

Christianity, Tradition, and Everyday Modernity: Towards an Anatomy of Women's Groupings in Melanesia

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ABSTRACT

This paper approaches its central theme of women's groupings in Melanesia via critique of several longstanding shibboleths, including examples of their strategic appropriation by indigenous people. These stereotypes include the romantic image of rural dwellers as pre-modern traditionalists on whom Christianity is an imposed foreign veneer; the hoary rhetorical opposition of 'West' and 'non-West'/modernity and tradition/individual and community; and the pervasive essentialization of Melanesian women as 'naturally' family-oriented, communitarian, and less individualistic and competitive than men. Seeking patterns in regional diversity and fragmentation, the paper examines cultural, historical, and structural correlates of a wide range of women's groupings, including National Councils of Women, church women's organizations, and the largely self-financed local church fellowship groups which are growing steadily in number and significance in the virtual absence of effective state institutions. Increasingly, women's groupings are complementing their traditional Christian spiritual, domestic, and welfare concerns with attention to global feminist, human rights, and ecological issues which are often reworked locally into scarcely recognizable shapes. Eschewing romanticization, the paper considers the potential and the problems of women's groupings in male-dominated Melanesia, including women's own divisions and their typical aversion to assuming public responsibilities.

TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN MODERNITY

To live in a thatched house (ill-lit by kerosene or candles), to cook on an open fire (fuel scarce and small children at risk), to eat food you have grown or gathered yourself (walking to distant gardens or bush), to drink from streams (polluted or far from the household): the main clauses are a scenario for Survivor; the parentheses are practical corollaries of such a lifestyle for many citizens of 'developing' countries, particularly women, including the vast majority of Melanesians.¹ The parentheses, in the opinion of most people who live them as well as me, are not romantic but more or less deprived.

My introductory rhetoric is not meant to deride rural life as such. Nor does it unproblematically endorse modernity and globalization which, via colonialism, postcolonial dependence, and transnational capitalist encompassment, have fuelled the grim conditions now widely noted in Melanesia. These conditions include unstable, pauperized, corrupt, ethnically-divided, 'criminalized' states;² worsening ecological damage; rampant alcohol abuse with escalating sexual, domestic, criminal, and political violence; declining self-sufficiency and an increase in degenerative diseases with the supplanting of local by imported foodstuffs (Schoeffel 1986:39-40). Equally though, this dismal litany is not meant to typify postcolonial Melanesia as in the glib sobriquet 'arc of instability' with which journalists,

politicians, and some academics like to pigeonhole the entire zone to Australia's north and east (e.g., Anon. 2002; Australian Broadcasting Commission 2001; Callick 2000). Crisis, corruption, collapse, and incompetence make headlines in Australia, gratifying embedded prejudices but effacing less dramatic, more ambiguous, mundane stories that are also to be told about a region characterized by spectacular diversity in actions, experience, and patterns of governance as well as cultures and languages. For example, Bougainville's debilitating decade-long war epitomized calamity but left an ironic positive legacy in the popular hope for a more controlled, discriminating, self-reliant engagement with modernity: in retrospect, some Bougainvilleans recall the blockade of the early 1990s as a time not only of terrible hardship and suffering, as imported fuel, food, and medical supplies dried up, but of better fitness and health because they walked far more, grew their own staples, and revaluated local medical knowledge, much of it women's (Anon. 1995:29; Douglas 1999a:85; Saovana-Spriggs 2000:29-30).

My intention rather is to underline the obvious but still too often neglected point that rural Melanesians are not premodern, 'backward', 'underdeveloped', or generically romantic but are our relatively deprived contemporaries. Actual villages are not the anachronistic museums of authentic tradition imagined in urbanite nostalgia, within as well as beyond the region, but historical products of more or less lengthy indigenous engagements with commerce, Christianity, migration, and colonialism (e.g., Barker 1990b, 1996; Douglas 2002:6; White 1988). The villages and smaller rural settlements in which the vast bulk of Melanesian citizens reside today are mostly strongly Christian spaces where modernity is part of everyday experience and aspiration, however limited its material trappings. My notion of everyday modernity draws on Essed's conception of the 'everyday' (with respect to racism) as "'socialized meanings making practices immediately definable and uncontested ... These practices and meanings belong to our familiar world and usually involve routine or repetitive practices'" (1991:50 quoted in Wodak and Reidigl 1999:179).

Most Melanesians would prefer to be able to pick and choose from modernity and the global in locally meaningful ways in order to improve the quality of their lives without losing valued existing aspects. Thus rural women commonly express modest, practical, but entirely modern wish lists – for reliable power, clean water, literacy classes, adequate health services, and sufficient cash to pay school fees, make contributions to their Christian fellowship groups, and buy a few luxuries (including imported food) (e.g., Billy, Lulei, and Sipolo 1983:118-23; Brown 1988:131; Macintyre 2000:167; Pollard 2000:54-6). Yet, like most ordinary people in Melanesia, they commonly stereotype the emerging urban-based indigenous elites as selfish, corrupt, and unMelanesian. In every country in the region, disparities in wealth and opportunities are felt across a widening rural-urban divide and trigger a drift to the towns. There, inequality is institutionalized in urban settlements that house a growing under class positioned as the inverse counterpart of the new elite in an incipient class hierarchy (Dinnen 2002a:44, 58-9; Errington and Gewertz 1996; Gewertz and Errington 1999). Locally, such inequities outrage indigenous and Christian values of equivalence, reciprocity, and sharing and are commonly read as signs of 'Westernization'. Melanesians today often rhetorically align Christianity with tradition or custom (see Pains, this issue, 158, 168) – 'our Christian Melanesian communalism' (Boseto 2000:10) – in local versions of the globally pervasive nostalgic opposition of tradition and modernity. Yet in practice across the region, it is often women gathered in local women's groups – the great majority of which are church fellowships – who bring traditional (and) Christian community values to bear on cautious, pragmatic engagements with modernity (Douglas 2002:7-8; McDougall, this issue; Pains, this issue; Sepoe 2000:160). The Papua New Guinean political scientist Orovu Sepoe questioned whether her countrywomen were not 'the real actors in development' (2000:102). In counterpoint to the heavy formal male domination of all Melanesian polities, the collective, organized local face of modernity is frequently female.

'WEST' AND 'NON-WEST'?

