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*BOOK REVIEW of DURAND, MARIE, STERN, MONIKA & WITTERSHEIM, ÉRIC, 2024. LE VANUATU DANS TOUS SES ÉTATS. HISTOIRE ET ANTHROPOLOGIE. INALCO-PRESSES. ISBN: 978-2-8583-1438-6*

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**BOOK REVIEW of DURAND, MARIE, STERN, MONIKA & WITTERSHEIM, ÉRIC, 2024. *LE VANUATU DANS TOUS SES ÉTATS. HISTOIRE ET ANTHROPOLOGIE*. INALCO-PRESSES. ISBN: 978-2-8583-1438-6**

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Vanuatu, with its exceptional linguistic diversity and density (François et al., 2015), is widely recognized as one of the world's foremost linguistic living laboratories (see p. 33 of the volume). Unsurprisingly, the complexity of its linguistic landscape reflects the archipelago's rich cultural identity and history. In such a context, linguistic research is inherently interdisciplinary, and contributions such as those gathered in this volume provide valuable insights into the necessary background for understanding this unique environment, from the colonial Condominium era to the beginnings of the independent state of Vanuatu and further to the current postcolonial perspectives.

Even though they do not directly address language issues — except Leslie Vandeputte's thoughtful contribution “Bislama: Colonial Language or National Language?” — these texts remain valuable for linguists as they raise awareness of the complex interplay between historical, cultural, and linguistic dimensions within Vanuatu's language ecosystem. This is true both on theoretical and practical levels. For instance, Laurent Dousset's chapter “The Origin of Grade-Taking Societies” offers interesting insights into hypotheses concerning the ancestry of languages spoken in the area under study. Meanwhile, the entire second section of the book proves particularly useful in anticipating potential challenges of fieldwork.

The volume contains fifteen chapters including the introduction, written in French (eight chapters) and English (seven chapters), with abstracts in both languages for each paper. A postface by Margaret Jolly offers an appraisal of the whole work. Most of the contents were developed and discussed in an international research seminar held at the EHESS (École des hautes études en sciences sociales) between 2016 and 2019.<sup>1</sup> The interdisciplinary approaches of the contributions, with political anthropology *in fine* as the center of gravity of the book, allows one to know and understand Vanuatu, the “land that stands [by itself]”.

The introductory text, co-authored by the volume's editors, provides a thorough account of the background literature. Some fundamental figures of economic geography are given, outlining the current state of the country and its interconnections with the rest of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Initially called “Faire de l'anthropologie en contexte postcolonial : le cas du Vanuatu” [Doing Anthropology in a Postcolonial Context: The Case of Vanuatu], it has been renamed to “Connexions et circulations postcoloniales : le monde vu du Vanuatu” [Postcolonial Connections and Circulations: The World Seen from Vanuatu].

The political aspect of this postcolonial state and evolving context is the fruit of “the way the country has attempted to assert its sovereignty since its independence in 1980” (p. 13). A synthetic presentation of the chapters follows.

The book is structured in four parts. The first part deals with aspects of formation of the various power relationships within society, in the *longue durée* scale.

In her chapter “Colonial Sources and Indigenous Perspectives”, Virginie Riou refers to a multitude of indices coming from the study of the French Overseas Colonial Archives (*Archives nationales d’outre-mer – ANOM*), suggesting that the insular sociopolitical dynamics of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the inter-war period often “subverted stereotypes for colonial life” (p. 88). The particular characteristics of this dynamic can be traced back to the complex interplay of confrontational – coalitional relations between island worlds and Europeans, that sets up as a struggle over land despoiled for plantations in the period of the “Joint Naval Commission of the New Hebrides” and further develops in the era of the Franco-British condominium. Far from being a typical *semi-colony*,<sup>2</sup> the archipelago, as this analysis shows, was never a typical colony either. While it is obvious that the *ANOM* archives provide limited material that helps at building a thorough understanding of the Islanders’ worlds, the author states that “a critical analysis of these sources can shed new light on the local sociopolitical dynamics of the past” (p. 90).

