a labor ship's account of the accessible and "well-sheltered" landing at Losalava in the northeast). Parnaby (1964:68) estimates that between 1860, just before the labor trade began, and 1910, the total population of the New Hebrides declined by 75 to 80%.



neither speakers of indigenous languages, nor landowners, nor descendants from autochthonous tribes).<sup>13</sup> Very few non-indigenous Gauans reside in the western half of the island.

**Table 1.1:** Comparative population histories

Year	New Hebrides/ Vanuatu	Banks Islands/ TORBA	Gaua	Gaua as % of Banks pop.
1892 <sup>14</sup>	n/a	6,682	2,767	41.4
1910	66,755	8,500	2,000	35.3
1934	45,000	2,202	679	30.8
1950	48,000	3,233	320	9.9
1967 <sup>15</sup>	77,710	3,259	426	13.1
1979	111,251	4,958	780	15.7
1989	142,419	5,985	1,285	21.5
1999	186,678	7,757	2,031	26.2
2009 <sup>16</sup>	234,023	9,359	2,491	26.6

With new possibilities opening for people arriving from elsewhere, tivönö found themselves confronting a profound shift in their conceptions of group identity. In the past, there were hierarchized, cross-cutting divisions by bush/coast residence, moiety affiliation, and East/West origin. Mission-driven migrations to the coast and the loss of political identifications with moieties erased the first two of these divisions. While the East/West distinction is still in evidence (as manifested in the Nume terms *tavaliu* [this side] and *tavulun* [the other side], respectively), these categories tend to be overlooked in light of the newer distinctions of indigenous/non-indigenous. Non-indigenous Gauans are the new other—the new otherness by which East Gauans locate themselves in social-cosmological space. Older tivönö observe how inter-group relations between

<sup>13</sup> Vanuatu Census 2009; village data per Inter-agency Assessment (2010) and field notes.

<sup>14</sup> 1892, 1910, and 1934 figures from McArthur and Yaxley 1967. 1934 Gaua figure from Harrison 1937.

<sup>15</sup> 1950 and 1967 figures from McArthur and Yaxley 1967.

<sup>16</sup> 1979, 1989, 1999, and 2009 National Population Census Reports.

young people hasten the growth of Bislama as the principle language of Gaua and how intermarriages bring new resentments with respect to land inheritance. The once-possible world of cultural revival is supplanted by a transformed social terrain, deepening the necessity to maintain kastom identity in the tivönö communities of the east.

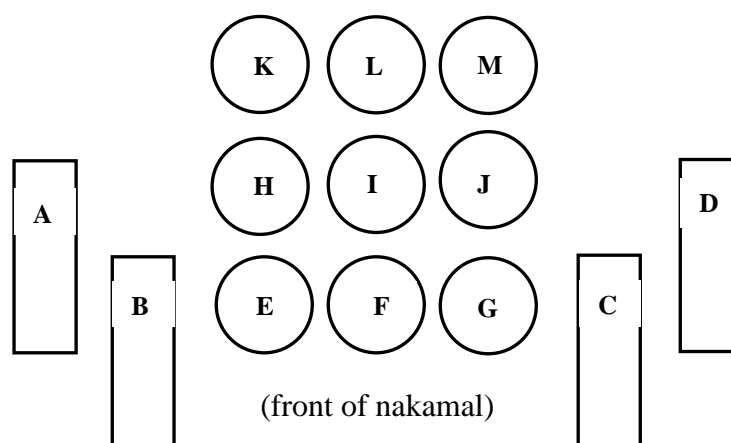
Western contact, the peace and promise of Christianity, and the reshaping of the human landscape emerged as critical forking paths in my Gauan interlocutors' narratives of historical change. I intend my allusion to Jorge Luis Borges' story "The Garden of Forking Paths" to call attention to how they interpret their history as hypertext, viewing key moments as nodes from which distinct trajectories emerge.<sup>17</sup> While other trajectories—other possible futures—continue as reflections of what may be otherwise, only one is accessible to them as "life (as it) sits here" (*es ve sa tabene*) in present-day Gaua (see chapter 4). It is this notion of alternative worlds which informs my understanding of Gauan ethics as an active striving to bring conceptions of "ought" and "is" in line with one another, of reconnecting with paths of authenticity and reclamation which have eluded them.

Ethics as the production of possibility, in this sense of seeking something other, is familiar within the larger Gauan cultural and historical context. In the west I met a man who had taken up the project of constructing a *nakamal* (meeting house) in the outer boundaries of his home village where men could train young boys in the lost arts of Lakona kastom. His first order of business was to fashion woodcarvings that would

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<sup>17</sup> "Time forks, perpetually, toward innumerable futures" (Borges 1998:127).

serve as locus points for improvisational storytelling—the oral construction of virtually infinite possible worlds (Figure 1.2):



<u>Key</u>	<u>Name of carving</u>	<u>Signification</u>
A	Mere Men Letes	Eel of the Lake
B	Mere Men Lelug	Eel of the Waterfall
C	Mere Men Lenow	Eel of the Sea
D	Mere Men Lemelispi	Eel of the Creek
E	Rolioqo	Woman of high rank
F	Wuwut of Lememar	Man of the Lake, First-born brother
G	Rosuŋ	Woman of high rank
H	Deliqsöm	Devil that kills Wuwut
I	Mutmutuvul	Boss of the World
J	Wiri	Last-born brother
K	Mowte	First devil the two woman encounter
L	Maliŋsa	Second-ranking boss
M	Mulsa	Second-born brother

**Figure 1.2:** Organization of Werere kastom nakamal

Every kastom storyteller opens with the fixed story point of Wuwut’s (F) jealousy of all things in the possession of his two wives, Rolioqo (E) and Rosuŋ (G). From there, each storyteller must devise his own possible world which incorporates all of the remaining characters in the nakamal, the six “possessions” (H through M) of Wuwut’s wives. Regardless of the path taken by the storyteller and the events he sets into motion, he must ultimately arrive at a vision of a well-ordered life that is uniquely Gauan as

stipulated by the Four Eels (carved crossbeams of the nakamal: A through D) representing the waterways of Gaua. The stories created within the confines of the nakamal are coexisting worlds by virtue of their unique associations with their creators, individual young storytellers tasked with solving the fundamental moral problems of gender, collective life, and cosmological order.



**Figure 1.3:** Werere with his unfinished kastom nakamal in Dolap, West Gaua. Note the mouths of the “eels,” the crossbeams visible above the standing woodcarvings at left and right of center. Photo by Jeffrey Wescott.

I found the kastom nakamal to speak to the same concerns about possibility as the historical accounts of my other interlocutors. As a template for generating multiple worlds, the nakamal is not bound to the past; rather it intimates what storytellers perceive as achievable going forward. In this dissertation I explore these insights by focusing on Gauans’ ethical relations with others and, relatedly, their interactions with the environment. It is my supposition that issues of environmental conservation and climate change will emerge as the new forking path for Gaua—as the coming moment

when life will advance toward one of multiple possible futures. As with countless other moments in Gaua's long history, environmental change represents a novel, if not entirely unfamiliar, tension between kastom conceptions of the good life as rooted in the island's land and its lake, and myriad possible futures arriving from somewhere in the deep sea.

### **Outline of the chapters**

In chapter 2 I explore two worlds of Gauan culture and history existing in parallel. One is the "is" world of everyday experience as it plays out in the changeable activities of households and communities at the edge of the sea. The other is the "ought" world of moral obligation, conceptions of the good symbolically inscribed in Lake Letes, the spatial and temporal locus of Gauan identity. Letes is where the paths of contingent everyday life and mythic atemporality diverged and where Gauans expect to eventually reconnect them through ethical living.

In chapter 3 I bring my investigations of ethics fully into the contingent social spaces of everyday life. There are particular ways of imagining the situations of others which tivönö identify as uniquely kastom and which inform moral experience more generally. Conceptions of commonality and otherness guide the moral imagination toward comprehending and motivating caring for others.

Chapter 4 extends the reach of the moral imagination out of the dyadic relational encounter and into the more inclusive realms of kinship and community. I explore how people of East Gaua imagine their possibilities as ethical beings by appealing to notions of the good which transcend subjective experiences and expectations, and I assess the extent to which they imagine possibilities for a "moral community."

Chapter 5 focuses on subsistence, the field of human-environment interaction which closely charts the obligations and expectations tivönö have of themselves. The changes to subsistence practices that have taken place in recent years cast into sharp relief the ethical significance of productive work.

In chapter 6 I look at the effects of incipient ideas and practices of environmental conservation on the ways tivönö organize their ethical lives. Encompassed within the wide conceptual category of *konsevesen* on Gaua, along with environmental laws and ecotourism development, is the evidence of climate change and how it too influences ethical thought. I arrive at the problem of how the inclusivity of Gauan ethics finds its limiting case in the temporal horizons of a conservation “ethics of posterity.”

### **Notes on terminology**

The community of people to whom I refer as “tivönö” throughout this dissertation does not refer to itself as such, nor does it have a term which accomplishes this demarcation. All “tivönö” are indigenous (i.e. descended from an autochthonous tribe) but are not members of the indigenous, non-Nume-speaking communities of the west or the southeast. On my final visit to Gaua I asked my interlocutors to weigh in on an appropriate reference term for the purposes of my dissertation. We settled on “tivönö,” all in lower-case letters to convey its adjectival quality: tivönö are “of the place,” an idea which gives full expression to a valued autochthony in a way that feels less arbitrary than the invention of a proper noun. People are tivönö by virtue of their common connection to the practices of *kastom* identifiable as indigenous and proper to the Nume-speaking people of north and northeast Gaua.

Why then do I refer to the set of beliefs, practices, and concerns of tivönö as “*Gauan* ethics?” While I attribute the obligations and expectations of this ethics primarily to the kastom-influenced ontologies and cosmologies of tivönö, I recognize, as I believe tivönö do, that the real effects of their ethical actions shape life on Gaua more generally. “Gaua” signifies both the literal and figurative fields of possibility for the ethics I pursue in this dissertation, although it is not necessarily the definitive horizon of the possibility-making which takes place within it.

I wish to clarify also that I recognize no viable distinction between the terms *ethics* and *morality*. I am not the first anthropologist to take note of the fact that these terms, as they have been bequeathed to us from millennia of philosophical thinking about the good, are used interchangeably to the extent that any differentiation is arbitrary, even if constructive within the context of a specific scholarly project (Zigon 2007a:17-18; Lambek 2010:8-9; see also Faubion 2001:84; Laidlaw 2002:316). Although I prefer the term *ethics*, having begun my own investigations with Aristotle as well as with *Hopi Ethics* (Brandt 1954), I employ *moral* as the (in my estimation) more familiar adjectival accompaniment to terms such as *experience*, *imagination*, *development*, and *community*.

Finally, I want to make clear the distinction between two other closely related terms. I mean the term *possibility* to describe the existence of conditions necessary to bringing about a particular state of affairs in the world, yet which do not assure its coming about. In the Gauan context, an ethics of possibility consists in the capacity of persons for imaginatively accessing and making socially productive use of such conditions. There is as well a subjective component to possibility, an attitude which

tivönö take toward the likelihood of certain outcomes. The optimism, anticipation, or despair with which they encounter various possibilities I call *futurity*, and will emerge as an ethical component of subsistence work in chapter 5.

### **Notes on language**

Nume is the language of the indigenous people of north and northeast Gaua. The geographic range of Nume begins in the northwest village of Vatles and extends along the north and northeast coast to the eastern village of Tarasag, where both Nume-speaking and Mere Lavan families reside and where non-indigenous East Gauan settlements continue southward.

Nume belongs to the North and Central Vanuatu sub-branch of the Remote Oceanic branch of the (Central-Eastern) Oceanic sub-group of the (Eastern) Malayo-Polynesian group of the Austronesian language family. The total number of primary-language Nume speakers in 2003 was approximately 500 (François 2005). My own census, conducted in September-October 2009 with the assistance of local chiefs, places the total number of primary Nume speakers residing in north and northeast Gaua at 572. Nume is spoken in the indigenous households of the north and northeast, with both Nume and Bislama, the Neo-Melanesian lingua franca of Vanuatu, commonly spoken in combination in inter-household conversation. Both Nume and Bislama are officially forbidden in primary and secondary schools in the northeast district of Losalava, where English is the language of education.

There are some distinctions between the American English and Nume pronunciations of vowels:

“a” (e.g., Tarasag) — *a* as in the Spanish *mañana*



“e” (e.g., *ate*) — a monophthong *ay* as in the French *élan*

“i” (e.g., *aqiri*) — *ee* as in the English *meet*

“o” (e.g., *qo*) — as the English *oh*

“ö” (e.g., *tivönö*) — *eu* as in the French *leur*

“u” (e.g., *ususur*) — *oo* as in the English *boot*

“b” (e.g., *basran*) — as the English *b* but preceded by *m*

“d” (e.g., *domwen*) — as the English *d* but preceded by *n*

“g” (e.g., *Gaua*) — *g* as in the English *guard*

“□” (e.g., □*ervi*) — a distinctive Melanesian sound somewhere between the “hard” *g* (voiced velar plosive) of *goat* but with unobstructed airflow through the vocal tract. May be approximated by voicing an English *ee* but with the lower jaw fully extended forward and slightly raised

“ŋ” (e.g., *leŋmwe*) — a nasalized *n* as in the English *song* but without the voiced *g*

“q” (e.g., *Qat*) — a simultaneous voicing of *t*, *p*, and *k*

“r” (e.g., *rasogo*) — ranges from a soft rolling *rl* sound to a more guttural *rg*

“v” (e.g., *Vunlap*) — *v* as in the English *very* but softer, almost approximating *w* as in *weather*

Bislama has a few double-vowel diphthongs which are voiced as follows:

“ae” (e.g., *kakae*) — a long *i* as in the English *ice*

“ao” (e.g., *olbaot*) — *ow* as in the English *cow*

“oe” (e.g., *boe*) — *oi* as in the English *boil*

Nume terms presented in this dissertation are in italics; Bislama terms are italicized and underlined.

## Chapter 2: Terra Moralis

In *A Geographical Guide to the Real and the Good*, Robert Sack (2003) argues for a definition of place as “an area of space that we are bound to and to some degree control with rules about what can and cannot take place” (4). Place is more than location: it demarcates the expectations and obligations that give meaning and purpose to action. The possibilities and limits to life’s projects, including the fashioning and contesting of identities and social relations, become available to people through their interactions with and within particular places. In this chapter I explore Gaua’s geography of the good—the ways in which tivönö view certain places and the relations between places as making ethical claims on them. Histories of loss and transformation, and a present marked by growing demographic diversity, all continue to shape the Gauan moral landscape. Reflecting on places, tivönö assess their obligations to preserve elements of an autochthonous identity increasingly called into question by alternative ways of seeing the world. In both its geography and its moral-symbolic power, Lake Letes is the center of Gauan tivönö identity. Their interactions with the lake through personal experience and mythic narrative clarify what is possible for them as persons of the place.

The chapter begins with a preliminary overview of Lake Letes as the moral-symbolic locus of tivönö life. The lake’s origins and its presence in everyday experience impart a unique relation between landscape and cultural identity relative to most other places in insular Melanesia. Next, ideas about myth and movement shed further light on how tivönö inscribe their ethical concerns onto the lake and its surroundings. Lastly,

the chapter examines the ways in which Letes, inhabiting a spatiality and temporality distinctive within the Gauan landscape, nonetheless impinges on the places and spaces occupied by human communities. I explain why maintaining the boundary between two separate yet mutually effecting parts of the landscape is an ethical matter for tivönö. The chapters that follow explore how social relations and human-environment interactions provide fields of action where tivönö assess the possibilities available to them as ethical beings. The goal of the present chapter is to show how the production of possibility makes sense—to tivönö and to the ethnographic perspective—within the context of the singular landscape in which it takes place.

## **Tes**

While traveling through the New Hebrides under the sponsorship of the Linnaean Society of London, John R. Baker arrived at a small hamlet in northeast Gaua called Nobur. The British biologist and zoologist recorded the coral species he observed along two transects stretching from the shoreline to the fringing reef. Baker's brief stay at Nobur was one of many stops he made throughout the northern region of the archipelago in 1922 with the Cambridge anthropologist T. T. Barnard. Returning to Oxford to resume his teaching duties, Baker immediately petitioned the Linnaean society to fund a second expedition. Five years later the society granted his request, enabling Baker to fulfill his "irresistible impulse" to return (Baker 1929a:1). His primary research goals were the study of intersex pigs on Espíritu Santo and Gaua, and an investigation of the freshwater lake in Gaua's caldera.

Baker begins his account of the 1927 Gaua visit with a quote from R. H.

Codrington, who devotes a few brief sentences to describing the lake in his book *The Melanesians* (2005[1891]):

Dr. R. H. Codrington says (p. 17): ‘The Tas in the middle of Santa Maria [Gaua] in the Banks Islands is the only lake of considerable size in Melanesia.<sup>18</sup> It is about 5 miles long, occupying the hollow of an ancient crater, into which the steaming hill Garat has been intruded; the waters pour out in a magnificent waterfall...The Tas of Santa Maria will surely reward its first scientific visitor.’ It has been my fortune to be its first scientific visitor. [Baker 1929b:311; 2004:131]

Citing references to the lake by other missionaries and explorers (e.g., Mawson 1905), Baker concludes that the lake was unvisited by European visitors prior to his arrival in 1927. He observes that both the 1897 British Admiralty Chart and a map by the French Ministhe des Colonies represented the lake “in quite the wrong position, of quite the wrong shape, and far too small” (1929b:311). Baker set ashore again at Nobur and spent nearly one week in Gaua’s caldera collecting aquatic specimens, taking depth measurements, and observing the geysers of mud that gushed from boiling springs at the lake’s northern shore which he named after his benefactors, the Percy Sladen Memorial Trustees. His brother, S. J. Baker, mapped the course of the “Lusal River” on the lake’s eastern boundary solely from descriptions provided by Nobur residents (Figure 2.1).

Of the caldera, Baker observed:

The lake is about 1,100 feet above sea-level. There seems to be little doubt that the basin of the lake with its surrounding hills is the crater of an immense extinct volcano. Mount Gharat is a secondary cone, its

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<sup>18</sup> At 19 square kilometers and with a maximum depth of 120 meters, Letes is the largest freshwater lake in the Pacific Island region outside of the much larger landmasses of New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, and easily the largest of Vanuatu’s 25-30 freshwater lakes (Bani and Esrom n.d.:2). Lake Tegano, located in the south of Rennell Island in the Solomon Islands, is many times larger than Letes, with an area of 155 square kilometers (whc.unesco.org). It is a brackish lake, however, and therefore categorized differently from the fully freshwater Letes.

southern slopes being now in the solfatara stage, with steam and probably other gases ascending from them. The lake has, curiously enough, no native name. They refer to it as *tas*, which simply means ‘sea’. Since it is inconvenient for it to be anonymous, I propose that it shall be called Steaming Hill Lake, from the steaming hill, Mount Gharat. [Baker 1929b:314]

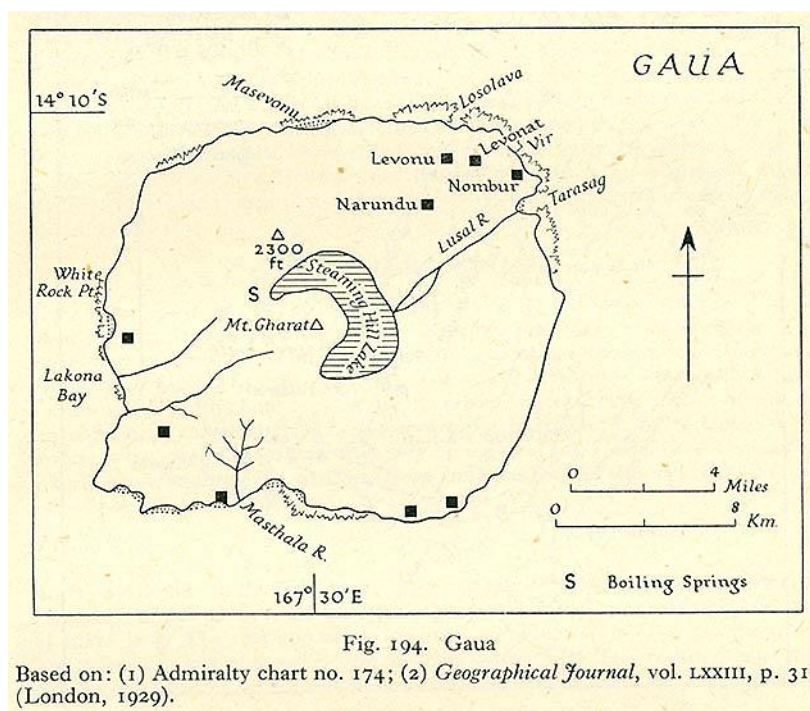
A measurement of the lake’s acidity (a slightly alkaline pH of 8.5) provided evidence that, contrary to earlier conjecture by Palmer and Codrington (1896), the lake did not have the brackish quality which may have explained why local residents referred to it as “Tas.” The lake needed a proper name, and Baker provided one. The map that Baker published in 1929 reveals the large, kidney-shaped “Steaming Hill Lake” wrapped around the eastern side of Mount Gharat, bounded on its northwest shore by the Sladen Boiling Springs and on its east by the Lusal River, which meets the sea at the village of Nobur.<sup>19</sup>

Eighty years after this second of Baker’s two expeditions to Gaua, I spoke with two tivönö elders born shortly after the first visit of *waetman* to the lake. Both men were born around 1930 in Tarasag, the village that encompasses the smaller stretch of coastal land called Nobur. Their fathers witnessed Baker’s arrival in 1927, and the men confirmed to me Baker’s self-reported status as the first European to reach the lake. They are equally aware of the long-standing misconceptions about the lake’s name extended by visitors such as Baker and Codrington. “Tas” is neither meant to indicate the literal presence of seawater in the lake nor is it a common-noun signifier of a nameless place. It is one of multiple terms in Banks Islands languages for “seawater” (e.g., Vienne 1984), although today *now* (sea, seawater) is most commonly heard

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<sup>19</sup> Indigenous Gauans today know the boiling springs by the name *Wawrduj*; the river is called *Solomul* and it flows due east from the lake to the coast near the village of Siriti. What the Bakers identify as the Lusal River is a northeast-running tributary which descends from Solomul to a point just south of Nobur.

among Nume speakers. Tas' toponymic connections to the lake, however, are revealed through the recounting of stories still widely known throughout the island.



**Figure 2.1:** A revision of the map produced in 1927 by Lieutenant S. J. Baker (Baker 1929b:315) and of the 1897 Admiralty chart. From "Pacific Islands" Geographical Handbook Series, Great Britain Admiralty Naval Intelligence Division, 1943-1945. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

Gaua's kastom storytellers explain that the true origin of the lake's name comes from the tale of Rovinquet, an old woman who lived in the center of the island with her two grandchildren. Rovinquet kept a coconut shell (*windiŋ*) under her bed, and warned the children not to go near it. One day, while Rovinquet was away at her garden, the children sat in the house and stared with bewilderment as blue and red fish leapt from the coconut shell, ready to be captured, roasted, and eaten. The children played with their own empty shells, throwing them around the house until all were lost under the old woman's bed. Ignoring the fearful protests of his brother, one child crawled toward the

forbidden shell, and peered inside it to find it was filled with seawater. Just then he capsized the shell and spilled its contents. The water continued to spill out until the entire village was underwater. Rovinget and the two children were unable to contain the surging water as it breached the boundary of the village at the cliff called Lesiri, where it fell and rushed back to the sea. This is how the lake was born, from the spilled torrent of seawater (*tas*) from Rovinget's coconut shell. Elder women and men of East and West Gaua recite versions of the Rovinget story to children both as a morality tale about the consequences of disobedience and to inculcate an attitude of respect for the lake and river. In my conversations with indigenous Gauans across age groups, Rovinget is depicted as a quasi-historical figure, at once allegorical and real, with the accounts of her experiences categorized as *ususur* (story) but with a quality of true presence in the world.

A Gaua-born resident of Port Vila provides an alternative story of the lake's origin in an article for *Island Spirit*, the monthly publication of Air Vanuatu:

History has it that Lake Letas was a traditional village located inside a valley at one time. Then Quat—the legendary Paramount Chief of TORBA [Province]—after building his canoe, wanted to get it into the sea from the middle of the island, but he did not want to use manual labour. [...] It is believed that he used magic to make a lot of rain for a long period of time. This rain filled up the whole valley and eventually created an outlet [to the sea]. [Welegtabit n.d.:28]

Welegtabit's account follows the story as recorded by Codrington around 1880 in which Qat, a mythic hero familiar to all Banks Islanders, carved an enormous canoe in the center of Gaua, and collected his wife, all of his brothers, and "the living creatures of the island, even those so small as ants" (Codrington 2005:166). As they all hid under the canoe's massive covering, a great deluge of rain came and filled the "great hollow

of the island” where “there was formerly a great plain covered with forest.” The plain overflowed and the rainwater carried the canoe and its cargo down the waterfall and out to sea. Qat escaped with the “best of everything,” the people of Gaua told Codrington, and so they eagerly await his return (2005:166).

The stories of Rovinquet and Qat both recount the existence of a village in the center of the island prior to the lake’s creation. In both accounts, water is the element of destruction and dislocation, whether activated through carelessness as by the curious grandchildren of Rovinquet or by design as by the mischievous Qat. The flood carried Rovinquet away from the island’s center toward the estuary at the furthest reaches of the river; her expulsion was the price she paid for the children’s desire to know the coconut shell’s true nature. The destructive force of Qat’s will brought death to villagers (per Welegtabit) and forest (per Codrington), and displaced the best of everything that had made life possible and good on Gaua. When Gauans tell the stories of Rovinquet and Qat, they often draw their own connections to the biblical Edenic Fall and the Great Deluge, just as they offer warnings to travelers to the lake not to step on the “wood of Noah’s ship” that lies petrified just under the soil at its eastern shore. Examining the consequences of action, we may understand Rovinquet and Qat as mythic personifications of a primordial, ambivalent human relation between possibility and limit, and *tas* as an analogous substance of creation and destruction. These are themes with which people of Gaua deeply identify and which they frequently revisit in kastom storytelling, and in church sermons where, for example, Qat as the “Holy Spirit” and source of Gaua’s eventual salvation liberates himself from the bounds of the island-as-corruptible corporeality.



Conforming to Codrington's and Baker's accounts of local articulations of *tas*, the lake has been called "Letas" in documents ranging from bathymetry studies (They et al 1995) and biodiversity surveys (Challis et al, 2001; Taiko-Nimoho and Ala 2001) to federal applications for UNESCO World Heritage status (VEU 2004). Welegtabit, a Gaua native, refers to the lake as "Letas" in his essay. These examples all differ from my own observations in the field. With only a single exception, every person to whom I spoke in East and West Gaua referred to the lake as "Letes." The proper noun "Tas" is nowadays reserved for the name of the antagonist in a well-known kastom story. In addition to providing the lake with a proper name, *letes* signifies the space within the caldera that encompasses the volcano, waterfall, and surrounding forest. As a referent for the lake, Nume speakers understand *Letes* as meaning "a lake in its totality," suggesting the body of water on Gaua to be a "lake" in its fullest possible sense as opposed to a water catchment or a less "strong" (*martig*) lake elsewhere. Tivönö over the age of forty recognize "Tes" as their lake's true name, identifying one's knowledge of this fact as a marker of indigenous identity.

The lake is a ubiquitous presence in Gauan life. Hardly a string band exists throughout the island's many villages that is without a song either named "Lake Letes" or which liberally references it. In the northeast, I heard a string band called *Asiwa* ("I don't know") perform a lively song called "Lake Letes." Its composer transcribed the English and Bislama lyrics per my request:

Big and beautiful, Water in Lake Letes  
 Bigfala lake ia long hol Vanuatu. [Largest lake in all of Vanuatu]  
 Inside long bottom blong lake ia ol big eel fish i ledaon  
 Mo long side bottom blong hill ia ol wild duck i stap float  
 Mo long side i ron i kam ol stream, hot water.

[In the lake the big eels lie, and at the side of the hill the ducks float, and in the streams on the other side hot water flows out.]  
 Inside long middle blong lake ia, Yu save lukim Mount Garat.  
 Mount Garat ia nao, where volcano i stap.  
 [In the middle of this lake you can see Mount Garat. That's Mount Garat there, where the volcano stands.] [Howard Aris, October 10, 2009]

String band performances reverberate with choruses of “Lake Letes, my island home” and descriptions of the volcano’s reflection in the lake visible from various locations along the eastern shore. Musicians explain that songs featuring the lake identify Gauan string bands in their festival performances on other islands; their lyrics tout Letes as a tourist destination unique within all of Vanuatu. Through myth and story, biography and musical performance, Gauans invoke connections to their lake in ways that suggest its pervasive presence in everyday life.



**Figure 2.2:** The good lake. Letes as seen from Non, a point on the eastern shore. Mount Garat is visible in the distance. Photo by Jeffrey Wescott.

Indigenous Gauans attribute qualities of sacredness and danger (*holi* [holy]; *tabu* [taboo]; *tigor* [taboo place]) to the lake, often when responding to news of disrespectful

acts committed by visitors to the caldera. Several months before the volcanic eruptions of late 2009, the Paramount Chief of Gaua placed a taboo on the entire caldera, prohibiting the use of nylon nets and diving equipment in the lake and string band performances on or near the volcano. Tivönö and West Gauan elders explain that prior to the current era of demographic change, taboos were unnecessary at Letes. Tribal affiliation determined customary ownership of and access to the lake, and trespassers reportedly met their deaths by decapitation or an arrow through the temple at the hands of landowning tribal members.<sup>20</sup> Although there were several villages within walking distance to the lake prior to seaward migration in the 1950s, no settlements existed in the caldera save for the home of Werisris, the shape-shifting man (and present-day spirit) known as the “Boss of the Lake.” All tribes of Gaua descend from the moieties of Matan and Velow, and members of both “mother tribes” (*veve*) claim affiliation with Werisris and declare their exclusive links to Letes and Mount Garat.<sup>21</sup> Although present-day as before the lake contributes very little to the household economy and is a rather long and arduous trek, indigenous communities nonetheless view the recently implemented taboos as necessary if regrettable measures to assist Werisris in defending the physical and spiritual integrity of this locus of autochthonous connection. They

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<sup>20</sup> Codrington (2005) describes both poison and non-poison arrows used in the Banks Islands. Poison arrows were constructed from the bones of dead men, their “poison” qualities attributable to “supernatural properties enacted by magic arts” (307). Whereas Codrington observes that the bone of a high-ranking man was the most deadly due to the *mana* (power) of its once-living owner (309), John Wetelwur, my interlocutor, recalled that in his youth (ca. 1940s), a dead child’s bone produced the deadliest poison arrow (called *tot*; all other arrows are called *wulu*). [John Wetelwur, March 20, 2007]

<sup>21</sup> The name of the volcano, *Garat* (alternately *Garet*, *Gharet*, or *Gharat*), also signifies Bönö, the final resting place for the Gauan spirit. Nume speakers explain that *Garet* means “to bite someone” whereas *Garat* denotes “to swim away.” Both names are accepted, although tivönö tend to prefer *Garat* as it evokes the exodus of Rovinqet and Qat from the flooded caldera.

assert the inviolable nature of a place removed from the exigencies of history by virtue of its geographical isolation and its mythic temporality.

The expressive media through which *tivönö* reveal their connections with the lake are rich with allusions to transcendent experiences and moments of moral awareness; these are recurrent themes in ethnographic and literary accounts of lakes and people (Orlove 2002:xxi-xxv). Such themes identify the lake-as-presence, a landscape that holds tensions and revelations that are ever-present concerns within the rhythms of everyday human life. The notion of a lake as an enduring and confirming presence contrasts with a view of lake-as-destination, of a place absent from the immediacy of experience and disconnected from life's most abiding concerns. In a similar vein, James Leach (2003) observes the interactions between the Reite (New Guinea) and their landscape as an immersive bodily engagement employing multiple sensory modalities. Against anthropological notions of landscape-as-potentiality—as absent until present through representation (e.g., Hirsch 1995)—there is “no ‘outside’ perspective” to transcend such horizons in the conception of landscape-as-co-presence manifested in Reite social action (Leach 2003:201).

For Gauan *tivönö*, Letes is a “presence” in a broader, more inclusive sense of the term. The connections they make with Letes in their immediate sensory experiences both precede and emerge from their thoughtful deliberations about the lake as a symbol of enduring autochthony. A woman from northeast Gaua recounted her personal experiences of the lake to me in ways that closely resonate with the accounts of other indigenous Gauans who have visited recurrently throughout their lives:

“U wes lolowon, sur na ve tale Tes”<sup>22</sup>

When I come down from Vari, I reach the lake and I cannot hear the sea.  
 I cannot hear anything at all.  
 There are ducks playing and singing, but there is no sound of the sea.  
 There is the smell of sulfur sitting on the surface of the lake there.  
 I try to taste the bitterness on my tongue.  
 The soft mud boils. The soft mud boils. The soft mud eats my shoes and  
 makes my eyes water.  
 I stand there. I know that I will become dizzy from the shaking ground.  
 I laugh at this! I shout!  
 When we hear the sea at night, we think about the lake. The lake is  
 different.  
 I imagine the time when I was born at the lake.  
 No, no—I was born in Namasari [northeast Gaua]!  
 But I too, I am of the lake. People of Gaua are of the lake.  
 I imagine my mother’s spirit there. I imagine all the things that are  
 gone.<sup>23</sup> [Roqil, April 4, 2008]

Beginning with a description of her final approach to the lake, the woman vividly recalls her journey in sensory terms. Silence replaces the incessant clapping of the ocean against the fringing reef which pervades every moment of coastal village life. She becomes aware of herself—of her body, of balance, and of the sensations of isolation—in ways unavailable to her in the spaces of everyday life. The woman later reveals how she listens to the gentle pulsing inside her ears as she sits quietly by the lake’s shore, far from the ocean and, more pointedly, from the sound of her family’s voices. Her engagement with the environment of Letes is auditory, if in silence. It is olfactory and gustatory in the volcanic emissions which blanket the lake; and it is tactile and

<sup>22</sup> “A song of sorrow, for I am from the Lake.” The day after I recorded the woman’s narrative, I played the recording for her. She felt that she had created a “kastom” song, and so she provided a title.

<sup>23</sup> In the original Nume: Le sav qoŋ nen na ve siu ma a Vari, na ve diŋ Letes na ve ta roŋote me now. | Lit nuk ve nenen, na ve ta roŋote ran me saven. | Navgi vanag te oror ti, te rawraw ti. | U duŋ now bek. | U bune wout aben, te sasa ti amek Tes en. | Na ve dael ni namiak ve gon. | U leb ve wel. U leb ve wel. | Leb en ve gen namuk sus ma ve da na löv matak ve sal. | Na ve tur abene, na ve gil si nanogok ve tiqilqil sur tan ve miriŋriŋ. | Ve mwara min ni, na ve wow! | Ale qoŋ kama ve roŋote u duŋ now, kama ve domwun u Tes. | U Tes ni sese. | Na ve domwun Tes ale qoŋ na me wöt ale Tes. | Bek, bek—Na me wöt saen a Gog! | Si na tale Tes. Tudun ta Gog ni tale Tes. | Na ve domwun e vev natan ve tog ale Tes. Na ve domwun savasav velol ve leŋ. ||

vestibular in the heat and movement of the boiling mud springs beneath her feet. There is an immediacy to the woman's experience with landscape, an encounter identified by other writers (e.g., Leach 2003:203; Howes 2003) in ways that capture what I call presence.

Letes is irreducible to a lake-as-destination, a place dissociated from everyday life. It is an experience of life in its present, a reminder of what is intrinsic to daily life through its stark absence. As catalysts for reflection, sensory experiences of landscape are media for deliberation on persistent concerns. The woman who recounted her journey returns home to her village, and hearing the ocean waves, she recalls the silence of the lake and conceives of alternatives to her daily routine. What does it mean for a *tivönö* woman like her to reflect on the virtuous possibilities of silence, isolation, and immersion in strange bodily sensations? Her feeling of having been born at the lake hints at a sense of dislocation further revealed in her hopeful thoughts of rejoining her mother in the world of spirits. She seems to suggest that in both its immediate and lingering modes of presence, Letes embodies themes of absence that are available for reflection to persons who feel connected to it by virtue of autochthonous belonging.

The woman ends her account by calling to mind the loss of "things" (*savasav*); she later clarifies this as including lost loved ones but also all that Gaua had in abundance before the changes brought about by traumatic events, beginning with Qat's exploits. Letes emerges in stories and personal reflections as the nucleus of something lost (*veleŋ*) and perpetually just out of reach: the "best of everything" with which Qat absconded; the plentiful gardens and lives free from the burden of knowledge in Rovinŋet's tale; and the quietude and immediacy of presence in my interlocutor's

account of her travels. As I introduced in chapter 1, tivönö freely acknowledge their dislocation from primordial culture—from moieties that nowadays are present in thought more so than in moral and political relevance; and from households that subsist without need of store-bought foods or health clinics, however appreciative people are of these things. Letes is an absence as it is a presence, a journey undertaken as escape, catharsis, or reclamation of something lost and which remains with persons like my interlocutor long after returning home. Tivönö confront the absence of things in part by reflecting on Letes as it embodies the tension between the possibilities and limits of autochthony.

Mary Patterson (2002) observes that “active volcanoes foster an outward orientation to the world” (207), provoked by the imperative to seek refuge from them during times of threatening activity. The eruption of Mount Garat in 2009 attests to this inescapable reality of Gauan life. As a metonym for the presence of Letes, however, Mount Garat inspires an inward orientation, reminding tivönö in their coastal villages of the connections and disconnections revealed with great clarity in myths and personal narratives of loss and reclamation. In this changing cultural landscape there is increasing awareness that some people do not identify with this inward orientation. Notions of presence and absence which populate tivönö discourse and which implicate Letes in everyday lives are replaced with bearings to other islands of origin. These are the changes which animated the placing of taboos at the lake for the first time in memory, and which only strengthen the resolve of many tivönö to protect their lake from the contingencies of history. This firm devotion to stasis exists as a particularity within the dynamic Gauan landscape: as tivönö readily acknowledge change in the

domesticated spaces of villages, fisheries, and gardens, Letes persists in a temporal void. It accommodates the antediluvian past and the near-future return of Qat as coeval states of affairs from which tivönö derive ethical concerns, and to which they focus their obligations to preserving the interior landscape as it is, with thoughts of reclaiming life's possibility as it once was.

I have reached this view of Letes as an atemporal landscape and locus of moral obligation by viewing it in isolation from the spaces that surround it. Attributing presence and absence to the lake, however, hints at its place in a network of moral symbolism connecting it to other points in a broader landscape affected by movement and change. The next section examines how tivönö imbue their movements to and within the lake with ethical significance. This ethics-centered perspective from which I comprehend tivönö conceptions of Letes—as an entity that embodies “ought” and “is” simultaneously—is sharpened by considering the work that people undertake to affirm the lake's spatial and temporal boundaries.

### **Devils swim downriver: myth and movement**

Movement of people between coast and caldera is commonplace in the Gauan landscape. There are routes to the lake scattered around the coast, accessible near the villages of Qetevut and Qetegaveg in the west, Biam and Qeteon in the southeast, and Siriti and Kaska in the east. At Aver in the northeast a banyan tree (*baq*; *nambangga*; *Ficus prolixa*) marks the trailhead of an old and preferred route for tivönö, although a new path from Namasari half a kilometer away has become increasingly popular. The Aver path is well-known throughout Gaua for the protocols travelers must observe as they proceed through the bush and into Non, the eastern section of the lakeshore owned



by Tribe Wumbu. At the long-abandoned village of Lenen, bush knives have cleared and carefully maintained a 25-meter tunnel through a series of interconnected banyan trees. At the tunnel's halfway mark lies an array of flat stones placed adjacently to one another to remind visitors of the respect owed to this land, still tribally owned despite its regression to bush. Further inland is Vat Naris, a large standing stone from which Tribe Naris emerged. Visitors who are not of this tribe are expected to keep their distance from the stone and to travel silently past it. Deeper into the bush, a creek called Lig Mörös beckons visitors to plant *qiri* (croton, *Cordyline terminalis*) on its north bank when passing it for the first time. Lig Mörös is the last stop before reaching Vari, a hill overlooking the lake and volcano, where one calls out “*Salavan tabene!*” (A stranger is here!) and awaits permission to pass by the welcoming sputter of Mount Garat.

Propriety of movement within the caldera is significantly more stringent than on the paths that lead to it. The penalty for careless cutting or breaking of bamboo and other ground flora around the lake is deep illness to family members and perhaps even one's own imminent death at the hands of malevolent forces inhabiting the lake. Near the western shore lies Vat Wubul (Tattoo Stone), a large flat rock at the water's edge upon which the great spider Maraw, who assisted Qat in constructing his canoe on Vanua Lava for travel to Gaua, carved his own likeness with his fingernails. To this day, kastom storytellers often conclude their orations with the phrase “*Bis bis marawa e*” (These, Maraw's fingernails) to metaphorically concretize in stone the events of the tale as a gesture of sincerity and as an affirmation of kastom authenticity.<sup>24</sup> Contact with

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<sup>24</sup> Tom Harrison (1937:131) and Charlene Gourguechon (1977:134) report that the phrase roughly translates to “the Spider's fingernails.” Harrison records that the arrival of hoop iron to the Banks Islands convinced local people that it was “the heaven-root, *gar tuka*” dredged from the earth's firmament by

Vat Wubul by hand or by boat once meant death by decapitation; today transgressors face banishment from the caldera for life and a permanent debilitation such as loss of sight or limb control. From the trailhead at Aver village to the path's end and throughout the entire caldera, movement is about obligation—the dutiful offerings of silence and entreaty and the careful avoidance of disruption.

The existence of protocols for moving to and around the caldera do not undercut notions of Letes as static and enduring; on the contrary, they reinforce this particular landscape as one which *ought not* to be altered by human activity. Jason Throop (2010) writes about the ways in which paths in Micronesian societies embody particular evaluations of human action. Whereas a tree growing in the middle of a trail in Pohnpei, Chuuk, or Kosrae would be circumvented and allowed to grow, the people of Yap would reject it as an uncertainty in and alteration of human space. The well-cultivated path on Yap alerts travelers to show respect when traveling along its route into the spaces of others. Stone-lined paths oblige deliberation and care when traversing them to ensure “that individuals who are walking on [them] will keep their minds focused on the task at hand and the purpose of their travels” (133). Throop describes the paths to and around Yapese villages and other living—that is, domesticated—spaces in ways both familiar and unfamiliar in the Gauan landscape. The carefully tended, croton-and-flower lined village entrances on Gaua serve the dual purposes of extending hospitality to visitors and displaying the dignity and dedicated hard work of landowning and other

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European ships. The hoop iron was interpreted locally as a manifestation of Maraw's powerful fingernails. Gourguechon suggests that the Banks Islanders, upon seeing iron nails for the first time, called them *pismarawa*, “Marawa's fingernails.” Today, many indigenous Gauans view Maraw as Gaua's first storyteller, instructing Qat in his heroic journey and inscribing “his (Maraw's) story” (*usursur namun*) into the Gauan landscape with his fingernails (*bisbis*).

residing families. By contrast, fallen trees and overgrown ground flora in the island's non-living spaces, beyond the daily industry of households and gardens, provide evidence of stasis, of an absence of human encroachment and change.

The paths (*sal*) that lead to the caldera manifest the reflexive appraisals of persons who traverse them. Travelers record their moral commitments to landscape either by slashed and uprooted flora or by the conspicuous absence of any such disturbance. Planting *qiri* along the creek, avoiding inappropriate noise and contact, and treading lightly through overgrowth are all movements which allay ambiguity and uncertainty with respect to intentions. In the non-living space of Gaua, movement is stasis: the ambiguities and uncertainties of change are deflected by the moral imperative to maintain the landscape of Letes as it is, and as it ought to be.

As a path connecting living and non-living space, the River Solomul is unique in its moral-symbolic importance to tivönö. Nume speakers interpret the name "Solomul" as meaning "it goes home" or "the return path," calling to mind the movement of Rovinqet and Qat and of the seawater (*tas*) that flooded the caldera in Rovinqet's tale. Lusal, Solomul's northeast-running tributary, derives its name from the Nume *lug* (milk) and *sal* (road or path). Many older tivönö identify Lusal as a metonymic image of Solomul, as the "path of milk," the conduit of primordial mother's milk emanating from the origin site of Gaua's two "mother tribes," Matan and Velow. For others, Lusal simply describes the churning white water at the base of the waterfall, Siri. As a path of origin and return, Solomul touches on profound issues of identity and moral personhood for many tivönö.