The recency of many Melanesian villages, their strongly Christian ambiance, and the ambivalent modern aspirations of their residents; the ideological coalescence of Christianity and selectively sanitized tradition, at least in most mainline churches;³ the growing public image of women's fellowship groups as both self-appointed guardians of Christian and customary morality and conduits for modernity: none of this accords with outsiders' stereotypes of rural life in Melanesia. These unexpected practical associations belie the hoary but still conventional conflation of 'the West' with civilization, modernity, individualism, and a unitary, bounded conception of the person, in opposition to the equally essentialized categories 'non-West' or 'indigenous' and their assumed correlates of primitivity, tradition, communalism, and a relational, composite conception of the person. Historically, racist or paternalist versions of this binary logic underpinned a wide range of colonial policy and missionary anthropology in Melanesia.⁴ More recently, the opposition has been variously reconfigured in terms neutral or positive to Melanesians. In the 1980s, anthropologists routinely opposed relational 'Melanesian' and bounded 'Western' concepts of the person but were vigorously contested from within the discipline, partly on the grounds that such constructions project present-day villagers as archaic or backward.⁵ These specific caveats had theoretical counterparts in poststructuralist feminist projects to decentre and gender the naturalized (male 'Western') sovereign subject. With the binary logic itself historicized and dislodged, 'Western' men, like 'Western' women and 'non-Westerners' generally, can be seen as variously individual or relational according to perspective, culture, situation, and strategy (Davies 1991; Kuehling 1999:33-71; Moore 1994).

Academic misgivings notwithstanding, opposition of 'Melanesia' or 'the Pacific' and 'the West' retains its sway across a gamut of popular rhetoric from postcolonial to new age (e.g., Ishtar 1994). Within the region, indigenous politicians use it to promote national or ethnic identity or to rationalize their own actions: as with the Solomon Islands Christian theologian and politician who counterposed the 'sharing and caring' ethos of 'traditional Pacific life' to the 'greed, domination, competition and exploitation' of 'the so-called "civilised nations"' (Boseto 1994:57-9; see also Lini 1982:27; Narokobi 1980); or the interim Prime Minister of Fiji who protested that Fijians "'do respond to the Pacific Way. In contrast, the aggressive and threatening Western way only hardens our resolve to do things our own way"' (*Age* [Melbourne], 28 July 2000).⁶ Ordinary people, especially rural-dwellers, often oppose their own professed communal virtues to the selfish materialism of urban and elite behaviour, especially politicians', and call it 'white man's fashion'. Melanesian men and many women criticize 'Women's Liberation' or 'feminism' as 'European', colonial, and alien to Melanesian cultural and family values.⁷ All such exclusive identifications of modernity with 'Westernization' and individualism – whether racist or romantic, colonial or postcolonial – discursively disable indigenous people by denying their histories and the authenticity of their material desires and by presuming that the potential for individual agency is limited to 'Westerners' (Dirks 1997:201). Yet although my last two examples invoke the residual derogatory analogy of 'white' or 'European', two to three decades after independence the agency condemned by disgruntled Melanesian citizens is primarily located within, not beyond the state.

In a further set of ironies, Melanesians have selectively naturalized and socialized Christian concepts of the individual in tandem with Christian concepts of community (e.g., Dickson-Waiko, this issue, 105, 113).⁸ Thus, Geoffrey White described how local leaders in Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands, deliberately mobilized Christian ideals of 'peace, unity and solidarity' to overcome the divisiveness and debilitating violence of precolonial socio-political relations, introducing new 'village conglomerates' and a 'new, shared identity of the "Christian person"' (1988:13, 19, 23, 31). Throughout the region, the ubiquity of Christian women's groups is testament to the localization of Christian community ideals. Several con-

tributions to this collection affirm that membership of a fellowship gives women a protected, increasingly respected space where they can build solidarity, confidence, and leadership or managerial skills and which usually supplies their only or main opportunity for sociality or collective action beyond the family (see also Douglas 2002; Dureau 1993:26-7; Sepoe 2000:144-5, 157). Furthermore, Christianity bridges the parochial and the global in ways highly pertinent to Melanesians. Psychologically, it offers them valued membership in a worldwide Christian moral community which transcends the perceived inequities or doubtful legitimacy of colonial and national states (Barker 1990a:10-21; Robbins 1998:113-24). Ideologically, its universalist religious humanism appeals to the 'pervasive religiosity' of Melanesians and is selectively mobilized in human rights campaigns against abuses of all kinds, sexual, political, legal, military, multinational, or colonial (Gibbs 2000:159-61, 170-2; Macintyre 2000:154-63). Pragmatically, the integration of local fellowships in church and women's networks helps articulate local and wider spheres, enabling some women to participate in or lead district, provincial, national, or international caucuses, in sharp contrast to their virtual absence from formal politics and public affairs generally (McDougall, Paini, and Scheyvens, this issue, 85, 88).

WOMEN, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

It is also important to interrogate the representation – including the self-representations – of Melanesian women as 'naturally' family-oriented, communitarian, and less individualistic and competitive than men.⁹ Such claims underwrite the counter-ideology of 'traditional' gender complementarity – rather than opposition or inequality – which Melanesian women invoke both strategically and by conviction as a corrective to present male domination and assertions of natural, 'traditional' superiority over women (e.g., Dickerson-Putman 1996; Pollard 2000:4-6, 39-40; Sepoe 2000:65-103). Yet a parallel naturalization of women's presumed leanings and competencies also underpins the hegemonic ideology by which local men rationalize the ongoing subordination, exploitation, and even physical abuse of women by constructing them as men's chattels who are properly confined to 'a "traditional" [pre-modern rural] domain, which is backward by definition' (Macintyre 2000:149-53, 162).

With reference to women's unprecedented organized public interventions to help resolve conflict during the violent political crisis afflicting Solomon Islands since 1999, Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard invoked the 'core value of motherliness' in ascribing to Melanesian women:

natural, God-given qualities such as love, care, peace, patience, humility and sensitivity. These values make women different from men. Women's various contributions and responsibilities in the areas of production, reproduction, community work and leadership, family welfare and nation building do not demand conflict (Liloqula and Pollard 2000:9; see also Boseto 2000; Paini, this issue, 85, 88).

As a mother, I appreciate the moral and emotional force of this recourse to the maternal. I also acknowledge its cultural, religious, and political connotations and discount neither its practical implications nor its historical resonances.¹⁰ However, I am personally discomforted by determinisms of all kinds, but especially spiritual or biological, and prefer to conceptualize human demeanour and behaviour as strategic products of the complex, situational interplay of cultural practice, historical experience, material conditions, and genetic predisposition – a discourse Pollard approached in more academic writings (e.g., 2000:1-56). By this reasoning, Melanesian women in general are socialized from infancy to be domestic, deferential, and reticent, though particular human actors are never simply the passive recipients of cultural conditioning. When Melanesian women exercise restraint over violent men or unite productively in the interests of peacemaking and reconciliation – as was often

reported in indigenous fighting and has recently been the case in Bougainville, Solomon Islands, and the Papua New Guinea Highlands¹¹ – they do so as sufferers of violence whose gendered positionings as mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, etc., give them a major stake in controlling or ending it. They sometimes do so successfully because their moral authority is recognized *in situ* and because as Christian outsiders in virilocal communities they may be well placed to combine to act as mediators.