In his chapter “The Origin of Grade-Taking Societies”, Laurent Dousset proposes some plausible *scenarii* of how the attested forms of social organization have emerged in central-north Vanuatu, based upon observation of contemporary ethnographic data. His work examines the rank-taking rituals of southern Malekula and connects them to broader social phenomena – particularly the dynamics of power and principles of social linking. The analysis challenges archaeological theories regarding the historical relationship between the Bismarck Archipelago and the societies of central-north Vanuatu. A comparative analysis, incorporating linguistic and genetic evidence, reveals a more complex scenario. In this setting, the author underlines an important distinction between ranking societies, secret societies, and initiatory societies, which has been often overlooked by both archaeology and, at times, anthropology. This distinction clarifies the social logics that make it possible to understand the ranking system as a product of the interaction between politically decentralized local societies and the re-emergence of centralized Polynesian societies around 1000 years ago. This leads to the hypothesis that Polynesian influence extended beyond the Polynesian Outliers, sparking social changes that reached far beyond their immediate sphere of influence.

In his chapter “The Historicity of Ritual Pig Killing in Vanuatu”, Knut Rio compares observations from his own contemporary ethnographic data (North Ambrym), with early 20th century accounts by John Layard (in neighboring Malekula) on the cosmological and spiritual meaning of pig-killings within the manly hierarchy of these islands. The entire society was gradually drawn into rituals involving the sacrifice of many hundreds of pigs, the most prized offertory substitute for humans, cycled through every six years. At the peak of the ritual, the greatest of men stood up on a stone platform and announced their increased status and thereby joined the ranks of the society of ancestors. Comparing this with the situation today, the author states that there is absolutely no build-up of super-human status in ceremonies. Pigs are still being killed, cows are being butchered and cooked, yams and taro are displayed and distributed in great quantities, and huge sums of money figure in bride price and ceremonial payments, but not anymore for the purpose of gaining spiritual power. They instead express bilateral connections and form a production redistribution system. In a development linked to the

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance (Wallerstein, 2004, pp. xii, 109)

introduction of Christianity, monetary value and colonial labour regimes, the former hierarchical order has gradually slipped to a *weltlich* version. This chapter is based on the author's article "The Transformation of Hierarchy Following Christian Conversion in Vanuatu" (Rio, 2019).

In his chapter "Big Men and Chiefs in Tanna (Vanuatu), from the Past to the Present", Marc Tabani focus on "the issues raised by contemporary codifications of traditional (pre-colonial) expressions of authority, at both national and local levels" (p. 155). This chapter responds to a discussion opened by *Chiefs Today: Traditional Pacific Leadership and the Colonial State*, edited by Lamont Lindstrom and Geoffrey White (1997). More precisely, the author studies the tension between "chiefs," "big men" and other authorities conceived of as traditional in the anthropological literature on the Pacific, *versus* the mostly imported (yet, to some extent, adapted to the local realities) bureaucratic and state institutions of contemporary Pacific societies. This tension is not restricted to the typical "census-map-museum" scheme as discussed by Anderson (1991). The study is based on the case of Tanna, in the south of the Vanuatu archipelago, and the ways in which local actors call on non-traditional practices and concepts to bolster their legitimacy. Particular attention is drawn to attempts to institutionalize "councils of chiefs" and the fascinating interplays between the institution of power in the newly independent state of Vanuatu and the negotiated place of the *de facto* influential men. This chapter addresses a core issue in the formation of postcolonial societies in the Pacific, and provides some keys to understand the particular ideological mixture (the so-called Melanesian socialism, in Vanuatu's case) that the independence leadership has put forward, in order to define its rule and legitimate its action. It is certain that a comparative analysis which takes into account other postcolonial countries in the region would multiply insight on this theme.

The second section explores issues of collaboration during fieldwork, focusing on the relationships between anthropologists, their interlocutors, and other involved parties, with a more introspective and personal approach.