In the previous section, I left Rovinquet and her two disobedient grandchildren in their futile attempt to contain the deluge of seawater gushing from the capsized coconut shell which flooded the village and the surrounding plain. As it cascaded off the cliff it carried Rovinquet and the children with it. In the present day, the environment surrounding the base of Siri Falls is always wet: this place is the womb of Rovinquet, eternally feeding the laplap leaves that grow in abundance at all times of the year. In the deluge, the rushing water reached the “house” where the river meets the sea, and where Rovinquet’s head now lies submerged. Persons who step foot on the slippery rocks that traverse the river at the “house”—the estuary, or *qerlu*—must take care, as Rovinquet, angered by her displacement, will devour them and carry them seaward. Qat too connected Letes to the sea, either through his lazy refusal to portage his canoe through the bush (per Welegtabit) or by mere expediency (per Codrington). He escaped with the originary objects of Gaua—the “best of everything”—and in so doing imposed new limits to Gauan lives. In the tale of Rovinquet, the downriver journey from the falls to the estuary is a movement from life (womb) to death (mouth)—the negation of human capacity and possibility.

In tivönö cosmology, the River Solomul figures prominently in the journey of spirits of the recently deceased. The death of a kastom woman or man of Gaua begins with the release of the soul (*atan* or *tajwinin*; see chapter 3) from the corporeal body. Atan travels from its home village to the estuary, and swims against the flow of the Solomul until it reaches the waterfall. From there it swims upward to the caldera and eventually arrives at the peak of Mount Garat. Directing its gaze due north to Valaval, a point just east of the abandoned coastal village of Masevönö, the soul descends to the

ocean's edge and faces a mountain on Vanua Lava called Areqoŋ. As it recites a prayer to the mountain, atan is carried to Leseber, Qat's ancestral village on Vanua Lava which lies within view of Areqoŋ. It returns to Letes to reside in Bönö, the dwelling of spirits in the massive "hole" beneath the lake and volcano (cf. Hess 2010:167 for an account of the path of the Vanua Lavan spirit). Even in the present day, tivönö who profess their deep devotion to Christian beliefs recognize the Solomul as the initial path to Heaven, which many still believe lies below the surface of Letes.

Tivönö explain the significance of the upriver journey of the human soul in ways that resonate with the origin stories of the lake and river. The atan of a tivönö person is cultivated and fortified by a lifetime of socially productive work such as generous giving and respectful talk. "Swimming" upriver proves one's atan worthy of its final destination in the dwelling of Gauan ancestors beneath Letes. The Nume phrase *Tare tamat ve sarsar siu tiqel Solomul* (Devils swim downriver) illustrates how the virtue of hard work is manifested in movement up the Solomul. The vices of laziness and complacency—the manner of devils (*matev nam tamat*)—reveal an atan unworthy of eternal rest in Bönö. These movements up- and down-river disclose oppositional pairs of symbols that speak to notions of moral identity, character, and concern:

<u>Downriver</u> path of <i>tamat</i> (weak beings)	<u>Upriver</u> path of <i>atan</i> (strong souls)
laziness, complacency, inertia	industry, cultivation, effort
Rovinqet's mouth (destruction)	Rovinqet's womb (creation)
entropy (dissipation of water, of Rovinqet)	reintegration (gathering of souls; Qat's return)
loss (of primordial things, of innocence)	reclamation

ocean (outward, undifferentiated)

Letes (inward, uniquely Gauan)

These oppositions suggest a tendency toward viewing upriver or inward movement as signifying autochthony and its associated moral virtues. Themes of creation, recovery of primordial things, and returning to the place of ancestral spirits are woven into narratives that value and reinforce hard work and creative production. By contrast, the devils' downward path, carried away from the center of Gauan origin and identity, is effortless and without purpose. People who present the stories of Rovinget and Qat and who describe the laborious journey of the Gauan soul connect themselves, their families and tribes to originary places at the island's center. These narrators reveal the conditions and obligations, but also the stakes, for how movement to and within the center ought to be achieved, procedures that are reinforced time and again in trekking inland paths.

Notwithstanding the understandable desires to identify with morally positive symbols, tivönö storytellers and other narrators of kastom knowledge are careful to avoid characterizing any person or group as fully embodying one extreme or the other—as entirely “upriver” or “downriver.” To understand why this is the case, we may consider how assigning, in definitive terms, certain individuals and groups to one or the other set of moral-symbolic associations ignores the mutual transformative effects of person, group, and symbolic order. The columns of “upriver” and “downriver” combine as sets of dualisms, by which I do not assume a self-evident “stable island of fixed categories amidst the flux of otherwise constant change” (Piot 2005:68), but consider how certain important oppositions are upheld or challenged by the everyday experiences of tivönö and others. Anthropologists have examined the

fractal relations among symbolic domains—that is, the ways that oppositional pairs bear structural resemblance or “self-similarity” to the interactions that take place at higher or lower levels of analysis, and how these nested pairs interact and influence each other (Mosko 2005:25; Piot 2005:73; Wagner 1991; Strathern 1988). In Gauan life, individuals confront intra-personal dilemmas of attending to their own well-being while comprehending how their obligations to others constitute them as persons of the place. Their deliberative actions are seen by others as affirming some idea of what it means to identify as *tivönö*. The cumulative practical responses of a plurality of *tivönö* to changes in demography and economic opportunity, and to new possibilities and desires, impact the still-higher-order notions of promise and limitation which inform thought and action in the most pervasive ways.

Examining dualisms at intra-personal, inter-group, and moral-evaluative levels of analysis, we understand how these tensions are “self-similar” iterations of a single dualism, and how they interact. The moral force of distinctions between upriver and downriver is sensitive to the experiences of persons and communities caught up in the flow of historical process. Yet just as evident are the influences of more or less enduring moral-evaluative symbols on the flux of everyday action—the possibility of a top-down effect of self-similarity by which people and groups recognize the limits to their own self-interests by reflecting on the moral symbolism of their landscape and why they feel compelled to care about it. On Gaua, the most salient experiences in terms of moral and symbolic change take place in the production of social relations (see chapters 3 and 4) and in the interactions between people and environment (see chapters 5 and 6). Avowing the atemporality of *Letes* amid the real experiences of these changes is a

moral strategy underwritten by myth and cosmology. The effect of this strategy is clear: tivönö see Letes as sequestered within its own spatial and temporal domain, even as their experiences of and meaningful responses to this bounded reality change. This separation of Letes contributes in no small measure to its role as a distinctive moral symbol, a role which storytellers hesitate to call into question by identifying it too completely with fallible, historically embedded persons and groups.

As for the perspectives of storytellers, they speak about autochthony and its associated virtues because these themes convey ideas of what a person of Gaua ought to be at *this* time and confronted with *these* particular circumstances.<sup>25</sup> For elders who have witnessed tribal warfare, depopulation, and cultural change, there is a pull toward a reclamation and assertion of autochthony that tends to cast non-native residents and visitors outward. Yet despite the highly valued corollaries between tivönö kastom and moral integrity, the storyteller is careful never to place the children of the indigenous *veve* of Matan and Velow fully upriver, and everyone else downriver. Tivönö are obligated to earn their eventual return to the lake through hard work in ways others are not. Storytellers offer asides in their presentations in which they give stern warnings to their audiences about the vicious consequences of laziness, indifference, and unearned entitlement. As they increasingly come to recognize the presence of novel influences within their landscape, many tivönö direct their attention inward, toward the lake. This too is movement, the effort of reclaiming the possibilities of a mythic and cultural-historical past when the best of everything—abundant fisheries and gardens, the

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<sup>25</sup> “Hence the truism that one can never read the same story twice, just as a narrator can only tell the same myth once” (Young 1983:11).



political influence of moieties and men's societies, and other means of self-reliance—all lay within reach.

### **Boundaries and ruptures in living space**

Movement across the landscape was a serious concern for all Gauans in the past. Tribal leaders called for the deaths of persons caught catching prawns and eels or cutting wood in areas around Letes to which they did not belong. Downward throughout the settlements in the bush and along the coast, people confined their activities to spaces that manifested their tribal affiliations. The journal of Fray Martín de Munilla records how the Quirós expedition of 1606, having been met by “remarkably friendly” islanders in an East Gauan village, observed the hostile reactions to their presence by members of “an adjacent clan” who dared not to cross into another clan’s territory (de Munilla 1966:85).<sup>26</sup> Tribal leaders imposed fines of shell money and pigs to trespassers who wandered into villages, gardens, and coastal fisheries to which they had no rightful claim to access and into which they were not formally welcomed. The living spaces of domestic production were zones of exclusivity in the social topographies of Gauans in the past, their boundaries frequently contested through intra-island warfare.

In the present day, Gaua’s indigenous elders lament the observation that people of Gaua “*go olbaot*”: they “go all over the place,” dismissing the moral and political imperatives of bounded places. Contemporary Gaua’s living space is confined to the coast, and has been since the exodus from bush villages beginning in the 1940s. While

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<sup>26</sup> A separate journal entry speculates that it was envy which prompted the hostilities of the adjacent clan: “No person [on the Gauan coast, within view of the expedition] dared to go from one district into the territory or district of another: for this island appeared to be divided between two chieftains, and each one had his boundaries, without the right to pass into the territory of the other. And this is how they acted [i.e. firing arrows at the passing ship, motivated by envy]” (de Munilla 1966:201).

history has altered the political topography, a division remains between living and non-living spaces; for tivönö, maintaining the moral-conceptual distinctions between these spaces is an everyday concern. Yet with its temporality compressed to accommodate both the limits of primordial loss and the possibilities of a near-future of reclamation, Letes nonetheless reveals its presence in historical time, within the dynamic spaces of human activity. The ethical significance of Letes is such that the rhythms of everyday life—the production and reproduction of relations and things—are permeated with its presence. What follows is an overview of the effects of Letes’ unique temporality and ethical potency on the living spaces of tivönö. Gaua’s spatial and temporal divisions, and the ruptures that occur among them, provide context for the social relations and human-environment interactions that concern the remainder of this dissertation.

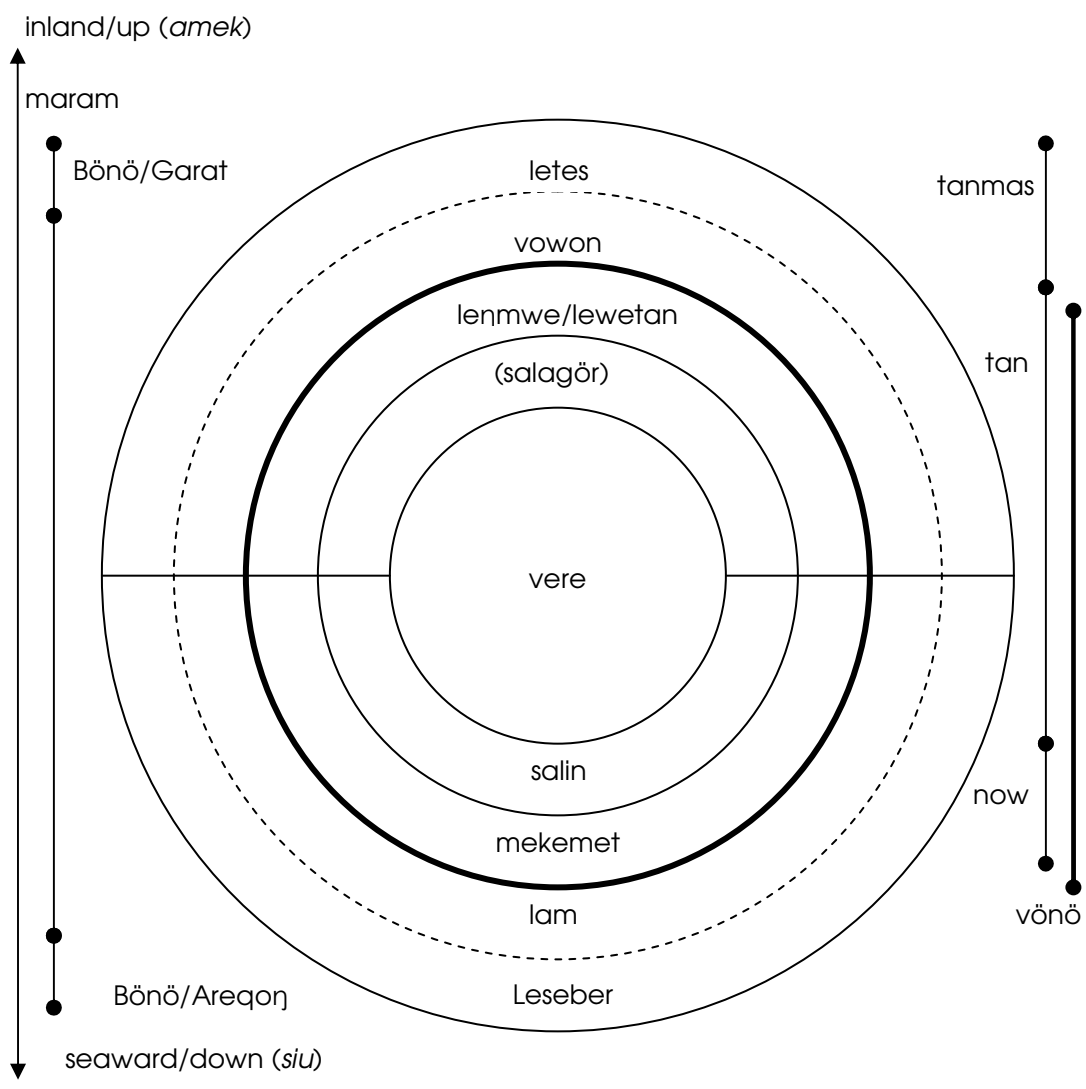
The erosions of boundaries separating the exclusive spaces of Gaua’s tribes have altered conceptions of where people belong. The combined effects of missionary-driven migrations to the coast, demographic fluctuations, and the indifference of those who “go olbaot” have all but erased tribal protocols of movement and spatial organization, although many landowners still identify their land by invoking tribal affiliation. Taking the (coastal) village as the locus from which all persons orient themselves spatially, however, elder tivönö explain that certain conceptual divisions within and between living and non-living spaces are much the same as they were in the past. Adopting and amending a diagram which illustrates the spatial organization of the people of Mota Lava further north in the Banks Islands (Vienne 1984:134), Figure 2.3 presents

divisions of living and non-living space among Nume speakers in East Gaua.<sup>27</sup> The double vector at the far left of the figure replicates the spatial and conceptual continuum of upriver and downriver discussed in the previous section.

*Vere* designates the village (*vili*), the center of domestic life and the site of most social activity outside the household; it includes the sleeping houses and cookhouses, *gamel* (*nakamal*, kava house or meeting house) and often a church. In its contemporary usage, *vere* often encompasses villages other than one's own, and depending on context, may include the airport, schools, medical clinics, and stores. The term also provides the common noun for "island" when describing Gaua as an undifferentiated physical locality (e.g., *map tabe vere*, map of the island). Before its demise, *salagör*, or the house occupied by the secret men's societies, or *tamat*, inhabited a liminal space just beyond the village, transcending boundaries of household ties in ritual terms. *Vere* in the present day extends to the lowland borders of gardens.

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<sup>27</sup> There are further divisions of space on Gaua that demarcate ownership of land, and which hold critical ethical and political significance. Chapter 6 takes up the problem of land ownership and access rights.



**Figure 2.3:** Conceptual organization of space among Nume speakers

*Lenmwe*, or taro gardens, are commonly placed near the entrances to larger areas reserved for gardening, although some households construct *lenmwe* along major paths near villages. Nume speakers describe *lenmwe* as functionally distinct from other garden space (*lewetan*) in that only taro is permitted. *Lewetan* denotes “yam garden,” but other crops have been gradually introduced to yam gardens such that the term now

extends to all gardens save for *lejmwe*.<sup>28</sup> *Lewetan* marks the inland boundary of living space, or *vönö*. In addition to denoting the conceptual space of domestic life and production, *vönö* encompasses the physical land upon which people have constructed *vere*, *lejmwe* and *lewetan*, and is the inclusive category for all spaces extending from the gardens and villages to the shoreline (*salin*) and outward across the seascape to the reef. *Mekemet*, the fringing reef that surrounds nearly 80% of the island, marks the seaward boundary of *vönö*. Persons who identify as *tivönö* present themselves as both architects and artifacts of *vönö*; they produce and embody the possibilities and limits of life as it exists between the spaces of *lewetan* and *mekemet*.

*Vönö* is further divided into *tan*, the terrestrial living space that includes villages, gardens, and coconut groves, and *now*, the marine space for domestic production lying beyond the village and including the shoreline and the reef. Beyond the outer reef boundary lies *lam*, the “deep sea” where very few Gauans venture in their subsistence or recreational activities. Whereas landowners and communities throughout Vanuatu claim extensive areas beyond the outer edges of fringing reefs (Fairbairn 1992:159), Gaua does not. *Lam* identifies the non-living space of the sea which in the northeast eventually becomes the marine living spaces of the nearby islands of Vanua Lava, Mota, and Mota Lava. Inland and beyond the boundaries of gardens lies *vowon*, the uninhabited and uncultivated forest. *Vowon* exceeds the limits of terrestrial living space (*tan*) and of living space (*vönö*) altogether. It is defined by its geographical and moral distance from domestic life: the *nut tale vowon* is a “bush child” (*pikinini blong*

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<sup>28</sup> *Lewetan* is further subdivided to include *dowondo* (fallow ground; *malatou* on Mota Lava, per Vienne 1984), for which gardeners allow a regeneration period of two to three years.

*bus*) born of an unmarried woman and by extension the outcome of an improper—undomesticated—act. Vowon was less extensive in the past when villages stood at various points along the flows and catchments of major creeks emanating from Letes. In the present day there is no recognized legitimate ownership of the vast tracts of hilly, mostly mature-growth forest that lie beyond the gardens. Together with lam and *milig*, the sky, vowon forms the vast outer shell of non-living space that surrounds the world of human activity.

Vowon shares the broader category of *tanmas*, or terrestrial non-living space, with *letes*. As a common noun, *letes* signifies a type of space far removed from the world of *vönö* and even of *vowon*. Encompassing the lake, volcano, waterfall, and forested region within the caldera, *letes* exists within *maram*, the visible world inhabited by and accessible to humans (c.f. Vienne 1984:68), as does *vönö* and the areas of *vowon* from which people harvest firewood, wild yam, and feral pig. *Leseber*, the birthplace of Qat which lies beyond the depths of the ostensibly impassable lam, is categorized along with *letes* as part of *Bönö*, the realm of the dead.<sup>29</sup> *Letes* and *Leseber* form the outer boundaries of *maram*: both are visible and accessible to living beings and share the same sky as the living space of *vönö*.<sup>30</sup> As I demonstrated earlier, however, *letes* as a particular conception of space designates a unique temporality which *tivönö* uphold as detached from the contingencies of human activity. The qualities of

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<sup>29</sup> Some *tivönö* associate *Leseber* with *Bönö* as it marks the penultimate point in the spirit's journey to the underworld below Gaua's caldera. It is designated in Figure 2.3 as a space of *Bönö*. Codrington (2005) identified the birthplace of Qat as Lo Sepere according to his Vanua Lavan interlocutors. The name also designated a moiety subdivision on Vanua Lava.

<sup>30</sup> As an outer spatial boundary, *Leseber* is limited in its signification to Qat's birthplace on Vanua Lava. Nume speakers describe distant places such as Efate Island in Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and the USA as *vere le lam* or *tavla now* (overseas places, places in the deep sea).

differentiation and change which lie at the mouth of the River Solomul and extend throughout the entire inhabited world of vönö and the forests of vowon must remain there, sequestered from the space of letes as the geographical locus of tivönö identity.

As “constructions of tradition,” kastom is always “about the present” and “historically contingent” (Lindstrom and White 1993:470). While vönö represents the space in which “tradition” is made and remade, any analysis of the cosmological order of Gauan tivönö kastom is incomplete without a complementary focus on the atemporality of letes. For this reason it is helpful to view letes as ontologically antecedent to the world of human creation and the changeable present. Of the island of Tanna in the south of Vanuatu, Joël Bonnemaïson (1994) observes that “the cultural strength of Tannese society derives from [the] vital connection between space and humans. If their social fabric were destroyed, the Tannese would lose none of their heritage—provided they kept the memory of their places. By returning to the island’s original space, they would recover the power to reconstruct their society along identical lines” (323). Bonnemaïson finds that Tannese society is “timeless in a way; it wants to be outside the flow of history...Tanna’s timeless space thus become places of the absolute—they forge a Dreamspace” (323). Tannese kastom orders time and space in a manner that perpetuates society by creating what Bonnemaïson calls “a context of insularity” where historical impingements are deflected by the atemporality of place. Tannese shape local identities through the “mesological,” or dynamic, interplay between culture and natural environment, both of which are insulated from events external to their relation even as Tannese recognize the growing presence of “the weight of local history” in their lives (323).

On Gaua, living spaces stand resolutely within historical time and space with the effect of safeguarding the symbolic potency of letes. The obligation to maintain this dichotomy within a kastom conception of order—being historically contingent and of the present (per Lindstrom and White) while accommodating and defending an atemporal Dreamspace (per Bonnemaïson)—manifests as morally salient attributes of everyday practice. We have seen how modes of discourse such as myth, personal narrative, and song, and how protocols of movement, preserve a particular transcendent view of letes. The conceptual organization of space is informed by obligation as well, guiding the proper relations between human activity and a moral cosmology bound in mythic time. Within vönö, however, there are moments in everyday life which manifest the rupture of the Dreamspace of letes into living spaces, and which provide opportunities for ethical reflection and action.

Families residing along the northeastern shore eagerly vaunt their privileged access to spring water flowing from Lake Letes. Aquifers provide fresh water (*tuv*, *springwota*, *freswota*) to several coastal villages; most empty into rocky pools at the shoreline which are accessible at low tide. As a material presence of the lake in living space, *tuv* sources provide vital potable water to families who have rightful access to them. Toward the end of the dry season in August and September, households without access to *tuv* and whose rain tanks are empty must carry buckets and bamboo deep into the forest to freshwater catchments close to the lake. In the village of Qetuv, named for its rich and dependable aquifer, a family measures its kastom authenticity in part by never having to traverse from village to distant bush to secure so essential a need. By contrast, a family in Neveto Station, an area without aquifers and whose residents are



first- or second-generation Gauans from Mere Lava and elsewhere, named a newborn girl “Tuv” with the hope of bringing rain during a difficult dry season. The material presence of letes in the form of tuv distinguishes those (almost entirely) tivönö communities who happen to reside in the right places along the northeast coast. The temporality of wet and dry seasonality is transcended in a small but significant way by villages like Qetuv which have the ability to collect water for drinking, cooking, and washing clothes whenever they need it, all signifying possibilities for continuing well-being and household productivity.

Letes is present as well in material forms which, as with storytelling and biblical analogy, call to mind anthropomorphic symbols of the inner landscape. As basic technology for daily subsistence and perhaps the clearest symbol of Qat’s pervasive presence, canoes signify a variety of concerns in Gauan life. Tivönö fishers who identify themselves and their methods as *kastom* haul their canoes onto Levara, the flat, perfectly trisected rock on the northeast coast which a majority of Gauans recognize as the petrified hull of Qat’s canoe. These acts propitiate marine spirits and allay fears of a disappointing catch. Fishers also evoke the presence of Lake Letes in their marine subsistence activities, explaining that Qat’s act of opening a river (“*ni ve da tuar sal velap*”: making a large road) and carrying away the essential things of Gaua deprived the lake as it replenished the sea. The fish caught by Gauan fishers belong to the lake: as such they must be (re-)collected in canoes which bear the *man* (magic) of Qat. Canoes and fishers are proxies to Qat’s compensation, without which the lake would cease its rupture into living space, abandoning its beneficence and ending marine subsistence on Gaua. Like the lake, Qat and his actions stand outside of historical time; there can be no

accumulation of compensatory deeds in his name over time as his transgression against Letes has always just transpired. The kastom fisher and his canoe recurrently reenact Qat's action in reverse, giving back to Lake Letes and to the domesticated spaces of vönö by taking from the sea.



**Figure 2.4:** The trisected rock identifying Qat's petrified "canoe" at Lesara, East Gaua, with kastom canoe (*wak*) in the background. Photo by Jeffrey Wescott.

Letes' rupture extends beyond island boundaries and into Western imaginaries of Pacific Island cultures and environments. Travel books, online travelogues, and even a governmental application to designate Lake Letes as a UNESCO World Heritage Site depict a pristine and enduring space seemingly disconnected from the incursions of history and modernity.<sup>31</sup> These depictions refract back into Gauan living space as change, as an incipient tendency toward self-identification as an ecotourist destination

<sup>31</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1974/>

and conservation hotspot.<sup>32</sup> Central to this change is a novel idea of stasis—of Letes as a metonym for the unspoiled kastom of Banks Islands cultures, regardless of various Banks communities’ own admissions of lost kastom and people’s commitments to projects that orient them to the future in ways that seem familiarly “modern” (Rio 2007). One oblique effect of this rupture of letes has been its contribution to the already extensive heterotopia of vönö.

The term *heterotopia* first appears in a lecture by Michel Foucault (1998a:179) wherein he distinguishes between two kinds of cultural space. A *utopia* represents places in society through reflection or inversion. Utopias are unreal in the sense that they consist only of representations of society and therefore have no true existence. Foucault contrasts this with the *heterotopia*, a real place where other places and the interests of persons who inhabit them are simultaneously represented. By “combining different places as if they were one” (Kahn 1995:324), heterotopias present their inhabitants with multiple representations of their culture, even if in illogical ways. Post-colonial Vanuatu is a heterotopia in the sense that kastom gathers local, intra- and inter-island interests into one site, exemplified in the governing apparatus in Port Vila where land reclamation projects represent village chiefs, regional industry, and the nation-state. On Gaua, tivönö survey their living space to find English-only schools, the foundations of old Anglican churches and missionaries’ houses, cattle and cultivars introduced by Americans and Japanese, the fragments of a crashed American World War II fighter plane, and the incipient practices and discourses of Western-style

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<sup>32</sup> Chapter 6 addresses the moral and political dilemmas generated by the incursions of conservation and ecotourism.

conservation and ecotourism, all examples of introduced things which coalesce in what is locally depicted as a living space that is uniquely Gauan.



**Figure 2.5:** Handling heterotopia. Bullets from the American fighter plane that crashed near the northwestern Gaua village of Vatles ca. 1944. The Vatles chief and other residents restrict access to the bullets, the plane’s front propeller, and the gravesite of one of the pilots (the other survived) through a strictly enforced taboo. Photo by Jeffrey Wescott.

What is “heterotopic dissonance” in places like museums (Kahn 1995) is for Gauans an affirmation of their own participation in world events while still holding firm to an ethics of self-reliance. Kastom has the ability to hold many of the aforementioned introduced things of Gaua within its conceptual grasp—as non-autochthonous yet locally valued. As it accommodates many of the heterotopic landmarks of vönö, kastom also encompasses what we may call its *heterochronia*, the simultaneous representation in the present of different moments in historical time. By contrast, letes is neither heterotopic nor heterochronic in historical time, but neither is it “unreal” in Foucault’s limited sense of utopia. Letes does not represent tivönö cultural identity through

reflection or inversion, but through notions of presence and absence which are both shaped by, and a creative force within, the “real” of everyday life. But Gaua’s heterotopia is not free of dissonance. For some tivönö, the hastening pace of cultural and linguistic diversity—the attenuation of local vernaculars and the rise of intermarriage between indigenous Gauans and other-islanders—creates a social world that often appears irreparably *zerrissen*, fragmented and inauthentic, “displaying many moral worlds and...many borderlands where moral worlds overlap, blend, and conflict” (Carrithers 2005:435). There lies the moral importance of *letes* and of the everyday, reciprocal intrusions between it and the people of Gaua. It is not the mere existence of the transcendent space of *letes* alone that impedes the entropic effects of *Zerrissenheit*, but the belief in an active relation between everyday experience and an enduring idea of *ought* symbolically rooted in the landscape.

One of the most persistent intimations of what ought to be concerns the tivönö moral imperative of turning strangers into kin (see chapter 3). This obligation is heterotopic by definition: it concerns the transformations of distant others, ostensibly “of other places,” into proper presences within one’s own living space. A heterotopic ethics necessarily draws the strange and distant into its own ambit of concern while it recognizes its own possibilities for influence in other places; the circulation of ideas relating to conservation and ecotourism, and their effects on notions of “stranger” and “kin,” provide productive examples in the Gauan context (see chapter 6). The obligation to others is heterochronic as well, asserting that past experiences of vulnerability—which range from commonplace situations of risk to signal moments of cultural-historical transformation—are apposite motivations for right action in the present. This

is the profile of Gauan ethics in living space—elements of commonality and otherness in tension. As the remainder of the dissertation argues, tivönö find the possibilities and limits to their life projects in the tensions between commonality and otherness. With its recurrent intrusions into living space, letes reminds tivönö of the moral imperatives of unifying “is” and “ought.” Yet the rupture is never complete: letes unifies “is” and “ought” precisely because possibility in such a space is always kept in abeyance, waiting for Qat’s return. In the meantime, possibility is by necessity a matter of everyday production in the social and subsistence spaces of tivönö.

**Conclusion: The good lake, the possible sea**

There is a well-known kastom song in which performers take the point of view of the volcano. In the final verse, they witness the unending argument between the lake and the sea: “Sea, you are angry because of the lake. Lake, you are angry because of the sea.”<sup>33</sup> The song begins with the volcano’s revelation that it was born from the same coconut shell that formed the lake and therefore claims kinship with it as a fellow offspring of the sea. Observing the dispute between lake and sea, the volcano takes neither side but asserts itself as an entity unto itself, declaring in the last instance, “Ea ea, na waor.” [It is I, the volcano.] Performers of the song explained to me that the volcano cannot take sides, residing as it does between the two opposing relations whence it derives its identity (its “brother,” the lake and its “mother,” the sea). Their keen analyses of the song echo the relation between the Dreamscape of letes and the inhabited, dynamic space of vönö—between the unassailable and transcendent good of the lake and the fragile and contingent possibilities of the sea. The work of fishers to

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<sup>33</sup> In the original Nume: “Now e, nik en ve mi now. Su reru Tes, ru Tes ve min now.”

appease the lake while fearing for the loss of their subsistence through negligent activity illustrates how *tivönö* are obligated to respond to the ruptures of *letes* into *vönö*. The converse is true as well, as careful attention to movement along paths demonstrates the moral imperative to preserve the persistence of cultural notions of the caldera as suspended in time. *Tivönö* cannot take sides: they exist within and between myth and history.

Sabine Hess observes that for the people of Vanua Lava, time is “implied in place”: the *Vurës* language conjures what Margaret Jolly elsewhere (1999) calls the “‘condensation of the temporal and the spatial,’ a ‘talking together’ of time and place” (Hess 2010:110; see also Ingold 1993).<sup>34</sup> Evidence that “time and place occupy the same space” (110) is not limited to language, but manifests for Vanua Lavans in the ways they think about the contexts for their interactions with others. I have described the connections and distinctions *Gauan tivönö* make between the living space of *vönö* and the non-living space of *letes* in a similar way. The distances between places find their temporal parallel in the difference between the dynamic history and heterochronia of *vönö* and the atemporality of the caldera. The mythical and cosmological underpinnings of this erasure of boundaries between time and place have cultural purchase because they imagine landscape as an ethical terrain. Themes of myth-time and geographical space come together in ways that motivate feelings of obligation and inspire certain ways of seeing the world. *Tivönö* is deictic: it signifies what a person is in relation to a place while connoting relations to other places in the *Gauan* landscape.

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<sup>34</sup> As metaphors for human action or experience, the “talking together” or irreducible co-presence of time and place in the Melanesian ethnographic context calls into question any privileging of one or the other as necessarily more or less ideological or permanent (*pace* Crapanzano 2003:8).

Furthermore, *vönö* condenses living space with the dynamic present, and *letes* “talks together” with the mythic past and near-future. The moral imperative to maintain time in its proper place reveals dimensions of *tivönö* that a focus on place-as-location alone may overlook.

Place is necessarily bound up in conceptions of the good. Robert Sack (2003) explains that place is a tool humans use when, “not accepting reality as it is, we transform it through place-making” (4). Transformation is the essential condition of humans in places: we cannot help but alter the environment by our acts of removing things and preventing other things from entering. Here we see place as possibility and limit—as transformation directed by visions and desires of what ought to be, and by restrictions of what is deemed detrimental, repressive, or unprofitable. The notion of ought “not only animates the entire process, but also provides the means of justifying or rejecting what takes place” (5). One aspect of Sack’s geographic theory of morality particularly relevant to the Gauan context is the thought that conceptions of “ought” are not bound to “the empirical conditions and forces that exist as is; rather the ought can be transformed by an intimation of an independently existing ‘intrinsic’ good” (8). As an organizing and motivating core of Gauan ethics, *kastom* provides such a good. Eluding any totalizing consensus as to what does and what ought to count as an instance of it, *kastom* nonetheless (or, perhaps for this reason) provides possibilities for a conception of life that is otherwise than it is. This notion of possibility guides the chapters that follow.



### Chapter 3: Imagining the other: moral experience

In late-November 2009, I returned to Gaua after a one-week excursion to Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital and largest urban center. On the flight into Gaua, the co-pilot of the small twin-engine plane sat in the open cockpit reading the latest edition of *The Vanuatu Independent*. He turned the page to reveal in large bold letters a report titled "Gaua Volcano: Explosive and Dangerous."<sup>35</sup> The other five passengers glimpsed it as well, and soon our faces were pressed against the port side windows, anxiously surveying the northern horizon for any sign of volcanic activity. Within minutes our plane descended out of the clear blue sky and into the thick, charcoal-gray plumes of ash that were slowly billowing from Mount Garat. The southwesterly winds that predominate in the pre-cyclone season blanketed the ash over the entire west of the island. When I reached my home village of Aver in the northeast, I was greeted by families from the West Gaua village of Onel Bay who that same day were evacuated from their homes by the Vanuatu and French Red Cross. Within three days of my return the entire population of West Gaua—404 persons—had taken residence primarily in the East Gaua villages of Aver, Lembot, Namasari, Lemoga, and Lemanman.<sup>36</sup> From the first public announcement of the relocation two days before it began, people in the east prepared for the doubling and tripling of their communities by reallocating housing

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<sup>35</sup> *The Vanuatu Independent*, 22 November 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Population data obtained from the "Inter-Agency Assessment on Gaua Island - TORBA Province, Vanuatu (31 January – 5 February 2010)." Joint report by Ministry of Geology, Mines & Water Resources, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Internal Affairs, NDMO, Save the Children, TORBA Provincial Government, UNICEF, UNOCHA, Vanuatu Red Cross and WHO, p. 2.

space, digging new toilets, and clearing bush to expand their gardens.

My host family in Aver was among the many who labored all day and well into the night for weeks reconfiguring their own living spaces to accommodate the relocatees, officially designated “internally displaced persons,”<sup>37</sup> who themselves worked to restore a sense of normalcy to their lives. I had grown accustomed to the easy hospitality of tivönö families, but their commitments of time and household resources during this crisis seemed to reach a new level. They insisted that this commitment to the well-being of others was firmly within the realm of expectations as an archetypical expression of *kastom*: “Our *kastom* is in our bones—it begins in the bones,” as one man described it.<sup>38</sup> My tivönö interlocutors explained that *lavaswut*, a welcoming attitude, appears from within them, and from the ensuing exchanges of generosity and respect new relations of kin-like status emerge.

Tivönö insist that they act for others without needing to choose to do so. This is not a relinquishing of the autonomy to do otherwise, but a revelation that the ethical dimension of tivönö *kastom* is predicated on a conception of moral experience that lies both within them and somewhere beyond them—both “in the bones” and in the cosmological order that imbues certain persons with an ability to act well for the sake of others. The “is” of my interlocutors’ deeply felt inclinations to provide help to West Gauans resembled for them the “ought” of *kastom* as it manifests in conversations and debates in cook houses and *nakamals*. I asked them to recall their thoughts from the days they were preparing for the arrival of the displaced westerners. Tivönö approached

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<sup>37</sup> Interagency Assessment, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> In Nume: “*Kastom matev ve kal lu ma den sursurun*” (“*Kastom* comes out of the bones”).

the problems of distant others by “imagining their place” (*vedomwun vere namnir*) and responding with a “strong manner” (*matev veboŋ*) motivated by anger or sorrow, the ultimate source of which was their belief in the autochthonous moral capacity of *kastom*.

In this chapter, I explore the moral experiences of Gauan *tivönö*. By “moral experience” I mean the processes of perceiving, thinking, and feeling which inform *tivönö* conceptions of the places others have, and ought to have, in their lives. I follow Johan Rasanayagam (2011) in viewing moral experience as a moment of transcendence, a stepping beyond the horizons of the self and into the presence of that which precedes and surpasses it. Transcendence in the lives of Rasanayagam’s Muslim interlocutors inheres in a variety of sources ranging from religious and state ideologies to embodied experience (2011:14). As they reveal in their ethical orientations to lake and landscape, Gauan *tivönö* find transcendence primarily through the ontological and cosmological insights which they commonly identify as *kastom*.<sup>39</sup> It is by no means the case that there is a single, unassailable rule for determining what counts as *kastom*, or that Christian devotion or desires to connect with the wider world to satisfy a growing wanderlust or technophilia carry no influence in moral experience. *Tivönö* describe in great detail the processes by which they come to comprehend the predicaments of others and the ways

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<sup>39</sup> I depart from Rasanayagam’s view that “experience is itself moral” (2011:14), that all experience is grounded in “moral sources” or “transcendent locations” such as divine revelation where experience itself is apprehended. In the Gauan ethnographic context, transcendence is not a precondition of experience, but is achieved through actions motivated by experience. It is surely the case that Gauan *kastom* symbols such as Lake Letes, and *kastom* discourses (e.g., “*Kastom* begins in the bones”), point to transcendent moral worlds that prefigure certain kinds of human experience. It does not follow that all experience within these transcendentally moral domains is morally salient, at least as it is conceived by Gauan *tivönö*. As I argue in this dissertation, a distinctly moral transcendence in Gauan ethics consists in acts of comprehending and creating possibility--in surpassing the temporal horizons of self and other as they exist in the present. *Tivönö* reflect on the transcendence of moral experience not in terms of where that experience begins, but in terms of where it leads, namely a future of realized social relations.

that the self is implicated in their interpersonal encounters. They too identify particular ways of responding to others as genuine autochthonous practices which reveal a highly valued, and increasingly imperiled, sense of cultural uniqueness. As the volcano scenario serves to illustrate, discourses about these practices and beliefs quite often take the form of talk about *kastom*.<sup>40</sup>

I begin by putting forward the notion that *tivönö* moral experience, or more precisely the moral imagination, emerges from an initiatory moment of the preconscious. *Tivönö* express their concerns about basic human vulnerabilities in their accounts of experiencing others in need. I argue that there are essential components to these accounts which are present elsewhere, as pre-symbolic motivations for thinking and feeling about others. I follow with an overview of the moral imagination itself. *Domwen*, the process of imagining others in their precarious situations, encompasses the moments following pre-conscious motivation and leading through to processes of recollection and emotion, culminating with the ethical act. The final two sections describe how *tivönö* experience self and other as they navigate the ethical terrain of everyday life. This account begins with elaboration on the ethically necessary forms of otherness introduced in the previous section, and concludes with a view of Gauan ethics as always operative, its objects always matters of concern and always providing opportunities for the creation of possibility.

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<sup>40</sup> In her analysis of the legal complexities of *kastom* in Vanuatu, Benedicta Rousseau (2008) provides an outstanding guiding conception of *kastom*'s ethical dimension. *Kastom* is "a generalised property of the majority of ni-Vanuatu, "used as a moral compass that orients action and as a critical tool for the evaluation of propriety of behavior, personality, motivation, intent and outcome" (26). In the Gaua context, the "moral compass," while not oblivious to *kastom* as a "generalized property" of ni-Vanuatu, points to how *tivönö* understand certain interpersonal acts and experiences as "markers of difference, a means of making distinctions" at the intra-island and even intra-community level (Bolton 2003:25).

### **Vulnerability on the skin**

When tivönö speak about the reasons for their other-regarding acts, such as giving generously or speaking well of someone, they describe a process which begins with an exercise of the imagination and ends with an account of the act itself. There are occasions when their acts of giving culminate in the formation of a new social relation, one to which I refer as a “relation of care” and which I explore in detail in this and the next chapter. There is, however, a moment in the moral-evaluative process which is prior to experience, an encounter between persons which registers below the threshold of conscious reflection, yet which signals its presence in tivönö agents’ post hoc deliberations about their own actions. Although these moments elude articulation, they are essential to setting into motion the moral imagination and to connecting people with situations that, although distant from their own present experiences, are nonetheless revealed as familiar features of a shared social world. In Gauan ethics, vulnerability defines the type of situation that calls for a person to take an active role in the affairs of others. Yet in its role as the catalyst to experience itself, vulnerability is an invisible presence in the ethical terrain of tivönö.

*Vulnerability* here describes how social and physical modes of well-being confront the risks and uncertainties of everyday life. We humans find ourselves endangered or otherwise disadvantaged by certain unavoidable contingencies in the historical and corporeal specificity of our being. Yet we find various instances of social interaction where this same vulnerability motivates a caring for others who face the same kinds of uncertain and precarious situations as ourselves. Conceptions of vulnerable selves and others have emerged in many recent academic approaches to

ethical problems (e.g. MacIntyre 2001; Das 2002; Butler 2004; Turner 2006, 2008; Stålsett 2007; de Melo-Martín 2009; Throop 2010). The works of Emmanuel Levinas have inspired much of the current debate concerning vulnerability's role in ethical or moral experience. Levinas describes proximity to human others and the responsibility it entails in starkly perilous terms. He identifies interaction with the human "Other" as "the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, in the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, in exposure to traumas, in vulnerability" (1998:82; see also Davis 1997:78). For Levinas, people are ethical beings by the ineluctable fact of their embodiment: the vulnerabilities of embodied others give rise to the moment of exposure, the implicating of the self in the Other's condition which Levinas identifies as the call to responsibility. The compelling feeling of responsibility based on a shared human ontology, and the awareness that one's responsibility to the Other cannot be delegated to a third party (1982:100), advance vulnerability as one possible response to the question "why be ethical?"

In Levinas' ethics, one feels the call to take responsibility for another person through one's sensibility, a "sentient vulnerability or passivity towards the other that takes place 'on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves'" (Critchley 2002:21; Levinas 1998:15). Sensibility is the capacity for an awareness of another person's vulnerable state that is prior to knowledge; it is a visceral response to the dangers and deprivations that others face. Levinas' attention to sensibility and embodiment identifies two important themes in his ethics. The first is the notion that all persons are similarly vulnerable by virtue of their shared embodied nature. The second and related notion is that the ineluctability of this existential condition places responsibility for one person's

vulnerability into the domain of others' lives. My sensibility to the vulnerability of others derives from the essential idea that their situation is, and ought to be, *my* concern. Levinas' ethics is founded "in a moral vulnerability to the other's vulnerabilities" (Cohen 2005:xxxiii), an integration of shared vulnerability and responsibility that is operative prior to reflection.

Sensibility's role in moral experience calls to mind Aristotle's notion of *hexis*, the effect of an object on the person who encounters it (2002a:98). *De Anima* translator Joe Sachs observes that *hexis* is a condition of receptivity to what lies outside of us. Moral virtue consists in our efforts to "hold ourselves ready" to sensations and information that constantly impinge on us (2002a:xix). In a similar way, sensibility is the receptivity to the vulnerability of others, threatening to knock us from our complacency and self-sufficiency. Unlike empathy, which is "one of the ways we know *how* and *why* people are thinking and feeling what they are, not just *that* they are" (Hollan and Throop 2008, 391; emphases added), sensibility provides the inchoate awareness *that* the other person confronts a vulnerable situation. Whereas empathy performs the recursive task of continuously feeding the imagination to virtually bridge the divide between subjectivities, sensibility provides the passive—unintentional and unguided—role of receiving the other's vulnerable presence.

Contemplating sensibility's role within the structure of Gauan moral experience begs the question: what sparks the moral imagination in the first place? Given that sensibility works prior to knowledge, the problem arises as to the degree of cultural elaboration of the moral imagination's initiating moment. To this problem of conceptual extension, Throop (2005) finds parallels between phenomenological accounts of pre-

objective experience—encounters with objects that are prior to interpretation—and Robert Levy’s notion of “uncanny” senses. Levy (1984) describes how among the Tahitians, “emotions of the uncanny” occur “in situations of certain kinds where it is unclear whether the ordinary categories of orientation in the spatio-temporal world are operating” (22). Uncanny emotions are not highly conceptually elaborated in Tahitian culture as are emotions such as anger (Levy 1973:284). As with pre-objective experiences, these emotions may be “present yet ‘unnoticed’ at the fringes of our awareness” (Throop 2005:502). As Throop observes, Levy calls our attention to “the possibility that there are a number of feeling states that are ‘hypocognized’ and controlled by cultural invisibility or at least by difficulty of access to communication” (2005:507).