If Melanesian women do have greater ideological and practical recourse to collectivity than men – as seems to be widely the case in modern Christian settings, at least – it is mainly because their virtual debarment from positions of public leadership and limited access to available resources, especially cash, make them less susceptible than men to the individualizing lure of status rivalry with its corollary of control and ostentatious disbursement of wealth (Hviding and Bayliss-Smith 2000:165-6; Macintyre, this issue, 128). While women in Melanesia clearly share the general human propensity to conflict and division, the pragmatics of deprivation mean that cooperation and pooling are often critical strategies for them to acquire small quantities of cash which they tend to reinvest in the significantly female domains of family, women's group, and church rather than squander on alcohol and competition as do many men (McDougall, this issue, 133-6; Membup and Macintyre 2000; Sexton 1984; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993:83-4; 1998). Thus constrained, women in general are correspondingly less directly vulnerable to the material expectations of kin and wantoks or the risk of public disapproval and private envy, including sorcery, to which ambitious and successful men are exposed by virtue of Melanesia's pervasive egalitarian ethos of reciprocity and equivalence – though just such threats apparently discourage many women from taking on the leadership of women's groups and organizations or harass those who do (Lee 1985:232; Macintyre, this issue, 128; Pollard, this issue, 57).

Pollard noted that in Solomon Islands the dominant 'ideology of female subordination to men' has as its counterpart 'the parallel female conception of their centrality':

paradoxically, the women do not actually see their role in society as degrading. Instead, a Solomon Islands woman is proud of herself and her supportive role; she knows that the success of husbands – as of men in general – is simply a reflection of the success of their wives, and of women in general (2000:4, 6).

Like Roger Keesing (1987:58-61), I worry about the hegemonic implications of such pronouncements by Melanesian women but take them seriously because they are evidently so widely and strongly held. Sepoe pointed out that 'from [Papua New Guinean] women's perspective, they are significant agents' (2000:77). To ignore or dismiss these expressions as simply hegemony or mystification is ethnocentric and arrogant. It also unwittingly colludes with indigenous men in demeaning entire domains of actual female expertise, decision-making, and (largely unpaid) action which underpin the economic and moral existence of families, communities, and ultimately nations throughout Melanesia.

Equally, though, the spiralling load borne by rural women, especially, in most versions of Melanesian modernity is neither just, efficient, nor sustainable (Lee 1985:233; Schoeffel 1983:26-7). In Papua New Guinea, they 'struggle with meagre resources and give more (in terms of labour and time) than they receive' (Sepoe 2000:155; e.g., Dickerson-Putman 1996). Writing ethnographically about an 'Are'Are community in south Malaita, Solomon Islands, in the mid-1990s, Pollard qualified her recognition that the 'constantly over-worked' women bore their burden with 'pride' because they knew that otherwise 'community life would be miserable, unsettled and uncomfortable': 'a woman's pride', she cautioned, 'comes at considerable physical and mental cost' (2000:33, 38). Christine Dureau (1993) reported deep ambivalence about motherhood on the part of women in Simbo, western Solomon Islands, in the early 1990s. On the one hand, children were 'inherently valued' and maternity was seen as integral to being female; on the other hand, in practice women associated moth-

erhood with 'exhaustion, illness and decrepitude' because its physical and emotional demands, in the context of 'male laziness in respect of childcare', compounded their escalating productive, domestic, financial, and social responsibilities. These women also found their childcare responsibilities 'severely disabling socially' (1993:18, 20-2, 26, 28, 31).

Particularly apposite to this paper, Simbo women specifically begrudged constraints on their involvement in the social and religious activities of the major local women's organization, the United Church Women's Fellowship (UCWF), which had become a linchpin of the community. Doing "'God's work'" with the UCWF provided women with new and valued opportunities for 'autonomy and sociability' but provoked much friction between spouses: men refused to contribute a greater share of childcare to enable their wives to participate more fully in the UCWF because they mistrusted it as 'a leisure activity' that threatened their marital domination (see also Paini, this issue, 85, 89). They nonetheless took responsibility for food preparation during an inter-island UCWF rally, though men and women alike stressed that such behaviour was 'a reversal of the norm' (Dureau 1993:22, 25-9, 33). Similarly, in 1996 Regina Scheyvens (this issue, 38) observed men in Choiseul providing, cooking, and serving food for women gathered in their village for a UCWF circuit meeting. By the late 1990s, Debra McDougall (this issue, 69) found that the structural significance accorded the UCWF in Ranongga, an island adjacent to Simbo, had so increased that men could no longer regard their wives' involvement as 'a waste of time' though a few years earlier they too were publicly of that opinion (Dureau 1993:33).

'Are'Are women 'bemoaned the loss of the old sense of sisterhood and community' and blamed the 'rise of individualism, coupled with the emphasis on the acquisition of cash' since independence in 1980: "Cash is replacing the communal spirit that we enjoyed in the past", the women remarked sadly' (Pollard 2000:47, 49, 51). In all likelihood, their nostalgia recalled a relatively recent, **Christian** tradition of community rather than a timeless indigenous tradition since in many areas of Melanesia before pacification women seem to have had relatively few opportunities for female interaction beyond a small circle of related households (Lee 1985:223; Schoeffel 1983:11).¹² Martha Macintyre (this issue, 127) maintains that in matrilineal Lihir, New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea, 'there is no tradition of women working cooperatively as a distinct group defined entirely in terms of sex, apart from church organizations'. The apparent rarity of organized indigenous female collectivity is no doubt partly a discursive artefact of the general invisibility of Melanesian women to Europeans, including most anthropologists. However, it was also an actual corollary of certain region-wide fractionating tendencies: the defensive introversion of small, autonomous settlements in the context of low-level but endemic inter-community violence; the isolation of wives in strongly kin-based, mostly virilocal settlements; the household basis of production, for which women usually took primary responsibility; the formal monopoly by men of external linkages such as ritual and exchange partnerships and marital and political alliances (e.g., Brown 1988:127-8). Almost from the outset of Protestant missionary settlement in Melanesia in 1839, Polynesian, Fijian, and European female missionaries instigated regular gatherings of women for spiritual, moral, and educational purposes and ultimately encouraged the establishment of formal community women's groups – though local female agency, interests, and agenda were undoubtedly crucial to the reception, implementation, and effectiveness of such initiatives (Douglas 1999b, 2002).