In his chapter "Who's Rules Rule? Balancing Kastom Conservation and Contested Leadership in Northern Vanuatu", Thorgerir Kolshus' account on the implementation of a film project in the Banks islands (Mota), sheds more light on the questions developed in the previous chapter, from a closer-to-the-field point of view. Indeed, the presence of various leadership structures and conceptions of authority can be recognized as an important feature of Vanuatu's remarkable cultural richness. While these differences pose few challenges in daily life, conflicts of interest often arise at the local, provincial, or national levels, building a front of disputes over authority. The situation becomes even more complex due to traditional knowledge ownership, which is typically held individually, as well as the local presence of party politics, which enables the pursuit of personal ambition, free from kinship-based obligations. In the account it is shown how these overlapping spheres of influence manifest on Mota Island in the Banks Islands, where several legitimate but conflicting interests come to the forefront during the aforementioned project of a documentary film on *kastom*. This case study also highlights a key challenge in preserving *kastom*, that is, how to balance the need to protect restricted knowledge from devaluation with the broader goal of safeguarding traditional practices for future generations.

In the chapter "Filming the Volcano: The Matter of Perspective on Mount Marumb", Haidy Geismar uses the story of production of a documentary film on the island of Ambrym as a starting point to critically explore the visual legacies of colonial representation, while also considering how new cinematic forms of representation challenge and reframe these legacies. Additionally, the chapter reflects on the broader implications of these visual conventions for

understanding cultural differences and diverse perspectives, both within the field of visual anthropology and beyond.

The chapter “History Through One Life: Jean Tarisesei, Women’s Kastom and Social Change in Vanuatu” by Lissant Bolton is devoted to tracing the passionate biography of an important figure in Vanuatu’s society and cultural life: Jean Tarisesei. Born during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century on the northern island of Ambae, Jean Tarisesei was married to a key member of the early Independence movement in Vanuatu. After the early death of her husband, she went on to work for the *Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta*, where she was tasked with developing and leading a team of women fieldworkers. These fieldworkers, a group of volunteers, are dedicated to documenting and revitalizing local knowledge and practices (known as *kastom*) across the Vanuatu islands. The detailed overview of any individual’s life, that carries the wealth of the specific, can serve as a counterpoint to both history and anthropology, when the latter is considered in its dimension of abstracting and generalizing personal experience. This biographic sketch reflects on the broader societal transformations in Vanuatu, in particular, on the shifting attitudes toward *kastom* over the past seventy years, as experienced and witnessed by Jean Tarisesei herself.

The three chapters that follow reveal some aspects of intricate local actions related to global initiatives, in the context of natural disaster crises and health awareness campaigns.

Manon Garcia reports a variety of ways in which the evolution of informal settlements passes through catastrophic natural events, studying narratives related to losses caused by Cyclone Pam<sup>3</sup> in the village of Tara (Efate Island).

In the same vein Maëlle Calandra, based on an ethnographic survey, recalls the absurd terms in which some aid was given to the inhabitants of Tongoa by an international NGO to survive this disaster.

In the chapter “Sexually Transmitted Infections in Vanuatu: A Globalized Prevention System”, Alice Servy examines the establishment and functioning of the prevention system for Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in Port Vila from 2009 to 2013 through ethnographic research. A striking discrepancy between the intensity of prevention campaigns and the small number of HIV cases reported between 2002 and 2013 is observed, while the population faces other pressing health issues (such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and diabetes) that have a far greater impact on mortality than STIs. This cannot be really understood without examining Vanuatu’s connections with other countries and regional organizations. Unsurprisingly, the organization of the STI prevention system in Vanuatu combined with the lack of concern for other epidemics is shaped by the forces of globalization, including the transnational flow of capital, people, and ideas.

The final section of the book examines various post-colonial contexts, including the rise of Pentecostal Christianity, urban dynamics in Port Vila, the use of Bislama, and the connections between independence, music, and popular culture.