Reading sensibility as pre-objective, we may take a few salient points from Throop’s Levy-inspired analysis, each one relevant to our comprehending sensibility’s role in initiating moral experience. One point is that “feeling states” give meaning to particular events in one’s social environment, an idea advanced here and elsewhere (e.g., Prinz 2006:33). Also, some feeling states may become available for reflection—if at all—only after their immediate emergence in experience, as post hoc interpretations or justifications (cf. Haidt 2001). Lastly, the level of conceptual elaboration of these experiences is culturally and perhaps even situationally variable.

As tivönö recall their experiences of encountering others in vulnerable situations, they describe the role of memory in accessing the salient features of those situations. They begin their accounts by describing attempts to comprehend others’ experiences through reflecting on their own. When pressed to recall moments of



awareness or concern prior to the mnemonic reconstructions of other's situations, tivönö acknowledge the presence of feelings which they can neither name nor describe.

Typically, there is *wan smol samting* (some small thing) about the incipient moment of the encounter which comes into being prior to the work of memory and imagination, but its exact nature seems to elude them. Tivönö describe it as “like a quiet wind” (*leŋ dödö*) or “an unidentified voice asking, ‘what is your name?’” (*garam ruŋ vite ‘nasiŋ se?’*). They express their frustrations at trying to articulate these vague feelings, finding it impossible to do so within the narrative logic of moral experience. Sensibility it seems is conceptually unelaborated in Gauan ethics.

I suggest that tivönö narratives of moral experience bring to light the impetuses of the moral imagination. The problem of locating them is not that they are “culturally invisible,” but that tivönö communicate their presence in other ways. They do not recount their moral experiences by describing how a person looked hungry or ill and how one or another isolated observation compelled them to provide care. Tivönö rather focus on particular, recurring types of situations, each of which they articulate by attributing multiple qualities to it such as hunger, fatigue, and illness. In other words, the impetus to respond to another person's vulnerable state begins with an assessment of the situation and its multiple, culturally elaborated qualities rather than with some isolated sign of risk or deprivation. The account of the erupting volcano which opens the chapter provides a helpful example. People identified the source of their motivations to help the displaced westerners as the *situation* of homelessness they were observed to inhabit. Tivönö proceeded to comprehend—or at least recount to me—the situation of homelessness through a cluster of qualities which define it, namely hunger, thirst, and

fatigue. I refer to the qualities which coalesce to define particular situations as *indexes* of vulnerability, and suggest that they provide us with an indirect glimpse of the pre-objective moments of sensibility which trigger the tivönö moral imagination.

In a survey I asked my tivönö interlocutors to describe for me the kinds of situations in which they commonly observe others to be in need of care or assistance. In a series of follow-up meetings I asked each person to rank the situations he or she had presented to me in descending order of occurrence based on personal observation. These situations are listed in the first column of Table 3.1, with the mean ranks of situations across the entire sample listed in the third column. In the first round of surveys, my interlocutors described the qualities or indexes which they most closely identified with each situation; a limited number of indexes (second column) reappeared consistently across several different situations.

In discussions with my interlocutors, bodily uncleanliness (*susu bek*, *doti*) ranks as the most frequent situation calling for an intervention of care. They identify uncleanliness as a condition constituted by hunger, illness, and isolation from caring family and friends. Tivönö tend to describe encounters with untidy persons as “situations (*situesen*, *taem*) of hunger, of illness, and of being without family”: these indexes are not attributions of particular persons (e.g., “John is starving”), nor are they generalizable beyond the present situation (e.g., “John lives a life of isolation”). Their descriptions seem to situate persons within predetermined situations rather than attribute the existence or quality of any situation to the agency or intentions of persons involved. Tivönö avoid the direct attribution of any index to any individual because they view

these indexes (even lack of money, as a source of shame) as subjective, and therefore inaccessible, states of other minds (a point which I elaborate below).

**Table 3.1:** Situations and indexes of vulnerability in Gauan moral accounts<sup>41</sup>

Situations	Indexes	Situation mean rank
Unclean appearance (clothes, hair, skin)	hunger, isolation, illness <sup>42</sup>	1.4
House(s) destroyed or in disrepair	fatigue, isolation, illness	1.7
Crying in public	hunger, thirst, isolation, poison magic	2.1
Frequent visits to others' houses and gardens	hunger, isolation, lack of money	2.9
Gardens destroyed or in disrepair	hunger, fatigue, poison magic <sup>43</sup>	3.6
Sustained inactivity in public	hunger, isolation, illness	4.5
Dry season scarcity	hunger, thirst, fatigue	6.6

Throughout the survey sample, indexes appear as consistently clustered descriptions corresponding to the various situations in the first column. I summarize my point as follows: It is the situation as a familiar type, and not its component indexes, to which my interlocutors claim to direct their memories and imaginative reconstructions, recalling their own experiences of uncleanness, property destruction, scarcity, and so forth. Indexes are features of situations, not the direct attributes of individuals. While the Levinasian notion of a sensibility to the vulnerabilities of others holds in the Gaua context, there is a turn away from Levinas in that the locus of vulnerability is not the exposed Other qua other, but the situation that brings about the exposure.

<sup>41</sup> Data were obtained in two surveys each of 89 Nume-speaking Gauan adults (42 female, 47 male). The second survey was conducted 16 months after the conclusion of the first.

<sup>42</sup> Illness is often, but not always, attributed to poison magic. Painful injuries, headaches, general bodily soreness, and malaria are examples of commonly diagnosed illnesses (*sem*) unrelated to poison magic.

<sup>43</sup> Poison magic directed toward gardens typically manifests as blackened taro leaves and stems and unformed tubers.

The frequent appearances of these indexes in situational narratives suggest that their presence may not be limited to the culturally elaborated structures of tivönö moral experience. Descriptions of uncleanness reveal preoccupations with human skin, food, and productive, able bodies which are present in structurally invisible moments —as pre-objective, sensible experiences that give rise to imagination and reflection. They are only grasped within structures of experience which, unlike sensibility, avail themselves to conscious elaboration. Hunger, thirst, fatigue, and the other indexes may be extrapolated from their narrative elaborations to account for how tivönö achieve an initial awareness of situations of vulnerability.

In trying to comprehend the initiating moment of tivönö moral experience, I do not mean to force an etic conception of sensibility onto people's own accounts of their encounters with others, nor to attribute concrete perceptual properties to “hunger,” “fatigue,” or “social isolation” to which they may be receptive in their interactions with others. Rather, I mean to suggest that in their narrative presence, ideas about hunger, fatigue, and so forth are central to meaning-making in East Gaua, pervading all phases of moral experience and action. While the site of their cultural elaboration is the situational narrative, their meaning-making effects may extend to pre-objective experiences which are hypocognized, not manifest in “naming, classification, and doctrine” (Levy 1984:219). Hunger (*milijsal*), thirst (*matmörös*), fatigue (*mutmut*), and illness (*sem*) appear in moral narratives as concerns for the well-being of others as inhabitants of certain situations. We may observe the same of poison magic (*man*), isolation (*tudun tale vowon*, person of the bush), and a lack of money (*söm bek*) to purchase store-bought foods and medicine, each one a potential cause of the previous

four indexes. To adopt Michael O’Hanlon’s (1989) phrase, tivönö “read the skin” of others in ways that disclose moral truths about the situations in which they commonly find themselves. This act of “reading,” however, precedes conscious awareness of the other as an object of moral concern. The decorated bodies of Wahgi dancers in O’Hanlon’s account are moreover “read as embodiments of the moral health of the community” (Barker 2007:6; see also Kolshus 1999:128). We may comprehend the pre-objective “readings” and narrative preoccupations of Gauan tivönö as distinct forms of commentary on the state of well-being in their own communities.

Indexes of vulnerability do the work of imbuing tivönö moral narratives with metaphors for commonality. As metaphors, hunger, thirst, and fatigue remind people that, in Levinasian fashion, common vulnerabilities implicate the self in the other’s well-being. Bodily metaphors in particular index “a set of common experiences and a common language of responsibility...care, and dependency, namely, a common language of vulnerability” (Turner 2001:30). But these indexes also serve as metaphors of otherness, calling for persons to confront the unbridgeable alterity of other minds and bodies and to take responsibility for others qua others in their times of need. The unresolved tension between these two sides of vulnerability—between commonality and otherness— enables one to think of all others as both stranger (*salavan*) and kin (*rasogo*), an idea I explore in chapter 4. In their ethical work, tivönö render hunger, isolation, and other concerns about others morally ambiguous by revealing them as detrimental to others’ well-being but also as opening new possibilities for expanding social networks and strengthening ethical conceptions of self. This is not a view from cynicism, but the recognition by tivönö that the very possibility for possibility in their

lives turns on the precarious negotiation between what is common and different among them.

### **The ethics of almost-being-there**

While living and conversing with Nume speakers in East Gaua, I learned that they often preface their stories of memorable social encounters by explaining that “there are different kinds of people”.<sup>44</sup> Terms such as *blakman* and *waetman* describe a range of divergent behaviors, material cultures, and worldviews which, as elsewhere in Melanesia (Bashkow 2006), are distinctions found to be fluid and contextual. In conversation, tivönö sometimes appeal to terms like *tavaliu/tavulun* (of East Gaua/of West Gaua) and *vinij/tavlivinij* (of the tribe/of another tribe) to identify themselves as persons of a place and a tribe, and as rightful owners of this land and that kastom practice. When asked questions regarding the different ways and situations of interpersonal encounter in their everyday lives, tivönö make other distinctions. One involves dividing their encounters with others into two broad categories, two mutually exclusive modes of social-ethical address.

The first of these is what I call the encounter of ascribed distance, where an observer perceives another person as fully in control of a situation that for others would likely present some danger or hardship. These are persons who *prima facie* exhibit one or more of the indexes of vulnerability that occupy tivönö moral discourse, yet who appear unaffected by them and for this reason ought to be left to themselves. This encounter, and the reflection and response it calls forth in the observer, establish a momentary ethical relation based on respect for the other’s evident ability to work

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<sup>44</sup> “Ra mel tudun sese vaten matev sese aben.” [There are different people with different ways.]

through a problem. While *tivönö* tend to describe this evaluative process as distinctive to each encounter, with relations of this type fading shortly after a particular event, many say that they recognize some more or less enduring identifications with specific others as ethical relations of ascribed distance. Such a relation of respect (*domav*) may only reside in the mind of the observer of the distant other; it nonetheless contributes to one's repertoire of social relations, one's reflective assessment of ways of knowing and interacting with others.

A very different kind of encounter finds the observer playing an active role in the situations of others. The indexes and situations of vulnerability which are operative in the incipient moment of *tivönö* moral experience give way to memories and imaginings through which one comprehends the difficult situations of others. Such comprehension motivates responsible action on behalf of the observed persons. As with encounters of ascribed distance, encounters of "care" or *tomtom* often become enduring commitments to an ethical stance toward particular others. Whereas commitments to respectful distance quite often involve chiefs and their wives, members of landowning families, and adult opposite-sex siblings, *tivönö* maintain that relationships originating in an act of care, or in recurring acts of care, are possible regardless of the other's stature or place of origin. All persons are potential recipients of care. A person who is cared for becomes *rasogo*, a woman or man to whom one feels a bond of obligation as a member of one's own family. The relation of care generally continues as the caregiver in the originating encounter routinely provides the other person with food, labor, and advice; such a relation is socially marked by the exchange of kin terms between the two, such as "father/mother" and "child," "brother/sister," or quite often simply "friend." As

Stasch (2009) observes of a similar exchange elsewhere in Melanesia, two people “have ‘become relatives’ through specific face-to-face encounters and acts of giving” (17).

Situated between the pre-objective sensible moment of encounter, and the concrete acts of care which confer qualities of kinship on others, is the work of the moral imagination to bring relations of care into possibility.

In the days and weeks following the eruption of Mount Garat, Gauans from all communities generously offered their time to discuss with me how the crisis affected them. A woman in her fifties and life-long resident of the northeast village of Namasari recalled how she reacted to learning of the displaced persons’ plight in ways that echoed the sentiments of my other tivönö interlocutors:

(The displaced westerners’) food is burnt from the ash. Their steer, and all of their chickens, are gone. I imagined them in the bush, with no food, no drinking water...and no houses. We people here in the east were ashamed when we imagined them with no food (and) no house. We all think deeply about this. Our food is their food now. Our house is their house. It’s all the same!<sup>45</sup> [Helen, December 1, 2009]

As the woman recounted her experiences of the event, she described how her initial thoughts were directed toward the risks of homelessness that the displaced westerners faced following the eruptions. She imagined (*domwun*) them confronting hunger, thirst, and exposure to the dangers of the forest, and explained that her fellow tivönö often feel ashamed when thinking of others facing such difficulties. While shame (*maraga*) tends to drive a person into hiding, away from the view of others (e.g., Jorgensen 1983), there are situations in Gauan life which direct persons toward helping others as a means to

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<sup>45</sup> In Nume: “Gengen namnir tiŋtiŋit sur vuvu en. Buluk namnir, ma to namnir dul, ve bas. Na me domwun nir ve sasa ale vowon, gengen naganir bek, be namanir bek...ma wuvur bek. Kama wusul kama tivönö e me maraga si kama me domwun tudun en ve sasa, gengen naganir bek, (ma) wuvur bek. Kama dul ve domwun tabe kose. [My interlocutor switches to Bislama:] Kakae blong mitufala i kakae blong olgeta ia naoia. Haos blong mitufala i hoas blong olgeta. Olgeta semak nomo!”



mitigate these negative reflexive emotions. Shame itself is a situation of vulnerability (Schieffelin 1983:189), one which often requires outward acts of care rather than inward retreat for its resolution.

Speakers of the Nume language describe *domwun* as having two possible meanings, conveyed in Bislama as *tingboat* (to reflect on, to remember) and *tinghevi* (to regard as important [Crowley 2004:276] or to think deeply about).<sup>46</sup> They further clarify *domwun* as the act of thinking about that which is not immediately perceptible (*wan samting we i no stap*: that which is not here), but which can be grasped imaginatively by attending to familiar environmental and situational cues. One example of *domwun* is the practice of wondering aloud what life was like in one's village during the time of one's grandparents. The shapes of coastal rocks and the slopes of shorelines provide mnemonic templates to be filled in by thoughts of ancestors fishing in the lagoon and performing in the *lesar* (dancing ground). Elders cry and shout angrily as they narrate visions of lost cultural pursuits played out in familiar landscapes. My interlocutors' thoughts about the plight of the displaced westerners show *domwun* in another setting, as their perceptions of the environment, and their own experiences of past deprivations, constructed the context which made possible their comprehending the westerners' hardships.

Nume speakers extend the term *domwen* as the nominal form of *domwun*, but describe the noun as encompassing all the various possible meanings of the verb. As

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<sup>46</sup> Some Gauans use the Bislama term *rimemba* rather than *tingboat* to signify acts of remembering, although *tingboat* is far more common to East Gaua and more frequently used when Nume speakers give the meaning of *domwun*. They often clarify *tingboat* as *tingboat ol samting blong bifo* (to think about things in the past), a meaning also conveyed with the Nume term *domkel* (to think back). These clarifications notwithstanding, tivönö describe memory as the faculty of individuals only in a delimited sense, a point I will address presently.

with its corresponding verb, *domwen* expresses an ability to place oneself in a situation (*situesen*) by recalling salient features of that situation in one's own experiences.<sup>47</sup> Yet *domwen* also requires that one reflects on the consequences of the situation (*tinghevi*) for persons who confront it in the present. Whereas the verb *domwun* identifies discrete acts of imagining, remembering, or reflecting deeply, *domwen* captures all of these meanings as synchronous aspects of a practice of thinking about others. *Domwen* brings the imagination and reflection of *domwun* into ethical territory as an ability to comprehend what others may be experiencing. While tivönö frequently describe the ability to access the situations of others as an autochthonous virtue unattainable to some people, in discussing specific persons and situations they tend to regard it as a skill characteristic of any properly socialized person.

As a term signifying a complex of imagination, memory, and thinking about others, *domwen* is increasingly unfamiliar to younger Nume speakers. Many tivönö in their teens to late-thirties convey their feelings of motivation to help others either by combining the Bislama *tingbaot* and *tinghevi* or with the Nume verb *domwun* coupled with the nominal phrase *dudumi velap* (big thought). Older, more adept Nume speakers attribute the decline of the term *domwen* to the sharp rise in Bislama usage brought about by the growing influences of non-native residents. Nonetheless, they insist that the combinatory use of *tingbaot* and *tinghevi* serves as a viable if regrettably less potent alternative to *domwen*, a view directly confirmed by the substance of my younger interlocutors' personal accounts of their moral encounters.

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<sup>47</sup> *Situesen* is the preferred term in Nume speakers' descriptions of events or of the conditions specific to particular types of events. Some of my interlocutors offered *wasijin* (*taem*, time) as a near-equivalent in the Nume language, but settled on the Bislama term *situesen* when asked which term better denotes the object of *domwen* imagination and reflection.

Essential to any domwen experience are the emotions which motivate commitments to act on behalf of others. Emotions are “ways of making sense of and acting in the world. To be in a particular emotional state entails perceiving the world in a particular way; noticing things that one might not usually notice and being affected by what one sees in ways that one might not normally be affected” (Crossley 2001:85). With respect to Gauan ethics, we may understand sensibility as the passive reception of stimuli that direct observers to the vulnerable situations of others, and domwen as the imaginative and affective unfolding of how and why others’ situations matter to those who observe them—why certain situations have the impact they do. Shortly after the volcano event, the Namasari woman recalled for me the feeling of anger that arose inside her as she imagined how displaced families from Bushman Bay in West Gaua must have reacted to having been moved to two different destinations around the island before settling in the northeast. Recounting her own experiences, she described memories of her entire village retreating high into the bush to escape an approaching tsunami just two years earlier. As these memories coalesced in her mind they formed hazy contours of thoughts of displacement which reproduced the predicament of the displaced westerners. Feelings of anger and frustration grew within her, impelling her to take action on the others’ behalf. The woman’s story is illustrative of myriad tivönö accounts of encounters with others in need: it is the emotional thrust of imagining the other’s place from which tivönö make sense of and subsequently act in the worlds of others.

To what extent then are these other worlds accessible to tivönö? One of the key ontological assumptions behind acts of domwen is that others’ “worlds” are in fact

situations which are common to a human mode of being. Despite the possibilities for tivönö to experience various, familiar *types* of situations at different times, any given situation is an experience in and of the present (i.e. occurring in real time), and can only be grasped by others as a situation of a particular type. The focus on situations which we find in domwen means that its emotional and motivational content derives from its knowledge of types of situations, and not in its inhabiting the immediately occurring situation of others. To understand this key aspect of the Gauan moral imagination we may consider one possible distinction between empathy and simulation:

[Whereas *empathy* allows me to] identify with others by feeling at one with them, [*simulation*] allows me to identify with others by pretending to be in their situation. Not just a feeling or a mysterious intuition, simulation allows me to project myself into a series of hypothetical situations to test the most likely course of behavior. Whereas empathy is thought to be something that you are born with or not, simulation is more like a technique that can be learned and refined. [Makkreel 2000:181]

These technical definitions are not unchallenged, notably within the debate on methodological understanding in the human sciences (e.g., Makkreel 2000:191 for the cultural embeddedness of empathy; Kögler 2000). For our present purposes, however, the foregoing distinction helps to clarify how tivönö reconstruct the processes of domwen in their moral narratives.

There are philosophers of mind who regard simulation as limited in its ability to adequately understand its objects. They advance their criticisms in light of their attempts to arrive at a deeper understanding (*Verstehen*) of the authorial intentions behind texts and the subjective states which motivate human action. The methodological goal of adopting *Verstehen* as “sympathetic understanding or reenactment” is to construct a virtual world of the self in the other’s position, a

“transposition” of self that simulation cannot accomplish (Makreel 2000:182). Yet for reasons of Gauan human ontology which I will presently make clear, it is precisely this limitation which recommends simulation as an appropriate conceptual tool for understanding the possibilities and necessary limits of domwen. The moment of *Verstehen* in the domwen experience consists in grasping how a particular type of situation affects the physical, emotional, and social well-being of persons who inhabit it. The situation is a third room that mediates the common vulnerabilities and the subjective alterities of persons within it. Only by interpreting situation in this way, as a familiar but highly constrained cognitive and affective space, do we understand the motivational and predictive power of domwen. Tivönö direct their acts of domwen toward understanding (which I take as both cognitive and affective) and responding to the familiar difficulties and trajectories that befall persons in certain situations. The careful work of simulation in domwen manifests a well-cultivated personhood, drawing on culturally and historically embedded knowledge (rather than a “psychologically pure dimension,” *pace* Kögler 2000) to foster an understanding of the other’s situation—at a distance—as one’s own concern.

In recounting their domwen experiences, tivönö describe a progression from imagining the other person’s situation to developing the rousing feelings which motivate acts of care. They experience the transition from *kere* (seeing) to *ker liŋliŋi* (recognizing; seeing within oneself), and finally to *kere gor* (looking after). The other person’s situation develops from an object of awareness to one of familiarity simulated through memory and cultural knowledge of what it means to be vulnerable, and then to an object of cathexis, the precise emotions of which one recognizes as one’s own. The

new, emotionally invested object implicates the self and moves it to come to the aid of the other person. In their moral narratives, *tivönö* find themselves moved to respond to others' situations by the anger, shame, or frustration that emerge when the self comes to comprehend the problems which characterize the situation as its own concern. For the caregivers of the displaced westerners, it was the emerging feelings of anger, and not some empathic grasp of the qualitative experience of the other, that motivated their offers of assistance. They described to me how the felt spontaneity of their feelings surprised them, signaling the transition of the situation from one kind of internalized object to another.

To this point my focus has been the familiarity of situations of vulnerability shared by all persons in the Gauan social world. Situations and their component indexes provide a common grammar of experience that motivate the actions leading to relations of care. Simulation's role in assessing the well-being of others is likewise predicated on a more or less shared set of ideas about how the world is and what is possible and desirable in it. Beyond what we may call the ontological commonality that vulnerability brings to Gauan ethics is an equally unassailable otherness, one which makes simulation, rather than more "empathetic" processes of transposing self into subjective other, a necessary limit to *tivönö* moral imagination and experience. As in many other societies in Oceania, Gauans find dubious the idea that the thoughts and feelings of others are directly accessible to them. There is considerable ethnographic evidence from Oceania in support of an "opacity doctrine," where people in these societies, to various degrees, tend to take it as given that the minds of others are not, or ought not to be, available to them for inspection (Robbins and Rumsey 2008:405-6). For *tivönö* and

other people of Gaua, dubious connections among thoughts, words, and actions present real concerns about the risks and uncertainties of social interaction. Opacity of other minds constitutes an otherness that informs moral experience with a corresponding force to the shared vulnerability that generates acts of *domwen*.

Early indications of these concerns in my fieldwork were evident in my asking people to find causal or even correlative connections between thought (*dudumi*) and action or manner (*matev*) in others. People often met my inquiries with dismissive reprimands, though not because they saw these connections as entirely invalid. They tended to identify such connections between their own thoughts and actions, which may help to explain why people were so generous and appeared so comfortable revealing to me their personal experiences of *domwen*. Gauans are hesitant to put themselves in a position of publicly speculating about the “true thoughts” (*dudumi vidun*) of *others* and being subsequently viewed as someone who can predict others’ actions and consequently be implicated in them.

Their hesitancy, however, was predicated on my inquiring about specific persons such as spouses or neighbors. When responding to questions about abstract persons such as “people of Gaua” or “people of the tribe Matan,” Gauans allowed for the possibility of recognizing a causal link between the thoughts and actions of others. Stasch (2008) reports how the Korowai of West Papua identify “a kind of unity to speaking, thinking, and acting” (445). Acknowledging the links between other persons’ thoughts and actions concedes this autonomy—that their thoughts and actions originate with them and that each person has privileged access to his or her own thoughts. Recognizing that others are the owners of their own thoughts “forswear(s) ability to

predict what someone else will do” (2008:445). The ways in which Gauans avoid linking the thoughts and actions of specific others, while allowing for these links to exist in abstract kinds of persons, reveal the anxieties people feel when their public thoughts about specific others threaten to form unintended associations with unpredictable and possibly malevolent intentions. For Gauans, opacity statements (e.g., *Tingting blong mi i blong mi nomo*: My thoughts are mine alone) assert and protect the autonomy of speakers rather than the referents of their statements. Third-party assumptions about collaborative relationships between persons and specific, potentially dangerous others undermine claims that such persons’ actions are guided by their own thoughts rather than by the coercion of others.

In reconstructing a Gauan psychology of encountering the vulnerable other, I have to this point focused on the importance of bringing the past into the present. Tivönö observe that the transition from *kere* to *ker liṅliṅi*--from awareness to recognition—requires a biography of deeply felt experiences and a repertoire of cultural-historical knowledge to guide the comprehension of others’ situations. Yet just as critical to the temporality of domwen is the observation that, as traces of past vulnerabilities overcome and opacities respected, the moral imagination is for tivönö a space for possibility and hope. Examples of imagination and experience oriented to the future are available to tivönö in the paradigmatic cases of *tavusmel* (traditional ranked men) and *marana* (chiefs) whose esoteric techniques of self-induced suffering once conferred on them the ability to identify with, and then pacify, the destructive emotions of others. The *manman mamartig* (strong power or strong magic) of such men lay in their ability to positively transform the lives of people afflicted with negative



emotions—to reorient their thoughts and feelings toward socially productive ends and communally engaged futures. I witnessed several occasions of village chiefs laughing, crying, and shouting and stomping angrily with persons who entreated them to ease the pain of their anger or shame. These moments categorically reveal how the moral imagination endures in the present as a vital part of the chief’s repertoire and as a means for restoring a sense of hopefulness to his community.

In ideal terms, domwen synthesizes John Dewey’s two definitions of imagination: it is (1) the “creative tapping of a situation’s possibilities” through (2) the “empathetic” or vicarious projection of the self into the other’s situation (Fesmire 2003:65; Dewey 1932). Domwen achieves its distinctive integration of possibility and simulation by linking emotional experiences (past) and creative possibilities (future) to present encounters with situations of vulnerability. Furthermore, T. O. Beidelman (1993) reminds us that imagination provides the means to interrogate the tacit assumptions of a cosmology—to “deconstruct a system” that one may come to view as “binding or repressive” (6). Deconstruction here suggests imagination-as-freedom, an opening of possibility not only to comprehend events in the lives of others, but also to determine that situations could be otherwise than they are. In the final section of this chapter I address the paths available to tivönö for finding and acting upon new possibilities in their ethical lives, a theme to which I will return in succeeding chapters. First I examine how opacity and its negations situate selves and others in the social-ethical space of tivönö.

### **Transparency as vice and virtue**

One aspect of life which tivönö recognize as enduring from their more committed kastom past is the essential role of chiefs and mothers' brothers as exemplars of a well-cultivated and morally productive personhood. Chiefs and mothers' brothers loom well above parents, grandparents, teachers, and clergy as persons best able to guide the moral development of children.<sup>48</sup> Following the birth of a child, parents call upon the mother's brother (*marun*) to take responsibility for his sister's child (*marun*) with the ceremonial exchange of money for an oath of *tomtom*, or care. One contribution of the mother's brother to the education of the child is the development of the ability to discern the wants and needs of those around him with an aim to judiciously providing for them. This subtle breach of opacity first becomes operative in a child's proactive leading roles in school and community projects, and is validated in the ways the parents of other children positively sanction the child as worthy of assuming a leadership role. As they get older, people look to the village and district chiefs as exemplars of care and concern. The Bislama term *jif* (chief), an artifact of the Condominium administration of the New Hebrides (Bolton 2003:19), corresponds in the present day to the Nume term *marana*. Both terms identify persons who function as community representatives and arbiters in ni-Vanuatu politics while also embodying the expertise of a *tavusmel*, a person who holds deep and esoteric local cultural knowledge. Chiefs are ethical standard-bearers by virtue of the wide domain of their *tomtom*; the

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<sup>48</sup> I posed the question to my tivönö interlocutors: "Who is best qualified to teach children how to become 'good' (productive, generous, and respectful) persons?" Total combined first- and second-place responses to the question (n=122): chiefs (99); mothers' brothers (82); parents (28); grandparents (15); teachers (15); clergy (8). Average number of responses per respondent: 2.1. I established productive capacity, generosity, and respect as primary ethical attributes of persons via the same survey.

breadth of a chief's concern for others is as inclusive as the mother's brother's is focused and deep.

Personal attributes associated with tomtom, such as generosity, hard work, and composure, identify the chief and the mother's brother as exemplars of personal excellence to which tivönö are encouraged to aspire. Young men and women perceive inter-island travel and participation in local development projects as inherent, desirable activities of these exemplary figures, reinforcing and complementing their moral influence. When facing community-wide emergencies such as cyclones, volcanic activity, or potentially violent land disputes, tivönö turn to people who they feel consistently exhibit these attributes. In uncertain times, composure emerges as critical to a leader's behavior and as a model for others to follow. A defining aspect of chiefly composure is the unwavering ability to conceal inner anger, fear, or worry from revelations through bodily gestures or eye movements. Inattentively tapping or digging with a stick in loose ground, or continuously expelling breath through rounded lips, give the outward impression that one is worried or afraid. The perceived disparity between what one says and the movement of one's eyes provides further evidence of guarded emotions. Joel Robbins (2004) observes how the Urapmin of the West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea regard the eyes as "the quintessential organs of revelation" and "the primary means of unveiling the hidden" (139), hence the considerable presence of ocular symbolism in Urapmin cosmology and practice (see also Throop 2008:415). In East Gaua, elder men recall moments in the salagör when boys were expected to give accounts of themselves and their ritual activities in front of the rest of the group. A boy was instructed to stare into the flames of the open fire; his eyes, in full view of the

others, were scrutinized for any gesture which may betray his own words and undermine his composure.

These men contend that commonplace concerns about eyes are the inevitable outcome of all indigenous Gauian tribes having descended from one of the island's two founding tribes, *Matan* (literally, "its eye"). Tivönö understand *Matan* as referring to the "eye of the island" (*mat nam vere e*), the volatile and unpredictable volcano which people throughout the island reported to me as their greatest source of fear in life even before the 2009 eruptions. They point out that *mat*, the root of *matan*, means not only "eye" but "death" as well. In recounting the myth of the founder hero Qat from local sources, R. H. Codrington (1881) describes a character named Mate who "lived by the side of a volcanic vent" at the center of Gaua where lay the entrance to the "lower world" (274).<sup>49</sup> Mate brought death to Gaua as the result of the actions of Qat's brother, Tangaro the Fool, whose unintended deception forced Mate to lead all humans into the lower world from where they could never return. Qat secretly intended for Tangaro to trick Mate into death so that all humans would know impermanence. We may understand Mate, by way of Tangoro, as unintentionally complicit in the revelation of human mortality, imposing the ultimate limits to human possibility as Qat's unwitting proxy.

Recounting the story of Qat as he learned it from his maternal grandfather, an elder in Aver village explained that all descendants of tribe Matan are destined not only

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<sup>49</sup> Codrington (1881:274) records the name of the lower world of all of the islands of the northern New Hebrides as *Panoi*, which on Mota is taken to signify Hell. Elder tivönö recognize this name but say that on Gaua the spiritual lower world has long been known as *Bönö*, the place of the spirits of the dead. Codrington's report that there "was not a separate receptacle for the ghosts of each separate island" contradicts contemporary Gauian belief about the past.

to mortality, but also to the same susceptibility to deception, intended (Qat) or unintended (Tangoro), as their founding figure, Mate. Viewed in its broader cultural-mythological context, the Nume root *mat* incorporates themes of mortality, vulnerability to hidden intentions, and involuntary revelation which turn up in *tivönö* preoccupations with eyes in interpersonal encounters. As with bodily gestures, acts of “reading” the eye movements of others reveal moments of subtle telepathy which bypass the moral constraints of opacity. Accounts of young boys’ presentations in the *salagör* reveal that what makes leaders exemplars of composure is their ability to avoid involuntary revelation. This is most evident in times of distress, when thoughts of mortality occupy the minds of those who look into their leaders’ faces for calm reassurance. Leaders are judged by what they present in their demeanor and their committed acts of care rather than through public conjecture about their “true” intentions.

The possibilities for social-ethical relations open to *tivönö* are to a large extent predicated on an ability to maintain one’s opacity to others. Yet there are forces both internal and external to persons that threaten to undermine attempts to keep thoughts and emotions hidden. *Tivönö* recognize the material human body as the vessel for *wuvu* (spirit) or *wuvu veboŋ* (good spirit). There is a soul, called *atan*, which is differentiated from *wuvu* in that the latter does not travel to the world of the dead following corporeal death (see chapter 2).<sup>50</sup> Church sermons and outreach groups call for members to cultivate the strength of “spirit” to secure passage into Heaven; most of my *tivönö* interlocutors take this English term to encompass both the transcendent *atan* and the

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<sup>50</sup> Modern Nume speakers use *atan* to denote the soul that travels to the land of the dead following corporeal death. This term, however, is an effect of the language of Mota on Nume terms following the rise of Mota-language sermons in Anglican churches on Gaua. The older and now moribund Nume term for soul is *tajwinin*.

transient *wuvu* (cf. Codrington 2005:248; Kolshus 1999:110; Hess 2006:289).<sup>51</sup> When they distinguish between the two, however, it is *wuvu* which is susceptible to the corrosive effects of a sinful life. They explain that like so much else, the nature of the interaction between *wuvu* and *atan* is lost (*lus*) to cultural oblivion.

*Wuvu* are thought to transfer from a living grandparent or other elder tribal kin to the newborn child, shed of the personality of its previous human vessel. They are often depicted as “good” spirits because all *tivönö*—all *people*—are thought to begin life as virtuous blank slates. Even the Anglican priests of Gaua pay little heed to the doctrine of Original Sin, opting for the notion of *wuvu* as a gift of uncorrupted moral potential—a manifestation of the Holy Spirit—from elder to younger kin. Baptism in Anglican churches centers around the giving of a *kastom* name and a Christian name, or the public announcement of these names if they have already been chosen, and serves to implicate all persons present as responsible for the moral development of the child (cf. Kolshus 1999:117 for baptisms on Mota). This development consists in strengthening *wuvu* against the malevolent influences of external *wuvu vetes* (bad spirits; also *tamat*) through the cultivation of a child’s capacities for critical thinking, and teaching skills such as gardening, fishing, and cooking which imbue thinking with moral efficacy.

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<sup>51</sup> There is a general discrepancy among the major churches on Gaua as to the congruence of “Heaven” and “Bönö.” *Tivönö* who are Anglicans tend not to distinguish between the “Paradise” described in their bibles and church sermons and the realm of the underworld under *Letes* as revealed by *kastom*. Anglican priests and parishioners maintain that this is due mostly to the pragmatic, mostly *laissez-faire* attitudes toward *kastom* taken by the Anglican Church on Gaua. On the whole, Assembly of God adherents are somewhat chary of identifying the two afterworlds as the same, although this is likely due to the tendency for *tivönö* who are disinterested in *kastom* to attend AOG services. The Seventh Day Adventist church, which has sent missionaries to Gaua since the time of Harrison’s visit (1937:326), has been dismissive of *kastom*, which may account for its growing popularity in some non-indigenous communities. SDA presents itself as adamantly non-autochthonous, a spiritual movement from elsewhere, pointing to the absurdity of locating Heaven in Gaua’s caldera. Nonetheless, several *tivönö* with whom I spoke who are active with the SDA church hold firm to their *kastom* beliefs and express their hopes for an afterlife on Gaua.



**Figure 3.1:** Cultivating the inner spirit. A Gauan tivönö girl peels Malay apples from her family’s tree for young children displaced by the 2009 volcanic eruptions. Photo by Jeffrey Wescott. Use of photo by permission of Fred Mala Aris.

The most corrupting of bad spirits is *wuvu suṅsuṅ*, the “spirit that fills you up.” *Wuvu suṅsuṅ* enters the body through poison magic, proximity to taboo objects, or through an incantation uttered into a *kastom* leaf by a malevolent other. The contaminated person begins to commit acts which are harmful to others, such as destroying gardens or spreading malicious gossip. These acts initiate a chain of destructive behaviors which threaten the integrity of *wuvu*. *Wuvu suṅsuṅ* is parasitic, feeding on *wuvu veboŋ* to sustain its own growth: unless treated by *kastom lif* (leaf) medicine or exorcism, *wuvu suṅsuṅ* “fills up” inside the person until all that is hidden within him is pushed out into public space. The illness that follows the expulsion of the good spirit into oblivion further renders the contaminated person transparent to others. Whereas the person was once vulnerable to his inner feeling of obligation to others, he has become vulnerable only to the caprices of the bad spirit, which itself is fully

invulnerable to any social obligations whatsoever.<sup>52</sup> As the contaminated person fails in his commitment to keep his internal states hidden from others, he becomes physically ill, like the practitioner of magic who accretes poison inside him throughout a lifetime of malevolent activity until it destroys him from within. The afflicted person will sweat, discharge phlegm, curse and excrete in full view of others, wasting away until his bones are visible beneath his ashen skin. Transparency—the dissolution or obviation of the ethically virtuous trait of opacity—emerges through increasingly other-denying actions.

The problem of transparency in Gauan ethics calls to mind Levinas' idea of responsibility to others as founded in the vulnerability of the other to potential violence by the self. An essential part of his ethics is that the Other discloses the incipient relation of responsibility within a condition of the mutual ignorance of intentions (1982:86). I have shown that *tivönö* relations of care are predicated on the ambiguity of others' thoughts: they require the imaginative, simulative acts of *domwen* to motivate an appropriate response to the other's situation, that is, to avoid doing unintended violence to the other. A person corrupted by the malevolence of *wuvu sunsun* loses his ability to influence the situational outcomes of others through taking responsibility for them; so too is he deficient as a viable recipient of one's care. The transparent person fails to keep his composure, speaks disrespectfully about others and acts only in ways that benefit his own interests. He negates the expectations that define relations of care

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<sup>52</sup> *Tivönö* understand "good" *wuvu* to be an intrinsic part of the person it inhabits. Such a person is autonomous in that he is understood to cultivate his *wuvu* through his own actions—as the sole author of his actions, somehow separate from the direct influence of his *wuvu*. As *wuvu sunsun* enters, grows, and expands as a result of the person's own actions, his autonomy is increasingly imperiled as he has begun to relinquish control of his actions to the power of the malevolent spirit. From the *tivönö* perspective, what may be seen externally as increasing freedom, as from social expectations and responsibilities, is precisely the opposite.



and for that matter, social relations more generally. Furthermore, the threat of violence about which Levinas writes derives from the fact that the threat is hidden; it is this condition of uncertainty which makes ethical relations a space of vulnerability. There is nothing hidden about the violent intentions of the transparent person. Whereas vulnerability in Levinasian terms provides a positive impetus for other-regarding action, the transparent person faces only his own vulnerability to the corrupting influences of wuvu sunsuŋ. His vulnerability is a system of inward regression, disqualified from all that is possible in the field of social relations.

Practitioners of poison magic are the paradigm case of viciously transparent persons on Gaua. Their unintentional, self-induced death by poisoning provides a familiar lesson to children about the corrupting influences of social isolation and unremitting anger. Although there is no Nume term to distinguish such persons, *wuwur*, which Nume speakers identify as a variation of *warar*, serves as an adequate signifier. *Warar* denotes the incorporeal, primordial evil that precedes all human existence, and it lends its malevolent connotations to *wuwur*: both terms find their Bislama near-equivalent in *nakaemas*, which denotes “sorcerer” elsewhere in Vanuatu.<sup>53</sup> Whereas sorcerers in some Melanesian societies have been observed to play a positive if limited moral role (e.g., Stephen 1995), elsewhere the sorcerer is a moral being insofar as “he embodies, suffers and reflects the hidden or manifest violence in his society” (Dalton 2008:49). The positive capacities of Gauan *wuwur* are limited to an ability to keep watch over one’s family while one is away on another island. *Wuwur* provides a

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<sup>53</sup> *Tamat* is a Nume term which denotes “devil,” “malevolent spirit,” and “corpse.” In East Gaua, *tamat* and *wuwur* are the most common manifestations of the disembodied force of *warar*.

contrast to appropriate opacity: as an archetypal transparent person he dissolves the distinction between hidden and manifest violence which makes social relations both possible and precarious.

Beyond the extreme example of wuwur, there are other kinds of persons whom tivönö recognize as incapable of keeping their intentions away from public view. One I describe as the “one-upper,” a person whom some of my interlocutors call a *man blong flas* (flashy person). Aside from the undesirable trait of blatantly showing off his possessions to others, such as his large house and clean new clothes, the one-upper cannot help but to comment on the newly acquired possessions of others. One tivönö man recalled an incident in which he received a new lantern from a friend, and a man who many describe as a one-upper promptly informed the man of the many ways that his own lantern was far superior to the man’s. With his intentions transparent and fully predictable to all around him, the one-upper provides others with no sense of otherness with which they may identify him as a viable ethical relation.

Wuwur and one-uppers demonstrate how opacity is itself a motivating condition for emerging relations of care. As tivönö are quick to explain, however, people assess others’ capacities for respect and care by the sustained quality of their observed actions. The philosopher James Mensch (2003) describes encounters between human others in Levinasian terms, as a “saturated givenness.” By virtue of the fact that an observing self never knows for certain what the other person will do in the future, the other is always “more than one intends” (1), always more than one can fully assimilate into one’s own sense of the world. In Gauan social encounters, wuwur and one-uppers are by contrast less than one intends: observing their actions, one finds that the sense of futurity that the

other offers is forestalled by expectations of malicious behavior. Returning to Levinas' point about the potential for hidden violence in ethical relations, to be transparent in Gauan society is to be temporally as well as ethically limited. In communication, saturated givenness appears in the ways each interlocutor can never fully predict the reasons the other may advance for his speech act (cf. Habermas 1999:31, 71). There can be no expectation of a shared future with wuwur and one-uppers because there is nothing given to anticipation. For tivönö, "temporality as a medium of otherness" (Stasch 2009:17) is preempted by revelations that the other is less than one intends.<sup>54</sup>

There are persons for whom opportunities for maintaining the ethically necessary otherness of opacity are either unavailable or insufficiently motivating. Yet the breaching of opacity is not always a morally negative act. All of the normative dangers of transparency notwithstanding, there are socially sanctioned moments for expressing one's thoughts, fears, and even anger. Public displays of this sort are often acceptable if situationally appropriate, in contrast to the persistent acts of anger and self-interest which identify transparent persons. The most socially acceptable acts of transparency involve the role of parents as moral proxies to their children. When parents learn that their child has disrespected another family by destroying property, stealing

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<sup>54</sup> The obviation of social viability in transparent persons and the corrupting processes of malevolent spirits beg the question of such persons' prospects for ascension into Heaven (or Bönö). Hess (2010) reports that for the people of Vanua Lava, Hell takes the form of *wērēsōr*: "the place of sorrow and sadness where souls receive their punishment for their immoral and evil practices in the world of the living" (166). All Gauans with whom I spoke recognize the Christian Hell, to which they refer in Bislama as *fāea* (fire). When I asked my tivönö interlocutors what kinds of actions or personal qualities lead to damnation, I was met with silence. People who are evil and antisocial in their lives wander the paths and forests of Gaua without connection to others. When they die, their fate is to continue their (in)activity and placelessness for eternity. Hess' study of the afterlife on Vanua Lava anticipates this predicament of the ill-fated dead, describing *wērēsōr* as "marked by restless movement, or enforced mobility, that is associated with not having a place" (2006:290). Gauan tivönö have lost their word for that placelessness of the damned, but not its viability as a potential fate.

garden crops, or killing chickens, they are expected to approach the victims and openly express their shame and anger for the incident. Parents make it publicly known that their own tears of remorse and contrition accurately depict what their child is internally experiencing. They work to effectively bring their child's intentions into the open to counter the claims of gossiping third parties that *they* in fact know the true inner states of the child, a situation which occurs despite the general aversion to implicating oneself in the intentions of others. As parents an implicit obligation to step away from the safety of their concealed thoughts and feelings to rectify the inappropriate actions of their children. This is perhaps the most common instance of ethically viable—even obligatory—transparency in Gauan life.

A more exclusive space for obviating the opacities of self and others manifests when someone falls victim to wrongdoing or disrespect. Such a person may publicly elaborate the intentions and inner characters of anonymous perpetrators, often generalizing their harsh castigations to the community at large. I present here a case study of a woman from Aver village who awoke one morning to find that someone had stolen her four bags of concrete mix. She first sat quietly in her cookhouse to reflect on what had happened, and then spent the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon pacing the village, wondering aloud what kind of person one must be to steal from a fellow community member. The woman alternated between focusing her angry comments on the characteristics of the thief—her or his appalling lack of self-sufficiency and ineffective parents—and those of a community that clearly thought so little of honesty and hard work as to allow such a disrespectful act to occur. In her invective, she dissolved the opacity of her interlocutors. Her act of identifying the

individual thief with the entire community implicated both as people whose regrettable true intentions had become transparent to her. The woman's public revelations (*vitlug*, to reveal what is unknown) of the inner thoughts of others brought a performative mode of transparency into ethical territory by virtue of both the pedagogical aim of her pronouncements and her standing as a respected person of the place.