I have argued elsewhere (2002) that the prospect of female sociality was always a prime attraction of Christian gatherings for women in places such as Aneityum, south Vanuatu, and New Caledonia where solitary women and nuclear families were the main productive units in taro gardening. However, ni-Vanuatu women to whom I spoke in 1997 were also ambivalent about the demands made on their time, finances, and physical and emotional resources by church and other women's groups, acknowledging them as beneficial but intrusive in the context of their other heavy duties and the core value of family solidarity. Sepoe described a similar pattern in an East Kerema village in Gulf Province, Papua New

Guinea, where women's 'first and foremost consideration' was 'ensuring the well-being of the family', where women bore the arduous brunt of subsistence production in addition to their domestic responsibilities, and where 'the basis of productive activities' was 'more individual than collective'. Here, too, young mothers struggled to find time and resources to participate in the local UCWF which performed 'much of the communal activities of the entire village', especially social welfare and church fund-raising, but also provided 'what little recreational time is available to the women' (2000:139-43, 160). Dureau reported likewise that in Simbo the household had 'always' been the 'site of production' which 'remained largely individualistic' while contracting to 'within the nuclear family', thus increasing the proportion of garden work undertaken by women at a time of overall escalation in its labour demands. Again, women accustomed to more or less solitary gardening embraced enthusiastically the novel opportunities for community-wide sociality, status, and service offered by Christian fellowship groups despite tensions between family responsibilities and community interests or demands (1993:20-1, 23-9; 1998:260; see also McDougall, Macintyre, Paini, and Pollard, this issue).

The reiterated theme of tension between women's maternal and family responsibilities and their desire or sense of obligation to participate in community women's groups, most of them church-linked, belies the trope of Melanesian mothers as natural communarians and any romantic presumption of innate indigenous harmony between family and wider community interests. McDougall (this issue, 64) notes that 'Ranonggans themselves think that community is very difficult to achieve.... Collectivity thus is an ideal that must be periodically re-enacted'. Penelope Schoeffel warned against the incautious 'assumption that because of traditional social structure, communal undertakings will be both congenial to Pacific Islanders and will fit in well with and support customary habits, institutions and values'. She pointed out in contrast that the household was and remains 'the basic unit of production' across the region notwithstanding wide variations in the size and composition of households, their patterns of governance, and their degree of encompassment in more inclusive social groupings (1983:27-8; see also Lee 1985:232). Macintyre (this issue, 127) indicates the related fallacy of assigning 'an assumed communitarian sentiment' in Papua New Guinea to 'an imagined "village community"' which is actually a 'colonial artefact' and is usually riven by affiliations to kin-based social units that are the main locus of collective loyalty, action, and rivalry (see also Barker 1996). Women in particular, she argues, 'seem to define their interests first with respect to their family and lineage and then in terms of church-based activities'. In Lihir, parochial attachments and sectarian rivalries undermined the effectiveness of Petztorme, the new island-wide umbrella women's organization established after the onset of large-scale mining operations in 1996. Macintyre quotes a Lihirian woman: "'we are so used to working in our families and taking care of them, it is hard to change and to really work together'" (this issue, 130). In Vanuatu, I heard similar sentiments repeatedly expressed by disgruntled organizers of women's groups and ambivalent group members alike.

WOMEN IN THE QUEST FOR STRUCTURE

As resource-dependent, recent colonial legacies imposed on arbitrary assortments of small, highly diverse societies with no overarching indigenous polities, Melanesian states are inherently burdened by dubious legitimacy and doubtful prospects. Moreover, the poor performance of most national governments throughout the region has seen a sharp decline in the internal efficacy and local presence of the state as the widespread pride and optimism of new citizens in the immediate aftermath of independence have been largely replaced by frustration, cynicism, and contempt. In this virtual absence of effective state institutions, it appears that 'organizations of civil society',¹³ notably the churches, women's organizations, and non-government organizations (NGO), in conjunction with an endless proliferation of

plans and programs, are being mobilized as alternative structures in efforts to fill the official institutional vacuum and order the spectacular diversity and flux of practice. In this collection, that process is exemplified in Pollard's and Anne Dickson-Waiko's kaleidoscopic catalogues of often short-lived women's groups, organizations, associations, programs, and projects. It is arguably the peripheral position of women in heavily male-dominated national Melanesian polities which has impelled them to develop and strengthen their own structures – there are few gender-specific men's organizations in the region apart from sporting groups. It remains the case, however, that women's groupings and projects are often contingent and ephemeral, especially when they rely on outside funding (Macintyre and Pollard, this issue). Anna Pains (this issue, 88) indicates further the importance of the politics of personality in that 'very active [women's] groups often virtually disappear with the departure of dynamic leaders'.

A recent report on Solomon Islands stressed that the churches are 'the only community level organisations that have wide organisational networks' and that women's networks are the most significant of these. The authors noted that 'the country as a whole is not strong on structure' and is afflicted by the 'problem of short-term life of structures' (Scales, Dinnen, and Hegarty n.d.:10-11, 14) – a dilemma common to all the independent Melanesian states. In principle, if not always in execution, parish-based women's fellowships and the district, provincial, national, and regional networks of which they form the base constitute visible and relatively stable structures which can provide members with the security of belonging to 'a larger whole'. McDougall makes this point with respect to the Ranongga UCWF and tellingly cites a male pastor who lauded the UCWF 'as a model community organization': **"they have structure ... They climb with something to help them climb, but we [men] have no ladder to climb"** (McDougall, this issue, 68). Nonetheless, Dickson-Waiko and Pollard make it clear that 'the potential ... for widespread networking' between the umbrella church women's organizations and their community constituencies has not always been adequately or evenly realized (Dickson-Waiko, this issue, 110; Pollard, this issue, 58). There is, moreover, considerable denominational variation in the scope and effectiveness of church women's networks, with the UCWF in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands notable both for its participatory principles and its 'elaborate structure' cross-cut by a 'dense network of personal ties' (McDougall, this issue, 74; Scheyvens, this issue, 37). When Pollard did fieldwork in her own 'Are'Are community, members of the local South Sea Evangelical Church Women's Fellowship regretted their lack of 'contacts with a wider women's network', whether church or official, and recommended that their group 'should have formal links to church, non-governmental and governmental women's organisations at the national level' (2000:56, 92). Similarly, in the East Kerema village where Sepoe did fieldwork, the women stressed that **"No government official or leaders of national women's organisations ever stop by to listen to us"**. She remarked: 'The reality of women's situation has yet to be understood by the State and the church' (2000:155, original emphasis) – 'the church' in this case being the UCWF, the largest and best-managed women's organization in the country.