In the chapter “Pentecostalisation as Social Reform in Vanuatu: The Case of the 2014 Malekula Revival”, Tom Bratrud deals with a phenomenon arising in many parts of the world known as ‘Pentecostalisation’. This refers to the spread of charismatic Christian beliefs and practices, which have been affecting social and political landscapes in Vanuatu since the turn

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<sup>3</sup> Cyclone Pam, one of the most powerful storms of the 2014–2015 South Pacific cyclone season, formed on March 6, 2015, and swept across a wide arc of the Pacific. While several nations—including Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and New Zealand—were affected to varying extents, Vanuatu bore the full brunt of the cyclone.

of the 21<sup>st</sup> century together with a precipitous rise of Pentecostal churches. This chapter explores how Pentecostal-charismatic ideas, particularly those emphasizing “breaking with the past,” resonate with ni-Vanuatu seeking radical social change – an aspiration that post-colonial leaders and institutions have failed to fulfill. Research across Melanesia highlights how the desire for profound transformation often drives people to break away from established colonial churches and institutions to forge something new. In the particular case of Malekula, Vanuatu’s second-largest island, the colonial Presbyterian Church has become strongly associated with kinship, community, and local identity. As a result, efforts for social change often occur within the framework of the established church rather than through a complete departure from it. Using the Christian charismatic revival movement that emerged on Malekula between 2013 and 2014 as a case study, the author shows how local Presbyterian churches are adapting Pentecostal-charismatic practices to address the community’s desire for change while preserving social cohesion. This revival has brought together Pentecostal and mainline Presbyterian churches, creating a powerful grassroots movement aimed at transforming Vanuatu.

In her chapter “What to Do with these Migrants? Low-Cost Housing Policies and Urbanisation in Port Vila (1965-1975)”, Marie Durand gives an outline of the urban development of Port Vila as being shaped by the colonial regulations, military settlement during World War II, and attempts to implement low-cost working-class housing policies – an echo of the welfare state action in post-war Europe. This work draws from archival traces of such housing programs and relates them to similar urbanistic approaches in the broader region (Port Moresby, Honiara).

In the chapter “Bislama: Colonial Language or National Language? Speakers’ Ambiguous Perceptions of Bislama in Contemporary Vanuatu”, Leslie Vandeputte examines the perception of Bislama in modern Vanuatu. Unlike other cases where a creole language has been developed as a vernacular idiom, the archipelago is home to over 135 languages and the English-based Bislama has become, from a simple contact language used when needed, eventually the dominating *lingua franca* of its relatively small (*circa* 300,000) population which includes European settlers. Since Vanuatu gained independence in 1980, Bislama has been promoted as a national language, with an official status alongside English and French. Moreover, since 2016, Bislama has been formally recognized as an “Educational language” used especially in multilingual settings. While this role has conferred indisputable momentum to Bislama, field surveys reveal that it is also perceived to act as an invasive species in local language ecologies, downgrading linguistic diversity and proficiency in English and French. In the absence of a national linguistic pride that could be obtained by cultural production – especially, literature – the author suggests that Bislama might be seen as a necessary compromise for nation-building.

The last chapter of this part, “Music and the Spirit of Independence” by Monika Stern and Éric Wittersheim, refers to popular culture in Vanuatu’s pre- and post-independence periods, with a particular focus on music. It explores the various connections between music and the political events of the time. The first section examines how the emergence of an acoustic “string band” style, though primarily viewed as entertainment, played a significant role in the independence movement by uniting the political leaders and the population around a shared “soundtrack” that symbolized national unity. The chapter then shifts to the conflict between the members of the Black Brothers, a band originally from West Papua, and the Vanuatu government, where the band sought asylum in the 1980s. This conflict illustrates the break between the music world and political leaders, marking the end of the political idealism that characterized the newly independent government. Finally, the chapter discusses how local reggae musicians, who later emerged on the scene, would operate as a vector of critical stance towards official policies.

Overall, “*Le Vanuatu dans tous ses états*” stands as an interdisciplinary companion for the working linguist, in a context where the usefulness of multiple anthropological, historical, ethnological and cultural identity approaches to language studies is hard to overestimate.

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Sadly, Aristotelis Giannakos, my beloved friend — endowed with an insatiable curiosity and a gift for conversation that made every encounter memorable — left us too soon, before our paper was published. More than an academic, he was a true savant. He would have laughed, yet I know he would have been deeply moved to see his final published words associated with the political anthropology to which he secretly dedicated his life.

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