Tivönö men report that adulterous desires and the coveting of other men's houses or property are their most strictly guarded inner feelings. Women cite fears that their husbands are unfaithful to them and their lingering anger over past jealousies as feelings which ought not to be openly revealed. When I asked my interlocutors to describe what thoughts and feelings must be kept hidden, most of them couched their replies in the third person (e.g., "we Gauans" or "people here") for fear that our conversations might be misconstrued as personal confessionals. By contrast, most elder persons maintain that they are beyond shame, and that transparency without consequence is one of the few luxuries of old age. They observe that the Nume term *tamaraga* (old man) also means "no shame"--that *tamaraga* is the fusion of *ta* (the particle placed before a verb to negate it) and *maraga* (shame). Younger tivönö say that an old person's words cut particularly deeply as they are viewed as accurate representations of true thoughts and feelings.

The indifference of elders to their own revelations is not without limits. An illustrative example involves an elder of the tivönö community who recounted for me a time when he feared that his feelings of shame for having failed to meet his family's expectations of him would surface and become visible to them:

Some years ago, near the end of the year, we had very little food. I could not provide for my family. I felt like a dog. I wanted to cry, but I could not let my family see me cry. I did not want them to know that I felt like a dog. ‘Papa is not giving us the things he has...Papa is lazy.’ Were these their thoughts? My stomach was full of shame. My stomach tried to come out. I was afraid my stomach would come out.<sup>55</sup> [Sovut, April 1, 2008]

Having conversed with the man several times on the topic of attitudes of older tivönö, I trusted that he felt comfortable enough to recount this difficult story to me just because he was nearly eighty years old. His elder status, however, could not prevent the shame of failing his family’s expectations of him from arising and threatening to render him transparent. My interlocutor believed that he was a fraud, someone who is not the kind of person capable of producing for and maintaining the well-being of close others. He felt his low self-worth amplified by fears that his stomach, the seat of shame for tivönö, would “come out” into full view. As both an active member of his church and a lifelong practitioner of *kastom*, he dedicated himself to instructing his community in proper moral conduct, encouraging them to aspire to the true manner (*matev vidun*) of a person of the place. Even his elevated stature in the community could not protect him from feeling the threat of social death brought about by the shame of unfulfilled expectations.

Yet my interlocutor also recognized the possibilities available to him in confronting his own transparency. For the Aver woman who was the victim of theft, the poignantly ethical moment of her public diatribe was the unguarded expression of opinions and feelings which compelled those around her to question the strength of their

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<sup>55</sup> In the original Nume: “Ranti, tare tow vebas, tow vebas, söm naliblama wiswiskit. Na me ta le mi gengen nam na-rasogok. Matev namuk nam tuar tok. Na me mörös te rara, wa na-rasogok nir me ta ververe mi na sur na me rara. Na me ta mörös mi na...matev nam tok. ‘Papa ve ta le mi tare savasav namun... Papa ni ve marej.’ Dudumi e namnir? Nataqak velol sur maraga. Nataqak ve kal lu ma ale vere. Na me qanqane nataqak te kal lu ma ale vere.”

own ethical commitments. For the community elder, ethics was in *self*-disclosure, a reflexive assessment that either sacrifices the self to shameful exposure or presents possibilities for renewing one's commitment to a particular kind of being. As self-sacrifices in the service of ethical renewal, moments of transparency which tivönö men and women recounted for me with great clarity contrast with the destructive revelations of the likes of wuwur and one-uppers.

The woman's public reprimands showed her to be the kind of person who feels so strongly about the value of trust in her community that her moments of unguarded anger threatened to reveal thoughts and feelings previously unknown even to her. The elderly man's internal scolding revealed and perhaps reinforced his own commitment to his relations of care. In each of these cases we find persons opening themselves to the risks of revealing thoughts and feelings of which they themselves are unaware. Self-opacity is a concern to all tivönö, who take it as given that women and men hold thoughts and feelings which are beyond reflexive awareness, often maliciously held by traces of wuvu sunsun dwelling in their bodies. There are times of unguarded anger, shame, and fear when people suddenly find themselves divulging their true manner in view of all, including themselves. Those who witness such events follow C. S. Peirce's observation that "it is the belief men betray and not that which they parade which has to be studied" (1998:346). At first glance, self-opacity discloses the negative side of ethical possibility--that more can emerge from other-regarding acts than one may desire. Yet the chief, the mother's brother, and others thought to have well-cultivated moral imaginations and capacities open themselves to these vulnerable moments by virtue of their making ethics a constant concern in their lives. In doing so, they confront

seemingly unending possibilities for unscripted revelation. They are the kinds of persons who ought to welcome rather than fear such moments.

### **Always-vulnerable persons**

The idea that tivönö view themselves as always vulnerable to the situations and needs of others seems to place Gauan ethics into the realm of supererogation, of people giving of themselves beyond what is expected of them by some relevant normative or intrapersonal standard. To be always-vulnerable surely raises expectations for imagining others in the ways I have described. As always-vulnerable, tivönö men and women perambulate villages and paths with their sensibilities and moral imaginations ever-receptive and readily activated. When my interlocutors conveyed to me the insistent need for persons of the place like them to remain watchful and responsive in their social worlds, they quickly acknowledged the practical realities of such vigilance. Tivönö offer the phrase *ra mel wese nam manman sese* (other birds' eggs) to express the idea of foolishly taking on responsibilities well beyond expectation. Yet the notion of being always-vulnerable is powerful as a way of distinguishing oneself and certain others in social-ethical space. Tivönö recognize the practical value of making the well-being of others one's constant concern. Thinking of others, one often finds a greater sense of achievement in the everyday labors which are otherwise merely exhausting and monotonous. As a matter of social-cosmological order, tivönö are always-vulnerable because as persons of the place they can be; for this reason it follows for them that they ought to be.

The possibilities for an ever-vigilant concern for others bring Gauan ethics into conversation with certain recent moral-ethical theories in anthropology. One such



theory is put forward by Jarrett Zigon, who situates much of his analytics of morality within Heidegger's ontology of *Dasein*, the human capacity for intersubjectivity in a pre-existing world. Zigon defines morality as "those bodily dispositions enacted in the world non-intentionally and unreflectively. To be moral is to inhabit a bodily disposition, one might even say inhabit a soul, that is familiar to oneself and most others with whom one comes into contact" (2007:135). Humans navigate within their "familiar sharedness of morality" without having to deliberate on the most appropriate actions to follow in any given interpersonal encounter. The multitude of moralities operative in any given society coalesce into the unreflected, bodily moral disposition. What results is a "range of possibilities" available to pre-deliberative action, a range which is "altered, ever so slightly, by the creative and free (i.e. conscious) process of ethics" (2009a:262-3; 272).

There are times, however, when the expectations we have of our intersubjective world are confounded, the range of possibilities for unreflected action exceeded. We are forced to step away from our current situation and relinquish our non-conscious dispositions to awareness and deliberation. In Zigon's framework, this is the "ethical moment" of reflection and creative action. Here he adapts Heidegger's notion of "the breakdown" to his moral framework:

Just as the hammer [in Heidegger's example] is usually and for the most part ready-to-hand [i.e. does not require deliberation and conscious attention to use effectively], so too are moral expectations and dispositions. They are normally unquestioned, unreflected upon and simply done. [...] But on occasion, something breaks down. A disagreement arises. Someone asks you a troubling question to which you might not want to answer. [...] These dilemmas, difficult times, and troubles do arise from time to time and they force one...to step away and

figure out, work-through and deal with the situation-at-hand. [Zigon 2007:137]

Zigon's framework consists in a series of transformations, beginning with the unreflected moral dispositions which mediate our everyday social interactions and giving way to the "stepping away" of ethical reflection catalyzed by troubling moments. In the final transformation, the troubling question or dilemma is resolved, its novel solution is incorporated into one's dispositions, and one achieves the moral telos of returning to the "comfort" of her or his unreflective state of intersubjective being. An anthropology of moralities, Zigon argues, ought to limit itself to the analysis of moral breakdowns, "to those social and personal moments when persons or groups of persons are forced to step-away from their unreflective everydayness and think-through, figure out, work on themselves and respond to certain ethical dilemmas, troubles, or problems" (2007:140; cf. Robbins 2009:278).

This moral-theoretical framework bears structural resemblance to the theory presented by Hans Joas in *The Creativity of Action* (1996) and critiqued by Benjamin Dalton (2004) and others (e.g., Camic 1998). Dalton observes that despite his stated goal of arguing for "a creative dimension to all human action" (Joas 1996:4), Joas presents a model of action which takes creativity to be a "phase" of action "that emerges in response to the interruption of habitual activity" (Dalton 2004:604). A "phasic" conception of action (610) ignores the possibility of a "tension between unreflected habitual action and acts of creativity" (Joas 1996:129, emphasis added) and opts for a reading of creativity as the momentary mediation between crisis events and confounded habits.

Dalton observes that there are types of creative actions which emerge without benefit of a crisis or “shattering” event. They include experimentation with a routine due to boredom or exhaustion from a habitual action (2004:608), or the perfection of routinized actions—creative episodes in which a person strives to improve current ways of doing things (610). Additionally, Nick Crossley (2001:88) notes that children and adults often transfer novel ways of doing things from one domain of social interaction to others, as has been observed in occasions of play. None of these creative actions requires the breakdown of unreflective habits for their emergence; something need not go wrong for a person to act with creative deliberation. In theorizing action as a phasic sequence from habit to creativity and back to reconstructed habit, Joas falls short of his stated goal of comprehending the two as co-occurring types of action in tension. He consigns creativity to a “residual category” (1996:4) of action, requiring a separate theory of explanation. A good deal of action goes unaccounted for in a phasic model that imagines alternating tides of habit and deliberation.

Tivönö and other people of Gaua regularly find themselves confronted with situations they did not anticipate or which make them uncomfortable. The “troubling questions” and dilemmas to which Zigon refers surely arise in the shifting cultural, political, and demographic landscapes of Gaua’s communities. Breakdowns occur, and as the cases of ethically constructive transparency reveal, they bring reflection, self-assessment, and creativity into the spaces of selves and others. Furthermore, the notion of a pre-objective, kinesthetic morality is compelling, and evident in the receptive sensibility to vulnerable others that makes domwen possible. In viewing tivönö life through the lens of a phasic framework of morality, however, much ethical work is lost.

The chief, the mother's brother, and all who aspire to the moral stature of these exemplars comprehend responsibility as always there to be taken up. Their everyday walks around villages and other communal spaces are opportunities for ethical cultivation of self and community. For all of its analytical power, a phasic model of breakdown and resolution cannot account for ethical experimentation and deliberative perfection. These capacities are essential to the cultivation of *domwen*, constructive transparency, and the more pervasive idea of a culturally and historically situated receptivity to the vulnerabilities of others. The instruments of ethics available to *tivönö* are honed through careful attention to the words and daily activities of others. By forcing these deliberative practices into residual categories, the breakdown model fails to capture many of the proactive ways that *tivönö* work toward genuine ethical encounters and relations. The model arbitrarily segregates the "productive" from the "reproductive" (Faubion 2010; see also Robbins 2007) and obscures much that transpires in a life of making possibility.<sup>56</sup>

The final phase of the breakdown model, in which persons return to their non-conscious dispositions (albeit with a transformed moral habitus), poses similar problems when applied to the ethical lives of *Gauan tivönö*. *Domwen* is a domain for creative thought in intersubjective life, a process through which persons reaffirm or question their moral commitments and imagine other possible worlds. The ever-present tensions

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<sup>56</sup> Zigon adopts Foucault's idea of ethics as "a conscious acting on oneself either in isolation or with others," but refines it within his own theoretical framework to direct its focus toward "the ethical process of working on the self as always open-ended and situational...as a recurring existential moment throughout one's life that can never end in self-mastery or authenticity" (2009a:261). However, he calls for an anthropology of ethics that limits its analytical scope to the "recurring" moments when people are "forced to step-away from their unreflective everydayness" (2007:140, emphasis added). A phasic framework fails to explain how "breakdown" accounts for conscious, *proactive* (i.e. not prompted or forced by confounding events) exercises of self-fashioning as everyday practices, regardless of ultimate aims.

between attending to the well-being of self and others, and the challenges of interacting with particular others who are at once stranger and kin (see chapter 4), define the work of Gauan ethics. Such an ethics has no resolution, no return to a place of comfort. The ethos of what we may call “the unresolved event” is demonstrated in the expectations tivönö have of themselves in their relations of care. It is not simply that tivönö want to view themselves, and to have others view them, as fully capable of attending to “other birds’ eggs,” as having the knowledge, skill, and material means to meet an unending string of obligations if they so choose. The point is that the relations of care to which they have already committed require their constant vigilance and creative input, and their continuing viability as certain kinds of persons rests on the ongoing successes of these relations of care.

While trekking together around paths in the northeast, a tivönö man pointed out to me the gardens of families to whom he has given assistance over the past two or three decades. He recalled earlier times when these gardens had fallen prey to drought, poison magic, or simple neglect and he and his family took it upon themselves to provide assistance. Situations of vulnerability such as these reveal the ongoing obligations of entire households in the northeast: conversations in the cookhouse commonly involve assessments of the states of others’ property, and thoughts about what further assistance is needed and ought to be given. The repairs of other families’ gardens enacted in the past are unresolved events: they are the essential, ever-present concerns in these enduring relations of care. There is an underlying moral aesthetic of self-sacrifice to this ethics, one which is also apparent in the tivönö notion of *lavaswut*, the obligation to welcome all persons at all times. As with *lavaswut*, the commitment to the unresolved

event sacrifices the comfort of the self-sufficient life: it forgoes the possibility that one can disconnect oneself from the dynamic living space of *vönö* and reconstruct obligation entirely on one's own terms, as a sort of post-autochthonous ethics. My interlocutors' descriptions of their steady commitments to others' gardens provide a vivid example of how persons of the place find comfort in the discomfort of their vigilance, as visceral and contemplative confirmations of their place in the moral-cosmological order. At the same time, commitments to the unresolved event reveal to *tivönö* the limitations to their "compromise" between self and other (Edel 1963:203), the points where certain possibilities close as long as others remain open.

Breaking free of the breakdown, we find spaces for thoughtful creativity in the moral imaginations and actions of *tivönö*. We must acknowledge, however, that opening these spaces to ethical cultivation is but one side of the opportunity coin. The always-vulnerable person may not be always-responsible. The deliberative practices of perfecting and deviating from habit are achieved only by surrendering to the risks and uncertainties of creative action, efforts which open possibilities for acting with harmful intentions. Paul Rabinow describes the resonance of Georges Canguilhem's conception of evolutionary processes in much of contemporary ethical thought, observing that "we must move, err, adapt to survive. This condition of 'erring' or 'drifting' is not merely accidental or external to life but its fundamental form" (in Foucault 1997:xl; see also Foucault 1998b; Faubion 2009, 2011). Erring and drifting serve to chart the outer contours of ethical possibility; they are deliberative, risky practices that open one to the freedom of testing the boundaries of moral expectation. This may take the form of eliciting one's own visceral response to cruel actions toward others, as Levinas observes

in the evaluative experience of callousness. Erring and drifting reveal how far one can distance oneself from the other-regarding commitments to which one feels always vulnerable.<sup>57</sup>

An elderly tivönö man and former chief described for me an evening long ago when, exhausted and frustrated due to his unending responsibilities to family and community, he pushed his sister's two young sons to the ground and violently threatened them with a flaming torch in full view of the entire village. As he stepped away to regain his composure, he felt his heart surrounded by "the knives of people's eyes" (*tare □asel nam mate nam wusul*). The man recalled his action as a desperate attempt to apprehend his own place in the shared values of the community: he wanted to experience the intensity of the expectations people had of him as a respected and feared leader. Although he observed that several days later his sister and the rest of the community treated him just as they had before the incident, the man felt himself more acutely aware of the limits to his own deviation from responsibilities as a chief and as a mother's brother. Only by committing a shameful act of such magnitude did he come to understand himself as someone incapable of doing so with self-impunity.

A similar case involves an East Gaua woman who retreated to her native village in the south early one morning so that she could "know the pain" (*gil mönö*) of abandoning her family. When she returned to her family nearly one month later, they reacted as if she had never left, which upset her greatly. Without recourse to her

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Sack (2003:194) equates moral drift with self-deception—the idea that one can progressively convince oneself of the rightness of one's own increasingly unethical actions. While this is clearly observable in the processes of *wuvu sunsun*—where, more accurately, increasing moral drift is matched by an increasing indifference to the world—Gauan ethics recognizes a drifting of purposeful deviation which often works to counter self-deception. One may discover, recover, or reinforce one's ethical commitments.

family's reactions of resentment, anger, or relief, the woman found herself forced to confront her anxieties about her responsibilities to her family and the true extent to which they needed her. Again, the locus of revelation was the heart: the woman described how her heart had gone "cold" (*wonmwalak mamirir*) from her family's indifference, revealing that her erring and drifting had pushed beyond the limits of moral possibility.

There are other, less dramatic, ways in which tivönö cut across the grain of social-ethical space. By refusing to attend a nearby fundraiser, speaking ill of someone in gossip, or conspicuously ignoring visitors, people undertake their ostensibly other-denying acts to test the boundaries of their own vulnerabilities to responsibility. They do so, of course, with the potential for others to take their actions as evidence of selfishness, jealousy, or perhaps the incipient presence of *wuvu suṣṣuṣ*. Yet the agent in these situations finds himself sacrificing the short-term feeling of self-confident community spirit for a more substantive, rational and visceral assessment of his responsibilities. These are the expectations of being always-vulnerable, for better and for worse. Roy Wagner (1975) observes that "explanations [for motivation and creativity] in terms of disturbance and injustice belittle human achievements to the level of correctives, and reduce life to an equilibrium model" (34). A full account of Gauan ethics recognizes the breakdowns that occur in the face of change; but it also observes the proactive ways in which tivönö engage with a social-ethical world that is never at equilibrium, even as an ideal.

## **Conclusion**



In this chapter I have presented critical aspects of a Gauan theory of the moral encounter. The guiding focus has been the moral imagination, the capacity for ascertaining the kinds of vulnerable situations others confront and how best to respond as a capable ethical agent. These components and processes of the tivönö moral imagination coalesce as a distinctive marker of kastom personhood. I began by explaining how a pre-reflective awareness of the vulnerable situations of others sets into motion the deliberative processes of the moral imagination. The situations to which ethical agents are attuned are the type which forestalls possibility in life: agents are receptive to certain hindrances to possibilities for well-being and future-making even if these concerns are not always foregrounded in thought. Imagining the situations of others requires not only familiarity with certain kinds of vulnerability, but also an awareness of and respect for the compelling otherness of other persons' subjective experiences. There are persons in the Gauan social environment who are for various reasons unable to maintain the opacity of their own mind and heart, and for this reason are often deemed inappropriate or even dangerous as objects of care. Conversely, states of cognitive and affective transparency may also serve the carefully delimited but morally significant ends of fostering relations or providing therapeutic self-assessment.

As the tivönö moral imagination works to make sense of these various interpersonal connections, it does so with an ideal of proactive ethics, of keeping oneself always ready to respond to others' situations, but also of testing the boundaries of moral expectations as a person of the place. Such persons risk becoming moral pariahs in their efforts to discern, often viscerally, their horizons of responsibility and the consequences of being "kastom" in everyday social life. In sum, there are two

general tendencies of action in Gauan ethics. The first suggests that the imaginative process that leads to other-regarding care is directed by an “attractor” (Mosko 2005:17) in the tivönö moral “system.” Caring for others is the telos to which persons know they ought to strive: it increases its pull on them exponentially as they move closer to it, connecting with others as particular persons and experiencing the recursive effects of feeling genuinely and properly “of the place.” Then again there is the tendency to understand the self as unable to fully accommodate the system’s attractions and expectations: there are always frustrations, changes of heart, and other fields for the moral imagination to tend and uproot. My interlocutors reveal their ability to recognize, while never fully reconcile, the inward pull of others and the outward summon of still-other possibilities.

Taking the tivönö moral imagination as a whole, from the pre-conscious sensibility to others in need, through imagining what is compellingly familiar and what is insufficiently other, and lastly to the deliberate fracturing of one’s own moral ground, we find a concern for possibility. The moment of transcendence in Gauan ethics—the moment that people experience as distinctly “kastom”—is the movement from a situation’s existing possibilities to the production of new ones that exceed the concrete situation. We have seen this production of possibility in the construction of new, potentially enduring relations of care with others. These new possibilities are enacted in encounters with *particular* others, but they always point to something larger than themselves, something more socially comprehensive. That is the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Imagining many others: kinship and community

In chapter 3, my Gauan interlocutors lived in the moment. Even as they appealed to memories of the past and forged ideas of interpersonal futures, they became aware of the problems of others, and the possibilities and limits of their moral selves, within the “encounters of care” taking place in real time. This was the near-immediacy of the moral imagination, taking hold of the vulnerable situation and the opaque, *particular* other and guiding the self toward some form of right action. In this chapter I explore the moral imagination beyond the face-to-face encounter with particular others. We have seen that among the possibilities generated by the moral imagination are the transformations of “strangers” (*salavan*) into “kin” (*rasogo*), the establishing of relations of care (*tomtom*) and “looking-after” (*kere gor*) from ultimate social distance. Kinship is more than an encompassing category for household, lineal, and affinal relations, and it is more than a convenient metaphor for relations of care. Ideas of what is inherently and unavoidably present in relations with consanguineal kin provide a framework for people to think about aspects of their moral lives and selves which transcend their dyadic relations.

The erosion of an exogamous matrilineal system as an organizing principle has been among the more striking cultural losses tivönö have faced over the past century. Yet notions of kinship endure as ways of organizing one’s broader range of social connections and commitments. The concerns which Gauan tivönö express about kin relations however conceived return us to the domain of possibility—not for the creation of relations with particular others as we discovered in chapter 3, but for the

viability of certain ways of thinking about moral “communities” on Gaua. Ideas of what constitutes a life of community provide social-ethical context to the focus on human-environment interactions in the final chapters of the dissertation.

I begin by examining how tivönö contemplate the multiple attributes of commonality and otherness they perceive between themselves and others, and how these meditations inform notions of selves and of broader social-ethical worlds. These meditations are largely motivated by attitudes toward kin-relating. Next I consider what takes place following the initial encounters of care in acts of *domwen* as described in chapter 3. Through the exchange of kinship terms in incipient relations of care, tivönö apprehend a shared “lifeworld” which impinges on them as a moral obligation both to a particular other and to a wider social network with its own expectations of right action. Having explored the capacities of kinship attitudes and terms for revealing the ethical big picture in Gauan social life, I examine how morally adept persons step away from everyday moral commerce to take a perspective on that picture. The possibilities for new horizons of ethical living as evidenced in the always-vulnerable agent in chapter 3 shift from concerns about self and particular others to broader senses of community.

### **Attitudes and ambivalence in Gauan kinship**

The phrase *ni ve sese* (he/she is different) is ubiquitous in conversations among Nume speakers and covers wide referential ground. Depending on its reference and the context of its utterance, the phrase may identify social awkwardness, mental instability, limited skill or intellect, a nonconformist spirit (usually said of children), an uncommon talent, or even the unique knowledge gained from extensive travel. Implicit in this simple phrase is the evaluative notion that the person being described is different

*from the rest of us*, one who stands out for good or for bad by virtue of a distinguishing trait. Otherness is a pervasive idea on Gaua, an observation confirmed in the operations and tensions of the moral imagination, and in the ways Gauan communities set themselves apart from one another. These forms of otherness are in many ways more substantive than those identified by “ni ve sese,” as they concern notions of human ontology and social-cosmological order with wide ethical relevance.

Coming out of chapter 3, an essential point to hold moving forward is that Gauans who identify as *tivönö* imagine their relations with others as expressions of commonality and otherness existing in constant tension. They register their beliefs about other persons by revealing their familiarity with certain kinds of situations they see others confronting while avoiding talk of what others are thinking and feeling or what they intend to do next. Vulnerability and opacity are ontological concerns: they are more or less shared conceptions about what exists and does not exist as possibilities for human intersubjectivity. *Tivönö* express their beliefs that all human beings are both ontologically common and ontologically other: as humans we are all vulnerable to danger and deprivation; and we are qualitatively unique subjectivities with thoughts, feelings and experiences that are not, and ought not to be, available to inspection by others.

*Tivönö* is a term I use to identify a group of persons who ostensibly share an awareness of these human attributes and who find themselves obligated to negotiate the tensions between them to the good of others. I opt for the phrase “find themselves,” as *tivönö* describe their other-regarding obligations as requisite traits of their identities as persons of the place, not as desired traits in a supererogatory sense. As they explained it

to me, this is simply who they are, cosmologically common to other tivönö by virtue of ordering their beliefs and practices in such a way as to conceive of them as constituting an encompassing conceptual framework of life and the world.<sup>58</sup> At work is a mutual causality, of tivönö finding themselves making the world as it makes them. I briefly mentioned this relation of heteronomy in presenting the tivönö view of kastom as both “in the bones” and diffuse within the cosmological order (see chapter 3). “Kastom” is here coterminous with “tivönö,” identifying a group of people who are cosmologically other than the rest of their fellow Gauans and the broader world by virtue of their relation to that world and the obligations that accompany that relation. To return briefly to the question of supererogation, no person of Gaua who self-identifies as “tivönö,” “kastom,” or “manples” ever suggested to me that their far-reaching obligations demonstrate a superior kind of personhood. In ethical terms, these appellations do no more than identify the day-to-day obligations of persons who inhabit a cosmological order, one which they tend to regard as qualified to make certain claims on them.

I do not intend the divisions between ontology and cosmology, and commonality and otherness, to exhaust the kinds of considerations tivönö make when they imagine relations with others. On Gaua, histories of collaborations and disputes with others and their associates, and myriad political and practical realities, all contribute to how one assesses relations with others and to how one locates oneself and others in social-ethical

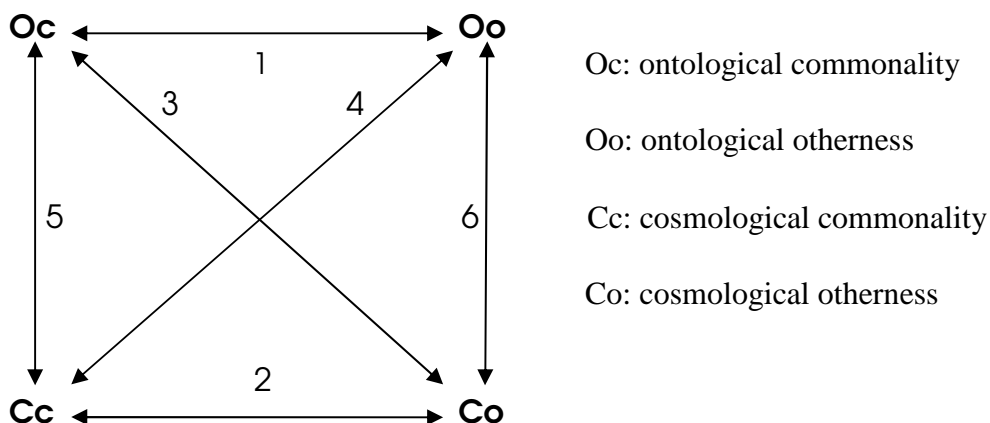
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<sup>58</sup> I am indebted to the explication of “cosmology” presented by Thorgeir Storesund Kolshus (1999). Of his interlocutors on Mota, Kolshus writes, “One could...argue that the ‘true’ cosmology actually is the *system of classification*, with the opposition inside/outside not only being the main tool for the ordering of the world but is equipped with qualities approaching an almost ontological nature, i.e. producing statements concerning how the world *is*” (3). Gauan tivönö approach the distinctions between themselves and those on the “outside” of their “group” as both a creative engagement with the world—the making of possibility and limit through acts of ordering—and an acknowledged awareness of the reality that confronts and constrains them. This point is valuable to our comprehending the arbitrariness of distinctions between “is” and “ought” in many anthropological projects on the ethics of other societies.

space. Yet within the complexities of moral decision-making, what is evident in observing the practices and discourses of *tivönö* is that shared vulnerabilities, unshared inner states, and concerns about authenticating indigenous identities all appear as routinely compelling factors in forming social relations. These factors coalesce as diverse attributes of self and other, foregrounded in particular situations which range from moments of self-assessment to interpersonal crises. In these situations, other people are not simply *sese*, simply “different” from the rest of us by virtue of an isolated character trait. I present Figure 4.1 to clarify this distinction, and to organize my further explorations of how various ideas about commonality and otherness contribute to *tivönö* ethical thought.

We may interpret each of the six numbered lines in Figure 4.1 either as a tension between two traits, or as two non-conflicting or complementary traits, residing at once in a single individual who is the focus of the moral imagination at any given time—that is, whose relation to an observer poses a particular ethical question. The exception is Cc-Co (number two in Figure 4.1), which is an either/or configuration demarcating *tivönö* from other indigenous and non-indigenous persons. This distinction is rarely ambiguous: a child born to one *tivönö* and one non-*tivönö* parent will enjoy the rights of resource access of the native mother or the native father (often through his sister), and will typically speak the language of the native parent. There are times when one feels a clash of loyalties between one’s dual identities, when the value of the cosmological distinction becomes unclear, as when hearing about an indigenous person’s claiming long-lost rights of resource access from non-native landholders (or “renters”). The foregoing example notwithstanding, it is the mutually exclusive distinctions by which

tivönö order their social-cosmological world which allow them to identify themselves as having abilities, obligations, and goals in common with some others and quite different from other others.



- 1 – The vulnerability-opacity nexus
- 2 – The tivönö divide
- 3 – *salavan*<sub>1</sub> (the vulnerable stranger)
- 4 – *salavan*<sub>2</sub> (the opaque fellow tivönö); the first facticity of kinship
- 5 – *rivte/amaren*; the second facticity of kinship
- 6 – *aras/añis*; the moral-imaginative “frontier”

**Figure 4.1:** Configurations of commonality and otherness in Gauan ethics

In chapter 3 I examined the traits of ontological commonality and otherness (Oc-Oo, number one) which stir the tivönö moral imagination. As features of relations between persons, neither situational vulnerability nor opacity are limited to encounters with socially distant others. They are present in everyday encounters with those persons whom tivönö most closely identify and most frequently interact—their own kin. To encounter otherness in one’s closest relations is to identify strangers in one’s cosmological order: others who are fellow tivönö yet always distant in their “true” intentions and feelings. The interaction between these two conflicting traits (Cc-Oo, number four) constitutes what I call the first facticity of tivönö kinship—the presence of



the strange in the intimately familiar as explored in great depth by Stasch (2009) in his ethnography of the Korowai. By “facticity” I refer here to Heidegger’s observation that humans come to grasp their existential condition through the particular attitudes they take toward facts in the world (see Blattner 2006:45). In the present context, it is a fact for tivönö that they cannot bridge the divide which separates them from the subjective experiences of others, even of their closest kin. They reveal the facticity of this condition of relating—this intimate alterity or “close strangeness” (Stasch 2009:107)—in the attitudes they take toward the very notion of kinship, a complex fusion of care, concern, and ambivalence.

The first facticity of kinship makes possible the imagining of the vulnerable stranger (Oc-Co, number three): tivönö recognize their obligations to respond on behalf of individuals who are non-tivönö yet susceptible to facing the vulnerable situations familiar to all people. They attend to the well-being of visitors from distant villages, islands, and beyond—to persons who are *salavan* (strangers) in its primary meaning of neither indigenous to nor residents of East Gaua. Intimate alterity anticipates the attitude of care toward vulnerable strangers by asserting that like anyone, kin are defined in part by their quality of otherness.

Whereas the first facticity of kinship concerns the attitudes taken toward the strangeness of fellow tivönö, especially one’s closest kin, the second facticity (Oc-Cc, number five) posits a deep sense of similarity attributable to the fact of shared qualities of autochthony and co-presence. People whom tivönö regard as proximate to them, as sharing with them connections to place (*rivte*: nearby) and certain expectations of the determinate future (*amaren*: tomorrow; see chapter 5), are people whom they tend to

imagine as kinds of kin. In the present day these relations are theoretically, if rarely practically, traceable to the common connections to moieties and tribes that organized social interaction in the now-distant past. The attitudes tivönö have toward the shared vulnerabilities of people within their cosmological order are evident in how they express their fears that the unfortunate events in the lives of close others are sure to befall them as well. Anticipating a misfortune already met by one's own kin reveals the anxious ambivalence of unmediated closeness. Tivönö commonly recognize events such as serious illness or injury to kin as their own life's inevitable trajectory; children are doubly susceptible to meeting the same misfortunes as their brothers, sisters, and uncles. The reality of sharing a common nature and inhabiting a common social order creates a sense of proximity typified by the cohabitation of kin, generating an uneasy resentment through the constant and undesired foretelling of one's own fate.

Concerns about the inevitability of life are evident in the Nume phrase *Es ve sa, ma ve sa tabene* (Life sits, and it sits here). Tivönö explain how life surrounds each one of them, unyielding and incontestable, with markers of identity that situate them within a specific place and time. Spirits particular to places (*ate vere*) enter the bodies of persons at birth, to return to the ground and trees of the same place following death. *Ate vere* contribute to the health of children: parents and chiefs send young girls and boys into the bush during early morning so that heavy, dew-covered leaves will "strike" (*vus*) them, dispelling illness and giving them the vigor of *ate vere*. Adults identify each other as having been born in a certain place and as embodying a corresponding *ate vere* which they share with others born there. The essential economics of place—land ownership, resource access, and even household productivity—draw together persons who

recognize each other as kin.<sup>59</sup> Faced with determining factors of identity such as these, tivönö feel that they are inextricably emplaced, subject to the contingencies of life confronted by all others who inhabit the same place.

This air of inevitability is compounded by the belief that close kin relations, which are generally taken to be siblings, both parents (despite the matrilineal system of descent), and mothers' brothers and fathers' sisters and their children, are like anatomical features: one acquires both through exigencies independent of human activity and will. The person who finds that he has this face, these legs, and these arms understands that it is so due to the influences of spirits of place and of human spirits (*wuvu*) transferred to young children from an elder family or tribal member. Both Qat and the Christian god are often identified as facilitating consanguineal relations in that they create the situations wherein people occupy the same place and time and come together as families. Tivönö recognize relations of blood and their own physical being as objects that burden them to care: they are objects indexical of "thrownness," the ineluctable conditions of life from which tivönö "cannot extricate [themselves]" (Blattner 2006:78; Heidegger 1963:174).

While consanguineal kin and anatomical features come together as the sharpest examples of "the way things are," this correlation is not limited to relations by blood. Codrington (2005:28) observed over a century ago that Banks Islanders (specifically his hosts on Mota) recognize a symbolic extension of the term denoting "my spouse" (in Nume: *iasak*) as signifying one's own arms and legs. This semantic connection between

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<sup>59</sup> Here I refer to consanguineal kin, not relations cultivated through encounters of care as I describe in chapter 3.

marriage partner and anatomy continues in East Gaua, with women cleverly castigating their spouses' most recent regrettable behaviors by complaining of pains in their arms and legs in the company of other women. From the perspective of reckoning one's own corporeality through connections to kin, it is perhaps unsurprising that tivönö quite often view life as a limit that surrounds them, and that their fates are closely intertwined with the fates of close relations.

The abundance of sameness that kinship imposes on conceptions of life does not preclude possibilities for freedom. (We may bear in mind the “always-vulnerable” capacities of kastom adepts to create situations wherein new possibilities [and limits] may occur, even as probable outcomes are poorly understood and even beyond imagination.) By taking a broader perspective and considering the otherness of close relations—by thinking of an uncle or a brother as *salavan* in its secondary sense of a radically other subjectivity—a person may imagine alternative possible futures. The Nume phrase *Gid basran salsalavan* (We are all strangers), by which tivönö reveal their obligations to visitors, identifies the space for otherness opened by this meaning of *salavan*.

This notion of stranger underscores the value of the first facticity of kinship (Oo-Cc): tivönö may imagine this tension resolving to desired ends in situations where, for example, a man witnesses his father or brother performing important tasks inadequately, commonly fishing, settling a dispute, or dealing with disobedient children. A woman observes her sister's marriage to a man who is lazy or abusive, and distances herself from this possibility in her own life by focusing on her own inability to imagine what decisions brought her sister to accede to the marriage. The intentions that guide

the poor performances and decisions of kin are starkly unknowable and cannot be appropriated into one's own conceptions of the future. Whereas the first facticity of kinship threatens ambivalence in the form of the strangeness of people with whom one shares one's household, it presents the opportunity of otherness, a way to get past the feeling that one's fate—one's tomorrow in a particular shared place—is necessarily prefigured in the transpired events in the lives of kin. Co-presence is a double-edged sword, a sign of belonging but also of inevitability. With the mediation of otherness, however, it becomes less determinative of what is possible.

Keeping in mind the facticity of the strangeness of persons closest to the self and of the unsettling sense of vulnerability in a shared place and time, the question arises as to why *tivönö* turn to kin terms to forge their relations of care. In the next section I will examine the process by which they ascribe kin terms in relations of this type. As prologue I emphasize here that while kinship presents the *tivönö* moral imagination with a set of compelling attitudes, these attitudes emerge within a complex of tensions between commonality and otherness—or strangeness—which are imagined to exist in others. The intimate alterity of kin is as meaningful to Gauan ethics as any expression of commonality.

George Simmel (1972) imagines the stranger as one who is recognized as belonging to a fixed social group, yet is defined within that group by the fact that neither he nor the “qualities he brings” to the group are indigenous to it. This simultaneous presence of internal and external attributes demonstrates “the union of closeness and remoteness” that for Simmel defines all human relationships (1972:143). Within the group, Simmel finds these attitudes in tension, “since the consciousness of

having only the absolutely general in common has exactly the effect of putting a special emphasis on that which is not common. [...] For this reason strangers are not really perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type” (1972:148). A “stranger” becomes a certain *type* of stranger according to the particular otherness he brings to the group. Reflecting on types of otherness in the group destabilizes notions of its homogeneity—that it is unvarying and even *sui generis* in its beliefs and values. In formal terms, this brings to mind Levinas’ (EI:91) observation that encounters with something radically other “call into question” the individual self that posits its own fully formed subjectivity and self-sufficiency prior to such encounters. Simmel’s stranger anticipates the Levinasian Other, bringing “a distinctly objective attitude” (Simmel 1972:145) to the interpersonal or intra-group encounter.

Simmel observes that while both closeness and remoteness exist in all social relations, any particular relation has its own “special proportion and reciprocal tensions” between the two factors (1972:149). Kinship provides the paradigmatic special proportion in the tensions between commonality and otherness in the Gauan *tivönö* moral imagination, with household relations being the most critical. One meaning of the Nume term *veniη* is any place demarcated as belonging to a tribe: *veniη* denotes “bundle of coconuts,” and persons of the same tribe holding the same rights to a piece of land are thusly likened. Despite intra-household divisions in traditional exogamous Gauan society, where the father belongs to a tribe different from his wife and children, there remains in the present day as before an idiomatic use of *veniη* which connotes the shared origins, places, and fates of members of the same household. *Tivönö* attribute the extending of *veniη* to include all of one’s most intimate kin to the observation that just

as coconuts grow and flourish together on the same tree, so too are they similarly vulnerable to storms and decay. The loss of one coconut exposes the others to more immediate dangers from the elements, invoking the unmediated closeness expressed in the second facticity of kinship. The shared experiences among household kin include the formative years of children as well as the ordeals of productivity which for young adults bring into sharp focus the intimacy of household relations—the special proportion—relative to relations with more distant kin and with others in the community and beyond.

The awareness that even persons considered *veniṅ* are irreducibly other in their intentions and feelings is intensified against the intimacy of the household. One Nume-speaking woman evoked *veniṅ* by describing her own experience of gaining this awareness in her late childhood as an encounter with *kariv vedar* (rotten tree branch). She recounted the painful revelation years ago that her mother had an extra-marital affair, one which in the young woman's mind demonstrated her mother's unequivocal rejection of her family's affections. Yet even as she recalled the feelings of inner turmoil that marked this experience—the indifferent objectivity of her mother's transgression—the woman came to view it as an instructive moment of grasping the otherness of even the most familiar persons in her life. Her story echoes the themes of other childhood accounts in which *tivönö* cast their experiences of disillusionment as emergent moments of vulnerability. In these moments they come to terms with the inability to fully know *any* other person, and with the possibility that intimate others are susceptible to things in life that one has never considered. The woman who recounted her childhood experience to me thought of her mother's surprising actions as possible

courses in her own life that she otherwise would not have imagined, and she described herself as more cautious in her interactions with men as a result.

Veniñ relations confront intimate alterities as well in sibling play. Tivönö brothers and sisters quite often act oblivious to each other's pain, as when one is injured while playing or struck by a parent as punishment. Children in pain become increasingly demonstrable in front of their siblings, appearing to grow more upset about their siblings' indifference. Other children such as cousins and non-family playmates seldom show such plain apathy toward another child's pain. This conflict between young siblings occurs despite the many occasions of showing generosity and affection for each other, although camaraderie of this sort tends to occur between same-sex siblings. We may understand this interpersonal dynamic as formative lessons in respecting opacity at the risk of showing apathy: the path of learning proceeds from surprised indignation to eventual acquiescence when a child comes to terms with the stark objectivity of a sibling's emotional distance. Adult siblings do not take this oblivious stance toward one another, although as parents they idly support their own children's indifferent attitudes toward each other in moments of pain. Children once described the remote and uncaring expressions of their siblings with the phrase *kere vat* (stone gaze); but this phrase, so evocative of the objective, distant other in the familiar, has fallen into disuse.

In her analysis of Vanua Lavan conceptions of the person, Hess (2006) observes that "kinship...clearly demonstrates the themes of dividuality and individuality, but it lacks the complexity and contested quality of issues of life and death" (2). I have presented a view of Gauan ethics which finds tivönö conceptions of the person within



the coordinates of a shared vulnerability, a qualitatively distinct subjectivity, and a place in the cosmological order. With its interlinked dimensions of commonality and otherness, kinship, like life and death, offers the complexity to comprehend essential aspects of tivönö personhood which Hess finds lacking for the well-defined purposes of her analysis. Kinship's complexity is, however, less critical than its potential to proffer an understanding of the "contested qualities" of tivönö personhood, a point I raised in observing the dual facticity of inevitability and freedom. Having witnessed the loss of much of what once constituted their system of exogamous matrilineal kinship, tivönö turn to dualisms of inside/outside which they observe and negotiate as matters of ethics. These dualisms (numbers one through four in Figure 4.1) create "an overarching system based on a situationally determined criterion of *relevance*" (Kolshus 1999:3). The relevant comparisons and distinctions—the commonalities and othernesses at issue—depend on the ethical question one is trying to answer at any given moment.

A larger question arises from within the various ambivalences of inevitability and freedom, and solidarity and detachment, which tivönö ponder through notions of kinship. It involves the full reach of one's commitments to others—the scale of the moral imagination. Nume speakers evoke the term *navgi* to identify various types of group belonging. Although translated as *komuniti* (community), *navgi* signifies collectivities in ways that are both more inclusive and more precise than associations by co-residence. I learned of one such use when I inquired about the extent to which West Gauan volcano relocatees could be integrated into the "community" (i.e. the assemblage of villages and settlements) of East Gaua. My interlocutors explained that *tavulun* (West Gauans) were part of their *navgi* simply by virtue of their need.

But what is *navgi* in this sense? I soon discovered that the term as it is commonly expressed has an ethical valence: *navgi* is a community *of the good*. When I asked whether *navgi veboŋ* (literally “good community”) denotes a collectivity of people whom one feels obligated to look after (*kere gor*) and care for (*tomtom*), I was corrected by Nume speakers who explained that, as with the term *tudun* (person, human), the qualifier *veboŋ* is superfluous. I had come to recognize the ethical substance of *veboŋ* in limited contexts, as in the recounting of others’ acts of generosity and respect or in praising a well-constructed house or successful fundraising feast. My interlocutors understood what I was after with my question regarding *navgi veboŋ*, and clarified that *navgi* as it describes their relations with the volcano relocatees necessarily incorporates the obligations of *kere gor* and *tomtom*. Unlike occasional uses of the term which identify co-residence, as for example *navgi Lembot* (the community of Lembot village), the far more commonly evoked form of *navgi* imagines a community from the perspective of Ego: one chooses the members of one’s own *navgi*. This usage is identifiable by the phrase *navgi namuk* (my *navgi*) rather than the non-possessive construction as with “*navgi Lembot*.”<sup>60</sup>

Reflections on the possibilities and limits of kinship bonds do more than raise questions about relations with proximate persons. These reflections structure the broader boundaries of a collectivity of others which *tivönö* take to encompass all recipients of their hospitality and care. *Tivono* describe their own *navgi* with the ambiguity of the familiar and the strange—as a myriad of vulnerable and opaque others

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<sup>60</sup> Nume speakers utter the non-possessive construction (e.g., “*navgi Lembot*”) to identify “all the people of a place”; beyond co-residence, the phrase does not identify a corporate group bound by any shared qualities or goals.

such as the relocatees from the west. Yet *navgi* as a collectivity of persons in need surpasses the boundaries of proximity and contemporaneity: it may incorporate persons neither present nor even yet known to someone, as evidenced by the *tivönö* woman who told me I was a member of her *navgi* before I had even arrived on Gaua. Here we find an example of the sixth configuration in Figure 4.1, the “moral-imaginative ‘frontier’ (Oo-Co) to which future and, from the perspective of the present, truly unknowable persons belong. While these are persons whom *tivönö* view as obligations-in-waiting, moral connections to such persons are far less clear than as to, say, the vulnerable stranger who arrives here and in the present in need of help. The terms *aras* (distant) and *an̄is* (the indeterminate future) which attach to such persons identify the “frontier,” the aspect of the imagination which Crapanzano describes as resisting articulation (2004:18).