AN ANATOMY OF WOMEN'S GROUPINGS¹⁴

The remainder of this paper focuses squarely on the theme of women's groupings which I have approached obliquely via critique of several entrenched stereotypes about Melanesians generally and women in particular. The early Protestant mission legacy of regular women's gatherings for prayer, Bible literacy, domestic training, and moral 'improvement' supplied the prototype for the local women's fellowship groups which expatriate Protestant female missionaries and indigenous pastors' wives began to establish piecemeal from the early twentieth century and more systematically after World War II. Now almost totally indigenized, women's fellowships are normal – if variously active and effective – features of the socio-economic landscape in communities throughout Melanesia and Oceania generally,

notably in rural areas. Pollard (this issue, 49) urges that this 'existing framework of church and other local women's groups' offers the best potential channel for rural development programs, especially those targeted at women and young people. It is clear from this collection that such groups are growing steadily in number and social, economic, and moral importance – a case in point of popular recourse to a parallel structure to compensate for the local deficiencies of the state. However, the unfashionable conjunction of women with parochial Christianity means that, with a few exceptions, local church women's groups are seriously underresearched in anthropological, feminist, and development literature and largely ignored by aid organizations.¹⁵ Indeed, to my knowledge this special issue is the first systematic examination of such groups in an anthropological forum.

The major national Protestant women's organizations were consolidated from the 1960s to coordinate pre-existing fabrics of parish-based women's groups.¹⁶ This was particularly the case in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea where the nonhierarchical Methodist Missionary Society and the congregationalist London Missionary Society (LMS), with their strongly indigenous ministries, had provided fertile grounds for the ad hoc emergence of local women's groups. From 1968, the UCWF combined the fledgling national women's organizations of the Methodist Church of Melanesia and the Papua Ekalesia (the former LMS) and provided a model for the development of other national bodies, notably the Catholic Women's Association in Papua New Guinea (Schoeffel 1983:14). The male-dominated, centralized, largely expatriate hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea had been much slower to endorse the formation of parish women's groups but the church did so energetically from the 1970s in tandem with the systematic development of its national women's organizations. Paini (this issue, 86) shows on the contrary that in New Caledonia indigenous lay female agency was paramount in the formation of both the Catholic umbrella organization and the *Drueulu Women's Group* in Lifou which is the main focus of her paper. The 'freedom of movement and autonomy of action' of this group and its social rather than religious orientation, in a parish served by a local catechist rather than a priest, contrasted ironically with the formal hierarchical structure in which the Evangelical Church women's group in the same village was embedded and the "religious nature" of many of that group's activities.

Though central links with remote fellowship groups were (and still are) often tenuous, the solid, steadily-widening community base of the major church women's wings contrasted with the top-down approach initially adopted by the quasi-official, partly government-funded hierarchies of national and provincial councils of women that were established in the several Melanesian countries between 1979 and 1983 (Scheyvens, this issue, 31). National Councils of Women (NCWs) have done much to bring women's issues to public notice and to coordinate women's groupings but were often condemned locally, even by women, as elitist, urban-centred, and feminist – sometimes still a term of real abuse throughout the region (Dickson-Waiko, this issue, 101, 116; Douglas 2002:20-3; Lee 1985:225-6; Sepoe 2000:111-22). NCWs were initially opposed by most churches because their principles 'were seen as secular and conflicting with Christian norms' (Sepoe 2000:183; see also Scheyvens, this issue, 35). Since the mid-1990s, with governments forced into drastic financial cutbacks through public sector reform programs adopted at the behest of donors and international agencies, NCWs have lacked the resources to undertake effective rural outreach (Brouwer, Harris, and Tanaka 1998:7; Pollard 2000:55-6, 92; Sepoe 2000:111-22). Nonetheless, the will to do so increased during the same period in all three Melanesian countries as the NCWs restructured their relationships with governments and sought to broaden their support base, in particular by forging closer linkages with the major national church women's organizations. Most mainline church women's wings are now formally affiliated with their respective NCWs but conservative evangelical and pentecostal churches generally remain aloof (Douglas 2002:19-20, 22-3; Pollard 2000:92-5; Sepoe 2000:184).

Some scholars and secular aid workers appear to be more comfortable with central,

mainly urban-based organizations such as NCWs, Women in Politics committees, and women's crisis centres than they are with local church women's groups (e.g., Jolly 1996; Mason 2000; Tahī and Kilsby 1998). These umbrella groupings attract the attention of concerned outsiders because of their central location, their scope, their hoped-for potential to effect significant changes in women's lives, their familiar organizational structures and management practices, relatively radical agendas, and articulate, often tertiary-educated leadership who draw on universalist human rights and democracy discourses and adopt important proactive tactics – consciousness-raising, training programs, workshops, counselling, or provision of refuge and legal assistance for victims of sexual and domestic violence. In such settings, the prayers which bracket almost every meeting in Melanesia can be easily (if inaptly) rationalized as pro forma. In Vanuatu, at least, such organizations strategically temper their activism on gender issues by adopting non-confrontationist methods, embracing maternal metaphors, and endorsing the Christian and customary family values to which, in any case, their leaders are staunchly committed (Douglas 2002:21-2). Nonetheless, for the great majority of Melanesian women, it is their local fellowships, if anything, that provide avenues for collective action, small-scale development activities, and perhaps modest empowerment (e.g., Scheyvens, this issue).

A further, understandable reason for scholarly and professional neglect of local women's groups is that most are small, pious, profess modest, mundane agendas, use cautious, low-key methods, and are wedded to a self-effacing ethos of service, voluntarism, and self-financing which makes few coherent demands on international aid or attention. A strong orientation to spiritual matters, home economics, and welfare – diminishing nationally but still dominant locally – typifies women's groupings throughout the Pacific Islands and is usually expected or demanded by female participants. Women's preoccupation with prayer and seemingly mundane concerns has frustrated feminists, especially those involved in aid projects seeking to empower indigenous women rather than reinforce their apparent domestication (Lee 1985:223, 233; Scheyvens, this issue; Soondrawu 1991). Yet what some outsiders read unproblematically as a sexist traditional and colonial legacy can look rather different in the process of localization when women's own interests, desires, and agendas enter the equation. I have argued elsewhere (2002) that the ubiquitous adoption of sewing, weaving, and quilting should not be regarded as a missionary imposition but as a longterm process whereby women themselves commingled, appropriated, and transformed indigenous and imported techniques, materials, and values (see also Jolly, this issue, 255-6). Such activities and relevant related skills like sewing machine maintenance appeal to Pacific Islands women for complex, varied reasons: utilitarian, economic, ritual, social, and artistic (Douglas 2002:3-6, 15-16). Macintyre (this issue, 130) speculates that Lihirian women are especially attracted to sewing lessons because they provide 'a single, flexible personal skill with domestic and potential commercial utility rather than loading them further with demands for unpaid collective work'.