The unmediated otherness implied in these terms of spatial and temporal distance is not easily overcome by appeals to kin-like intimate alterity or notions of the vulnerable stranger. This otherness suggests the limits to *navgi* as an all-encompassing moral community which *tivönö* conceive as the full field of their obligations. *Aras* and (especially) *an̄is* resist articulation by their definitions, and provoke anxieties in *tivönö* who need to imaginatively locate themselves and others within situationally relevant conceptions of *navgi*. I will return to the problem of the moral-imaginative frontier in chapter 6, as environmental conservation and its “ethics of posterity” pose this problem of very distant persons as objects of care. Next I explore the intimations of *navgi* as revealed in kin term exchange.

### **The horizons of kin term exchange**

The English term “responsibility” is mostly unknown even to tivönö who learned English in primary and secondary schools. The few who are familiar with the English term find a passable Bislama translation in the phrase *i stap long han blong* (is in the hand of, is in the care of), common on Gaua as it is throughout Vanuatu. To claim that one has placed someone or something under one’s care is to present oneself as an influencing force in the life (*es, laef*) of the person or object; it is to assume a vital, nurturing role in its development. Tivönö find a resonance of this idea in the Nume term *kere gor* (to look after); they explain that it is through *kere gor* that one demonstrates *tomtom* (care, love) toward others. As they are given expression in Nume, sentiments of care and cultivation—and by extension, responsibility—reveal the ethical potency of reckoning “strangers” as kin.

The Nume possessive marker *nabla* identifies an object as something for which the speaker has assumed responsibility—a relation of *kere gor*. With *nabla*, Nume speakers most commonly identify themselves as cultivators of gardens or fruit trees growing on their land. The phrase *nablak lewetan* is roughly equivalent to “the garden that is under my care,” and is differentiated from *namuk lewetan*, which contains the general possessive marker *namu* and conveys “the garden which is mine to use.” *Namuk lewetan* is rarely if ever heard, given the vital connections between persons-as-cultivators and gardens-as-things in need of cultivation. With gardens and trees, *nabla* often identifies the speaker as the planter and the person responsible for its subsequent growth and maintenance. After gardens and trees, Nume speakers limit their use of

*nabla* to asserting active, nurturing connections to houses, domesticated pigs (*wutve*), and shell money (*söm tamin*).<sup>61</sup>

Tivönö explain that objects such as these must be cultivated as they “cannot stand on their own” (*nir ve turtur bek*) and require human intervention at various stages of their “growth” (*vitu*) in order to flourish. They further emphasize that as with gardens, humans are imperfectly self-sustaining. Elders recount a past in which growing children were likened to various stages of a developing yam, an analogy which extended to adults who were observed to confront their own limited skills in planting gardens or who had reached the appropriate age for marriage but had not yet found a spouse. Yams were divided into male and female types not only for their heteromorphic features, but for the different kinds of care they required to ensure their growth.

Yet despite the compelling comparisons they make between the care and cultivation of gardens and persons, tivönö do not express their connections to human others through the possessive marker *nabla*. Although the general marker *namu* is infrequently heard (e.g., *iasa namuk*: my spouse), kin relations are commonly expressed through single-word contractions. “My spouse” becomes *iasak*, or as commonly rendered in reference, *na-iasak*. Single-word possessive contractions of this sort are limited to most kin terms (e.g., *tumbuk*: my grandparent/grandchild”), aspects of human or animal anatomy (e.g., *na-qutun*: its head) and houses (*na-gavruŋ*: your house). These

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<sup>61</sup> *Vatu*, the national unit of currency of Vanuatu, takes the general possessive marker *namu*, even if referred to as *söm* (*namuk söm*, *namuk vatu*). The reason for this may be based in the idea that Gauan shell money is historically “relational,” “implicated in...the remaking of human form, feeling and relationship” (Wagner 1991:165). The significance of shell money to the basic conditions and experiences of Gauan life of the past contrasts with the “representational” role of *vatu* as a proxy for commodity value. The logic of commodities reduces money from a medium for the unification of “body and life processes” to “mere ‘wealth objects’” (1991:165). Shell money embodies social relations and their possibilities; *vatu* stands outside of them.

contractions place kin relations, anatomical features, and houses into a restricted class of objects that transcend a less elaborated ownership (i.e. the general marker *namu*) by identifying qualities of *kere gor* and *tomtom*—of looking-after and caring-for.<sup>62</sup>

While visiting the East Gaua village of Tarasag one morning, I greeted an acquaintance and his wife with the phrase *Talo veboŋ, namuk bulbulsal* (Good morning, my friends). The man laughed and responded, *Talo veboŋ, na-bulsalak!* He explained that his use of the single-word contraction for “my friend” (*bulsalak*) indicated that I was now under his care, and that my use of the general marker *namu* was wholly inappropriate to our relation. Addressing other persons as *bulsalak* (or *na-bulsalak*) is one way to identify them as objects of *kere gor* and *tomtom*, using the single-word possessive contraction otherwise reserved for addressing or referencing kin. The more common way to assert caring connections to others is to address them as *tuak* (my elder same-sex sibling), *tisik* (my younger same-sex sibling), or *nutuk* (my child).<sup>63</sup> This mode of address establishes the speaker as assuming responsibility for the well-being of the other person, regardless of whether the other is a consanguine, a friend, or a stranger.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The question of why *wuvur* (house) stands alone as taking both the *nabla* and single-word contraction types of possessive construction, and why it shares the single-word construction with persons and anatomical features, was left unresolved in my meetings with Nume speakers.

<sup>63</sup> Enduring relations of care, the initiating encounters of which I described in chapter 3, are commonly between persons of the same gender. Cross-gender relations of care tend to be between persons of different age groups, e.g., young women caring for elderly widowers. Close affines—parents and siblings of spouses—tend to be construed as by definition relations of ascribed distance.

<sup>64</sup> Addressees of these kin terms reciprocate accordingly. One who is “*nutuk*” responds with the gender-appropriate term for “parent”: For “mother,” the proper address is *Veve* or *Mama*; for “Father,” the Nume term is *Mam* or *Mama* or the Bislama *Papa*. Hess (2010:18) has noted the potential for confusion in observing Vanua Lavans who also refer to “true” or classificatory fathers as both “Mama” and “Papa.”

Tivönö describe their commitments to kere gor and tomtom with a seriousness that is consistent with their articulated concerns about situations of vulnerability. A classificatory kin name and an initiating act of generosity give the recipient and all in her social proximity the impression that one intends to treat her as one would a sister or a daughter. Caregivers are expected to accommodate the needs of their new classificatory kin just as they do within their own households. The productive work of gardening, fishing, and drying copra for export brings possibility into the lives of fellow household members by assuring basic well-being and inculcating a belief that goals and desires such as attending school, expanding social networks, and creating a family of one's own are achievable. In analogous relations of care, well-being and futurity constitute the long-term expectations recipients have of their caregivers.

There are, however, the more immediate expectations of generosity and respect which move the incipient relation forward. In failing to meet them, the caregiver is vulnerable to accusations of being a person of “rotten speech” (*luglug vedar*), someone whose actions routinely contradict stated intentions. In East Gaua I witnessed a striking (and perhaps overly literal) example of this failure of respect. A young man who had just promised a community elder to rebuild his hurricane-damaged house demanded payment several days into his repair work. He paced along the main inter-village road, screaming “[The man] is a [various expletives]!” for hours in protest of the elder's refusal to pay the young man for what was by all accounts an overture of generosity and care. As a consequence to such acts of selfishness and disrespect, third parties may conclude that that the caregiver's relationships to “true family” (*rasogo vidun*, *stret famli*) are similarly without value. Conversely, the perspective of the recipient is such

that she finds herself engaged in an asymmetrical reciprocity, the procedural expectations of which strongly encourage her to assent to the relationship. The acceptance of one's expressed commitment to *kere gor* and *tomtom*—the simple act of receiving—is an offering of respect observable by others. A refusal to accede to the commitment may insinuate that the caregiver cannot be trusted or ought not to offer help given her presumed history of deficiencies in providing for others, her own kin in particular. The exchange is one of care for a public recognition of trust: its asymmetry lies in the power of the recipient to withhold the illocutionary act of consent that makes the potentially enduring relation possible.

The hierarchy that this asymmetry implies—the conferring of generosity, respect and confidence on givers through the acceptance of their care—is a serious concern. Encounters of care appear to invert the potential hierarchy of giver over recipient (Godelier 1999:12), placing the recipient in a dominant position. Whereas many other exchange events position givers as placing the burden of an equal or greater return on the recipients, exchange in *tivönö* relations of care ostensibly give recipients the formidable power to undermine the social stature of givers by refusing their offers of care. *Tivönö* adamantly maintain that a refusal to accept help from others, especially when it is clearly needed, is a spiteful act carrying additional consequences beyond givers' vulnerable senses of self. The unwilling recipient may have something to hide, among the possibilities being self-induced states of vulnerability through possession by malevolent spirits or a suspicious avoidance of caregivers and their families due to adulterous relations with others' spouses or potentially destructive jealousies.



The extending of kin terms in encounters of care, and the exchange of generosity for assent that marks incipient relations of care, comprise a set of informal, mutual understandings and expectations that are representative of broader concerns in Gauan ethics. These acts hold certain normative assumptions about what it means to think of others as kin and what is at stake in the procedural aspects of exchanging kin terms with others. The notion of what is at stake in communicative acts calls to mind a conception of vulnerability proposed by Jürgen Habermas. Humans confront a basic vulnerability deriving not from the vicissitudes of our biological nature, as Levinasian ethics does with its focus on corporeal suffering, but from the fact that we “are constituted as individuals” only by “growing into an intersubjectively shared lifeworld” (1999:199). This “lifeworld” or *Lebenswelt*, which for Habermas is the domain of shared meanings and normative integrations in social space (102), is maintained through the thoughtfulness and consideration individuals give to each other in communication. Acts of sincerity and respect in linguistic exchange offset the precarious nature of interlocutors’ senses of self as participants in the lifeworld.

“Reciprocal vulnerability” is essential to Habermas’ “discourse ethics”: only by participating in respectful communicative exchange do people “preserve both the integrity of individuals and the web of interpersonal relations in which they form and maintain their identities” (1999:x). The philosopher Stephen Hendley (2004) finds common and complementary themes linking Levinas’ and Habermas’ notions of ethical vulnerability. Both writers understand encounters with others as a field of reciprocal vulnerability. For Levinas, proximity to the “face” of the other implicates the self in the other’s suffering and calls on it to take responsibility for the other regardless of the

mutually hidden intentions of the interlocutors.<sup>65</sup> For Habermas, there is an impersonal aspect to the communicative act which places the self in a position of having to answer for why it is speaking, for what it is saying, and for the consequences of its words in the lives of its interlocutors (Hendley 2004:162; see also Hendley 2000). The capacity for being sensible to the vulnerability of others grounds the capacity for adhering sincerely to the impersonal procedural expectations of speech. Together, Levinas and Habermas speak to the ethical nature of vulnerability in social interaction: Levinas responds to the question of why we feel compelled to care, and Habermas to the question of how we rationally manifest caring attitudes in our social-communicative acts.

The lifeworld of reciprocal vulnerability in Habermas' ethics glimpses another dimension of *navgi* as Gauan *tivönö* describe it. The consequences of kin term exchange in relations of care are measured by the experiences of feeling oneself to be either respected (*domav*) or disrespected (*domav bek*) by the other. The threat of disrespect is, as Axel Honneth (1995) observes, a form of identity violence which impedes other persons' "untapped possibilities for identity-formation" (81). Unlike my previous description of *navgi* as a moral community of potential and actual relations of care (i.e. both *dumanis* and *entelechia* in Aristotle's sense; see chapter 1) from the perspective of Ego, *navgi-as-lifeworld* connotes the reciprocal nature of Gauan ethics. *Tivönö* observe that the asymmetry of obligations, implied in the idea of *kastom* as "in the bones" and outwardly expressed as a reflexive expectation of self, requires confidence in the integrity of the field of relations in which the self acts. In other words, one cannot do it

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<sup>65</sup> Critchley (2002:12) clarifies that Levinas's face-to-face relation "is not a relation of perception or vision, but is always linguistic," always a communication. Unlike Habermas' communicative act, Levinas' speech act is prior to knowledge—an encounter that precedes reflection on procedural, impersonal norms of thoughtfulness.

alone. Exchanging expressions of siblinghood or parent-child affection through kin terms requires some requisite belief that the giving person is not the only one holding firmly to the genuine possibilities for a good life implicit in *navgi*.

*Tivönö* ardently express their desires to help others, yet they are wary of the possibility for unreciprocated respect. The imagining of *navgi* as the inclusive field of one's asymmetrical moral obligations is incomplete. The possibilities for becoming a certain kind of person turn on some sense of an objective moral criterion or a reciprocal vulnerability to disrespect. As with kinship, *navgi* is reckoned from the first-person perspective. Yet again as with kinship, the sense of a Gauan "moral community" such as I have described must appeal to something outside the person, something objective and even "procedural," for it to be truly moral. We may observe the same of the transcendence *tivönö* achieve by becoming a good *kastom* person: it cannot occur in a vacuum of solipsism.

### **Shifting perspectives**

To this point I have emphasized the ways in which *tivönö* conceptions of kinship index higher-order concerns beyond the immediate encounters in which they are contemplated and expressed. In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that the dyadic relation is in any way morally secondary to the collective, however "collective" is construed. The kin terms exchanged in *tivönö* relations of care are "moral judgments" (Bloch 1971) which influence multiple levels of interpersonal connection: these terms articulate pervasive concerns about possibility and limit which both occupy and transcend everyday commitments to particular others. These multiple levels of interaction and obligation are not mutually exclusive fields of moral awareness, as

evidenced by the ways tivönö take broad perspectives that encompass both their one-to-one relations of care and their connections to and within navgi. In the exploration of perspective which follows I consider other possible constructions of “moral community” in which shared vulnerabilities exist regardless of the identity of the perspective-taker. Both “community-as-*my*-obligation” and “community-as-*shared*-obligation” are viable moral objects for persons who take multiple perspectives. For my tivönö interlocutors, the capacity for taking dual perspectives on their society is “a prerequisite of practical moral life” (Parish 1994:122).

Clarifying the significance of perspective for both dyadic relations and the possibilities of “moral community” on Gaua requires careful consideration of three factors: how tivönö comprehend the objects of their moral concern in structural terms; how they understand themselves as the type of person who takes on such concerns; and how moving between perspectives on the dyad and the myriad brings to light problems inherent to both and points to possibilities for mitigation and resolution. To address the first and second factors I turn respectively to the works of Kenneth E. Read and Kenelm Burridge, two influential observers of Melanesian moral systems.

Anticipating by several decades the current anthropological interest in the ethics of other cultures, K. E. Read’s work urges a sensitive inquiry into the proper objects of moral concern. In his analysis of the moral system of the Gahuku-Gama of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, Read examines the ways that situational factors and conceptions of humanness shape the logic of social obligation. The Gahuku-Gama have what Read describes as a “distributive morality” which “explicitly recognizes significant differences in the individual’s moral obligations and responsibilities to other

people” (1967:195). These differences are predicated on the understanding that moral agents distribute their responsibilities to others “according to the positioning of other individuals within the system of interpersonal and inter-group relations” (195). Within this system, behavior is differentially assessed “according...to the different values placed on different individuals in different contexts” (Read 1967, in Barker 2008:5). John Barker calls attention to Read’s insight into “the effect of social distance on the intensity of moral obligation” (6). The upshot of Read’s analysis is a conception of rightness and wrongness that varies according to whom one faces in one’s social encounter, with even homicide regarded as a potentially legitimate moral response as dictated by the relative statuses of the individuals involved (Read 1967:201).

Abiding by the asymmetrical obligations of kin term exchange is a commitment guided by *kastom* but which calls on even non-tivönö to heed in relations of care. There is an initial attribution of strangeness or distance between agents and their prospective recipients of care which shape the ways these exchanges are performed. From this ideal position within the ontology of Gauan ethics, the variability of social distance is collapsed. Although this moment is contextual in the sense that the responses one has to others are shaped by the particularities of each situation, other persons *qua* objects of moral obligation in the encounter are consistently strangers-in-need. The result is that potential objects of care are not distributively ordered. There are, of course, certain kinds of persons who are excluded as recipients of respect or care, with evidence for their disqualification revealed in their transparent displays of malevolence and self-interest. Furthermore, there are many instances in their lives when moral agents fall short of accepting all qualified others as worthy and obligatory objects of respect or

care, notably during times when marital or other close relations are strained, preoccupying the minds of potential caregivers.

These caveats notwithstanding, my tivönö interlocutors emphatically insisted that *salavan* (in the sense of “vulnerable stranger”) is the initiatory status of an object of moral concern, an attribution of ultimate social distance with the implied imperative of transcending this distance through care. Contrary to the distributive logic of relations within the Gahuku-Gama moral system, Gauan ethics posits a sort of *tabula rasa* orientation to others in scenarios such as encounters of care or ascribed distance where an existing relation does not yet exist. The moral content of the situation in the Gahuku-Gama social encounter flows from the predetermined distinctions and relative positioning of interlocutors. By contrast, the ethics of the Gauan encounter of care begins with an undifferentiated imagining of a vulnerable stranger and proceeds until the other’s situation has been resolved or one of the participants fails to abide by the expectations of interpersonal communication. The “effect of social distance” that informs Gahuku-Gama morality is precluded in a Gauan system of relations in which all others are *salavan* either confronting difficult situations or proving themselves self-sufficient and worthy of respectful distance. At first glance this process appears to assume a social-historical vacuum—that no other factors enter into decisions to help particular others and that there are no prior relations or histories between interacting parties. This is the aspect of their ethics about which tivönö are most adamant: one must always *try* to approach another person’s vulnerable situation from an unbiased perspective. None of my interlocutors believes that he or she has an unimpeachable

record of treating others like salavan deserving of care. Yet they all express that, in an ideal possible world, they want it to be so of them.

To the extent that Gauan ethics is distributive, it is so in the sense that certain persons are set apart from others by their abilities as practitioners of local *kastom*. Differentiation is not with respect to the objects of obligation, which is a concern for the Gahuku-Gama, but to the agents of such obligation. These are persons who inhabit the cosmological order of *tivönö* and who take up the ethical challenges associated with such *kastom* markers as land ownership, local environmental knowledge and tribal affiliation. Read observes how the Gahuku-Gama moral system posits statuses rather than individuals as moral agents, and that the obligations of these statuses are situationally variable according to the statuses of others involved. Having set all “others involved” to the ideal social distance of “stranger” and generalized situational variability to “vulnerable others,” Gauan *tivönö* turn their focus to the differential capacities of ethical agents. The reflexive distribution of Gauan ethical agency—the ways that persons differently assess their own capacities for other-regarding action—is informed by how one comes to understand oneself as a person of the place. This is where perspective begins in Gauan ethics, and it remains the case in contemporary Gaua that the chief and the mother’s brother provide the exemplars of self-assessment which guide the outward focus on the moral problems that surround them.

Kenelm Burridge introduces the term “manager” to identify the moral exemplars of the Tangu of northern Papua New Guinea. Tangu managers are idealized figures who “set the pace of community life” and “provide an example for the rising generation” by balancing the great opportunities they make for themselves with the associated

responsibilities they incur (1969:131). A Tangu manager has “a sharper sense of situation than others” which allows him to guide the actions of others without claiming authority over them (132). Despite his uncommon abilities, the manager submits to the scrutiny and criticism of others: Burrige describes a “manipulation of ambiguities” in the formal airing of grievances which ensures that there are no privileged positions among participants (132). The equivalence he achieves is indicative of the expectations of the Tangu manager. He is at once admired for his frankness and a source of jealousy for his ability to avoid moments of injurious disclosure; he is expected to “commit his reserves” in time of need, but also to “acknowledge his dependence on others” (132). Burrige effectively summarizes the obligations of the Tangu manager as follows: “He redeems himself by fulfilling his generality as intensely as possible” (133).

“Generality” is significant to understanding moral exemplars in Tangu and in Melanesia generally, but it serves to clarify the scope of obligation in Gauan ethics as well. As generality connotes equivalence in the Tangu context, it precludes a reading of the Tangu manager as a supererogatory figure; that is, as a man expected to think and act unerringly toward the fulfillment of his obligations. Burrige makes this explicit when he warns of the potential for the Tangu manager to pursue his ambitions and desires “by asserting his singularity,” the defining *modus operandi* of the Tangu sorcerer (133). While he walks the line between reciprocity and self-interest closer than most others, the manager remains aware of his proximity to the threat of shame inducible by a breach of the equivalence that he maintains in his carefully unassuming generality (130). Even the manager can go too far in his ambitions, a possibility which precludes viewing him as a supererogatory figure.



Elsewhere, Burridge (1975) presents a typology of categories of Melanesian person “by which any man could define himself to himself and others” (96). In this typology, which consists of the categories “manager,” “sorcerer,” “ordinary man” and “rubbish-man,” Joel Robbins (2008) observes that “there is no part written for the saint” (28): the Melanesian context as a whole, Robbins argues, does not recognize supererogation as typified by the Western saint. He proposes that the possibility for a Western model of sainthood is predicated on a split between ethics and politics, which is possible—even necessary—when a Western person strives to maintain an indissoluble ethical stance in changing political terrain. Melanesian ideal-typical persons such as Burridge’s manager, commonly identified in the guise of the big man, must be conceived by their communities as susceptible to moral error from time to time given the exigencies and moral contradictions of their political commitments. They are compelling symbols precisely because they confront moral crises, not because their actions are unfailingly for the good. The Melanesian big man and the Tangu manager become exemplary figures, types of social actors who face head-on the contradictions of their ethical and political being (Robbins 2008:28).

Early one evening in October 2009, about 250 people gathered into the large nakamal in Lebeliu in northeast Gaua. The occasion was a celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the founding of TORBA Province. The evening’s speakers were a former provincial government representative from the island of Mota Lava and an Anglican priest from Vanua Lava, followed by the Paramount Chief of Gaua. The first half of the chief’s talk covered much of the same ground as those of the two speakers who preceded him—familiar rhetoric about the need for all islands in the province to come

together to face the challenges that lie ahead. At one point, the chief abruptly turned to the increasingly contentious issue of land ownership and resource access. The audience fell silent as he offered an emotional apology on behalf of him and all of the other landowners for the recent increases in trespassing, vandalism, and stealing of resources on their property. He acknowledged that there are certain expectations Gauans have of their chiefs and landowners, and that it is they, and not the perpetrators of these disrespectful acts, who ought to bear the blame. It is incumbent upon those to whom Gauans turn for exemplary behavior to instruct others. By raising the incendiary subject of land and resource access, the chief entered a no-win situation, forcing himself to navigate between the Scylla of eluded responsibilities to his community and the Charybdis of political vulnerability as a representative voice of Gaua's landowners. Steering toward the latter, he later met with stern rebukes from fellow landowners who felt that he had given cover to the trespassers and thieves in the community.

The chief explained to me why he had chosen to issue a *mea culpa* rather than an accusatory warning to transgressors. The gathering provided an opportunity for him to open up to the community, to “reveal his heart” (*vitlug na-wonmwalan*) and express what he thought people needed to hear. His apparent transparency was in the service of both educating the community and mitigating claims that landowners had been purposefully selfish in restricting resource access. Teaching others and keeping the peace, the chief explained, are the obligations not only of community leaders like him, but of all *tivönö*: it is *this* status, as a person of the place in East Gaua, which precedes and informs his duties in every other one of his social roles, including father, caregiving “brother,” and even church deacon. As a man representing the general categories of

landowner and chief, he had to present to his audience an overture of equivalence, placing himself firmly within the ambit of moral consequence shared by every other person of the place.



**Figure 4.2:** Victor Wetias (second from right), Paramount Chief of Gaua, Mere Lava, and Merig since 2007 and my VCC field collaborator, awaiting the start of a *kastom* ceremony with village chiefs in Lebuliu, East Gaua (December 2009). Photo by Jeffrey Wescott.

Like the Tangu manager, Gaua’s Paramount Chief had to show himself negotiating the delicate balance between acceptable ambition and self-interested overreach. In his speech he accomplished this by comporting himself as vulnerable to shame through his public contrition. His dual status as landowner and chief presented him with the additional concern of having to avoid the appearance of placing the interests of the first over the obligations of the second. Yet why even raise the subject of land and criminality during the TORBA celebration? Although he offered to me the initial explanation that he was publicly separating his “two houses” (*na-gavrun teru*) of

landownership and chieftainship, the chief explained that the very act of bringing the subject of resource ownership and access to the introspection of the community takes a politically fractious problem and redirects it as a meditation on personal responsibility for people to take with them. The chief confronted the contradictions of his ethical and political being by raising his own failure to adequately inform potential transgressors. Only by publicly facing his imperfections was he able to address a sensitive issue in his community and generate a fresh and potentially constructive dialogue about it.

It is of little consequence to people in East Gaua that the man who occupies the office of Paramount Chief—a man many have known his entire life—is not a supererogatory “saint.” The impact of the chief’s words derives from the idea of the chief as a metonymic extension of his community, the *navgi* where his obligations are fully operative. This is perhaps most evident in the generality that he conveys—a moral exemplar and landowner who feels compelled to assume responsibility for the recent troubles of his community. It is demonstrably the case that the Melanesian big man and his ethical-political variations “push social life forward” by resolving dilemmas others avoid (Robbins 2008:28). Such dilemmas often lie latent in the shared social consciousness, unearthed by persons who reflectively understand themselves as ethical instigators of a sort, as Gaua’s chief illustrates. It is important to keep in mind, however, that his obligations and actions as chief are always grounded in his primary identity as *tivönö*. This raises questions as to how *tivönö*, like their chief, achieve a wider social perspective, and how they direct their capacities for taking multiple points of view toward normatively valued ends.

This final question encompasses those which have preceded it by imagining the ability to stand outside of dyadic relations, a perspective already familiar to us from the ways Nume speakers deploy kin terms to identify their connections to more inclusive groups beyond particular kin relations. As we have seen, the objective of making strangers into kin places virtually no limit to potential recipients of care, save for the obviations of radical transparency. Yet to self-identify as *tivönö* is to conceive of oneself as inhabiting an exclusive group of virtuously autochthonous persons. Contradictions arise between the highly valued goals of affirming commonality and otherness, and moral exemplars bring these contradictions to light. By taking a broader perspective they show others that ambiguity is always present in their social relations and that they ought to work to resolve them. On occasion they reveal that ambiguity is in the end never fully resolvable.

In his analysis of social production in North Ambrym, Vanuatu, Knut Mikjel Rio (2007) focuses on the influence of the “third party,” which he describes as “a particular kind of agency that people find to be crucial in the formation of their ongoing life: the direct influence of...other parties who stand in a position of ‘seeing’ other people’s activities in larger perspective than they see themselves” (x). Rio adopts the notion of “thirdness” from C. S. Peirce to describe the “triadic” view of relations that stands outside the perspectives of persons within the dyadic encounter. In his concise exposition of thirdness, Rio presents Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1991) account of viewing two people from a window, each unaware of the presence of the other. Their relation is constituted solely through Sartre as the distant observer. When the two people meet, “their mutual reciprocity as in the eyes of the third party is closed off and they engage

in a seemingly dyadic relation” (Rio 2007:26). As Rio emphasizes, however, “the triadic constitution of their relationship continues to hold,” positing the presence of an “invisibly foregrounded” (Battaglia 1994, in Rio 2007:xi) third party that is present—and influential—in the dyadic relation. Although the alternation between dyadic and triadic perspectives is an argument within Sartre’s theory of reciprocity, Rio broadens its application to consider how “a dialectical process of *shifting perspectives*” contributes to “process[es] of production and in the constitution of people’s lives” (2007:27). Thirdness in Rio’s account is both a mode of knowing and a creative force: it is a perspective on the nature and power of influences external to particular social relations which itself confers a capacity for informed, socially productive work.

A key point to Rio’s analysis is his observation that there are certain types of person in Ambrymese society—akin to those identified as “great men” in the Melanesian typology—whose power “is based on their capability of taking up a totalising position, a position that makes them able to put together their community as a whole while still also being part of the community” (2007:30). Rio contends that the ability of persons to “look down on social processes” and “turn perspectives around” has garnered scant attention in Melanesian anthropology (31). This is all the more surprising given the scholarly deliberations on the tenuous division between individual and society, described as “false alternatives, doubly so implicated because each one implies the other” (Wagner 1991:162). Roy Wagner’s observation that the Melanesian big man “aspires to be something that is both [individual and society] at once” (162) informs and endorses Rio’s notion of a mediating figure between dyadic relations and the structural and ontological realities that influence such relations. The Ambrymese

power of perspective consists in the ability to enact “the perspectival movement between the context and the contexted” (Huen 2009:153)—comprehending that “ideas and practices are always already contextualized” (158) and therefore subject to influences external to the particular relations in which they operate.

Expressed to me by my interlocutors as an ideal of *kastom*, *tivönö* understand themselves and each other as able to direct their abilities as ethical persons toward concerns that are at once particular to their situation and relevant to the wider community. They describe these abilities as uniquely *kastom* by observing that only by taking these multiple perspectives can they assess their own actions in terms of the expectations of “the place.” I understand this assessment as between the “is” of *kastom* “in the bones” and the “ought” of *kastom-as-cosmological-order*. Rio describes the movement from the one-to-one relation to the broader analytical point of view as “duality released by a sort of communicative trinity” (2007:26). In *tivönö* moral experience, the simulating acts of *domwen* shift vulnerability from invisible foreground to an impetus for a relation of care. The relation moves from possibility to actuality—a practical reality for the entire community. As the third point of the communicative trinity, vulnerability appears as the motivation driving the acts of giving and receiving that make such relations possible and often enduring.

Turner (2001) identifies three components to his sociological theory of vulnerability which help to guide our understanding of Gauan ethics. His first component, ontological frailty, is what I identify in chapter 3 as the Levinasian level, evident in the sensibility to hunger, fatigue, and other indexes of vulnerability which motivate acts of *domwen*. The second component, vulnerability as an impetus to

building and maintaining “an interconnected and inter-dependent social world” (7), appears as the Habermasian level of mutual sincerity and thoughtfulness through communication in the exchange of kin terms. Whereas these two components are evident in the dyadic social experiences of *tivönö* (and with Habermas’ discourse ethics pointing to more socially inclusive expectations), it is Turner’s third component, the precariousness of institutions that compensate for ontological vulnerability, which emerges in the triadic perspective.<sup>66</sup> While not intending to endorse the neo-Hobbesian thrust of Turner’s theoretical framework, I want to suggest that the type of person who takes a totalizing view of Gauan society confronts certain structural vulnerabilities which may remain hidden in the dyadic perspective of the social relation. Moving between what Levinas (1969) calls the “infinity” of the face-to-face encounter and the “totality” of the informed, third-party point of view, *tivönö* apprehend the interconnections among the various levels of vulnerability and, if inclined, act to compensate for their perceived weaknesses.

Recall from chapter 3 the Aver village woman who fell victim to an anonymous thief. On the morning in which the woman berated her fellow villagers, she initially revealed the anger and shame she felt as a victim of the actions of a particular person. Her experience was a dyadic encounter of disrespect (*domav bek*) with an anonymous party, and whoever was responsible had effectively severed any pretense of social amity between them. In her act of calculated transparency, the woman presented to everyone within the sound of her voice a vision of a *navgi* disintegrating from a collapse of

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<sup>66</sup> Note that Habermas (1999:201) views language in this way, as a “key resource” used by all potential interlocutors to compensate for ontological vulnerability.



mutual respect and trust, and of families leaving Gaua as many had done in the island's past. There was no qualitative difference between the anonymous thief and the complacent collectivity: these are merely "false alternatives," to borrow Wagner's phrase. The woman's respected position among her fellows as the eldest child of a powerful landowner lent gravitas to her words. Her warnings about the vulnerability of both particular relations (hers), and of the common vision of a sense of shared belonging surviving into the future, to the corrupting influences of disrespect provided those around her with serious food for thought.

There is a larger substantive concern within the Aver woman's third-perspective warnings about the disintegration of relations and communities of *navgi*. Vulnerability has purchase in the public pronouncements of respected *tivönö* because it reveals the ontological and structural connective tissue from which concepts like "navgi" and "amaren" (the determinate future) have meaning. Vulnerability is essentially a form of commonality, yet the vulnerability of others is graspable only by imaginatively simulating their situations, an act driven by the need to overcome the radical alterity of other thinking, feeling subjects. Commonality and otherness are thus *both* highly valued as ethical motivations. At the same time, one forges a distinctive *tivönö* personhood by identifying, while not conforming by compulsion, with persons, practices and worldviews locally recognized as *kastom*. The exclusivity of a *tivönö* cosmological order and its ethics suggests an otherness at odds with the alterity-into-sameness, stranger-into-kin value at the core of such an ethics.

In her public talk, the woman envisaged the premature and violent deaths that await those who isolate themselves from the needs of others and issued reprimands to

those who “walk quietly” (*vanan dödö*) among them, unwilling and unmoved to commit to other-regarding actions. This juxtaposition of concerns—calling for a common grammar of respect and trust while observing the differential capacities and obligations for adopting such a grammar—recurred throughout her polemic. She laid bare a central dilemma of contemporary Gauan social life: how to negotiate between the mutually exclusive goals of commonality and otherness. In the act of revealing both her own thoughts and, imaginatively, those of the thief and the entire community, the woman momentarily eliminated opacity as a form of otherness. Yet there was no possibility for a radical commonality, for the wider shared perspective that she disclosed revealed to everyone the disrupting presences of self-interest and suspicion that lie beneath the surface of everyday social interaction. Tivönö gain perspective on the morally productive values of commonality and otherness: the idea that “everyone is a stranger,” even one’s closest kin, opens possibilities for creating social relations with almost anyone, grounded in an awareness of others’ situations and an active responsibility for their well-being. Yet otherness is also a cosmological assertion about the expectations tivönö have of themselves as persons of the place, as against those not of the place whose social and moral commitments lie elsewhere. When the perspective-takers of Gauan society “put together their community as a whole” (Rio 2007:30), they encounter the persistent dilemma of determining just which community—ontologically undivided or cosmologically demarcated—ought to be the object of their morally-guided intentions.

The foregoing account of the shifting moral perspectives of tivönö, focused as it is on the problem of negotiating between commonality and otherness, brings to

attention other concerns in tivönö life. I made brief mention of the primary concerns of well-being and futurity in the discussion of kin term exchange. Well-being—a condition of existence recognized in local terms as good or minimally as satisfactory (cf. Casimir 2008)—motivates the actions taken on behalf of others in enduring relations of care. Within this context of care, the well-being of others is forged in the ongoing moral work of mitigating common vulnerabilities while respecting unique subjectivities. We may understand futurity—the attitude that one’s goals and prospects may come about—as a desired outcome of improved well-being.<sup>67</sup> Recall the Aver woman’s insistence that distrust and disrespect augured the demise of community life as Gauans know it. These negative attitudes, widely distributed, obviate the possibilities for genuine relations of care within which persons contribute and receive the well-being characteristic of household relations. Furthermore, like the dissolution of close kin relations, notions of a shared identity, as a family or as a community bound together by *kastom*, into the future are at risk in an atmosphere of distrust and disrespect. Like commonality and otherness, well-being and futurity occupy the collective as they do dyadic relations. They are enduring ethical beliefs and motivations on which persons take a variety of perspectives.

The familiar means by which tivönö caregivers produce well-being and futurity in their own lives and in others’ is through subsistence work. While the ethical dimensions of Gauan subsistence provide the subject of chapter 5, here I offer some initial remarks that imagine subsistence as a field of shifting moral perspectives. Consider for example the responses provided by adult tivönö in East Gaua to a single

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<sup>67</sup> See chapter 1 (“Notes on terminology”) and chapter 5 for distinctions between *possibility* and *futurity*.

question regarding their thoughts during subsistence work, presented in Table 4.1. The eliciting question in Table 4.1 does not assume that all of my interlocutors are fully engaged moral perspective-takers of the type I have described. This inquiry, however, identifies some of the prevailing values and concerns that tivönö associate with their subsistence regimes, and which are the likely preoccupations of persons who do in fact take multiple perspectives as an ethical matter of course in their lives.

**Table 4.1:** Responses to the question:  
“What thoughts come to mind as you are gardening or fishing?”

Rank	Response	No. Responses <sup>68</sup>
1	For whom (how many and which persons) do I need to provide?	79
2	Recollections of past experiences (e.g., ship arrivals, shark encounters)	59
3	Fears that a crisis, such as overpopulation or volcanic eruption, will destroy all gardens and fisheries on Gaua	42
4	Pride that this is the garden/fishery of <u>my</u> family/tribe, and that it will be handed down to <u>my</u> children	32
5	Anxieties about kastom techniques: Do they violate environmental law? Are they falling into disuse?	25

Fishers and gardeners assuring that they meet their productive goals as providers for others was the most common response to the question of what comes to mind during subsistence activities. Fishing and gardening focus the thoughts of tivönö on their commitments to their dyadic relations, a conclusion reinforced by the sense of pride that comes from imagining one’s children inheriting one’s subsistence space and the possibilities for securing well-being that go with it. At the same time, these productive acts, while assuring the well-being and futurity of particular others, stimulate thoughts

<sup>68</sup> Survey conducted March-April 2008. Most participants (93 of 102) provided multiple responses to the question.

of how certain wide-ranging threats may impact entire Gauan communities. Overpopulation and its threat to Gaua's resource base, and extreme volcanic activity, are problems with wide-reaching effects; they occupy the minds of subsistence laborers as they secure the basic everyday needs of particular persons. In their changing demographic landscape, tivönö take a perspective on these and other threats to their collective well-being and futurity, with the second concern encompassing the fears of losing local environmental knowledge and aspects of their linguistic heritage to the ever-growing cultural heterogeneity of East Gaua. To echo the sentiments frequently expressed by elder tivönö, how successful such persons are in turning perspectives around depends in large part on how they can convince *all* Gauans regardless of place of origin to take their own perspectives on the moral and practical implications of Gaua as a "moral community."

### **Conclusion**

My principal kastom mentor described *navgi* as like a house. A person who lives his life in accordance with the kastom ideals of generosity and respect will welcome any and all visitors through his door. The host will find common ground through conversation, and will graciously set the boundaries of expectation as he would have done with any kin relation over the years. He will remain aware of all that takes place under his roof. Yet in the end, this is *his* house, a place of his own construction which depends on a certain "return respect" (*domav kel*) if it is to remain standing. The one feature of *navgi* which I learned from discussions with other tivönö and which my mentor did not convey in his rich metaphor is the notion of *navgi* as moral potential.

The class of “visitors to my house” includes persons whom I have never met, provided I maintain the requisite attitude of viewing all strangers as kin-in-waiting.

Thinking of *navgi* as a moral community calls to mind Stasch’s critique of the prevailing essentialism of *Gemeinschaft* in much of anthropology, where constructions of “the local” assume “communities of pure identification based on unmediated co-presence in the same place of living” (2009:9). *Navgi* construed as a type of moral community aligns with Stasch’s call to recognize how “otherness [is] an internal feature of local social relations and local social practices” (9). It makes the point that spatial and temporal co-presences are not requisite to moral-community belonging, and that otherness is itself a motivating factor for membership in that community: one achieves a level of ethical being by virtue of possessing a “house” of nearly-ininitely diverse “visitors” entailing endless possibilities for relating. The conceptions of commonality, otherness, and possibility explored in this and the previous chapters provide the ethical ground from which to comprehend how interactions with the environment are intimately connected with ideas of the good life on Gaua.

## Chapter 5: Subsistence and the possible present

The possibilities and limits of life emerge as recurring themes in the literature of Western encounters with Oceanic societies. A striking example is Tom Harrisson (1937), who depicts life on Gaua through the same trope of “That Curious Despair” with which he assesses the lives of people throughout the New Hebrides. He writes of the “heathen lost souls” of the 20,000 people of Gaua estimated by Quiros and his crew in 1606; by the time of Harrisson’s arrival in 1935 Gaua had plummeted to a population of 679 and was declining still (1937:269). These souls, Harrisson imagines, may well have sung an old song of Gaua to lament the palpable limits of life:

Appoint your messenger...The people have forsaken me.  
I am like a cockle-shell on the beach, I have no companion.  
I am a floating cloud; I have wandered hither to you.  
Howl. My voice has reached the shore.  
It has pierced the withered breast, the breast of youth.  
[Gaua informants, in Harrisson 1937:324]

With its allusions to disconnection, loneliness, and decline, the song expresses a general theme reinforced by Harrisson’s observations of Gaua’s “weak character” forged by climate, mosquitoes, and isolation and the “dead fire” of its volcano. The island itself, he seems to say, is lost in meaninglessness and futility.

Four decades later, Charlene Gourguechon (1977) would observe that the villages of Gaua seem “unanimated”:

The people are calm and speak softly. They certainly don’t laugh in the unbridled manner of the Santo and Malekula Islanders. [...] Unfortunately, in space and in spirit they are as far from the Christian world as from their ancient Melanesian World, so there isn’t much left for them. I sensed right away, in these villages, the sadness of nothingness, of a life without goals or traditional context. [Neither God

nor Qat] is able to shake them from their profound lethargy.  
[Gourguechon 1977:134]

We may well attribute the substance of Harrisson's and Gourguechon's accounts to their timing in Gaua's history, a period of extraordinary depopulation and cultural loss before the return of emigrated Gauan families to their native island beginning in the 1970s. Recounting his visit to Gaua in the late 1990s, Charles Montgomery (2004) describes how Gauans had all but forgotten their identifications with Qat. He perceives the seemingly haunted remains of Gaua's once vibrant communities of stone buildings as artifacts chronicling a cultural demise (2004:121-8, see also Huffman 2001:256). Notwithstanding the limitations of his account (i.e. the mistaken observation that Qat's symbolic presence has waned), Montgomery taps into the prevailing theme of Gaua as a society shorn of meaning and purposeful vitality. During my own time on Gaua, I experienced directly how people speak of cultural loss—the loss of *kastom*—and the closing of possibility, with the cross-generational “entropy” (Meigs 1984:122; Jorgensen 1991:374) of indigenous knowledge and skill foremost among their concerns.

Lost in narratives depicting futility's hold on *les tristes tropiques* are the ways people of Gaua come to terms with their real and enduring concerns about life. Through acts which are by turns deliberative and spontaneous, they perpetuate a sense of themselves—a *matev nam tivönö* (way of the place)—that does the distinctive ethical work of assuaging feelings of loss, isolation, and futility. In previous chapters I explored how everyday ethics on Gaua involves the disclosure and production of possibility. Letes both reveals the limits of primordial loss and announces the possibilities for reclamation through practices of *kastom* performed in the dynamic



spaces of vönö. As moments of struggle and negotiation between forms of commonality and otherness, the tivönö moral imagination fixes new horizons for social integration and authentic indigenous identity. In this chapter I return to the question of well-being and futurity as viable productions of possibility. I argue that subsistence and its associated beliefs and discourses provide the primary space for tivönö to produce and reproduce well-being and futurity, shaping Gauan ethics as an ethics of possibility. Gardening, fishing, and other modes of production secure the health, safety, and trust of particular others recognized as kin. Tivönö also perpetuate a distinctive moral order through maintaining kastom ways of making a living. This approach fully acknowledges the limiting drudgery of subsistence labor (Chayanov 1986), but also the demonstrated ability of Gauans to follow their own labor schedules and ease the sense of these activities as relentless tedium (cf. Rodman 1987). Subsistence is work; it is also the production of possibility structured and mediated by desires as well as needs.

I begin by presenting well-being and futurity as the two most effective concepts for comprehending Gauan subsistence as a production of possibility. They coalesce as a formal framework, laying the conceptual ground for the more concrete ethnographic accounts in the sections that follow. In the first of these accounts I observe how modes of subsistence in Gaua's past were "articulations" or productive expressions of well-being and futurity, practiced by persons capable of influencing social and cosmological orders through their unique relationships to the local environment. The chapter concludes with an overview of tivönö subsistence regimes currently in practice, and examines how contemporary approaches to making a living succeed or fail as productions of possibility.