The last two decades have seen widespread if uneven politicization of women's groupings throughout Melanesia as many complement or even supplant traditional zones of concern with attention to global feminist, human rights, and ecological issues: sexual and domestic violence; sexually-transmitted diseases; inequities in political participation, legal access, education, and economic development; environmental degradation. Even bodies that used to look old-fashioned and conservative to some modern feminists, like church women's organizations and YWCAs, are increasingly pursuing social agendas and implementing programs which can be quite radical when translated in culturally-meaningful terms to rural contexts, a point made strongly by most contributors to this collection, especially Scheyvens (see also Sepoe 2000:14).

Urban-based national organizers and local rural women can reportedly be at cross purposes with respect to human rights discourses. In Solomon Islands, Dureau found that whereas the United Church officially represented the UCWF 'as a Christian theatre of

female enablement', UCWF participation was for Simbo women a matter of 'the organization's social and religious significance' (1993:26; see also Sepoe 2000:156). With respect to the Anglican Mothers' Union, the women's organization of the largest church in Solomon Islands, Scheyvens (this issue, 37) remarks a growing divergence between the ongoing home economics focus of village groups and 'a gradual but significant shift in the direction and strategies' of the Honiara-based leadership towards greater social and political activism. McDougall (this issue, 74) maintains that internationalist individual rights and feminist discourses held few attractions for rural UCWF members in Ranongga. They preferred pragmatic, low-key personal interventions in family conflicts to abstract principles against domestic violence but displayed a striking capacity to appropriate the global agendas of national UCWF officers to suit their own prescriptive moral concerns, especially control of young female sexuality. Dickson-Waiko (this issue, 99) describes an 'inconspicuous' but 'evolving indigenous feminism' in Papua New Guinea as a 'mass grassroots women's movement ... determined by rural and settlement women themselves' in the face of 'general uninterest and ignorance' about feminism on the part of educated middle class women. Macintyre (2000:153) also attributed the 'demand for women's human rights' in Papua New Guinea to 'grassroots women's organizations', specifically in the context of the Bougainville war, but located opposition to such demands primarily in the neo-traditional rhetoric and paternalist agenda of 'western-educated male politicians' who denounced women's protests as 'culturally-inappropriate and the product of "western feminism"'.

Dickson-Waiko (this issue, 101) calls the relationship of religion and feminism an 'unlikely marriage' but the union was commonplace in Europe and the United States from the mid-nineteenth century when Christian women's organizations campaigned with early secular feminists under the maternal banner for radical political and moral causes like temperance, maternal and child welfare, abolition, and women's suffrage (Koven and Michel 1993; Marshall and Marshall 1990:105-20). The anti-alcohol march by a Lifouan Catholic women's group described by Pains (this issue, 82) has several regional antecedents, notably the women's ecumenical movement against male alcohol abuse in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia, which achieved and maintained a municipal prohibition law for at least a decade after 1977. Mac and Leslie Marshall (1990:106, 111-17) discerned 'many parallels between women's temperance and prohibition activities in Truk and those in the United States a century before', including the launching of the Women's Crusade of 1873-4 by Protestant American women in a male-dominated society which idealized female domestication. The Lifouan women's actions were far more limited in scope, organization, and duration than the Chuuk campaign but they, too, may be generically compared to the American movement. Yet while such historical analogies have heuristic and comparative value, it is important not to take them as literal precedents or to conceptualize modern indigenous people as positioned at an earlier phase of a universal evolutionary trajectory.

It is equally important not to romanticize indigenous women's groups, their selfless, consensual ideology, and seemingly pastoral settings, or exaggerate their energy and effectiveness. Melanesian women, observed Sepoe (2000:102, 181-4), are not a homogeneous category though they are often condemned by men and outsiders for not acting as if they were (Brouwer, Harris, and Tanaka 1998:7; Lee 1985:231-2; Macintyre, this issue, 126). Working with women, says Pollard (this issue, 58), drawing on long experience as a member of a local fellowship, a volunteer leader in a rural women's association, and a national women's affairs bureaucrat, 'can be exhausting and frustrating'. Not only do shyness, inexperience, fear of malicious gossip or sorcery, and respect for the widespread Melanesian value of seniority make many women unwilling to speak up or take on public responsibility or leadership positions, but those who do are often condemned for flouting the equally widespread Melanesian value of egalitarianism or for failing to redistribute generously in accordance with the key value of reciprocity (Lee 1985:230-2; Macintyre, this issue, 127-8; Pollard, this issue, 58).

Pollard (this issue, 45, 57, 58) points out further that women's very common insistence on servicing their groups via voluntary input and self-financing, on the grounds of group ownership and self-sufficiency, with its concomitant rejection of external funding, limits the scope of projects and imposes a 'high cost' on the meagre resources and time of group members who are already heavily burdened, especially leaders (see also Sepoe 2000:125). Sepoe noted that village women in Papua New Guinea often made strategic use of giving and 'the customary practice of reciprocity'. However, this was generally not an effective means to access resources in contemporary contexts except when an occasional VIP visit enabled women to 'earn group income' by providing hospitality, a non-confrontational ploy which did not interfere with their normal responsibilities (2000:155, 159). Macintyre (this issue, 128) argues trenchantly that the 'self-help' philosophy leaves Petztorne women with 'nothing to distribute and ... constantly trying to draw women into activities that involve no remuneration'. This reinforces 'entrenched views of women's lack of access to wealth and power' in comparison to Lihirian men who exploit the mining project far more effectively by accepting operating grants on behalf of organizations in which they are involved. Pollard, though (this issue, 53, 57, 59), also emphasizes the risks for women's groups inherent in receipt of external grants: they include 'financial dependence'; 'the time constraints of fixed-term funding' which makes continuity and stability difficult to achieve; the negative effects on women's own fundraising efforts; and the backbiting, jealousy, and accusations of corruption which sudden access to money can provoke within a group. She further signals the resilience and ongoing viability of many self-financed women's groups during the recent crisis in Solomon Islands whereas most externally-funded social projects and programs struggled or lapsed when overseas aid dried up or was diverted to meet other priorities.

WOMEN IN MALE WORLDS

Everywhere in Melanesia, there is serious discrepancy between women's burgeoning local presence, even to some extent in community politics, and their national invisibility. The public effacement of women is justified by male (and even female) contempt for women's political capacities,¹⁷ though throughout the region they are widely recognized as critical to local production and as exercising practical moral authority in the domestic and community economies as well as in situations of conflict, fighting, peacemaking, and reconciliation. Thus, in urban squatter settlements in Nouméa, Kanak and Wallisian women were said to work closely together in local women's action groups whereas Kanak and Wallisian men remained divided by 'ethnic' prejudice and only interacted via female intermediaries (Dussy n.d.). During the war in Bougainville, organized groups of Christian women went into the bush to seek out and 'bring back home' alienated young Bougainville Revolutionary Army men (Anon. 1995; Saovana-Spriggs 2000). In Solomon Islands, the volunteer ecumenical Women for Peace group was formed in mid-2000 in Honiara 'with the general objective', says Pollard, a founder and leader of the group, 'that women should contribute to the peace process in their capacity as mothers of the nation' across the fault-lines of ethnicity, religion, age, class, and politics (Liloqula and Pollard 2000:9-14; Paina 2000; Pollard, this issue, 52). Their efforts have been highly praised by Solomon Islanders and outside agencies alike (ACFOA 2000:28; Fugui 2001:554; Roughan 2000), but it is as yet unclear that symbolic maternal authority can consistently restrain undisciplined mobs of violent, alienated young men bearing high-powered weapons, in view of the 'criminalisation of state' and the collapse of effective policing (Dinnen n.d.).¹⁸

In each of the Melanesian states, the category 'women' is accorded constitutional and legal lip service as an equal and integral component of national polities that in practice are marked by profound gender imbalance with oppression and marginalization of women (Jolly 1997; Macintyre 1998; Molisa 1987, 2002; Pollard 2000:17; Sepoe 2000:11-14; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993). In church affairs, similarly, Pollard's observation with respect to

Solomon Islands holds good across the region: 'women outnumber men' and are 'so powerful and important' that without them 'church-related activities in the villages would die a natural death' but men 'remain the principal decision makers' and retain control of the 'higher echelons of Church governance' (2000:44, 50). Thus, while the Women for Peace Group is a key contributor to the Civil Society Network (see note 13; Pollard, this issue, 53, 60, note 7), it is primarily male church leaders of the Solomon Islands Christian Association who speak publicly on behalf of the Network (David Hegarty, pers. comm., 2 Sep. 2002).

Women are effectively excluded from formal politics and public affairs in Melanesia by virtue of male prejudice and their own lack of education and opportunity but also by choice: notoriously, women rarely vote for female candidates and most women, especially uneducated rural-dwellers, agree with men that politics is men's business (Brouwer, Harris, and Tanaka 1998:7; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993:68-9). In Bougainville, for instance, where women's vital input to the peace and reconciliation processes is widely acknowledged, most men and many women nonetheless refuse women's right to exercise public leadership in the post-conflict polity and insist on a return to 'traditional' female spheres (Anon. 1995:30; Regan 1999:15). Yet the issue is not a straightforward matter of the presence or absence of female choice and agency. Some, mostly educated Bougainvillean women undoubtedly do aspire 'to take a proper share in governing the island' (Saovana-Spriggs 2000:29). On the other hand, women who attended a 1998 meeting with representatives of the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches rejected a proposal that all church programs for Bougainville should be co-ordinated through the ecumenical Inter-Church Women's Forum. They insisted that 'it was about time the [male] church leaders take note and acknowledge their responsibilities seriously by leading the people' and that women 'can only be there to support all activities and initiatives of the Church Leaders' (Gegeyo and Luke 1998).¹⁹ In Melanesia, as elsewhere, many women evidently avoid public leadership as a further burden rather than pursue it as a right. Nonetheless, political education and training programs run by the Women in Politics committees in all three independent states have encouraged the nomination of female candidates in recent national elections, though so far with very limited electoral success.

CONCLUSION

The course of doing research on women's groupings in Melanesia is littered with moral and intellectual potholes, many of which have been mentioned in the course of this paper. Elision (of women and Christianity), sexism, ethnocentrism, essentialism, secularism, sectarianism, romanticism, pessimism, and overoptimism are some of them but perhaps the biggest, given its practical implications for Melanesian women themselves, is also the newest – overestimating their potential to produce results that formal institutions, apart from the churches and some NGOs, seem patently unable to achieve. Just as pernicious is the corollary of attributing to Melanesian women a natural capacity for harmonious cooperation that Melanesian men are evidently lacking. Collectivity, as McDougall (this issue, 65) found in Ranongga, is hard to achieve and even harder to maintain. There is a clear risk that local men and overseas agencies alike will take the self-effacing effectiveness of women's fellowship groups as grounds to load them further with responsibilities and expectations and in the process undermine the spirit and the will that has so far underpinned their modest successes.

NOTES

1. Approximately 85% of Papua New Guineans live in rural areas (Brouwer, Harris, and Tanaka 1998:6), as does a similar or greater proportion of the population of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu and of the Kanak population of New Caledonia. In absolute terms, New Caledonia is an exception to my rhetorical scenario since most Kanak people these days have access to electricity, reticulated water, and reasonable health, education-