### **The subsistence of possibility**

Burridge (1969) provides a description of Tangu life which anticipates the formal model of Gauan subsistence I have in mind:

[Tangu] subsistence activities provide grounds of experience that are widened and deepened by the ways in which Tangu themselves interact and communicate their parts. Subsistence tasks...sculpt the contours of self-revelation, and provide public evidence of knowledge, skill, thought, cunning, industry, organizational competence, and resilience of character: qualities which are chiseled into prominence or eroded in encounters with others. [Burridge 1969:60]

Through their gardening activities, Tangu women provide “security and nourishment for themselves and their children”; for men, the symbolic identity of wife and garden secures the basis of production from which a Tangu man “takes his tradition into the future” (1969:58-9). Burridge depicts Tangu subsistence activities as the primary means for securing well-being and the ground for cultivating a future in which a customary orientation to the world remains viable. Attributing well-being and a sense of tomorrow to subsistence is neither particularly innovative nor controversial; Burridge’s real insight lies in his keen observations of just how deeply these activities are implicated in structuring Tangu conceptions of self, other, and society. Tangu women and men realize their possibilities and limits as ethical persons through their productive interactions with the environment. They provide a powerful ethnographic example from which to comprehend the ethical dimension of Gauan subsistence.

As I observed in chapter 1, anthropological approaches to understanding the subsistence routines of small-scale societies have tended to preclude sensitive explorations of ethics. The problem has been left mostly unresolved by the turn to political ecology and other sub-fields of the “New Ecological Anthropology” as

described by Kottak (1999).<sup>69</sup> In some earlier research, the problem of ethics was subsumed—and mostly lost—within the broader problem of locating the social in the ecological. Roy Ellen (1982) observes that by applying “excessively simple criteria for the description of life-support techniques” (170), anthropologists presented an overly deterministic picture of societies. Categorizing groups such as Hadza and Tasaday as “hunter-gatherers” failed to consider not only other modes of subsistence in which these societies engage but also social and ecological distinctions that less totalizing attributions may have uncovered. Subsistence regimes are far more complex than can be conveyed by terms like “pastoralist” and “simple cultivator.” Ellen favors an approach that takes into consideration the “total life-support role,” stressing that “social relations as much as any environmental or technical characteristic determine the form taken by subsistence” (174).

On Gaua, subsistence arises from the opposing and complementary characteristics of “human” and “environment”—relations between entities which do not reduce one to the other, but integrate them to create something other. Much has been written about interpreting “humanity” or “culture,” and “environment” or “nature,” as meaningfully separable categories (e.g., Strathern 1980:177; Ellen 1996:31; Ingold 2000:40; Pálsson 2006). Here I examine how Gauan *tivönö* view humanity and environment as at once comparable and radically other to each other. The interactions between them bring about an emergent form—subsistence—with its own unique social and ontological entailments.

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<sup>69</sup> Burridge 1969 is a notable exception. See also Strang 1997 for her critical study of “environmental values” in Far North Queensland, Australia, and Valeri 2000 for the moral dimension of hunting taboos among the Huauulu of Indonesia. Simmons 1993 interrogates the philosophical assumptions of “environmental ethics” and its applications in cultural anthropology (see chapter 1).

One facet of the tension between freedom and inevitability which guides tivönö conceptions of life's possibilities (see chapter 4) is the realization that a desired future requires more than what is achievable solely through creative action. The interplay of commonality and otherness which guides the moral imagination in interpersonal encounters is part of the broader lived experience. That tivönö perceive themselves as humans (*tundun*) situated in an environment from which they differ in profound ways demonstrates the pervasiveness of the same-other dynamic. "The environment," which is without a viable Nume signifier and rendered in Bislama as *environmen*, embodies a distinctive form of otherness. The sea, the soil, and the weather evoke for tivönö the idea of *niran tañnen*, or "it is always precisely as you see it." Whereas passing other persons in villages or along paths is an encounter with *matev*, the quality of unpredictability which defines human behavior, *niran tañnen* describes a categorical predictability. Tivönö reinforce this vital distinction between *tundun* and *environmen* in the ways they talk about productive work in gardens and fisheries. It is the complementarity of the two traits which makes subsistence possible: the ingenuity of a creative and capricious *matev* and the fixed input of *niran tañnen*. The dualism implied by these oppositions is offset by the observation that *matev* and *niran tañnen* inhabit the same category of kinds-of-agency. This sameness of category founds the possibility for their interaction.

This apparent similarity ought not to inspire an animistic interpretation of tivönö nature. Conceiving of *environmen* as *niran tañnen*, as possessing the trait of predictability—or transparency—identifiable in newborns or persons believed to have lost control of their mental capacities, seems to attribute to it a quality of sentience or

conscious will. Tivönö identify certain types of spirits, called *wuvu* like the entities which inhabit the corporeal human form, in trees, rocks, and fisheries. They are thought to be either the incorporeal remainder of recently deceased persons or a kind of *tamat* (*devel*, malevolent entity) that precedes human existence. Attributing niran tañnen to forces in their environment such as weather, soil conditions, and seasonal migratory patterns, tivönö preclude a capacity for willfulness which they concede to various forms of *wuvu*. Whereas *wuvu* possess the will and capriciousness characteristic of living humans, *environmen* is wholly other in its predictability. Tivönö rely on this characteristic of otherness to make life a continuing possibility.

The predictability of *environmen* is where *matev* and niran tañnen diverge as kinds of agency. We have seen the difference between the “saturated givenness” of virtuously opaque persons and the transparency of persons who, as “less than one intends,” offer no possible moral future (see chapter 3). We may understand the relation between *tundun* and *environmen* as hinging on this distinction. Paul Ricœur (1991) observes that “like a text, human action is an open work, the meaning of which is ‘in suspense.’ It is because it ‘opens up’ new references and receives fresh relevance from them, that human deeds are also waiting for fresh interpretations that decide their meaning” (155). *Matev* is defined by its need for interpretation—it “opens up” possibilities for new relevance and meaning by its inherent creativity and unpredictability. These traits are notably absent from actions that are niran tañnen, by definition closed to interpretation.

To return to an earlier point, however, what makes the act of distinguishing between humans and environment coherent to tivönö is the shared attribute of agency in

the sense of an ability to effect change in the world. Jane Bennett's (2010) notion of "vital materiality" approaches the *tivönö* sense of what *tundun* and *environmen* have in common. Citing the work of Gilles Deleuze (1992), Bennett explains that "the power of a body to affect other bodies includes a 'corresponding and inseparable' capacity to be affected; 'there are two equally actual powers, that of acting, and that of suffering action, which vary inversely one to the other, but whose sum is both constant and constantly effective'" (Bennett 2010:21). Bennett's project is to comprehend the real effects that "things"—non-human entities—have on the world. On Gaua, *tundun* and *environmen* share the category of "things that have real effects on the world": they are both *actants*, a term Bennett employs to counter any attribution of subjectivity that terms like "agent" may imply (2010:9). At this shared conceptual level of actant, humans and environment come together, impelled by the productive needs of humans and the diurnal, migratory, and seasonal movements of the environment. Subsistence on Gaua consists in the dynamic relationship between these two active things, irreducibly similar and different.<sup>70</sup>

As (inter)actants, humans and environment secure the emergent order of subsistence in ways that reveal their heterarchical relation. By *heterarchy*, I understand *tivönö* to imagine subsistence as a "tangled composite" (Peltonen 2006:155) emerging

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<sup>70</sup> The Gauan view of the congruence and otherness of environment resonates with the ethical practice of erring and drifting as inspired by Canguilhem in my analysis of *tivönö* moral experience (see chapter 3). James D. Faubion (2009) observes that Foucault's view of his mentor Canguilhem's "history of life" is "as the history of 'that which is capable of error' (Foucault 1998b:476)" (1). Within a conceptual framework of ethical "production" and "reproduction," humans are, by the measure of Gauan ethics, capable of both. By contrast, their environment is solely a reproductive "actant" until brought into the relation of subsistence through human productive action. In this sense, environment could only achieve an ethical quality when it becomes productive, subject to the possibilities for error. I address this possibility in chapter 6.

from interaction between two equally contributory actants, *matev* and *niran tañnen*. In a heterarchy, the domination of one category or entity over others is only a possibility rather than a foregone conclusion as is the case where hierarchy is operative. In his own work on Finnish social movements, Lasse Peltonen (2006) takes the notion of heterarchy from a theory (in Kontopoulos 1993) in which the emergence of structure is neither a top-down process as hierarchy imagines, nor bottom-up as posited by methodological individualism. Ordered by the complex interactions between the distinct capacities of *matev* and *niran tañnen*, *tivönö* subsistence is always other than the sum of its parts. One key feature of heterarchy is its residual indeterminacy: the emergent form, whether social movements in Finland or subsistence on *Gaua*, has a quality of contingency to it which is inherent to it alone and which determines what is possible within it (Peltonen 2006:156; Kontopoulos 1993). Subsistence is a “possibility space” (Haila and Dyke 2006:4) where human activity is delimited by the kinds of changes (or “degrees of freedom”) that can occur within the space. *Tivönö* recognize that the possibilities for subsistence available to them cannot be determined by considering in isolation the components that give rise to the space. There are the actions of people, but also the motions of land, sea, and air.

The idea that *tivönö* perceive certain human-environment interactions as heterarchical—that subsistence is an emergent space resulting from the balanced contributions of *matev* and *niran tañnen*—is anticipated in the notion of ecological rationality. Roy Rappaport (1984) proposes the term to convey how societies direct their environmental practices toward the “persistence” of “social and ecological systems” (307). Wherever it is operative, ecological rationality “contradicts” *economic*

rationality, where the goal of maximizing individual interests directs the extraction and distribution of resources.<sup>71</sup> Avoiding certain unintended interpretations of “ecological persistence,”<sup>72</sup> we may understand ecological rationality in Gauan society as a principle, or more precisely an attitude, of well-being. Tivönö secure their well-being by the considered stances they take in their interactions with an entity that has essential qualities of predictability and otherness that must be respected and maintained. I understand Rappaport’s “systems” as those “in which individual actors participate and upon which their continued existence is contingent” (Rappaport 1984:207; but see Clay and Olson 2008:144-5). On Gaua, ecological rationality is a valuing of well-being, a reflection on the myriad forces that shape possibility in its most essential sense.

*Well-being* indicates a state of existence where essential bodily needs and “culture-specific derived needs or ‘wants’” are at least satisfactorily fulfilled (Casimir 2008:26). Well-being is sensitive to what lies beyond the immediate desires and influences of individuals, implicating broader community, regional, and global conditions and interests: it “must always be contextualised with reference to the well-being of the social units at the next levels of inclusion” (Lambek 2007:126).<sup>73</sup> In Gauan

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<sup>71</sup> Rappaport presents ecological and economic rationality as two possible and distinct factors driving human-environment interaction. He does not argue for the mutual exclusivity of the two forms of rationality in any given society, group, or individual.

<sup>72</sup> “*Rationality* implies, if it does not entail, consciousness, purpose, and deliberateness” (Rappaport 1984:306). In adopting Rappaport’s insights to a model of Gauan subsistence practices, I wish to avoid a reading of “ecological rationality” that posits an eco-centric teleology of human practices, i.e. that ecological preservation is the primary objective of subsistence- and other environment-related decisions rather than one *possible* guiding factor among many. Also, I adopt a view of “rationality” in the Gaua context as not precluding the possibility for emotions to provide agents with “decision-making guidelines” (Gigerenzer and Selten 2002) regarding uses of the environment.

<sup>73</sup> As Clay and Olsen (2005) note, Rappaport’s notion of social and ecological “systems” assumes such systems closed to external “perturbations.” In the model of Gauan subsistence I am constructing, it is important to acknowledge the ways tivönö perceive their well-being as contingent upon other interests and forces in other places. Here I identify one motivation for the “multi-sited” ethnographic approach



life, well-being persists through the actions of persons who apprehend and even value the possibilities and limits that the space or “system” of human-environment interaction discloses to them. While *tivönö* often describe the interactions between *matev* and *niran taŋnen* in ways that evoke the unvarying intimacy of a closed system, they frequently express their concerns about how shifting boundaries and changing effective elements of the world beyond *vönö* portend new forms of limit to the ways they secure their needs.<sup>74</sup>

Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2007) proposes the idea of limit to conceive of well-being as the realization of constraints and boundaries, “where the world exhausts itself” and “reveals itself as a moment of tension” (26). Ecological rationality identifies this tension in the “liminal condition” (26) located between well-being and vulnerability that impinges on human lives when limit reveals itself in the finiteness of the environment and the restricted (and restricting) possibilities for self-interest. Corsín Jiménez asks, “Where does life become larger than life? How do people ‘cement and put limits to’ their life-projects” (27)? Materially and symbolically, *Gauan tivönö* set and reset their limits with every encounter between the creativity and caprice of *matev* and the steady transparency of *niran taŋnen*. As a possibility space, subsistence presents opportunities for building social influence and material wealth. Given the obligations they have to

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advocated by anthropologists working in political ecology (e.g., Biersack 2006:26; West 2006:xix). I address the problem of other interests and their effects on *Gauan* subsistence in chapter 6.

<sup>74</sup> The notion of ecological rationality that I have adopted to describe *Gauans'* relations with their environment counters the view that “the notion of extinction barely impinges on Pacific Islanders’ engagements with the environment, as for them it is a source of food” (Foale and Macintyre 2005:4). The demonstrated abilities of *Gauans* to reflexively consider the finiteness of resources, and the value of respecting and maintaining the *matev/niran taŋnen* relation, points to possibilities for some form of “indigenous conservation ethic” (Johannes 2002) while avoiding any simplistic reductions to “primitive harmony” between an island society and its environment.

others in their lives, tivönö must find and acknowledge the limits to these projects of self-interest.

I have presented a basic framework for comprehending how tivönö view their interactions with the local environment—how the environment-as-actant reveals qualities of commonality and otherness from which the possibility for human subsistence emerges. Well-being is the outcome to these interactions: to be aware of the inherent possibility for well-being in the relation between *matev* and *niran tañnen*, and to act from this awareness to the good of others, indexes a distinctively ethical personhood. Well-being performs the additional ethical work of allaying the anxieties of meaninglessness and futility around the edges of Gauan lives, but it does so by endorsing a future orientation—an outlook that life is viable where material needs are met and social bonds are secured. Here I present *futurity* as the attitude that a particular possible future is both achievable and desirable. Like well-being, futurity provides an evaluative and experiential component to possibility’s objectivity.

What justifies the attitude that a desired future may transpire through action is the work of collective memory in the tivönö community. The temporal movement of memory is critical to this point. The Nume term *amaren* commonly denotes “tomorrow” in the usual sense of the day after today. It is also present in the familiar adage *Dul ranti amaren*, which conveys the idea “Everything before is coming.” Among possible interpretations, this phrase alludes to the return of Qat and of the primordial things lost to Gaua, and it articulates the collapsing of distinctions between past and present or near-future in much the same manner as tivönö perceive the atemporality of Lake Letes (see chapter 2). Tivönö comprehend *amaren* in terms of movement (*a* [to or toward] and

*maren* [morning]), as perpetuating the collective memory of a once-flourishing Gaua of the indefinite past, before the disintegrating effects of historical and mythical loss, into the lives of present, forward-moving persons. In addition to movement, *amaren* is a space that one constructs through practices which bring the past forward, a process which makes goals and desires something more than ephemeral nonsense; it is this *attitude* toward the future which I describe as “futurity.” A desired future is achievable by taking an idealized, shared past as a point of reference and revivifying it through present practices.

Explicating the role of memory in Sabarl society, Debbora Battaglia (1990) observes that “as a social action of literally ‘keeping in mind’, ‘remembering’ is significant to Sabarl primarily as a means of applying in the future something of value in the past or present—of thinking ahead and selectively projecting forward valuable knowledge” (8). Sabarl employ “markings,” signifiers of the past which are of “mnemonic value” for their ability to bind together imagination, custom, and place. Markings are important in that Sabarl place little value on the spoken word: the moral force of markings lies in their ability to allay feelings of displacement, given that Sabarl perceive themselves as inadequately autochthonous (1990:8). By contrast, Gauan tivönö regularly affirm their autochthony in both practice and speech, attributing many of their everyday actions to the expectations of *kastom*, speaking indigenous languages, and affirming their productive capacities through making social relations outside the household. These actions have powerful mnemonic value: as markings they perpetuate an integrated sense of a distinctive and deeply rooted indigenous identity.

The ethnopsychology of Gauan ethics presented in chapter 3 reveals *tivönö* individual memory to be ephemeral and therefore unreliable. An exception is found in the capacity for simulation in *domwen*; yet as *tivönö* explain, simulation's objects are situations that are general properties of human experience (i.e. common situations of vulnerability), not the unique experiences of individuals. We cannot comprehend *tivönö* memory by initially approaching it as a capacity of individuals, from which we proceed to construct metaphors to arrive at the notion of collective memory, as Crapanzano's critique of the collective memory "metaphor" seems to suggest (2004:156; see also Margalit 2002:49). The act of bringing past into present is for *tivönö* (and for Sabarl; Battaglia 1990:8) foremost a collective act, operating at a moral register separate from any instance of individual subjective memory. Even in dyadic relations of care, *tivönö* comprehend their memories as not wholly their own, but as the influences of the spirits of ancestors and places dispersed across kin and community.

As a form of "productivity" and a strategy for overcoming futility (Battaglia 1990:10), Sabarl acts of remembering anticipate the work of memory on Gaua. The notion of a collective memory that mitigates certain existential anxieties points to the importance of *tivönö* and *kastom* as significations of a moral community. These terms detach a group of people into a "mnemonic community" (Zerubavel 2003:4) demarcated not only by the collective memories of families and other social groups that comprise it, but also by the "socially appropriate narrative forms for recounting the past" (5). Mnemonic communities order their memories by "stringing together" often disparate past events and evaluating their current relevance through modes of

reenactment such as narration or practice. What emerges is the production of a kind of continuity that brings meaning and possibility to present actions and events.

For the mnemonic community of tivönö, Gauan history is “an articulation over time” of diverse events (Friedman 2002:305) which include moments of lost opportunities for cultural revival. Yet despite evidence that tivönö find continuity in their history, there are elements of creativity and imprecision in their accounts of temporality which appear as forms of constructive illusion (cf. Zerubavel 2003:40). Consider *amaren*, a term which denotes the determinate future—the coming-into-present—that Nume speakers recognize as well within their imaginative grasp. The temporal opposites of *amaren* are *nanno* (yesterday) and *nais* (the day before yesterday): these terms signify the determinate past, segments of cultural time for which people can and will provide an account of the events taking place within them. *Amaren* ostensibly finds its conceptual opposites in *an̄is* (the indeterminate future) and *ranti* (the indeterminate past). While we may recognize *ranti* as the sole signifier of the unaccountable past and for this reason conceptually incompatible with *amaren*, in the phrase *Dul ranti amaren* (Everything before is coming) it lends an air of indeterminacy to the otherwise routine expectations of the near-future.

I heard the phrase *Dul ranti amaren* uttered by Nume speakers who hoped for a revival of what they viewed as traditional Gauan practices such as kastom fishing technologies and taboos and a (limited) local shell money economy. In their remarks, these persons often included self-rebuking observations that their dreams of reclaiming their cultural past were impractical nonsense. Yet despite their expressed doubts, they held to the ambiguous connection between the past and near-future as a rationale for

their hopeful statements. Much of what passes as the “remembered” past is what Avishai Margalit (2003:58) calls “the memory of memory”: lying beyond the direct recollections of any living person, this past holds an ambiguity which in the Gauan case makes certain kinds of future possible or at least seemingly plausible.

When I inquired about the reasons why many tivönö desire the return of kastom subsistence practices such as bow fishing and prawn trapping, some of my interlocutors responded with what they later described as the prevailing wisdom (*luglug nam wusul*: people’s talk, public talk). The current thought is that these moribund practices once provided evidence of a strong body and productive mind worthy of holding and keeping pure one’s inner spirit. My interlocutors explained that what has made this particular validation of kastom subsistence so common nowadays, and so easily coopted by revivalists of tradition, is that it appeals to both churchgoers who are increasingly reminded by their pastors that they are vessels for the Holy Spirit (perhaps to counter rising kava use), and kastom practitioners who perceive spirits of ancestors and places as residing within them and guiding them. As I described in chapter 1, tivönö who self-identify as kastom practitioners also tend to identify themselves as dedicated members of a local Anglican or, less often, Assembly of God church. Part of what makes the reason for valuing kastom subsistence so appealing to tivönö is that it appears to emerge from the indeterminate past—an artifact of *ranti* which by virtue of its perceived wide acceptance takes on an air of legitimacy.

In a society that has witnessed the historical effects of discontinuity from a fluctuating demography, there seems to be a tendency toward fashioning well-accepted current “memories” of past ways of life into viable notions of how things are today and

ought to be going forward. Several tivönö over the age of forty described to me how twenty years ago, the dominant talk surrounding kastom subsistence practices centered on the imminent revival of kastom *kakae* (food). They recalled how people's visions of pre-resettlement (pre-1950s) gardening practices, such as long-vanished taboos and other methods of promoting growth, dominated discussions in households and public spaces about food and its production. The positive talk that surrounds any kastom subsistence practice cannot be taken as evidence of its actual presence on Gaua. It is merely an indication of how people generally find a current notion of the kastom significance of a practice as an effective marker of tivönö identity, wherein lies its moral force. For the kastom revivalist, however, the ambiguous nature of popular cultural-historical knowledge appears to work to the benefit of their cause.

Making the most of possibility in Gauan life may turn on achieving some balance between the productive ambiguities of the (un-)remembered past and the need for a stable, shared sense of what is and what has been distinctively tivönö in the world. Subsistence provides the "reliable rhythms" (Dyke 2006:284) that guide everyday social life and show evidence of continuity. Yet subsistence is also the "evenementually hot area" (Sahlins 1985:xiii) where routine practice most frequently confronts novel possibility. The movement of collective memory into the present and the coming-into-present (*amaren*) through subsistence and its related discourses provides a vision of continuity, of "firm walls" and "firm ground" enduring through time (Carrithers 2005:439). Yet in other moments, reflecting on their multiple projects, tivönö concede that the present must pragmatically be understood on its own terms, as contingencies calling for immediate response. This acceptance of the inescapable presentness of the

present does not endorse the interpretation that all is flux—that conceptions of enduring “totalities” are the ethnographer’s illusion. The question arises as to what motivates tivönö to consistently reconstruct their pasts and conceive of their futures, despite the ambiguities and inconsistencies that are always available to them for inspection. In many respects, *kastom* is that motivation, that comprehensive, reliable rhythm that makes the production of possibility worthwhile (cf. Leach 2003:218). When tivönö imagine their subsistence practices through the lens of *kastom*, they perceive themselves as connecting the past, present, and future in ways that ideally do not seem fragmented and artificial.

I have outlined a basic framework of Gauan subsistence to show how certain types of human-environment interactions provide both continuity and possibility in the form of well-being and futurity. In the inevitable abstractness of such a framework, however, the genuine concerns tivönö have of what has been lost to cultural and environmental changes go mostly unnoticed. Subsistence on Gaua exists within a wider possibility space of vulnerability where people must negotiate between their own and others’ well-being at the limits of *kastom* and the margins of change. Keeping in mind the generalizations presented above, I turn to the concrete acts which provide the rhythms of everyday life, but also the changes that destabilize ethically salient notions of commonality and otherness, within and beyond the tivönö social world. I begin with an examination of past practices and discourses that today exist mostly in memory.

### **Lost articulations**

Whatever changes have occurred in the methods of fishing and gardening on Gaua over the past several generations, there remains one constant certainty.



Subsistence is first and foremost a matter of survival, the securing of well-being in its most essential form of sustenance and shelter. It is an obvious point, perhaps, but one that is potentially lost when describing subsistence acts as moving the past forward or, as in Burridge's Tangu example, sculpting the contours of self-revelation. I explained how contributing to the well-being of others is for tivönö an inherently moral act—the outcome of negotiation between commonality and otherness as it resides within all persons, *salavan* and *rasogo*. In what follows, I examine how certain acts once provided opportunities for tivönö communities to look beyond the practical goals of subsistence and to reflect on and respond to some of the limits to life. These were moments when certain people appeared to adopt a broader moral perspective, to “look down on social processes and [turn] perspectives around” (Rio 2007:31). I qualify this description with the word “appear” to suggest how these perspective-taking and perspective—altering moments were the ethical properties of certain acts themselves, operative regardless of the proximate goals of actors.

The present section focuses on the ways subsistence-related acts (i.e. modes of producing well-being and the associated practices and discourses that give shape to them) revealed and responded to certain desires and concerns in tivönö life. These acts were articulations of the persisting anxieties of meaninglessness and futility in Gauan life, but also of the possibilities for the good life and an enduring tivönö identity which stood to counter them. By depicting these acts as “articulations,” I mean to convey how they communicate the possibilities and limits of life in locally authentic ways. I further intend “articulation” as signifying connection, as between the categories of *matev* and *niran tan̄nen* as well as between subsistence actors and the others whose lives and

perspectives are shaped through such acts. Subsistence articulates, or connects, the past and near-future as well, as clarified in tivönö notions of memory and *amaren*. A third sense of articulation, as an expression marked by clarity and coherence, underscores the stakes that tivönö confront in communicating the shared anxieties and expectations of others through acts of fishing and gardening.

These multiple meanings of articulation are brought to bear in the notion of *lavaswut*, a moral undercurrent to all tivönö subsistence practices and discourses. Expressing the sentiment “welcome to all, at all times,” *lavaswut* is articulated in any subsistence act with the potential to achieve the aim of providing food or other material needs to others outside of one’s own household. The implicit point to this idea is that with every instance of meeting its own material needs, the household faces a situation wherein it may have to defer its production to the needs of others. *Lavaswut* is the unequivocal expression of the ability of tivönö and their families to sacrifice: it affirms the social-ethical obligations of persons willing to sacrifice; and it provides a critical standard against which the subsistence-related actions and talk of others are assessed. Linking labor and environment and transforming them into sacrificial ethical capital, persons clearly communicate their ability to welcome anyone into their own productive domain at any time. By this measure, social relations are eminently possible—strangers may become kin—and connections to land and resources are affirmed. As we bear in mind going forward that *lavaswut* is at least tacitly present in all subsistence acts, it becomes increasingly evident that the ethics of “welcome to all” struggles for articulation as it confronts Gaua’s changing cultural and political demography.

The subsistence acts which reside in the collective memory of tivönö old enough to remember them were (and are) unevenly regarded as evidence of productive ability and kastom identity. One example of this disparity involves the use of fish “poisoning” techniques using wood, fruit, or leaves. *Wendak* is a woven pandanus basket into which any type of poison leaf may be placed. The leaves are crushed inside the basket with a piece of wood to draw out the poison, and the basket is attached to the reef or a nearshore pool to kill fish. Often a wood called *te* is scraped into the water by a fisher wading nearshore, killing any fish that swims into its path. *Gatuv*, a vine that grows throughout the lower forest on Gaua, is cut at the ring and its lethal “water” squeezed into a constructed stone wall called *gear* which traps the fish as the tide recedes. Tivönö who are familiar with these kastom techniques readily acknowledge their limitations. The spread of poison cannot be contained, and threatens to kill many more fish than can be legitimately claimed as a day’s worth of food for fishers and their families.

The preferences some tivönö have for the bow (*wuvus*) and arrow (*wulu*) over poison flora reveal concerns about technologies for which the costs of their use outweigh the benefits. Unlike the careless spreading of poisons in the past and present and the recent deployments of large nylon nets and small explosives, the kastom bow is an elegant tool, precise and responsibly non-destructive. In the past, boys entered *salagör* to learn among other things the esoteric methods of fishing proper to men of rank. Dancing was directly relevant to the process, as instructors likened the movements of fishers through the water to the strictly routinized dances that were essential knowledge to achieving successive ritual grades. Former *salagör* initiates explain that “dancers do not think; they just dance” (*Nir te lak ti am ve res vite nir en e*): dancing is

more bodily memory than deliberation. Similarly, the movements of bow fishing which young initiates committed to kinesthetic memory manifested a particular and exclusive *tivönö* mode of being, indexing their privileged training in *salagör*. Like the dances which accompanied grade taking, this *kastom* form of fishing communicated a distinctive masculine power: the initiate had the ability to provide for others, and his techniques manifested a broader set of socially productive capacities. Poison fishing and the more recent technologies introduced from elsewhere provide neither an analogous means for articulating the growing power of male *salagör* initiates nor post-*salagör* opportunities for perpetuating this form of gendered power into the future.

The privilege of articulating gendered power through subsistence-related acts was not limited to men. A method of fishing called *revesar*, which remains fresh in Gauan memory if nearly lost in practice, provided a medium for perpetuating a productive capacity distinctive to women. What follows is a synthesis of multiple accounts of *revesar* from communities throughout the island:

*Revesar* is a *kastom* fishing net designed to trap hundreds of fish at once and bring them to shore. We construct *revesar* by first cutting long vines of several possible types (e.g., *gargar bogo*, *gavurur*; *toprop*) and double-knotting them together. Then we find the middle (about 10 meters long) section of the extended vine and attach coconut leaves, wrapping them repeatedly around the vine until they are secure. Each coconut leaf must be torn down its midrib so that leaves and midribs are hanging perpendicularly from the long vine. Two men wade into the sea and position the middle “net” section of *revesar* where the fish are most densely populated. Other men attach the remaining lengths of vine to trees far offshore so that the entire village is contained within its boundary.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Aver residents asked me to measure this distance in their fishery with a tape measure. Estimating the placement of the middle net section in the bay with a length of nylon rope, we found *revesar* in Aver to have exceeded 150 meters.

The kastom net is placed into the sea during a high tide following a full moon. As the fish swim into the net the dangling coconut leaves make a noise—“sssssss”—which startles the fish and prevents them from passing through the net. We leave revesar in the sea for a few hours; some of us watch from the water’s edge as more and more fish congregate, “confused” (*domvu ruru*) by the sound and placement of the leaves. As low tide approaches, the chief directs two men—usually the landowner (if someone other than the chief) and his son—to either side of the leaves. The two men face the shore and clutch the net with their under-gripped hands.

The village chief stands at the shore and directs other men and women to approach the net along different points, to join the first two men and hold the vine as they have done. The chief alternates his commands between pushing the net to shore and calling for it to go slack to sieve water from it. One command he gives us is *Tañ ken du mutu!* (Let go of the coconut leaves!); another is *Ar vus now!* (Beat the water!). This disorients the fish and keeps them from escaping. When the water level is lowest, the chief orders everyone to stand on the submerged bottoms of the dangling coconut leaves. Hundreds of fish are visible along the entire length of the net. We move ashore, forcing the fish to be captured and collected in baskets by waiting others. Those of us holding the baskets separate the juvenile fish and throw them back to the sea; only some turtles and sharks are kept. The chief gives the order to kill the fish—*Ar vus mat wi□!* People kill the fish on the spot, together.

Now everyone in the community falls silent, even the chief. As we stand there on the shore, we still hear the clamor of thrashing fish echoing in our heads. *Tawa nam marana*, the chief’s wife, points to other wives in the village and assigns each a basket. Without speaking, the women wrap the fish in laplap leaves and apportion them to the men and unmarried women who are gathered around them. Our chief always receives the last portion; any visitors receive the first. We all walk away quietly and remain in our houses until the following day. If revesar must take place on Easter or during a day mourning someone’s death, it is after church services or ceremonies. It is important not to speak to others outside your family after revesar. It shows disrespect to the family of the woman who gave you the fish; that’s why we do not speak—we do not cry or complain that we were treated unfairly. [Gaua residents, 2008-2009]

Tivönö describe the call by *tawa nam marana* for women to assemble around the baskets as like a prayer in a church service. The obligation of all persons present to

remain silent throughout the proceedings precludes any arguments concerning which women are chosen to divide and distribute the fish, how many each person receives, and what is to be done with the fish upon receipt. Dividing and distributing fish communicate a woman's ability to circulate a privately owned resource with an authority and assurance otherwise reserved for a man of high rank. The evenhanded redistribution by a group of married women enhances the flourishing of participants' senses of *navgi*, incorporating all who are present for *revesar* as well as distant relations who may later benefit. *Revesar* begins with the centripetal power of men—the inward accretion of prestige and productive capacity to resource owners and community leaders. It concludes with the centrifugal power of women in the outward redistribution of food, a vital contribution to the well-being of all *navgi*. A reinvigorated sense of shared belonging emerges from the morally productive acts of women: in its dual signification, *veve* (both mothers and moieties) reclaim land and production.

*Revesar* is a rare event on present-day Gaua. Women articulate their redistributive capacities in other ways, notably through face-to-face gestures of generosity during food preparation in cookhouses. This form of giving is not limited to women, however, and signals a pronounced change from gendered modes of value articulation to gender-neutral acts which fail to perpetuate a particular cosmology of empowerment. The loss of *revesar* has resulted as well in the diminished tension between the self-interested actions of individuals and the other-regarding demands of *navgi* that highly routinized, communal subsistence acts once embodied and mediated to the good of both.

The foregoing examples depicted acts that perpetuated gendered, socially productive capacities. Furthermore, as articulations they derived their impact from the role of silence in their expression. As articulations of spatial and temporal boundaries, taboos were once conveyed in non-verbal idioms. The spatial ethics of gardens and fisheries provides useful examples. The stone boundaries of gardens, called *gear* like the walls used to trap fish, demarcated spaces in which gardeners cultivated yams (*dam*) and taro (*qet*) in ways that evoked relations to kin. Clearing land, planting the cuttings, decorating the growing tubers, and placing the overgrowth sticks were expressions of *kere gor* and *tomtom*—of looking-after and caring-for—reinforced by the referencing of crops with the possessive marker *nablak*, indicating “my (object) which I cultivate and give care to” (see chapter 4). Men arose before sunrise and walked to their “sacred place” (*holi ples*) within the garden walls. They performed *kastom* songs and dances to assure growth and to solicit the thoughts of spirits that observed and assessed their techniques. These spirits ascertained whether the gardener had fasted the night before and had refrained from applying bodily decoration or scent. Had he abstained from sexual intercourse, contact with pregnant women, and eating certain kinds of fish? These were matters of consequence, affecting whether his garden would yield *dam vewano* (a full, rich yam) or *dam malaŋ* (an empty yam). Above all, none of these practices was a matter for discussion: their elicitation in speech threatened to “leak the power” (*man vemowor*) that enabled growth from the confines of the wall to dissipate into the desolate bush.

In East Gaua, fisheries were once without markers of any kind to warn potential trespassers. There were only *vat wuvu* (spirit stones) to remind visitors to the fishery

that its resources ultimately belonged to the lake and the ancestral spirits residing beneath it. As with the tribally owned places around Letes, people simply understood the limits of their own and others' spatial boundaries. In West Gaua, taboos as public demarcations of space were similarly unknown. Chiefs announced taboos at public gatherings only to observe grade ascensions or the deaths of persons of high rank. The removal of a taboo after one to four years (with longer terms reserved for the deaths of landowning men of high rank) was marked by ritual pig killing, the burning of the taboo markers, and lastly with an announcement that "the road is opened" for women to go to the reef to collect shellfish. Taboos lent significance and solemnity to these pivotal events in the community; their public enunciations set them apart from everyday Gauan life. The death of a ranked man meant the loss of socially productive work. Taboos announced the disappearance of *lavaswut*—of a sacrificial capacity for welcoming others—and casted its positive moral force into sharp relief by signaling its painful absence.

In gardens and fisheries throughout Gaua, there are no longer taboos that go without saying. What was once tacit understanding of the obligations to respect the spaces of others has become necessary talk. Landowners call upon chiefs to announce the placement of taboo markers, a necessity borne of changing demography and the increasing indifference of too many young *tivönö* in the estimations of parents and grandparents. Chiefs publicly outline the specific proscriptions as signified by different parts of the taboo marker as they did when placing taboos for ceremonial purposes in the past (see Figure 5.1). The realization that unspoken understandings of resource restrictions have become matters in need of constant reinforcement has led many *tivönö*



to describe the markers as “empty talk” (*luglug maleŋ*). They explain that the ubiquitous “voices” of taboo markers along Gaua’s coast diminish the symbolic potency of taboos as silent articulations of cultural awareness, and more pointedly as catalysts for quiet reflection on the obligations of maintaining spatial and temporal boundaries.



**Figure 5.1:** Placing a taboo marker at Aver Bay, East Gaua. The stake is *vönö*, a type of wood which indicates *Vere e namuk* (This is my village). Young coconut leaves cascade from the top of the stake to signify *Sisigil* (This is taboo) and *Tow* (Do not [steal from me]). The lighter colored leaves are *weto* (wild cane); they reinforce the imperatives of the coconut leaves. Photo by Jeffrey Wescott.

Taboos, fishing techniques, and the economics of *revesar* provide examples of change where corresponding articulations of possibility and limit have moved away from unspoken expression. A very different case came to my attention when I collected names of fish species common to Gaua’s marine environment. I asked my Nume-speaking collaborators to free-list the names of every type of fish common to Gauan fisheries—to name them just as they came to mind. I asked the same question of every person and recorded each set of responses in the order presented to me. Eighteen

months later I again met with everyone who had contributed to the free-listing task,<sup>76</sup> and carried with me 30 small index cards, each with the name of a fish frequently identified in my first inquiry. Each of my collaborators ordered the cards to reflect which fish species he or she most commonly used as resource fish—that is, which types of fish each person most commonly caught for purposes of household consumption or local sale.<sup>77</sup> I recorded the ordered sets and calculated the mean rank order of “resource fishes” to compare with the mean rank order of “free-listed fishes.” Table 5.1 is a partial list of these rank orders.

The critical step was discussing the results with my Nume-speaking collaborators. I asked: Why is there such a disparity between the free-listed ordering of fishes—those that come quickest to mind in a spontaneous inventory of all of Gaua’s fishes--and the ranked ordering of fishes used for subsistence and other economic purposes? What logic motivates the ordering of the free-listed fishes? One frequent explanation was that landowners and their families think about their land in terms of connections between what resides within the living space of *vönö* (e.g., houses, fertile land, marine resources) and the ancestors to whom they feel indebted for all that makes life possible in that space. There are types of fishes that are unsuitable as dietary staples, due to such reasons as they are too bony, too scarce, or simply unpleasant to eat.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The second phase of the study featured three fewer collaborators: two had died in the interim, and one was off-island and unable to participate.

<sup>77</sup> I reviewed the outcomes of each ordered set to assure they accurately reflected the views of the corresponding collaborators, restating the goals of the task and resolving any confusion over written Nume terms. Collaborators omitted all fishes in the card set which they deemed non-resource species.

<sup>78</sup> Survey collaborators maintained that size, coloring, and abundance of fishes were not factors in the free-listing process.

**Table 5.1:** General free-listing and resource sort ranking of fishes, East Gaua

Species (Nume)	Scientific name	free-listed <sup>79</sup>	resource <sup>80</sup>
malages*	Chlorurus spp.	2.2	1.9
balaqmwut*	Plectrypops spp.	2.7	7.2
wundu*	Amphiprion spp.	2.9	/ <sup>81</sup>
vagolo	Naso annulatus	3.4	12.1
womatwewe	Family Holocentridae	3.5	/
ganas	Family Mugilidae	4.4	4.2
vag	Acanthurus striatus	4.7	12.5
birap*	Zebrasoma sp.	5.7	/
qol*	Pomacentrus spp.	6.0	2.6
liwat*	Ruvettus spp.	6.8	16.7
wombanwis	Naso lituratus	7.1	13.0
wetaqagat	Abudefduf spp.	7.9	/
bogo	Family Carcharhinidae	8.8	/
taqmweras	Siganus spp.	10.1	2.3
sumut	Siganus spp.	11.1	5.0
qas	B. muricatum	13.0	3.1
tirit	Diodon spp.	13.4	/
tarag	Neoniphon spp.	13.9	/
...	...	...	...
virig	Siganus vermiculatus	21.4	6.9
resmal*	Plectorhinchus vittatus	21.9	3.5

Yet several fishes that meet these descriptions provide metonymic connections to particular living spaces—to distinctive fisheries rather than to Gaua’s marine environment in general. Some tivönö collaborators asserted that the connections which transcend economic value emerged from the presence of certain fishes in kastom stories and ceremonies that have long disappeared from Gaua. They are vestiges of lost esoteric tribal knowledge present in contemporary discourse, learned from grandparents, mothers’ brothers, and chiefs who still point to sacred stones abandoned in the bush and describe how praying to a particular one secured the plentiful harvest of a corresponding fish or shellfish. My collaborators speculated that in Gaua’s distant past,

<sup>79</sup> Mean rank order of free-listed fishes (n=54).

<sup>80</sup> Mean rank order of pile-sorting outcomes of 30 cards (n=51).

<sup>81</sup> A forward slash (/) indicates a fish species that ranked lower than 20.0 in mean rank ordering.

people articulated their commitments to maintaining productive fisheries by speaking the names of certain fishes in appropriate public contexts.

The metonymic connections *tivönö* may once have had with their marine resources appears again in the nearly vanished practice of referencing certain types of fishes with the possessive marker *nablak* to identify them as objects of care, otherwise reserved for referencing gardens, trees, houses, and pigs (see chapter 4). At least some Nume speakers once identified fishes such as *malages*, *resmal*, and select others (marked with asterisks in Table 5.1) as possessions requiring cultivation and care; the limited few who have knowledge of this practice today continue to ascribe the exclusive form of reference to many of these same fishes. Such persons are mostly members of landowning families who view these ascriptions as desires to identify with local resources in elite ways. This attitude perhaps intimated the personal aesthetics of a *lavaswut* mode of generosity, of reinforcing one's own privileged moral position of sacrificial benevolence by linking cultivator and cultivated through public talk. My collaborators rejected the notion that the purpose was to assert resource ownership, given that such knowledge was always common. They predicted that this mode of public talk will soon vanish entirely, replaced by discourses privileging the consumptive and economic preferences of *tivönö* and other local and non-local fishers, and pushing associations with marine life into the unarticulated and soon forgotten.

As a final example of how subsistence-related acts once articulated certain desires and concerns, I identify another discourse which has all but disappeared from Gaua. There is a temporal ordering to contemporary Gauan fishing and gardening activities; yet what exists of Gauan calendrics today is a fragment of what guided

subsistence routines in the past. Ecological cues in villages and forests alerted people to the presence of abundant marine species and triggered seasonal proscriptions on terrestrial game such as birds and flying foxes. Many tivönö today recognize and abide by these environmental signs; by contrast, the phases of general, tidal, and cyclonic seasons have been forgotten by all but the oldest members of indigenous communities in the east and west.

Elders recall the spirited debates that took place in the nakamal as men argued whether Gaua had transitioned from one seasonal period to the next. The thresholds of seasonal change were not bound to corresponding demarcations of the western calendar or even to celestial cues. Men sought consensus based partly on accounts of their observations of patterns such as the presence and abundance of particular species and the growth stages of fruit-bearing trees. Those who sought to publicly announce the transitions of seasons presented themselves as exceptionally attuned to the patterns and cadences of weather and to the migrations of marine resource species. The lengthy debates featured such subjective criteria as the state of a man's appetite and the content of his dreams. Beyond these physiological and oneirological cues, men openly regarded each other's desires to publicly announce seasonal transition as reflecting a self-regarding political or economic strategy (cf. Mondragón 2004:291). Each man refuted the inflammatory claims of others by insisting that the proper timing of seasonal transition redounded to the benefit of the entire community.

The regimented logic of the Western month has profoundly affected the temporal ordering of Gauan life. Even the Bislama phrases *ples i hot* and *ples i drae* (hot/dry place) collapse general, wind, and tidal seasonal patterns into binary notions of "hot"

and “dry” and erase human presence in the environment (e.g., the time when “people are cold”). Seasons like *Dudumul*, the time to clear gardens and go fishing, were ushered into the daily lives of Gauans through announcements by respected community figures rather than by calendars contrived by unknown persons to meet indeterminate ends. The transitions of seasons signified changes to what was possible for fishers and gardeners in meeting basic well-being. The public announcements that articulated such possibilities and guided subsistence routines were creative acts, expressions of *matev* which through their absence have altered the temporal ordering of human-environment interaction.

Revisiting the activities surrounding the seasonal calendar helps us to comprehend Gaua’s cultural history of subsistence more generally precisely because these ways of marking time were manifested in world-making or illocutionary acts. The men who petitioned for the transitions of seasons brought into existence the temporal boundaries by which Gauan communities and households organized their labor efforts. The foregoing examples of how subsistence articulated the possibilities and concerns of life show that world-making illocution was not limited to calendrics, but found an array of expressions involving speech, silence, or movement. Redistribution of fish during *revesar* conferred gender parity and an economic capacity exclusive to women; taboos provided a medium for making the loss of productive and generous persons real and consequential to communities. I described as well the perlocutionary subsistence acts which persuaded and inspired changes in the world: garden taboos that appeased spirits and promoted growth; the kinesthesia of bow fishing that motivated respect for *salagör* and its initiates; and idioms of possession which sway public perceptions of one’s

productive power. These articulations offset anxieties about life's futility by revealing that the world as it appears is not inevitable.

The predetermined markings of the western calendar preempt such acts of world-making: they imagine only a foregone tomorrow that fails to comprehend possibility as the product of action. The subsistence-related acts that tivönö once performed were moral obligations to make events transpire—to secure the ongoing presence of certain values into the present and near-future. The loss of these acts presents tivönö with the choice of either finding new subsistence practices to articulate possibilities for well-being and futurity or, less likely, imagining wholly other arenas of everyday practice and experience to effectively respond to their existential anxieties.

**“It stands inside kastom, but it is not kastom”**

Earlier in this chapter, I described subsistence on Gaua as a possibility space, a plane of limiting ontology that emerges through interactions between humans and environments—between the creative and capricious actions of *matev* and its predictable other, *niran tannen*. In the past, people of Gaua articulated possibilities for well-being and futurity through such acts as communal fishing and silent cultivation of resource spaces. These were acts of world-making, the transforming of productive routines into possibilities for life and a distinctive and enduring indigenous identity. Change is an integral component to a possibility space: it may occur through deliberative acts of world-making; as the unintended result of human action; or through processes and agencies external to the space. Tivönö narratives of their subsistence past tend to emphasize the illocutionary acts of persons and minimize, while never erasing, the effects of outside forces such as regional economic and political interests and climatic

processes. In contemporary Gauan life, the incursion of novel ways of securing food is in the estimation of many tivönö the unavoidable outcome of two factors—the expansion of non-indigenous communities in the east and the growing significance of cash in the lives of households. Change has become the primary stress in the possibility space of subsistence, forcing tivönö to reevaluate its moral possibilities.

In this present-day space, people of Gaua find it axiomatic that securing the day-to-day well-being of oneself and one's household requires access to both gardens and fisheries. Elders in East and West Gaua recall an era when meat was more readily available from the culling of domesticated pigs both for routine provisioning and for ritual. Despite the continuing desires to own pigs as status objects and the occasional prestations of pig, cattle (*buluk*), or fowl during celebrations and mortuary rites, the reliable source of meat has mostly shifted to the fisheries. A diet consisting primarily of garden cultivars is augmented by fish to a much greater extent than in the past, with white rice, tinned meat, and peanut butter available in the many small stores scattered throughout the coastal settlements. The increasing availability and consumption of extra-island imports is largely attributable to the frequency of Air Vanuatu flights and copra ships carrying wholesale supplies. Copra, dried coconut meat from which oil is extracted, is an important source of cash for non-store owners with access and production rights to coconut groves. The farming and export of kava and cattle meat are on the rise, mostly in the island's east. In addition to gardening, fishing, and purchasing store goods, Gauans take advantage of the fruit trees which are in abundance throughout the island. Papaya, banana, and breadfruit, as well as a wide assortment of citrus and nut-bearing trees, populate the villages and pathways along the coast. There is no



consensus among tivönö as to which of these trees are properly classified as *kastom*, as most are well-known to be *wud blong waetman* (white man's trees) introduced to Gaua long ago.

The profile of labor and consumption patterns presented in Table 5.2 shows gardening as the primary subsistence activity and household food source.<sup>82</sup> With four of every five meals consumed during the household survey period featuring at least one garden crop, the remaining meals consisted of various combinations of fish, bullock meat, tinned meat, white rice, bread, and Ramen-style noodles. Fishing accounted for only one-tenth of total labor time, with fish featuring in nearly one in seven of the total meals during this period. The six participating households dedicated an average of 15% of their remaining total subsistence labor time to the production of copra, which largely consists of splitting coconut shells and preparing the meat for drying.<sup>83</sup> The figures presented in Table 5.2 do not account for the preparation of meals such as the cutting and boiling of taro and yam and the cleaning and roasting of fish. Clearing, planting, and harvesting gardens, fishing, and processing copra are considered *mugmugu* (work) whereas food preparation, performed in an atmosphere of household- and often village-level sociality, is not. Food preparation is a non-gender-specific duty in most tivönö households: there is no consistent subdivision of labor involved in cleaning, cooking,

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<sup>82</sup> Margaret C. Rodman (1987) defines the household in Vanuatu as “the fundamental unit of simple commodity production” (715). While households engaging in a simple commodity economy (such as exists on Gaua) “produce and exchange items exclusively for their own consumption needs and those of their families,” they participate as well “in capitalist markets without necessarily becoming involved in a capitalist mode of production” (715). This is mostly the case for Gaua, with the exception of the small, individually operated stores that are increasingly common throughout the island.

<sup>83</sup> None of the six households surveyed shared common labor or land. At least one member of each household assisted me by recording labor time and consumption data, which I collected every one to two days.

and serving. Many tivönö recognize this parity as a legacy of Gaua's past, when women and men prepared and consumed their meals concurrently in separate houses.

**Table 5.2:** Time allocations for gardening vs. fishing vs. copra production for six households in East Gaua over 93 days<sup>84</sup>

Household	Hours gardening	Hours fishing	Hours producing copra	Total labor hrs./household, 93 days
1	1,439	166	275	1,880
2	1,755	190	251	2,196
3	651	97	197	945
4	1,071	137	244	1,452
5 <sup>85</sup>	550	74	131	755
6	966	176	142	1,284
totals	6,432	840	1,240	8,512
% of total	75.5	9.9	14.6	-----

Although gardens remain the exemplary kastom space within vönö, the boundaries and kastom associations of objects and activities within them have diminished over the past several decades. Recall from chapter 2 the distinction between taro gardens (*leñmwe*) and general or yam gardens (*lewetan*): Gauans in all communities hold to the ideal of separating taro from other crops, although for some households space restrictions have limited this practice. Crops within lewetan tend to be spatially divided and apportioned according to desired yield, with sweet potato (*kumar*) and various types of yam (*dam*) claiming the largest areas, followed by island cabbage (*sosorop*) and finally the class of foods not designated as kastom, typically manioc, banana (*wetel*), maize, and capsicum.<sup>86</sup> Many elders recognize inconsistencies in the

<sup>84</sup> Combined total days in February-April 2008 and September-October 2009.

<sup>85</sup> 75 total recorded days for Household 5.

<sup>86</sup> In many lewetan throughout Gaua, there are spaces for the growth and harvest of trees commonly used for household construction. The most familiar trees are vönö (*navenu*, *Macaranga tanarius*) and *mamu*

ways people categorize garden foods as *kastom*. They explain that island cabbage and sweet potato were most certainly introduced from elsewhere, but have attained *kastom* status as local dietary staples over many generations. By contrast, all varieties of banana are *gengen nam vere dul* (the food of every island) and are emphatically not culturally rooted to Gaua. In addition to taro and yam there are tubers with little-known names like *wevi*, *saŋan*, *behu*, and *wiag* which are described as genuinely autochthonous foods (*gengen tivönö*) by the few families who cultivate them. They insist that the vast majority of Gauans who do not plant them are unable to distinguish them by appearance or taste, a fact which identifies these rare cultivars as highly exclusive markers of *tivönö* identity.

The most uncorrupted of *kastom* foods in lewetan find their *leŋmwe* equivalents in the division of female and male taro, called *wotlep* and *wititiwun*, respectively. Once imbued with the gendered symbolic capacities of their human counterparts, female and male taro are today separated in *leŋmwe* due mostly to their slightly unsynchronized growing seasons.<sup>87</sup> As with the small group of endemic tubers in lewetan, taro gardens still hold *kastom* resonances for persons—mostly indigenous landowners—for whom gendered classifications of taro index a cosmology that brought an assuring structure to ordinary labor. While gardens represent the majority proportion of labor hours and meal provisions, they provide as well a sense of rootedness for landowners and persons with the physical ability and legal grounds to exercise their creative and productive prowess

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(*namamao*, *Flueggea flexuosa*), both used extensively as timber for building houses and fences. An abundant grove of mature trees signals the long-standing presence of a landowning or landholding family.

<sup>87</sup> The attention given to taro's symbolic and practical value on Gaua is well eclipsed by the variety and specificity of taro terminology and typology among the people of Vanua Lava, located 40 kilometers to Gaua's north (Caillon et al 2002; Hess 2010). Yam remains the most important garden crop on Gaua, as revealed in conversation and in the care people give to its production.

as cultivators. It is not accidental that *wuwur* practitioners today as in the past unleash their poison magic in gardens, with their disproportionate jealousy manifested in blackened taro leaves and yams roots growing “without meat” (*dam vevano*). These *kastom* identifications abide as well in styles of food preparation and in the stances *tivönö* take when they witness others selling excess garden production rather than seeking out households and individuals who may have a need for it.

Contemporary attitudes toward the production and distribution of cultivars are mirrored to some extent in fishing practices.<sup>88</sup> Although marine and garden foods differ in obvious ways, as for example in their mobility, there are similarities between them with regard to maintaining the spatial distributions of different species. Gardens are often divided by means of natural terracing, distributed across various elevations along the gradual slope that lies inland behind coastal villages around much of the island. Fisheries are spatially divided into near-shore (*salin*), flat shallows (*lerat*), mud (*leleb*), mangroves (*woqil, qilavat, wegevep*), inshore reef (*mekemet*) and deep sea (*lam*). Observing the proper seasonal productivity of fishery micro-environments, and employing harvesting techniques appropriate to the species that populate these distinct spaces, are increasingly identifiable as *fasin blong kastom* (the *kastom* way) in response to eroding boundaries of resource access and restriction in the east.

Unlike gardening, contemporary fishing presents the worrisome and growing problem of overharvesting; the sea is the space of greatest change. Although nearly every one of my interlocutors insisted that one ought to fish only for short-term

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<sup>88</sup> I intend the terms “fish” and “fishing” to encompass the harvesting of both fish and shellfish, the latter of the two gathered by hand mostly along the fringing reefs that encircle 80% of the island.

household provision, many of them admitted to harvesting more fish and shellfish than are necessary to meet immediate subsistence needs. They described their actions as motivated primarily by new, more efficient technologies and the rising need for cash to pay for school fees and fuels for generators and chainsaws. Aluminum and fiberglass spear guns, large modern nets made of nylon, and waterproof flashlights have all but removed the sense of limitation and self-regulation that the older technologies once imposed.

Relatedly, the growing desire among many Gauan families for government- or church-supported primary and secondary education has blurred value distinctions between basic subsistence and status-building, such that making a living and making a name for oneself through one's educated children are equally subsumed under the rubric of family provisioning. School fees for primary education (2,500 vatu per school year in 2011) occupy the minds of many fishers with an eye toward the regional shellfish industry, including persons who self-identify as *tivönö* and who grow increasingly concerned about the threat of overharvesting in Gauan fisheries.<sup>89</sup> Yet not all that is culturally and ethically valued is relinquished to the inevitability of overfishing and cash-driven production. Both gardening and fishing still hold promise as a locus of *kastom* identity that many people view as worthy of safeguarding, even as the demands and desires of a changing lifestyle present *tivönö* with values and desires that often seem conflicting.

Several weeks after the volcanic eruptions of 2009, *tivönö* landowners assisted the newly resettled families from West Gaua with clearing land to plant new gardens.

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<sup>89</sup> 2,500 vatu equals US\$27.47 (May 2012).

Before this work began, the sudden increase in the population of East Gaua villages had strained the productive capacities of households. Gardeners who had planted maize (*kön*, corn) a few months earlier, however, were prepared. For weeks, the reliably high-yielding crop became the dietary staple for numerous households throughout the east, where children were rarely found without an ear in hand. Evening conversations in *nakamals* centered on the apparent good fortunes of the relocatees who shared living space with *tivönö* and other, non-indigenous families that had planted maize. Gauans understand maize to have originated somewhere outside of Melanesia; it has become for them a valued addition to household gardens for its relatively low labor requirements, appealing taste, and long shelf life. During the relocation period, maize became the definitively non-kastom food serving kastom ends: the ability of households to secure the well-being of large numbers of visitors became fulfilling expressions of *lavaswut*. These events contradict the proportional tendency within the possibility space of *tivönö* subsistence, where the expansion of food opportunities beyond kastom categories diminishes the ethical possibilities inherent to their production or acquisition. The presence of maize alerted newly assembled communities to the abilities of some people to contribute to their well-being and positive outlook.

Gaua's fisheries offer corresponding examples of how *tivönö* appear to "bend" novel objects and events to fit familiar values and categories (Robbins 2004:335, fn. 2). Modern spear guns and simple rubber-and-rod slings (*raba*) ostensibly stand outside the kastom moral and aesthetic evaluations exemplified by older technologies such as bow fishing and *revesar*. Yet there are discourses surrounding newer modes of fishing which highlight athleticism in ways that echo the kinesthetic skill of *salagör*-trained fishers of

the past. Fishing at night with waterproof flashlights (*tos*) is increasingly popular as well, especially among boys, although its legality is quite another matter (see chapter 6). My older interlocutors recalled the group activities of the past which provided both recreation and opportunities for boys to hone the skills necessary to provide food for others. Whereas coordinated excursions to hunt birds and wild boar and contribute to the domestic economy have declined, fishing cooperatively and competitively with modern equipment such as flashlights and spear guns is on the rise. The synthesis of ostensibly non-kastom technologies with the kastom ethos of collective and socially productive subsistence practices intimates the emergent possibilities of fishing's role in shaping the future of tivönö identity.

This hopeful synthesis nonetheless brings up one of the more challenging problems in the subsistence lives of tivönö, a problem which they candidly discuss in conversations regarding household production in changing times. To what extent can the mere attribution of “kastom” to a belief, attitude, or practice give it an aura of authenticity? More to the point, how is it “true kastom manner” (*matev vidun, stret kastom*) if it is patently “invented,” a provocative concept widely evoked in analyses of kastom in Melanesia? Hviding (1993) identifies the “heated debates” within anthropology surrounding the arbitrariness and even strategic quality of kastom as it manifests throughout Melanesia (e.g., Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Larcom 1982; Keesing 1989; Linnekin 1992; Bolton 2003). He observes, however, that “it has been necessary to point out that neither these nor other examples of ‘created’ cultural identities and reifications need be seen as ‘something contrived and insincere’” (Hviding 1993:803; Thomas 1992:213; per Hviding, see also Jolly 1992a). The drift of

certain subsistence practices away from what has been identifiably *kastom* has recently sparked a dialogue in East Gaua that some of what is deemed *kastom* in household production is indeed contrived. Bearing in mind the anxieties of possibility and limit which I described in the chapter's opening, it is unsurprising that some *tivönö* expressed their apprehensions about the “*kastom*” qualities and possibilities of this or that current practice.



**Figure 5.2:** A *tivönö* man with an afternoon's catch for his household, displayed on the iron rod which is fired from a rubber loop attached to another iron rod. Aver Bay, East Gaua. Photo by Jeffrey Wescott.

At the same time, the anxieties of inauthenticity are met with opposing forces of sincerity. Many *tivönö* told me that they know in their hearts that their household productions serve the right ends, regardless of whether the means of production is sanctioned as “*kastom*” by a reified metric such as public talk. I found in these conversations the recurring idea that *kastom* matters to people not only because it gives a distinctive local meaning to practices and ideas (i.e. confirms the cosmological order),



but because their actions taken for the good of others *feel* like a *kastom* moment that is unique to their place. Tivönö described to me how they “feel *kastom*” (*harem kastom*) as a kind of experience that is difficult to invalidate simply by thinking around it.

The dilemma of holding *kastom* firmly in the heart while deliberating about it in the head is captured in a phrase I heard repeatedly with regard to changing fishing practices and household food choices: “it stands inside *kastom*, but it is not *kastom*.”<sup>90</sup> The phrase succinctly captures the broad opinion of tivönö with regard to the ambiguity they face in maintaining a *kastom* identity while adapting to and even embracing the possibilities and limits of changing technologies and new desires. We have seen how collective memory instills a continuity of *kastom* to certain practices. It may be that the cultural resonance of transforming the strange into the familiar is operative as well. The social-ethical productivities of building relations from otherness instill feelings of being uniquely “of the place.” For many tivönö, that’s the only authenticity that matters.

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<sup>90</sup>In Nume: *Ni ve tur allon kastom, si ni ve kastom bek.*

## Chapter 6: Conservation's big talk

A young tivönö man recounted a recurring dream that appears to him during nights before fishing. In his dream he sits in his canoe, and feels a tug on one of the fishing lines he has cast. He grasps the line with both hands and eagerly pulls it, only to find that it is not a fish, but that the hook has caught onto something else, perhaps the reef. The young man plunges into the sea and follows the line. It has become entangled in the branch of a *navele* tree growing from the base of the reef, its ripe purple fruit falling from the branches that break the surface of the water. He reaches the reef and submerges to find that his line has hooked onto a door carved into the base of the tree, which he timidly opens to find a large cave inside. At once, a very old man emerges from the darkness of the cave, his withered face filled with indignation. The old man cuts the line from the tree with his bush knife and disappears, and with that the dream ends. The young man explained to me that he feels like the dream is attached to him, that he wears it on his skin whenever he is fishing or diving at the reef. He becomes nervous and self-conscious, as though he is being watched and his actions evaluated by angry ancestors (Cabot, October 11, 2009).

After securing the young man's permission and assuring his anonymity, I discussed his dream with others in the community. For tivönö, all dreams originate outside the will and agency of the dreamer. Whereas older women and men receive "news" from distant persons and events as they sleep, mostly value-neutral and unrelated to their own present concerns and desires, young people experience dreams as instigations, a pulling toward an elusive achievement such as acquiring knowledge

of a kastom story or “leaf” medicine. A dream is an experience with an otherness that inhabits the world just as it presents itself to the dreamer; it is not an accidental process internal to the self that awaits interpretation. For older tivönö, the young man’s fishing dream is news of imminent change, augured by the dissolution of ties between ancestors and their living kin, but also by the grotesque reconstruction of boundaries between land and sea, the logic of relations guiding interactions between people and environment. They explained that for the young man the dream was a regrettable revelation that his devotion to kastom fishing practices was increasingly irrelevant to his goal of providing for his household, and that new ways of imagining kastom identity may be required of him and of all young tivönö. Whether as news or as provocation, the dream provided an opportunity for tivönö to express their growing concerns about the changes taking place in the ways they interact with the environment.

In this chapter I examine the observations of people in East Gaua for whom dreams about change resonate with everyday concerns about the future of material and social production. Having examined the ethical dimension of subsistence—the ability of tivönö to create possibility in their own and others’ lives through fishing, gardening, and other productive interactions with local resources—I explore the growing effects of new kinds of human-environment interactions. “Conservation” is a relatively new form of talk on Gaua. Even my younger interlocutors remember a time before resources were explicitly viewed as objects for preservation, even if a particular antecedent form of “ecological rationality” guided many of their subsistence practices (see chapter 5). As the relations between people and environment change, relations between people change as well. New responsibilities toward gardens and fisheries announce new ways of

producing well-being, futurity, and care. For this reason I maintain, as I have in chapter 1, that environmental conservation and all that Gauans place under its conceptual canopy represent a new forking path—a new cultural-historical node where one of several possible worlds will emerge. As I comprehend it, the forking path of conservation on Gaua is the news and the provocation of the old man in my young interlocutor’s dream. The changing relations between Gauans and their environment augur shifting conceptions of otherness and possibility and new ways of reckoning tivönö identity, all of which are essential matters of Gauan ethics.

I begin with an overview of land, the fundamental unit of production in tivönö lives and a powerful and contentious marker of social-cosmological distinction on Gaua. Multiple forms of land alienation have progressively blurred the once-sharp boundaries of land ownership and access. With this increasing uniformity have come worries that much of what has made tivönö distinctive in their changing cultural landscape is slowly fading. I follow this problem of cultural and ethical convergence a step further in the next section, where I introduce environmental conservation as a primary agent of change. Tivönö and other Gauans are keenly aware of the anthropogenic changes to their resource base; yet they are uneasy about some of the inherent assumptions and proposed solutions of this new form of environmental relating. One such assumption within the discourses and practices of conservation is “vulnerability,” the focus of the subsequent section. As a particular set of risks to entire communities and ways of securing a living, this distinct form of vulnerability furthers the erasure of cosmological ordering and the ethical possibilities it occasions. I conclude the chapter not with the limits of inevitability but with a possible world of

hope available to tivönö and other people of Gaua in the midst of environmental change.

### **Dividing lines**

In chapter 2 I introduced *tan* as the terrestrial living space of Nume speakers, encompassing household settlements, common areas, gardens, and coconut plantations. Whereas *tan* in this context derives its significance in both spatial and ethical terms by its contrast to other spaces, the term also denotes “land” (commonly *graon*). On several occasions I heard landowners invoking the term *veniŋ* to describe their land. Recall from chapter 4 that *veniŋ* means “bundle of coconuts” and that people of the same tribe, and often the same household, are thusly equated and hold the same rights to a piece of land. *Veniŋ ta Qoŋ* identifies land to which persons of the tribe Qoŋ claim ownership and access rights, and acknowledged tribal leaders will often refer to such land as *veniŋ* in legal disputes and the occasional public quarrels over access to living space and resources. Typically, however, *tan* and *graon* are the preferred terms for demarcating areas along lines of political and cosmological affiliation, with ownership and access as increasingly contentious matters. East Gauan landowners observe that the growing preference for the Bislama term *graon*, even among fellow tivönö, demonstrates the need to unambiguously assert the rules of land access to their non-Nume speaking neighbors. As evidenced elsewhere in Vanuatu (e.g., Jolly 1992b; Hess 2010) and Melanesia more broadly (e.g. Leach 2003; Bashkow 2006:171-181), concerns about land occupy everyday conversation and activity on Gaua.

There is a general consensus across Gauan communities that Vanuatu’s constitution is and ought to be the ultimate authority regarding ownership of and access

to land. The Constitution states that “all land in the Republic of Vanuatu belongs to the indigenous custom owners and their descendants,” and that “the rules of custom shall form the basis of ownership and use of land”.<sup>91</sup> Landowners (*lanona*)—persons who may legally claim perpetual ownership of land and bequeath it upon their deaths—must be “indigenous citizens of Vanuatu who have acquired their land in accordance with a recognised system of land tenure”.<sup>92</sup> Tivönö recognize the legal requisites of indigeneity and inheritance codified in the Constitution as consonant with their own views of land ownership. As further evidence of their rightful claims to land, tivönö cite the presence within them of the spirits of ancestors (*wuvu*) and place (*ate ta vere*), and of spirits of the first animals their mothers saw or heard following conception or first pregnancy sickness in a particular place (Rivers 2005:151). These entities are all thought to be “owners” of land (cf. Robbins 2006:173), providing moral and cosmological evidence in support of legal statutes. Beyond this apparent simplicity, however, is the more contentious reality of how land rights are actually verified and contested on Gaua.

Gaua’s Paramount Chief told me that there is no more difficult problem facing his community than the growing frequency of land-related disputes. He explained that the intractability of the problem is due in part to the vagaries of legal phrases such as “recognised system of land tenure”: who is the ultimate authority regarding land tenure on Gaua?<sup>93</sup> The problem becomes more intractable with the critical loss of Gauan

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<sup>91</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu, Consolidated Edition 2006: Chapter 12, Articles 73/74.

<sup>92</sup> Constitution 2006: Chapter 12, Article 75.

<sup>93</sup> The imprecisions of Vanuatu land law are evident well beyond the boundaries of Gaua. Kenneth Brown (2005) chronicles the post-independence enactment of the Vanuatu constitution. He finds that in contrast to the Solomon Islands, where existing British Parliamentary laws were retained to supply the new nation with practicable common laws, customary laws, and judicial precedence, Vanuatu, emerging from a dual system of French and British colonial administration, constructed a constitution that was more general

systems of kinship—of common knowledge about such fundamental principles as rules of exogamy and cross-generational inheritance (Victor Wetias, December 21, 2009; cf. Kolshus 1999, 2008 on Mota; Hess 2010 on Vanua Lava). There are, however, some procedures which endure, albeit too ineffectively in an environment where litigation is an increasingly viable means of resolution. Throughout Gaua, the children of male landowners will, upon the death of their father, make a *kastom* gift of pigs, shell money, and cash to their father's eldest brother to secure their continuing rights to land. In this matrilineal system of inheritance and tribal affiliation, the children must pay to remain on the land of their father's tribe. There is always potential for acrimony between children who retain their father's land rights through *kastom* payment and the "true" *veniŋ*, such as the children of the deceased man's sister, who may have conflicting ideas about how the land ought to be allocated and used. Beyond the contingencies of land transfer, there is the widespread opinion among Gauans that their system of local government, based on the legislative and punitive power of chiefs, is woefully ineffective. This lack of confidence is no small concern, as chiefs are tasked with the sanctioning of land transfers and the resolving of disputes among landowners and land users.

"Landholder" is a term which frequently appears in the documents of governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to identify traditional landowners and their families as a particular class of stakeholder, as defined by, for example, conservation initiatives (e.g., VEU 2004). In these contexts, "landholder" is

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and had fewer legal precedents. Customary law and introduced post-colonial law have yet to merge in a way that clearly defines the authority and terms of either, a conclusion which is consistent with the observations of Chief Victor Wetias and other chiefs and landowners on Gaua.

synonymous with the Bislama term *lanona* as it is commonly phrased in communities throughout Gaua. Tivönö, however, make distinctions between indigenous Gauans recognized as *lanona* and persons who are land “holders” in the sense of renters, people who “just hold land” (*holem graon nomo*). Any resident of Gaua in need of land for homesteading or gardening approaches a local landowner with a formal verbal request. Nowadays there is no exchange of money or goods, although small gifts of garden foods are often given to the landowner weeks afterward to show gratitude and respect. In the past, the exchange of land followed a two-part process. First, the landowner performed *tuntun* (Listen to me), articulating his expectations of the responsibilities and acceptable activities of the prospective renter. Following *tuntun* there was *tunmot* (Pay me), the exchange of shell money, pigs, and cash. The performance of *tuntun* is largely gone from Gaua, while payment of *tunmot* usually takes the form of a small feast to honor the landowner. Renters cannot sell part of the land that they hold to another person without the consultation and consent of the landowner. Furthermore, any renter found using land inappropriately, as for unauthorized cattle farming, or if the land remains unused for a lengthy period of time, may be asked by the landowner to relinquish all access rights.

The foregoing briefly summarizes intra-island land leasing as described by tivönö landowners in East Gaua. Renters’ accounts fully corroborate this depiction but with an additional point. Many non-indigenous persons who ostensibly “just hold land” nonetheless hand it down to succeeding generations without the consent of the landowners with whom the original agreement was made. Adding to this contentious situation are the newly arrived residents who claim ownership and access to land based



on their ability to recite their tribal and familial connections to East Gauan landowners.<sup>94</sup> The situation is exacerbated by the fact that increasingly tivönö are unable to provide an account of their tribal affiliations, a problem that becomes more embarrassing for older tivönö in light of the ability of many non-indigenous Gauans to provide detailed accounts of their lineages and the lands associated with them. These factors coalesce as an ever-present anxiety in tivönö life, especially for those who recall an era when land disputes were resolved through the directness of more violent but effective measures. It is important to clarify that no one advocates for the return of such means of conflict resolution; they merely point to a collectively remembered past when tribal divisions provided absolute clarity to potential problems of land, property, and marriage.

Older tivönö contend that the proliferation of coconut plantations in the island's east provides the clearest and most distressing evidence of indigenous land relinquished to non-indigenous families through the granting of land through customary payment. In 1967, a man named Ismael arrived from Mere Lava with his family to settle in the East Gaua village of Lembal. Ismael purchased the large tract of land known in the present as Mondoro Station from a landowner residing in the southeast village of Qeteon, and three years later he began to plant stands of coconut trees with newly arrived Mere Lavan settlers. First- and second-generation Gauans from Mere Lava identify Ismael as

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<sup>94</sup> Per the Gaua Inter-agency Report (2010): “ People from Mere Lava, Mota Lava and Merig have in the last 40 years settled on mainly the eastern coast of Gaua by acquiring land through customary payment. [...] Census data from 1999 shows that 75% of the population owns land on Gaua, 20% owns land on Gaua *and* another island, 3% only owns land on another island, while 2% of the population owns no land at all” (5). I discussed these figures with tivönö landowners in August 2011. Every one of them insisted that the non-indigenous persons in East Gaua who claim to “own” land are in fact mostly second- and third-generation renters who have “lied” (*giaman*) about their landowning status, or have misunderstood the inseparability of land from its original tribal owners.

*fas landholda blong Mondoro* (the first Mondoro landholder) to recall the origins of Mere Lavan settlement on Gaua and to reaffirm the transaction between Ismael and the Qeteon landowner; in so doing they informally validate the vast coconut plantations that cover most of the east coast nearly a half-century later. The story of Ismael is empowering for Gauan residents of Mere Lavan descent. They recognize that the land within Mondoro Station, situated in what is now the geographical center of the resettled Mere Lavan community, remains entirely with non-tivönö landholders who have held control with a minimum of conflict with landowning families since the origins of their community.

For the indigenous and non-indigenous families who reside in the northeast, disputes over land are ever-present concerns. Several tivönö landowners were in litigation (as of August 2011) in accordance with the 2001 Customary Land Tribunal Act, which was established to resolve land disputes by “building on existing kastom structures to manage ownership and land boundary issues” (Stefanova 2008). Tivönö landowners threatened by land alienation in any form and at any scale, including at the level of intra-tribal dispute, submit oral and written documentation of multi-generational inheritance and tribal origin to support their claims to ownership, access, and rights of restriction. Tivönö landowners and non-indigenous claimants to landholdings all express their frustrations at the ineffectiveness of dispute resolution formally available to them. The range of concerns over land alienation recently expanded from intra-island clashes to encounters with foreign business interests.

In 2007, residents of East Gaua learned of a project involving the clearing of a large section of forest adjacent to the River Solomul. A solicitor working with the World Bank Justice for the Poor project in Vanuatu produced a timeline of the event:

An ex-Member of Parliament from a migrant community acted as a middleman on behalf of a Vanuatu-born investor of foreign origin. Four individuals from landowning families on the island [of Gaua] were flown to Port Vila and entertained. The objective was to negotiate the lease of 10,000 hectares for a cattle plantation. Apparently no papers were signed but soon afterwards several surveys were conducted and large numbers of migrant workers began clearing the forest. [Haccius 2011:13]

The headline of *The Weekly Vanuatu Independent* (15 December 2007) reported “Gaua carve-up by investor.” It featured two aerial photos showing long stretches of cleared forest running parallel along the river, and an editorial by two prominent Gauan residents (one tivönö and one of Mere Lavan origin) describing how the formal procedures for land development, which include an Environmental Impact Assessment and the approval of the Gaua Island Council of Chiefs, had not been carried out.<sup>95</sup> The editorial called attention to the hazardous effects of erosion and cattle excrement on the potable water of many eastern settlements. In his World Bank report, the solicitor concludes that the people of Gaua, “although they own the land...have lost control of it” (2011:13).

For many Gauan men, the cattle farming project presented a rare opportunity to earn a consistent wage. In conversations throughout the east there was careful optimism

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<sup>95</sup> Per the Vanuatu Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources: “Before the Department of Lands or the Ministry of Lands can accept Negotiation Certificates (formal permission to negotiate for land with local landowners), villages, areas chiefs, or island councils of chiefs must approve them first.” The issuing of the Negotiation Certificate is issued to prospective land buyers following approval of *several* departments and interests, including the Vanuatu Environment Unit, the Provincial Planner, and the local presiding chief. From “Proces mo OI Prosidja Blong Kareme Wan Lis Long Wan Kraon,” a pamphlet distributed by the Vanuatu Department of Lands.

about the possibilities open to families with steady cash incomes, such as traveling within and beyond Vanuatu and purchasing new clothes, a motorboat, or generator-powered lights. Yet within these hopeful discussions there were more measured thoughts about how other business interests might view the cattle farming project as an open invitation to take Gaua's land for their own purposes. There were more skeptical observers who predicted how foreign businesses would reduce Gauan residents to menial laborers, replicating the experiences of their New Hebridean ancestors on Queensland plantations over a century ago. Tivönö and Mere Lavans share the common sentiment that without local control of land, there is nothing to hold together any of the villages in the east. The prevailing fear is of being pushed out by laborers from distant islands seeking a wage and requiring spaces for settlement. Land is "grandmother's fire," as one Mere Lavan woman told me: it provides the continuity of shared belonging, even for families who still self-identify as "of another place" (*blong nara ples*). By 2011 the cattle project had effectively faded and the forest had already reclaimed much of the cleared land. It remained in conversations about land and development as a compelling reminder of how Gaua's own sense of isolation from regional and global events is increasingly called into question, and how land will continue to serve as the locus of interaction between Gauan communities and emergent interests from other places.

Land is the material substance to the living space of vönö, where the production of well-being and futurity through subsistence is possible. In view of the expectations and trepidations of all Gauans in response to the cattle farming project, it is clear that many non-indigenous residents feel themselves deeply connected to Gauan land and its

possibilities, despite the unlikelihood of their forsaking their native islands as their true *kastom ples*. Notwithstanding this common if tenuous sense of connection, land remains an important marker of otherness between tivönö and non-tivönö, both as a symbol of, and a medium for expressing, cosmological distinctions. There is a growing sense of alienation from land, both from the rising permanence of non-indigenous landholding and the formidable reality of external interests, particularly those determined to “hijack” indigenously held lands on Gaua as throughout Vanuatu (Daley 2009; see also Huffman 2011).

Prominent landowners describe the loss of land as the relinquishing of vital motivations in one’s life: without land and its productive and identity-symbolic capacities, there can be nothing “remarkable” (*vevadrus*) about a person. As is the case elsewhere in Melanesia, landownership on Gaua “organizes people’s social world as a field of otherness” (Stasch 2009:17). With tribal affiliations playing a decreasing role in tivönö identity and non-indigenous families claiming landownership status, however, the dividing lines of land are fading, and with them, the distinctions of cosmological order which guide ethical personhood. Land alienation is, however, only one process of convergence on Gaua; environmental conservation is another, albeit one which holds certain ambiguities as a source of both possibility and limit.

### **Conservation and convergence**

In the last decade or so, Gauans have witnessed the gradual introduction of a perspective on land and resource management which contradicts many of their own valued conceptions of it. *Konsevesen* (environmental conservation) signifies a wide-range of concepts and practices that have become part of everyday conversation around

Gaua. In the idiom of conservation actors representing the interests and goals of governmental agencies and NGOs, Gaua is a homogeneous community of “stakeholders,” with the stakes described in terms of economic and ecological viability into the future.<sup>96</sup> There is a fundamental stake for Gauans which goes unnoticed within the contexts of project proposals and environmental laws. It concerns how conservation carries its own set of implicit values and assumptions which render invisible locally significant forms of otherness. In my brief overview of land, I showed how Gauan identities are shaped in part by their differentiated statuses as owners, renters, and users of places. The cosmological—and by extension, ethical—associations of these and other statuses face erasure by some of the conservation-related activities and associated discourses that have visited the island in recent years. I present two case studies describing these activities—environmental law and ecotourism—to illustrate the processes of cosmological erasure at work in “konsevesen” on Gaua.

In February 2008 I traveled to West Gaua with a small group assembled to instruct residents in Vanuatu’s most recently enacted environmental laws. The party included Gaua’s Paramount Chief, representatives from the Department of Fisheries, and Joses Togase, a Mere Lava-born resident of East Gaua working with the Landholders Conservation Initiative Project (LCIP) at the Vanuatu Environment Unit (VEU). Togase trained and served in the agricultural sector of the Vanuatu government from 1982 to 1994. He began his work on Gaua with LCIP in 2006, tasked with establishing a “baseline” of conservation practices in Gaua’s communities that conform

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<sup>96</sup> “Stakeholder” refers to local persons directly and indirectly affected by a proposed or actual project, but it also includes governmental agencies and NGOs involved with the project in some capacity (UNESCO 2008:3).

to the “traditional” systems of land ownership and resource management. Within the kastom framework of land ownership and its associated procedures of taboo and respect-based enforcement, Togase saw a need to institute the “white man ways” (*fasin blong waetman*) of community-wide planning activities and workshops to achieve his baseline goals. The excursion to West Gaua was consistent with the general goals of his project: promoting awareness of the ecological and economic risks of certain subsistence routines and assisting landowners in placing taboos and educating households in “best practices” of resource use (Joses Togase, December 18, 2009).

According to the categories set by the Vanuatu Department of Fisheries, Gaua’s fisheries are mostly “subsistence” as opposed to “artisanal” where resources are extracted for sale in a market economy.<sup>97</sup> By this designation, the conservation goal for Gaua’s marine environment is to “conserve inshore fisheries resources to ensure their continued availability as food for the rural population” (Moses 2007). With the conservation agenda clearly defined, Togase and the group provided West Gauans with information about the most current prohibitions on subsistence practices and technologies, their necessity explained in terms of what has disappeared from Vanuatu’s marine environments and what are in the government’s estimations the most efficient ways to recover them.

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<sup>97</sup> “Subsistence” and “artisanal” fisheries are distinguished by the primary economic use of harvested goods but also by the types of technologies employed and marine areas targeted. Subsistence fishers in Vanuatu “target the inter-tidal zone and lagoon resources,” and employ gear types and activities ranging “from gillnetting, hand line, reef gleaning, spear-fishing and traps.” While some artisanal fishers meet the same descriptions as subsistence fishers, others occupy deeper waters with fishing boats and target larger species for export. Both categories are distinguished from the much larger commercial/industrial fisheries (Fisheries Department 2007:5).

In the remote villages of Dolap, Ontar, and Qetegaveg, the group communicated the new laws plainly and sympathetically, aware of the potential adversity the laws may introduce to household subsistence routines. The attendees were familiar with most of the presenters, and sat quietly in village cookhouses as steady waves of unfamiliar laws and exorbitant penalties washed over them for well over two hours. Collective gasps in response to hearing a particular law or violation fee punctuated the presentations. One such response was to the Fisheries Law (Act 42, 2005) which states that while landowners are free to conserve whatever they see fit, and may preserve or reject certain methods of harvesting, the use of poison leaf or any liquid or explosive substance will result in “a fine not exceeding ten million vatu” (approximately US\$100,000). Another law states that chiefs must announce taboos to the community accompanied by a Fisheries Officer. The violation of a marine taboo will result in a penalty of 50,000,000vt (nearly US\$500,000; Act 79, 2005); the taboo applies to harvesting, walking on coral, and the passage of boats inside the taboo areas. As the presenters reviewed the penalties, there emerged a palpable sense of discomfort and even anger from the attendees.

Following the presentations, the group opened the floor for questions and further discussion. In these exchanges, a pattern emerged: West Gauans were in agreement that in general, prohibitions on certain subsistence methods were necessary, and that the government ought to enact and enforce a uniform set of laws applicable to every island in Vanuatu. As I later learned, this was partially a tacit indictment of the weak system of chiefly power on Gaua, but also a fundamental recognition that their resource base is finite (see chapter 5). Whenever specific laws entered the conversation, however, they



were met by protests that the government ought not to regulate the subsistence practices of indigenous Gauans on their own land. While the attendees clearly recognized the losses of marine species due to poor management practices in the recent past, many objected to the notion that a general set of laws with obvious conservation aims could effectively resolve the micro-scale problems of specific West Gauan fisheries.

Landowners contended that every fishery or tract of land faces problems particular to it, as for example the combined effects of creek runoff and storm damage in a small lagoon, and that those families who have occupied these spaces for years are best suited to resolve them. They acknowledged that conserving key resources is a worthy goal of the government and of local landowners and land users. The recent environmental laws, however, group all people of Gaua into a homogeneous category of resident stakeholder or *man we i tekempat* (participant), with unique connections to land through knowledge, history, and productive capacity reduced to the uniformity of statutes and penalties. Some West Gauans approached me following the talk and insisted that they all had “different thoughts,” indicating that none of them was ready to abide by laws that erase what is so unique about them, their families, and the land with which they have interacted for countless decades. A few days later, I discussed my experiences with East Gauans who had attended similar presentations a few months earlier in their own villages. They firmly agreed that Vanuatu’s environmental laws, which had already become familiar locally as laws of *konsevesen*, erase critical distinctions among people and compromise conceptions of what land makes possible.

In October 2009, John Wetelwur of East Gaua provided me with his own written minutes of a series of community meetings conducted throughout Gaua in 2001 by the

Vanuatu Environment Unit. John noted that these meetings mark the moment when the term *konsevesen* entered Gauan communities and households in a lasting way, although he was well familiar with it from his travels throughout Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The meetings focused on three major objectives: local management of Lake Letes as a “sacred place”; educating young people about kastom subsistence practices; and improving the coordinated efforts of local chiefs, provincial authorities, and national agencies to *mekem ofisol* (make official) the placement and enforcement of taboos.

The intermittent efforts of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre to document key aspects of resource management on Gaua in the early 2000s alerted some landowners to the potential prestige of promoting “kastom” practices on their own lands. Joses Togase’s subsequent work as an Environment Unit representative beginning in 2006 was expressly directed toward the creation and management of conservation areas that conformed to the kastom practices of landowners and communities. Togase’s work was capably aided by a Peace Corps volunteer who taught environmental education in local schools and assisted with a conservation-targeted marine monitoring program called Reef Check in East Gaua in 2007 and in the west in 2008. The mid- to late-2000s was a period of immersion in the concepts and discourses of environmental conservation for communities throughout Gaua.

Prior to the environmental law talks in 2008, however, I learned of a growing dissatisfaction among some East and West Gauans that programs like Reef Check are insufficiently sensitive to the motivations Gauans have for maintaining their resource base. This sentiment was far from universal: some who disagreed accused the

programs' detractors of laziness and selfishness. Yet in their responses to the updated environmental laws, my interlocutors more inclusively expressed their uneasiness with some of the assumptions of conservation, even as they hailed the efforts of Togase and his Peace Corps co-worker to address such difficult problems as declining reef environments and shortages of potable water. Tivönö assessed conservation's "talk" as focused solely on trochus shells, green snail, and turtles—what is legal to harvest and what penalties await the transgressor. There is too little talk about kastom and how people "think differently"—how not everyone has the same "heart" regarding matters of resource management.

The ambivalence that many Gauans express toward new, conservation-directed environmental laws appears in their attitudes toward ecotourism. They are fully aware of the possibilities for a thriving ecotourism industry on their island, designed around its trio of natural wonders—Lake Letes, Mount Garat, and Siri Falls—and enhanced by the reputation of the isolated Banks Islands as a place where kastom life still flourishes. Supported by images of a culturally and environmentally pristine destination in the pages of *Lonely Planet* (e.g., Bennett and Harewood 2003) and *Island Spirit* (e.g., Huban 2001), many Gauans view ecotourism as the best chance for realizing new ways of life through *divelopmen* (development). Discourses of development flourish in places like the Banks Islands where residents express desires to overcome geographical and economic isolation and join the trajectories of better schools, hospitals, and life opportunities that they observe in other communities in Vanuatu. The proliferation of tourist bungalows throughout East and West Gaua provides evidence of the optimism

engendered by talk of tourism as a viable mode of development.<sup>98</sup> Alongside the enthusiasm and pride that these projects have brought to many Gauan families, however, is the growing sense that an emerging ecotourism industry endangers the valued and ethically relevant distinctions among them.

Societies throughout Melanesia and beyond struggle to achieve the kind of development that will transform their lives by infuse them with a capacity to meet their desires and to know other possible desires. For Mota, Gaua's neighbor to the north, development brought only disappointment, for it failed to provide the sense of empowerment that other, distinctively indigenous capacities already provided. Kolshus (2007) observes that for the people of Mota, "*divelopmen*, for all its elusiveness, implies the introduction of a reference standard that is permanently situated elsewhere, involving virtually infinite levels of new desires" (322). On Gaua, ecotourism as a new way of perceiving and interacting with the local environment is, like many (but certainly not all) self-conscious presentations of *kastom*, a commoditization of valued things imposed from the outside. The idea of *kastom* and environment as saleable commodities is largely unproblematic from a *tivönö* perspective. In the general context of tourism, distinctions between the cash value and moral value of certain *kastom* practices tend to become blurred, given the potential for cash to generate morally valued kinds of possibility (see chapter 5). What is troublesome in the Gaua context is that the reference standard which Kolshus rightly places outside the Melanesian world tends to restructure all local manifestations of development toward a uniform vision. The goals

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<sup>98</sup> Most of the existing tourist accommodations in East Gaua in 2011 were built between 2007 and 2010, suggesting that this period marked a peak of local interest in, and optimism about, tourism on Gaua (Jack Weler, pers. comm.).

and desires which motivate ecotourism become the goals and desires of *all* Gauans: the saleable commodity is the “Gaua-ness” of kastom and landscape, with the differentiations among persons, groups, and relations to land that organize and animate much of cultural and ethical life erased. As locally comprehended, such is the homogenization of Gaua in the assumptions and approaches of conservation-related laws and projects.