- al, and social security services but the material deprivation of Kanak rural communities remains stark relative to most urban dwellers and almost all Europeans in New Caledonia.
2. The phrase 'criminalisation of state' appeared in the subtitle of a seminar paper on Solomon Islands given by Sinclair Dinnen (n.d.); see also Dinnen 2002b:292-5.
 3. Historically, the attitudes of Christian missions to indigenous beliefs and practices ('custom' or 'tradition') ranged from qualified tolerance by Catholics and Anglicans to blanket rejection by most Nonconformist and Protestant denominations. With the transformation of missions into national churches and the enshrining of custom along with Christianity in the symbolic lexicons of newly-independent Melanesian nations as linked bases for national unity and identity, most mainline Protestant churches rehabilitated selected aspects of custom, though often with considerable ambivalence. However, the more evangelical churches like the Seventh-day Adventists and the Assemblies of God, together with almost all recently-arrived evangelical and pentecostal groups, display more or less extreme fundamentalist intolerance to custom. This paper refers primarily to women's groups attached to mainline churches.
 4. E.g., on New Caledonia see Douglas (1982:406-7) and Leenhardt (1947); on Fiji see France (1969) and Lee (1877); on Papua New Guinea, see Stone-Wigg and Newton (1933:8).
 5. Compare the oppositional configuration of 'Melanesian' and 'Western' personhood by Linnekin and Poyer (1990:6-7, 9), Gewertz (1984:619), Strathern (1988:10-18), and Thomas (1995:106) with the stringent critiques of such reasoning by Carrier (1992a, 1992b), Jolly (1992:146), Macintyre (1995), and Thomas in an earlier work (1991:57-9); see also Fabian (1983).
 6. With no doubt deliberate irony, the newspaper juxtaposed this statement to a photograph of an ethnic Fijian soldier manning a road block and armed with a machine gun (*Age*, 28 July 2000).
 7. Barker (1996:224-5), Douglas (2002:9), and Thomas (1991:197-204) exemplified rural complaints about urban, elite, and 'Western' individualism and materialism in opposition to 'the time-honoured communalism of past years' (Pollard 2000:49). Douglas (2002:20-3), Kuehling (1999:205-7), Macintyre (2000:153), Molisa ([Molisa] n.d.:5-6), Ounei (Ounei-Small and Gauthier 1995:39-40), and Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1993:71-5, 80-1) outlined various objections to 'women's liberation' and 'Western feminism' made by Melanesian women and men. According to Martha Macintyre (2000:154-5), elite Papua New Guinean women 'generally drew on liberal democratic discourses of egalitarianism rather than those of ... a "feminism" generally construed as sexual libertarianism' – a prejudice evidently based on local distaste for the supposed 'sexual freedom' of white female students at UPNG in the early 1970s (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993:80-1). From a romantic, counterhegemonic feminist perspective, Zohl dé Ishtar lamented the lack of universal female solidarity against 'a common [male] oppression' and rationalized the 'great hesitancy' towards the concept of feminism 'in Pacific circles' as a matter of indigenous priorities: 'racism is seen as the main issue' (1994:237-9).
 8. See Burridge (1991: esp. 54-70, 71-132, 159-67) on the tension of individuality and community in Christian experience.
 9. In her critique of romantic, naturalistic models of indigenous maternity as singular and primal, Christine Dureau pointed out that women in Simbo, Solomon Islands, expressed most resentment for 'those traits of child-care and raising usually presented as positive in naturalistic models' – the close physical bond with children and their extended nurture and emotional dependence (1993:29-31).
 10. Pollard's outline of 'the principles upon which [Solomon Islands] women as mothers mobilise culture and Christianity to resolve conflicts' chimes with Koven and Michel's (1993) analysis of the 'maternalist' political discourses and strategies by which Euro-American women's social movements from 1880 to 1920 'linked religious activism and domesticity to one another' and 'transformed motherhood from women's primary **private** responsibility into **public** policy'. Here, too, as women 'shifted tactics from "moral suasion" to direct political action', they continued to claim 'a kind of moral superiority rooted in their differences from men' (Liloqula and Pollard 2000:9; Koven and Michel 1993:2, 10-11).
 11. Anon. (1995:29), Douglas (1998:114-20), Liloqula and Pollard (2000:9-10), Counts (1980:341), Macintyre (1983:27), and Rumsey (2000) instance women's interventions to end indigenous fighting or ransom captives in Bougainville, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea respectively. McDougall (this issue) recounts local Solomon Islands histories crediting the introduction of Christianity to a senior woman's protection of an indigenous Christian missionary from the violence of male priests. Anon. (1995), Hakena (2000), Macintyre (2000:159-62), and Saovana-Spriggs (2000) describe peacemaking and reconciliation strategies deployed by women during the Bougainville war; Liloqula and Pollard (2000), Paina (2000), Pollard (this issue), and Roughan (2000) do so with respect to the conflict in Solomon Islands; and Garap (n.d.) does so regarding recent tribal fighting in Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea.
 12. The absence of women's groups was by no means total in precolonial Melanesian communities which varied widely in size, structure, and composition. Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi noted that many modern women's groupings 'are extensions of traditional women's organizations (or relations), often stratified by age with older women taking the lead', especially in female initiations (1996:73-4). Indigenous women's groups were specifically reported in parts of Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea, where such experience probably contributed to women's later formulation of savings and exchange groups called wok meri, 'women's work' in Tok Pisin (Sexton 1986); Margaret Jolly described the prevalence of collective gardening and other activities amongst women in south Pentecost, in north Vanuatu (1994:61-8). In Samoa, in contrast to much of Melanesia, indigenous association of women was institutionalized in the *auluma*, a village-wide society 'drawn from the female members of the families of the village' with 'considerable prestige and influence in ceremonial matters' and some veto rights over male decision-making (Schoeffel 1983:2).

13. The terms 'civil society' and 'organizations of civil society' are increasingly reified by educated Melanesians to mean a component of the national polity parallel to the 'public sector' and the 'private sector' (Liloqla and Pollard 2000:6, 7; Molisa n.d.). However, McDougall (this issue) reports a novel resort to the term in Solomon Islands to label 'named collective groups (e.g., "the Civil Society Group" and "Gizo Civil Society")' which have taken 'overtly oppositional stances' to government during the ongoing political crisis (see also Scales, Dinnen, and Hegarty n.d.:4, 10-12). The Solomon Islands political scientist Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka (2001) discerned a broader pattern of recurrent 'confrontations between the state and civil society' over questions of land and natural resource development.
14. For very incomplete, dated, but nonetheless useful listings of women's groupings across the Pacific region, see the *Pacific Women's Directory* (Pacific Women's Resource Bureau 1993, 1997) published by the Pacific Women's Resource Bureau of the South Pacific Commission (now Pacific Community).
15. Forman (1984) gives an outline of women's involvement in the churches in Oceania generally. Dickson-Waiko (this issue) and Pollard (this issue) provide an overview of church women's groupings in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands respectively. Randell (1975) and Schoeffel (1983) reconstruct the history and operation of different branches of the UCWF in Papua New Guinea. Sepoe (2000:55-6, 139-45, 154-60) discusses a UCWF group in a village in Gulf Province, Papua New Guinea; Dureau (1993) a UCWF group in Simbu, Solomon Islands; and Douglas (2002:6-11) a local Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union (PWMU) group in Aneityum, Vanuatu.
16. Expatriate female missionaries launched the PWMU as a national organization in Vanuatu in 1957. Colonial branches of the Anglican Mothers' Union, a 'world-wide charitable society', were installed by British or Australian women in Solomon Islands in 1924, in Vanuatu in 1938, and in Papua New Guinea in 1949 but remained under foreign leadership until the 1960s. The South Sea Evangelical Church Women's Fellowship in Solomon Islands, a parish-based, mainly indigenous initiative, claims to date from 1938. The Methodist Women's Fellowship began national meetings for women in Papua New Guinea in 1952 and Solomon Islands in 1962 (Forman 1984:163-4; Pacific Women's Resource Bureau 1993:130, 132, 153).
17. The sexist attitudes of postcolonial Melanesian men are variously embedded in indigenous values and practices which have been encouraged by missionary paternalism, colonial misogyny, and developers' machismo. Ironically, such attitudes are now often negatively reinscribed in the ethnocentric disapproval of well-meaning outsiders for whom Melanesian women are helpless, passive collective victims rather than personal agents who increasingly are mobilizing to assert their worth and transform their difficult situations in culturally meaningful ways.
18. Hegarty (2001) estimated in May 2001 that 'more than 500 high-powered guns remain in the community' in Solomon Islands.
19. I thank Anne Dickson-Waiko for bringing this text to my attention and supplying a photocopy.

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