The disillusionment that many tivönö feel about the current state of ecotourism is symptomatic of their refusal to accept some of the implications of a generalizing view of themselves and their landscape. They expressed these sentiments to me in a few recurring statements: “They (the Vanuatu Tourism Office) think that just anyone can take visitors to the lake!” “We tivönö know what is important to show visitors—the lost villages and the taboo places!” “Visitors to *our* bungalow leave with memories of a true (*vidun*) kastom experience!” “We want people who come here to learn about *lavaswut* and tell their families about it!” Where there is cultural convergence, these sentiments seem to say, there is a loss of the authenticity of experience which attracts tourists to Gaua in the first place.

As with other articulations of conservation, an ecotourism infrastructure on Gaua speaks to the general desires of people for whom development presents the possibility for new possibilities. The problem of presenting Gaua as a kind of eco-product is that while cultural and historical experiences contribute to its uniqueness as a tourist destination, the ways that these experiences forge distinctive communities, each with their own ways of knowing and acting in the world, are erased by references that are external to them. Like Vanuatu’s environmental laws, conservation-influenced

projects, even those such as ecotourism which strive for at least the veneer of “kastom,” arrive on Gaua locally perceived as external, generalizing standards. Ecotourism tends toward “generification,” the course by which “environments and people come to be recognizable only to the extent that they fit the generic categories ‘Nature,’ ‘Exotic,’ and ‘Simple.’ Aspects of environments that do not fit the categories are reduced to irrelevance” (West and Carrier 2004:491, after Errington and Gewertz 2001). As we have seen, the forms of otherness that tivönö identify in ethical and cosmological terms are far from irrelevant to their own lives.

One way to comprehend conservation’s pull toward cultural and ethical uniformity is to think of its expectations in contrast to one’s *navgi*. Recall from chapter 4 that *navgi* is a “moral community” from the perspective of Ego: one includes in one’s *navgi* everyone imagined to be a possible or actual recipient of care, whether in enduring relations of care or in more transitory moments of *lavaswut*, or welcoming hospitality. Tivönö described responsibility for their *navgi* as always evident to them: *kere gor* (looking-after) and *tomtom* (caring-for) are matters for everyday thought, reinforced through subsistence acts even as those acts are not immediately directed toward relations outside the household as it is presently constituted. They place their land, including fisheries, into *navgi* by virtue of their responsibilities toward “looking after” them, over and beyond land’s valued symbolism of a group of indigenous persons with distinctive rights and capacities. By contrast, the processes and events that have become “konsevesen” for tivönö, such as new and restrictive environmental laws, ecotourism, Reef Check, and even climate change (see below), undermine the ethical

force of *navgi* as that which is *one's own* responsibility given one's place in the social and cosmological order.

*Navgi* and *konsevesen* are both universalizing concepts. Whereas *navgi* dissolves boundaries of social and geographical distance to ascribe kin-like qualities to a wide range of people, *konsevesen* takes a holistic, ecological view of island environments and the people who inhabit them. Tivönö are dismayed that *konsevesen* denies their ability in many respects to draw up their own world of responsibility and care as exemplified in *navgi*. This situation, however, points to the more pervasive problem of denying the possibilities for a distinctive tivönö way of being through erasure of the ordering of tivönö/non-tivönö which sets the first of the two apart in social space by virtue of distinctive moral obligations and capacities. When land and resources are no longer conceived in terms of the obligations, capacities, and—crucially—*decisions* of tivönö landowners, “tivönö” and even “kastom” are semantically void. My interlocutors observe that *navgi* as an egocentric (but by definition, non-solipsistic) moral universe collapses in a space where a genuine otherness—an objectively measured distinction between self and other—is erased.

My interlocutors expressed their appreciation for the work of Togase and other conservation agents who have worked on Gaua. Beyond the problems of cultural and moral convergence, their trepidation lay in the belief that the government of Vanuatu seeks to inculcate new, Western-influenced methods of fishing and harvesting wood with dubious prospects for success. A recurring question, often directed to me, was “Why does the government want to make this work [of local resource management] so complicated? Our current ways are not confusing.” Flora Lu (2007) observes that

“people are not going to devise regimes that are more complicated than necessary, because developing these social arrangements involves effort and energy to reach consensus” (46). Tivönö and many non-indigenous Gauans are wary of a “commons” approach to resource management (Hardin 1968; Berkes et al 1989; Dietz et al 2003), where all properties and environments are presumed the right and responsibility of everyone. For them such an approach complicates the simple structures of social-cosmological distinctions, even if by “simple” (*isi*) my interlocutors perceive their systems of land use and resource management not as straightforward and noncontentious, but as rooted in everyday practice.

### **New vulnerabilities, fading alterities**

A recurring theme throughout the dissertation has been the role of otherness in the ethical lives of tivönö. I have presented a view of Gauan ethics in which acts of imagining and creating certain kinds of relations with others are guided by categories of inclusion and exclusion. Agents reflect on particular ontological and cosmological oppositions depending on the situations in which they find themselves—that is, depending on the ethical questions they are trying to answer. Among the questions tivönö ask when assessing the standards and assumptions of conservation-related laws and projects is “who gets to draw up the world?” This is the problem of *navgi*, where questions of whom one includes in one’s ambit of care and why one ought to take responsibility for responsibility in the first place are experienced as intimate concerns—as evidence of “*kastom* in the bones”—and as indexes of a *kastom* connection to place. In this section I examine how conservation awareness as it has developed on Gaua poses questions of inclusion, exclusion, and world-making by challenging fundamental



ways that tivönö organize socially and ethically. I depart from the previous section by focusing on a specific problem as it is comprehended within local conceptions of environmental conservation.

As conservation has entered the everyday talk of Gauan communities it has been transformed into “konsevesen,” a set of ideas and practices not bound to the Western conceptions from which it derives many of its basic premises. Some of these premises remain in local konsevesen as assumptions traceable to environmental laws and projects such as Reef Check. Western conservation’s own “normative assumptions” range from ubiquitous buzzwords to concepts that are “institutionalized in national, international, and multinational policy and law” and operative in projects across the globe (Callicott et al 1999:23). One such normative concept within the broad arena of conservation discourse is “vulnerability,” a research focus in its own right and with its own associated theories and vocabularies. Anthropologists Patricia Clay and Julia Olson (2008) provide a comprehensive overview of “vulnerability research” in their analysis of U. S. fisheries legislation: “vulnerability” is a multifaceted measurement of the risks that overharvesting and natural disasters pose to the economic and ecological well-being of fishing communities. Clay and Olson argue that U. S. fisheries legislation presumes “universal standards and applicability” in addressing problems of vulnerability, and is therefore insufficiently attentive to local sociocultural factors in fisheries management. Effective fisheries conservation requires destabilizing

homogeneous conceptions of vulnerability and even “community,” and attending to locally relevant factors such as “kinship and gender relations” (152).<sup>99</sup>

Vulnerability is a commonplace normative assumption of Western conservation. Detecting its influence on Gaua, however, is a difficult matter. As *konsevesen* is still new to Gaua relative to other occurrences of environmental conservation in the Pacific and elsewhere, it is difficult to assess in the ethnographic present what is construable as normative within this emerging discourse. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain prevailing themes. Over the course of the many interviews and surveys I conducted to understand how people in East Gaua confront a broad range of environmental issues, I discerned a small set of recurring, basic concerns comprehended within *konsevesen*. I present below the most common of these associated concerns, with representative examples of their expressed connections to *konsevesen* taken from field interviews:

*graon* (land): “With *konsevesen* we expect landowners to constantly guard their land from bad behavior in the community.”

*gavman* (government): “The (Vanuatu) government brought *konsevesen* to Gaua. They told us that *konsevesen* covers everything ‘from reef to forest’. You hear people (on Gaua) saying that now. But that is Port Vila (i.e. government) talk.”

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<sup>99</sup> The ubiquity of “vulnerability” as a guiding concept in conservation and related studies extends beyond fisheries management. Notions of sociocultural and economic vulnerability to anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic environmental disasters appear in early and influential appraisals of the modern “ecological crisis” of the technological West (e.g., White 1967). Academic conferences highlighting problems of green economies and sustainable development (e.g., UNRISD, 2011: <http://www.unrisd.org>), and of risk in “human-environmental systems” (Session 3-0965, 2011 Annual Meeting, American Anthropological Association), identify vulnerability as a central theoretical and practical problem with direct application to conservation issues.

*risos* (resources): “What are ‘resources’? We talk about *konsevesen* now, and we call food ‘resources’. The lake is ‘resources’ now. This is new talk, like ‘*konsevesen*’.”

*divelopmen* (development): “You cannot make a development project without *konsevesen*. Even when we built the (new primary) school, there was *konsevesen*.”

*fiuja* (future): “*Konsevesen* means thinking about the distant future (*aŋis*), the children of my children. We have to think about them now.”

*denja* (danger): “There are new dangers on Gaua now. The people who brought *konsevesen* to Gaua did so because of the new dangers. That’s why *konsevesen* is here.” These are emerging associations—concerns about life and community linked through discourses of *konsevesen*, some in novel ways. Once limited to assessments of the ritual power of ranked men and women, *denja* (danger) has entered the field of *konsevesen* discourse on Gaua as evidenced in local recitations of environmental laws and recounted experiences with visiting conservation agents. *Denja* as it is articulated in Gauans’ *konsevesen* narratives resembles “vulnerability” in Western conservation: Gauan lives and livelihoods *luk denja* (see danger) in the risks of neglectful resource management and other growing environmental concerns. In a manner analogous to “vulnerability” as deployed in U. S. fisheries management, *denja* presents Gaua with problems of uniformity which challenge local orderings of people and places.

People throughout Gaua have observed changes to their environment, many of which they perceive as non-local in origin, the result of processes or agencies external to Gaua’s human communities. I asked Gauans to describe the changes that have occurred in fisheries, gardens, and the forests from which they obtain firewood and

occasionally hunt wild boar and birds. The results are listed in Table 6.1. All of the observed changes in the first column are identified by my interlocutors as problems of *konsevesen*; furthermore, they are all categorized as *denja*, as direct threats to household subsistence. The highest ranking observation, changes in the size and abundance profiles of marine resources, is attributed predominantly to overharvesting as a result of an increasing population. This situation of “*denja*” is a source of considerable anxiety to Gauans across age groups and places of origin, and is the primary motivating factor in the broad support for some form of conservation presence on Gaua. Surveying the other observed changes we find that my interlocutors view four of the remaining six as originating beyond the boundaries of their island. These changes are familiar in Western environmental discourse as climate change, and recognized by *tivönö* and other Gauan communities as problems of *konsevesen*.

“Climate change” describes a range of transformations in climatological patterns and their associate effects, such as increases in sea surface temperature (SST) and latitudinal shifts in faunal migrations and ranges of botanical species. While many such patterns are predictable cyclical processes, others have been identified as anthropogenic in origin, the result of an increase in carbon dioxide levels in the Earth’s atmosphere from burning coal, gas, and oil (Flannery 2005; Kolbert 2006; Schneider et al 2009). Vulnerability has become a standard metric for assessing the potential hazards of climate change across multiple dimensions of human and ecological well-being. While “social vulnerability” indexes such factors as risks to human health and local economies, the term “vulnerability” has become so diffuse in scientific discourse as to become imprecise and impractical (Füssel 2009:2).

**Table 6.1:** Observations of locally- (intra-island) and non-locally- (extra-island) generated environmental change<sup>100</sup>

Observed change	Observed by Tivönö (total n = 88)	Observed by Non-Tivönö (total n = 32)	Locally produced change? <sup>101</sup>
Smaller and less abundant marine resources	80	25	Y: 88 N: 13
Pollution and reef damage from creek and coastal runoff	68	28	Y: 4 N: 90
Changing seasonal wind and rain patterns affecting gardens	63	11	Y: 0 N: 72
Reef damage from storms	54	19	Y: 3 N: 68
Shallow-water fish and turtle habitats destroyed by “hot sun”	39	8	Y: 2 N: 39
Household pollution (food refuse, coconut shells, batteries)	39	20	Y: 56 N: 1
Reef damage from boats and walking	30	2	Y: 27 N: 3

In Vanuatu, state-level climate change monitoring has reached the early stages of the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (NCCAS), designed to “address current weather and disaster issues” as they increasingly affect ni-Vanuatu families.<sup>102</sup> As of my last research visit to Gaua (August-September 2011), the “expert team of ni-Vanuatu” assembled by the NCCAS had not yet arrived to instruct Gauan residents in how to mitigate their own vulnerabilities from sea level rise and other climate change-related effects. As I found early in my fieldwork, however, Gauans had already become

<sup>100</sup> Survey conducted with 120 residents of East Gaua, September-October 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Total “Yes” and “No” responses for tivönö and non-tivönö. Differences between sum totals in the second and third columns and totals in the fourth column indicate “not sure” responses.

<sup>102</sup> Quote by Dr. John Hay, reported in the *Vanuatu Daily Post*, May 3, 2011.

<http://www.dailypost.vu/content/government-prepares-national-climate-change-adaptation-strategy>

As an “event” of climate change awareness in Vanuatu, the first NCCAS workshop in 2011 was long preceded by the evacuation of residents of Tegua in Vanuatu’s northernmost Torres Islands in 2005 ostensibly due to changing climatic conditions. Although reported assertions that the evacuation was directly attributable to rising sea levels have not gone uncontested (Peter Boehm, *The Independent UK*: 30 August 2006), narratives of *si i kam antap bigwan* (rising seas) reached other ni-Vanuatu communities, including Gaua.

well aware of changes in their climate. They described them to me as incipient “denja,” increasingly familiar as problems of *konsevesen* (see Table 6.1). Climate change is one facet of a growing local *konsevesen* discourse on Gaua which encompasses a variety of emerging environmental phenomena and their sociocultural effects.

One morning in northeast Gaua, two landowners and their sons led me through a dense patch of forest to the edge of the shore at an area called *Daŋara*. One of them pointed to a small stretch of sand and explained that in the dry season, the sea level never reaches the two- to three-meter-high rocks lining the shore just above it. Turning back inland, we headed up a gentle slope to the remains of a stone foundation of an old house about 30 meters from shore. The house marked the predictable sea-level highpoint for the rainy season (January-March). We then climbed a steep trail behind the stone edifice until we crossed the main road and continued further inland into one of the landowner’s coconut plantations. A copra drying house stood about 40 meters from the road. The landowner thrust his bush knife deep into the soil near the base of the house and explained that the ground was still soft from the flooding of the plantation nearly six months earlier. We were standing a considerable distance from the site of the once-highest point of coastal flooding, nearly 70 meters inland and 11 meters in elevation per my GPS unit. My guides anticipated that in a few years, with the sea reaching well beyond its rainy season high-water mark and breaching the boundaries of coconut groves and gardens, seasonal expectations of what is possible in household production will reduce to worried speculation. This is the “denja” that the rising sea at *Daŋara* has brought to the consciousness of *tivönö*—an emerging problem of dissolving spatial boundaries and diminishing possibilities.

In ideal terms, the *tivönö*/non-*tivönö* distinction is maintained by the control that *tivönö* exhibit over the productive capacities of land; I described earlier how this state of affairs has been eroding for the past four decades. Observations of non-locally generated environmental changes—of coastal erosion and intensifying storm damage to reefs and marine habitats—revealed growing sentiments that land and resources will become progressively less manageable. My interlocutors found these changes peculiar, with some describing them as *welerler* (insane, stupid) to convey the uneasiness and frustration that they engender. There were observations that the quality of *niran tañnen*, of nature’s predictability upon which the possibility space of subsistence is constructed, is increasingly *matev*—human-like, capricious, and insufficiently other. Cyclone Funa’s strange “conduct” in 2008—its pending arrival unannounced by any of the typical ecological cues—provides *tivönö* with a familiar instance of their changing relation to the environment. As well there were persons who found evidence of a new and confounding form of “denja” in the bodily registering of locally- versus non-locally-generated change and in the options for resolution available to them. Trespassing, household pollution, and vandalism of reefs are unambiguously comprehended as forms of disrespect, experienced as a cold presence originating in the heart and dropping into the stomach where it expands and causes shame. These situations are resolved by confronting the transgressor or his family about the disrespectful act or countering the experience of shame by alerting the community to the act (recall the Aver woman’s response to theft in chapters 3 and 4). In such cases, the identity of the transgressor is either known or is isolated within the boundaries of Gaua’s shores.

But who is the transgressor in the “act” of rising seas or destructive storms? Many of my interlocutors recalled assessing storm damage to fisheries and gardens, and noticing the stark absence of feelings in their hearts even as they interpreted the damage as transgressions against them. There was only a “small feeling in the stomach” (*tuar dudumi weskit allon na-taqan*): one of my interlocutors likened the experience to a small seashell attached to the inner wall below his ribs. Furthermore, they found no practical response as they did to local forms of disrespect, for the source of “denja” was beyond reach, in the vague realm of *lam* (deep sea) or *tavla now* (overseas, foreign place) rather than nearby in *vönö*, Gaua’s living space. Tivönö provide for the well-being of others and reaffirm distinctive kastom identities through the control of land and its resources, and by responding forcefully and effectively to persons who would impede these possibilities in their everyday lives. The new “denja” brought by changing weather and sea patterns is, at least for the moment, a confounding force in these efforts. This is the problem of inevitability, familiar to tivönö in their close interactions with household and other kin (see chapter 4). Novel changes threaten to erase possibility by rendering land both unpredictably productive and uniformly unmanageable across cultural divisions.

The instability of productivity has wide-ranging effects in the ways tivönö order their ethical worlds. Consider the inability to produce *amaren*, a near-future of possibility for self and others through productive work. In September 2009 I met with two households in a northeast village to discuss their reasons for allowing their low-lying taro gardens to go fallow and clearing new land to relocate them a walking distance of 45-minutes into the forest. They conceded that this move, which was



originally the idea of one of the household heads, seemed strange to others in the village: “Why would they do that? They have to carry baskets of taro through the bush!” Household members replied to the often derisive comments of their neighbors by reminding them about flooded village plains and uprooted banana trees and taro gardens during the last few rainy seasons. They described their decision as anticipating the immediate needs of their households and others during the increasingly powerful and unpredictable storms of the cyclone season.

This anticipation articulates the problem of possibility: that the future must be secured through the predictable production of well-being through subsistence. The opportunity for subsistence into the immediate future is at the core of concerns about climate change and its “denja.” These are grave concerns for tivönö: they comprehend their vulnerability to a changing environment in terms suggestive of Maurice Blanchot’s (1995) notion of “un-power,” a condition which, like death, “wrests from the present” and “rules out every conclusion and all ends, it does not free nor does it shelter” (48). This view of vulnerability, as a “denja” which places ultimate limits on well-being and futurity, is quite unlike the shared ontological condition which guides encounters and relations of care through common experience. A key difference between the two conceptions of vulnerability is in their comparative temporalities. The ethical stance toward the vulnerable other in encounters of care relies on the notion that the potential giver has experienced and overcome a problem and has gained the wisdom, and has the productive capacity and sense of obligation, to come to the aid of someone in the present. The vulnerability brought about by climate change and other problems of *konsevesen* posits a condition of contemporaneity: it deprives the tivönö ethical agent of

the temporal advantage of having already overcome danger or deprivation. Un-power in this ethical sense is shared—the anticipations of production are uniformly forestalled—and as such it becomes an unavoidable ontological condition with disintegrating effects on the moral force of cosmological distinctions.

It remains to be seen whether the commonality which transforms strangers into kin can withstand the violence of possibility's erasure—that is, the loss of the productive capacity necessary to every act of looking-after and caring-for. It is equally unclear whether alternative forms of freedom and cosmological ordering, and the possibilities they occasion, will emerge from the problem of rising seas, flooding coastal plains, and storm-shattered reefs, and from the new ethical questions they present in the lives of tivönö. I have described contemporary human-environment interactions on Gaua as questions or problems of erasure. Land alienation and the commons-based logic of many conservation efforts evidence erasures of spatial and cosmological boundaries. Vulnerability as a novel form of un-power has begun to blur the ontological and temporal distinctions vital to an ethical life for tivönö. If there is a path forward for agreement between konsevesen and Gauan ethics, it must bridge temporal disparities and offer tivönö conceptions of obligation and identity which they may experience as sufficiently “true” to place. I conclude the chapter with some thoughts about that possible path.

### **Possible conclusions: Strange paths of posterity and hope**

Throughout this dissertation I have focused on the ways in which Gauan tivönö produce possibility—that is, how they take as their ethical work the creative shaping of the future for themselves and others. “The future” in these various scenarios has been

*amaren*, the near-future or the coming-into-present. Qat's return to Gaua with the "best of everything" he stole in the island's mythic near-past is always just within reach, hence the care with which tivönö maintain the paths, waters, and boundaries of the caldera. As for interactions among people, the imaginative acts of *domwen* inspire relations of care in the very next moment, as the proper responses of kastom persons to the perceived vulnerability of others. People enact these relations through the procedural expectations of kin term exchange, where acts of generosity and respect are highly sensitive to delayed expression and reciprocation. The ethical act and the ensuing relation of care are accomplished in the coming-into-present: they identify the point in time (the temporal node, per chapter 1) from which new kinds of social-ethical being—new possibilities for relating to others—transpire and often endure. Articulations of subsistence were, and to some extent still are, similar acts of world-making—productions of well-being and futurity which link collective memories to present exigencies. Within the everyday practices which fall into the category of *amaren*, namely, providing for others and affirming authentic local identities, *konsevesen* on Gaua is increasingly present as a reminder of fragile cultural boundaries. Yet as a distinctive Gauan category encompassing many of the assumptions of Western conservation, *konsevesen* indexes a future that exceeds the bounds of *amaren* and poses questions of possibility that transcend present problems of cultural and ethical convergence.

Earlier in this chapter I presented a brief list of concerns or assumptions which my tivönö interlocutors increasingly associate with *konsevesen*. Among them is *fiuja*, which they recognize as the temporality of "the children of [our] children." I explained

in chapters 4 and 5 that Nume speakers reckon the future on two distinct registers. One is *amaren*; the other is *an̄is*, the indeterminate future which tivönö glimpse at the outer margins of moral imagination and obligation. When a tivönö woman described *navgi* to me and told me that I was a member of hers even before we had met, she explained my previous location within her moral community as *aras* and *an̄is*—as spatially and temporally distant. This stretching of obligation beyond the horizons of the contingent present is uncomplicated because it is a matter for one’s own quiet contemplation on the broader world of people, not a practical problem in need of articulation and action. The “moral-imaginative ‘frontier’” which I introduced in Figure 4.1 (configuration number six) describes this strangest of strange relations in tivönö ethical thought. Crapanzano’s notion of *frontier*, the imagined world that “resists articulation” (2004:18), well describes my curious presence as a member of the woman’s *navgi*—a presence of an impersonal type eliciting the most general obligation. *Konsevesen* and its associated notion of “*fiuja*” bring the moral-imaginative frontier out of the benign safety of contemplation and into the concrete, insisting that inhabitants of the indeterminate future represent real concerns embedded in practices of the present. This is the question of possibility that *konsevesen* poses to tivönö: What is the extent of one’s moral obligation to persons inhabiting indeterminate futures? Furthermore, what are the implications of such obligation on the viability of tivönö and *kastom* identities?

The genealogy of “*fiuja*” as a concern within Gauan *konsevesen* is traceable to *posterity*, which I identify as one of the normative assumptions of Western conservation. Posterity is the problem of “diachronic obligation” or “trans-temporal concern” (Grey 1996:162), where present actions are imbued with future-oriented

judgments given expectations that such actions will affect the lives of future persons. In more temporally distant understandings of posterity, future persons are “possible” persons: they are of a different ontological character than recipients of care who are currently living in that the kinds of persons they will become are shaped by actions of the present in unknowable ways. In other words, the worlds they inhabit cannot be fully known to us in the present, yet we are ethically bound to the conditions of those worlds by virtue of our world-making capacities here and now.

From a particular Western perspective, the obligation to reflect on posterity in interactions with the environment seem unmistakable to at least some people. The obligation becomes more evident when cast as a legal argument. William Grey (1996) illustrates this point:

If I were to secretly bury some toxic waste on a site subsequently developed, later occupants of the site might have a legitimate and actionable grievance against me. I could not defend myself by claiming that the plaintiff was not born when I buried the waste. [...] We can wrong a person by bringing it about that that person is adversely affected by our actions even if the aggrieved did not exist at the time of our actions. [Grey 1996:171]

So it is with the legal and ethical claims of conservation’s assumption of posterity. To similar ends, Jérôme Bindé’s (2000) “ethics of the future” opens the “horizon of meaning” of present actions and takes seriously the inherent uncertainty of large-scale human projects. The 1992 Rio Summit affirmed the “principle of precaution,” the careful anticipation of the most wide-ranging set of possible outcomes of present action, or what Bindé identifies as the establishing of “a new temporality of disaster” (2000:60). Notions of diachronic obligation and new temporalities of disaster reveal vulnerability as a guiding feature of conservation’s posterity.

While there are familiar notions of “denja” and “fiuja” in Gauan *konsevesen* located within the temporality of *amaren*, posterity as it is imagined in Western conservation fits awkwardly. Donald Tuzin observed that the problem of posterity’s long temporal reach is the most significant limiting factor to conservation projects in Melanesia (pers. comm., March 22, 2006). For Gauan *tivönö*, the transition of *an̄is* from informal contemplation to immediate concern provides evidence of Tuzin’s assertion. To understand why this is the case we may consider the structure of reciprocity in *tivönö* relations of care. I have described the objective, procedural expectations of a return of respect in incipient relations of care: one who gives to others and bestows on them the status of kin expects to be addressed by the appropriate corresponding kin terms. The return of respect is equally anticipated in moments of *lavaswut*, where *tivönö* persons and their families sacrifice material production and labor in the spirit of *kere gor*, or looking-after. Conservation’s posterity transcends the boundaries of the coming-into-present in which exchanges such as these take place. Its real moral obstacle lies in the fact that it is a temporality wholly different in kind from the socially productive realm of *amaren*.

In social-ethical terms, engaging the vague future of *an̄is* as a space of actualized relations announces the possibility of what Stuart Kirsch (2006) in another setting refers to as “unrequited reciprocity,” a disruption of the expected flow of exchange where the failure to return “dehumanizes” participants by negating the mutual recognition that exchange engenders (80). Additionally, as many *tivönö* landowners explained to me regarding their deliberations on long-term marine closures, the threat of “negative potentiality” (Munn 1986:223), of denying “the claim of the excluded other”

who is one's contemporaneous neighbor and a potential recipient of care, undermines the logic of adopting conservation's posterity as the socially viable future of *konsevesen*. Even in the context of *navgi*, where one contemplates a possible world of relations, the spatially and temporally distant "child" or "brother" ideally feels the ethical pull of reciprocal respect. Restated, the problem for *tivönö* is that unlike *navgi*, conservation obliges relations of care with possible persons who are, by posterity's logic, already real.

If there is an answer to the knotty ethical question of what *tivönö* owe to posterity (and equally, what posterity owes the present), it lies with their profound concern for possibility, though of a different sort. The Nume term *wun* signifies possibility within the temporal bounds of *amaren*: this is the active production of viable futures which I have addressed in a variety of cultural and ethical settings throughout the dissertation. A less common meaning of *wun* is revealed within the frame of *an̄is*: here, in the indeterminate future, *wun* for *tivönö* means "hope" (*hop*). Hope has received scholarly attention in recent years as a methodological and conceptual approach to analyzing conditions of despair, from terminal illness (Mattingly 2010) to the eradication of an entire cultural complex (Lear 2006). Zigon (2009a) argues that contrary to the affirmations of influential writers on the topic (Crapanzano 2003; Miyazaki 2004), hope is neither an active/passive dichotomy nor "a future-oriented stance toward either an ideal goal or the good" (2009a:254). Of the hope imagined by his Muscovite interlocutors, Zigon concludes that "to live in a social life demands not only a background attitude of persevering hope through the everyday routines of that

life, but also the active hope to keep going through the bad times, or the breakdowns, that are inevitable in all social and personal life” (2009a:268).

“Hope-as-perseverance” provides valuable insight into how Muscovites cope with the daily rigors of being. Yet the problem with attempting to situate Zigon’s conception of hope within the Gauan context is a familiar one: his notion of “active hope” succumbs to the same problem of phasic social experience that the always-vulnerable moral personhood of *tivönö* rejects as contrary to the expectations of *kastom* (see chapter 3). What is identified as “hope” in the Muscovite context—the everyday, contemplative desire that things will turn out alright—occupies what Gauan *tivönö* perceive as *amaren*. For them, this is the temporal space for the self-expectation of productive work, of routinely providing for others and building relations of care. Possibility is a production: it is always a matter for the active present and the coming-into-present, and it provides the impetus for believing that even the most despairing of life’s scenarios is not inevitable. By contrast, hope is excluded from the active future: it is the moral imagination’s exercise in conceivability rather than possibility. This is the passive/active distinction of *wun*. Yet conceivability is not without ethical force; hence the attention *tivönö* give to the moral-imaginative ‘frontier’ as an answer to potential questions of relating to others.

*Tivönö* perceive the frontier and its alterity. Otherness drives much of what they work to achieve for themselves, from expanding networks beyond current social and geographical boundaries to engaging novel ways of securing a living and even having fun through technology and travel. The possibilities of bending the temporal categories of environmental conservation to accommodate the ethical requirements of reciprocity



and respect turn on how “the otherness at the core of a relation consists specifically of a mismatch between different *temporal* levels of people’s relations” (Stasch 2009:17). Given how tivönö make commonality out of otherness in their relations of care, and observing their capacities for creating new possibility spaces with the non-human environment, closing the ethical gap of temporal mismatch is at least conceivable for them; it is a hope that becomes a possibility on at least one forking path of history. With the inexorable forward push of conservation’s big talk, hope may soon be a matter of active, productive possibility where old frontiers become new everyday concerns.

## Conclusion

The focal question of this dissertation has been how people in a small subsistence society in insular Melanesia comprehend their interactions with the natural environment as matters of ethics. Otherness and possibility emerged as interlinked concerns guiding the everyday actions of “tivönö,” or indigenous “people of the place” in East Gaua, Vanuatu, in their social-ethical space. I began in chapter 2 with an idea of Gaua’s landscape as a symbolic configuration of the world, both as it ought to be, embodied in the mythic timelessness of the lake, and as it is, the place of contingency and change represented in the populated areas adjacent to the sea. For tivönö, the boundary between what is and what ought to be is dissolved through acts which bring often novel possibility to the lives of oneself and others and affirm a distinctive *kastom* identity. This production of possibility occurs in two critical forms of everyday practice: creating and affirming relations with others and interactions with the natural environment.

In chapter 3 I explored how tivönö “relations of care,” which are grounded in the reciprocal exchange of generosity and respect, begin with an encounter with the vulnerable other. Bridging the gap of “is” and “ought” is the singular work of the moral imagination, or *domwen*. Tivönö transform “strangers” (*salavan*) into “kin” (*rasogo*) by carefully balancing the situational vulnerability of others, which they understand as a common human experience, and the radical otherness of other persons’ thoughts and feelings. In chapter 4 I explained how kinship guides moral-imaginative comprehension of the commonality and otherness characteristic of every person in one’s social life. These qualities are refracted into the notion of *navgi*, the “moral community” of

others whom one understands oneself as obligated to look after through acts of generosity and care. One's *navgi* includes *actual* relations of care as well as *possible* relations not yet actualized through socially productive work.

The productive capacity required to transform *navgi* relations from possibility to actuality is revealed through subsistence practices—through fishing, gardening, and producing copra and other saleable commodities. In chapter 5 I described the production of possibility through subsistence as the securing of *well-being*—meeting material and other needs essential to a satisfactory life—and *futurity*—cultivating an attitude in oneself and others that desires and goals are achievable. While subsistence facilitates relations of care through the production of well-being and futurity, it is itself the outcome of an encounter with otherness, a possibility space emergent in encounters between the creative and changeable human character of *matev* and the natural environment's steady predictability, or *niran taʻanen*.

In recent years, *tivönö* and other Gauan communities have witnessed a series of changes to their familiar perceptions of the natural environment and their place in it. A discourse of *konsevesen* has emerged as a local response to externally introduced conservation projects and other incipient developments such as ecotourism and climate change. In chapter 6 I examined how certain elements of “*konsevesen*” have prompted the erasure of ethically salient forms of otherness. The cosmological ordering of *tivönö*/non-*tivönö* which inspires a distinctive and ethically significant autochthonous identity is increasingly contested by the undifferentiating categories of “vulnerability” and “stakeholder” assumed by conservation agents and adapted and modified in Gauan “*konsevesen*.” *Posterity*, conservation's trans-temporal concern for and obligation to

future persons, provides the limiting case for Gauan ethics. The success of environmental conservation projects on Gaua hinges in part on the extent to which tivönö can imaginatively grasp obligations to temporally distant persons as matters of kastom.

I have presented tivönö kastom as an impetus to ethical production, by which I have meant the creation of relations of care and the securing of well-being and futurity for self and others. This is a view of kastom as a category of practice but also as *Weltanschauung*, a perception of the world and one's place in it which for tivönö imparts a sense of uniqueness as a person of *this* place (cf. Bolton 2003:25; Rousseau 2008:26). Although my interlocutors often invoked a fixed and enduring sense of kastom as “in the bones,” they also revealed its capacity for encompassing a broad range of ostensibly novel practices and events. Amidst the calm and clamor of change, kastom bends to encompass many novel modes of practice toward resolving the distance between “is” and “ought.”

Yet kastom is not infinitely malleable, a point observable in its confrontations with rapidly encroaching “world systems” (Hviding 1993). As various elements of “konsevesen” impinge on the forms of otherness with which tivönö position themselves in social-ethical space, the question of kastom is not merely what it can contain in terms of providing a sense of autochthonous identity in evolving practices. The unanswered question in the ethnographic present is whether being “true kastom” (*stret kastom*) will continue to matter into the indeterminate future imagined by konsevesen. This speculation in no way precludes the existence of multiple forms of “true kastom” which reveal themselves in interpersonal disagreements regarding questions of what relations

beyond the boundaries of Gaua are worth having and which cultural-historical moments are worthy of perpetuating. Where many tivönö and other indigenous Gauans come together on matters generally regarded as kastom, however, is in its role in making possibility. As they articulate essential problems of possibility in tivönö life, especially within a changing environment, questions of kastom's enduring value and temporal reach will continue to engage and provoke Gaua's people of the place.

## Appendices

### APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY

<i>amaren</i>	tomorrow; the near, determinate future
<i>aŋis</i>	the distant, indeterminate future
<i>atan</i>	the soul, the entity which inhabits the living person and travels to the afterlife following corporeal death
<i>ate vere</i>	spirits of place which inhabit persons, animals, and trees
<i>domwen</i>	fusion of imagination, memory, and reflection in moral experience
<i>domwun</i>	to imagine; to reflect on and regard as important
<u><i>fiuja</i></u>	future
<u><i>kastom</i></u>	practices, material culture, and worldviews identified as autochthonous and as attributes of an indigenous identity
<i>kere gor</i>	to look after, to take responsibility for (n. and v.)
<i>ker liŋliŋi</i> others	to recognize; to imaginatively implicate oneself in the situations of others
<u><i>konsevesen</i></u>	the class of human-environmental interactions (e.g., state-enacted environmental laws, NGO resource management projects, and climate change) which feature qualities and assumptions derived in part from Western environmental conservation
<i>lavaswut</i>	a welcoming attitude (welcoming all persons at all times)
<i>leŋmwe</i>	taro garden
<i>lewetan</i>	yam garden; general term for garden
<i>letes</i>	Gaua's caldera, including the lake, volcano, waterfall, and surrounding forest
<i>marana</i>	chief

<i>mat</i>	death; to die; eye (root form)
<i>matev</i>	way or manner, characteristic of humanness; defined by the quality of unpredictability
<i>nablak</i>	first-person singular possessive pronoun indicating something cultivated and cared for
<i>namuk</i>	first-person singular possessive pronoun indicating general ownership
<i>navgi</i>	moral community, from the perspective of Ego; the totality of persons in a place of residence
<i>niran taŋnen</i>	defined by the quality of predictability
<i>now</i>	the sea; seawater
<i>Qat</i>	founder hero of the Banks Islands and creator of Lake Letes on Gaua
<i>ranti</i>	the indeterminate past; the past preceding the day before yesterday
<i>rasogo</i>	general term for kin relation; matrilineal line (M, MM, MMM, Z, ZS, ZD, etc.)
<i>revesar</i>	a large kastom fishing net consisting of a long length of vine with coconut leaves attached and hanging perpendicularly into the water to attract and trap fish
<i>rivte</i>	distant
<i>Rovinqet</i>	founder figure of Gaua, whose grandchildren formed Lake Letes and the River Solomul
<i>salavan</i>	stranger; visitor
<i>tamat</i>	devil or other malicious spirit; evil or malicious (adj.); a now-moribund secret society where a man of high rank imparted secret kastom knowledge; a human corpse following burial
<i>tan</i>	land; the terrestrial living space of humans
<i>tavaliu</i>	all people who inhabit East Gaua; “this side of the island”
<i>tavulun</i>	all people who inhabit West Gaua; “the other side of the island”

<i>tavusmel</i>	a high-ranking man, a kastom adept
<i>tivönö</i>	of the place (adj.); in this dissertation: indigenous, Nume-speaking persons of north and northeast Gaua
<i>tomtom</i>	to care for; to love (n. and v.)
<i>tundun</i>	person, human (non-gender-specific)
<i>vere</i>	island; the domesticated living spaces of humans
<i>vev, veve</i>	mother (see Appendix C); moiety
<i>vinin</i>	fellow tribe members; fellow household members
<i>vönö</i>	the encompassing (terrestrial and marine) living space of humans; a tree ( <i>navenu</i> , <i>Macaranga tanarius</i> ) commonly used for construction timber
<i>warar</i>	the elemental force of evil manifested in malicious acts of humans and spirits
<i>wun</i>	possibility (in the determinate future); hope (in the indeterminate future)
<i>wutve</i>	general term for pig (also <i>qo</i> )
<i>wuvu sunsun</i>	a malevolent spirit that fills the human body and manifests in anti-social behavior and sickness
<i>wuvu (vebon)</i>	the “good” spirit bequeathed to very young children by tribal elders or mothers’ brothers
<i>wuvu vetes</i>	a <i>wuvu (vebon)</i> corrupted by the malicious influences of <i>wuvu sunsun</i> or other forms of <i>warar</i>
<i>wuwur</i>	a practitioner of poison magic; an act of poison magic



## APPENDIX B: TRIBES OF GAUA

Tribal identity has diminished in the indigenous communities throughout Gaua, but knowledge of tribes has not disappeared entirely. I present a list of Gaua's tribes collected from interviews with indigenous elders. The two moieties (*veve*) are marked in bold. There is little consensus as to which of the two moieties each tribe belongs. Note that Rivers (2005) records *Matan* and *Takwong* (or *Ta-qon*) as the moieties of Mota.

<u>Tribe</u>	<u>Location of origin</u>	<u>Connotation of name</u>
<b>Matan</b>	Lake Letes area	its eye, eye of the island; the original tribe of Gaua
<b>Velow</b>	Onel Bay, West Gaua	founder emerged from lightning or from light of burning wood
Balam	?	founder emerged from pig jaw
Gavurur	?	very large rope
Liwopalak	West Gauan bush village	emerged from <u>nambalanggo</u> (Dye fig)
Lulun	Dolap, West Gaua	emerged from black stone nearshore
Luwe/Ulmat	Dorig and inland southeast	branching of spring water
Makepam	Ontar, West Gaua	emerged from small offshore island
Mwel	Vatles	namele (cycad)
Mweo	Maewo (island SE of Gaua)	founded by a child who floated to Gaua from Maewo
Naris	Naris, NE Gaua	founder emerged from scratched stone
Qetram	bluff overlooking Onel Bay	emerged from place where yam is worshipped
Qonj	northeast Gaua	founder emerged from navel tree; night

Rovat	near Dorig (southeast)	woman of stone
Taburup	near island interior	?
Watag	?	born under the navele (bush nut tree)
Wumbu	Non, eastern shore of Letes	founder emerged from bamboo
Wutve/Qo	Roqosus Island, East Gaua	pig gave birth to girl who became tribal founder
□ervi	NE Gaua, near Lembot	founder emerged from scratched dirt

## APPENDIX C: EAST GAUAN KIN TERMINOLOGY

Gauan kinship follows a Crow-type matrilineal system of descent and tribal inheritance. Mother's brother (MB) and sister's son (ZS) exhibit cross-generational equivalence (e.g., ZS will address MBS as "son"; Keesing 1975:112). The term denoting FZ (*vev□a*) references the matrilineal line of descent from FZ "to infinity" (Schusky 1965:32). All entries are first-person singular possessive reference:

1. *tumbuk vaguru*: All consanguineal males and females of the third ascending and descending generations.
2. *tumbuk, mwerat/tawa tumbuk*: All consanguineal and affinal males/females of the second ascending and descending generation.
3. *mam, mama*: F, FB, FZS
4. *vev, veve*: M, MZ, FBW
5. *tuak velap*: (m.s.) eB, (f.s.) eS
6. *tuak weskit*: (m.s.) yB, (f.s.) yS
7. *tisik*: (m.s.) B, (f.s.) S, (m.s.) FBS, (f.s.) FBD, (m.s.) MZS, (f.s.) MZD, (m.s.) SWF, (m.s.) DHF, (f.s.) SWM, (f.s.) DHM
8. *tatak*: (m.s.) S, (f.s.) B, (m.s.) FBD, (f.s.) FBS, (m.s.) MZD, (f.s.) MZS, (m.s.) SWM, (m.s.) DHM, (f.s.) SWF, (f.s.) DHF
9. *nutuk*: S, D, BS, BD, ZS, ZD, HBS, HBD
10. *wenatun* or *nutuk*: MBS, MBD
11. *maruk*: MB, ZS, ZD
12. *vev□a*: FZ, FZD, FZDD, etc.
13. *walus*: FZH
14. *qalgat*: (m.s.) SW, (m.s.) WM, (w.s.) SW, (w.s.) HM
15. *qalig*: (m.s.) DH, (m.s.) WF (w.s.) DH, (w.s.) HF

16. *wulus*: WB

17. *tawari*: HZ

18. *namas*: HB, BW, MBW

## APPENDIX D: FISHERIES

<b>Fishery</b>	<b>Boundary Points</b> <sup>103</sup>	<b>Restrictions</b> <sup>104</sup>	<b><math>\alpha \Delta</math></b>	<b><math>\beta \Delta</math></b>
Metewe	Nel - Dervewut	none	HP	CSI
Salgi - Sime	Dervewut - Bilap	permanent	HTV	CFS
Maraqraq	Bilap - Maraqraq	temporary	HP	CFS
Lewes	Maraqraq - Tamaraga	limited	HPTV	CFS
Wonlav	Tamaraga - Ronorig	temporary	HP	CFI
Ronorig	Bequtun - Lenromos	limited	PT	FSI
Nerew	Topman - Toqeresar	temporary	PVT	I
Benaren	Toqeresar - Dudu	temporary	HTV	CF
Dudu	Dudu - Bororig	temporary	PT	CFS
Bororig	Bororig - Letaworus	temporary	HP	FSI
Nesalap	Neserser - Wermerin	limited	HPT	FSI
Legaban	Nisiar - Sereto	limited	HPT	CFI
Banamalap	Levara-Wer Salagor	limited	HPT	CF
Aver	Ririg - Ser Togola	limited	HPT	CFSI
Qanlap	Ser Togola - Bowoto	temporary	HV	CFI
Nogon	Nogon passage south	none	HPTV	CFSI
Mekamel	Mekamel passage south	none	HPTV	CFSI
Kaska	Lemanman - Wingoro	none	HP	FS
Siriti	Oktri Qin - Bluhol	temporary	HV	CFS
Laslas	Mbarevit Point - Bojej	n/a	H	FI
Mbarevit	Temet Aworor - Numwor	n/a	HT	FI
Lembal	Metesa - Vivtuŋ	n/a	T	CFI
Waetsanbij	two points	permanent	HT	CFSI
Rot – Ulan	Rot – Gerela - Ulan	permanent	T	CFSI
Lewul Vatvat	Doramalaq - Dogontip	limited	HT	CF
Vuvun	two points	limited	HP	CF
Onel Bay	Tev Mantap - Vatrow	permanent	HPTV	CFI

<sup>103</sup> Boundary points are reckoned clockwise around the island's coast.

<sup>104</sup> Recorded January-May 2008. Permanent: landowner has set restriction (*tabu*) with no announced end date. Temporary: landowner has set restriction and announced end date. Limited: landowner has set restriction allowing limited access.

**Key**

**a Δ:** Environmental change reported by fishery users as locally generated

H: Overharvested fisheries

P: Pollution (household refuse, batteries, coconut shells)

T: Trespassing

V: Vandalism (breaking reef by walking or boat)

**β Δ:** Environmental change reported by fishery users as non-locally generated

C: Changing seasonal wind and rain patterns

F: Flooding of coastal plains

S: Warmer sea surface temperatures

I: Increase in storm intensity (stronger winds and higher rainfall)

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