

Capital cultures: Gender, place and belonging in Port Moresby and Noumea

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*Noumea is nothing. It is French.
There is one home—it is Lifou*
(Christianne, 42, Noumea 2016).

I feel comfortable in Moresby wherever I am
(Marie, 33, Port Moresby 2015).

These quotations encapsulate differences between the perspectives of educated and employed Kanak women in Noumea and their counterparts in Port Moresby. Where Christianne reports no attachment to the town in which she lives, Marie sees Moresby as home. While these women have much in common—including being Melanesian, of similar age, having tertiary education qualifications from overseas, and being employed in white collar professions in the capital cities of their countries of origin—Christianne grew up in a French colony, while Marie was raised in what was then a newly independent Papua New Guinea (PNG). Their different relationships with the urban places they live in reflect the impact of the colonial past on the present as this is differently manifest in the unique towns of the Pacific.

In this paper, I explore Melanesian women's relationships with the capital cities of Noumea and Port Moresby. To do so I draw on conversations, email exchanges, interviews and focus groups with 16 Kanak and 12 Papua New Guinean women. Illustrating their profoundly different views about the urban areas in which they live, I argue that it is important to attend to the distinct voices of women that inhabit the towns and cities of the Pacific. Although they might all be described as middle class Melanesians, these Kanak and Papua New Guinean women inhabit cities that are differently shaped by colonial place making and the experience or absence of independence.

In the last 40 years, there has been an increasing focus on the 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber 1973) of urbanisation in the Pacific. Academics and development practitioners discuss squatter settlements, crime, poverty, ethnic conflict and corruption as well as the challenges presented by climate change and globalisation (see for example Oram 1976; Norwood 1984; Connell and Lea 1993; Connell 2003; Goddard 2010; Repic 2011). There is rarely much consideration of the difference gender makes to the experience of inhabiting towns and cities and when gender is mentioned it is almost exclusively discussed in relation to the security and safety problems women face when they are in public spaces, including markets and accessing public transport (UN Women 2012). Consequently, the dynamism of cities and the opportunities urban spaces offer women to forge a more independent and interesting life for themselves tend to be overlooked (Massey 1994; McDowell 1999; Rose 1993).

Unique histories of colonialism and its differential impacts on Pacific towns are also under researched aspects of writing on urbanisation in the region. But as Paul Jones

notes in his report for the Asian Development Bank (2012), Pacific 'urban villages' have emerged under different colonial regimes and administrative systems and this can affect social dynamics. While some urban centres have developed in countries with a degree of pre-colonial commonality in terms of genetics, culture and history, Apia in Samoa for example, others, including the towns and cities of PNG, contain the most ethnically and culturally diverse populations in the world.

The geography of these countries also shapes social relations and urban identities. While women living in Apia or Noumea can and frequently do return to their villages, thereby maintaining important familial and cultural connections, women whose families migrated to Port Moresby from the islands of PNG in the 1980s typically have only attenuated ties with their traditional places of origin (Macintyre 2011).

Who comes to the city and what they do is influenced by independence or national sovereignty which affects local control over employment policies. After independence in 1975, PNG introduced nationalisation, which meant that expatriates who sought to work there were required to apply for visas where previously they had been entering the country as an Australian territory. These changes resulted in an exodus of white public servants from PNG in the 1970s and 80s. Alongside this, the city's labour profile also changed. Moreover, as Melissa Demian (2017) notes, in the formal sector, Port Moresby has seen the most growth in clerical professions which tend to be occupied by women, thus giving rise to 'a feminisation of the workforce'.

In contrast, Kanaks in Noumea are in the minority including as employees in the formal sector. Those that are employed tend to work in 'blue collar' and service industry roles rather than in the public service or as professionals. Despite efforts to enable Kanaks to participate in education and employment, the gap between the indigenous population and other ethnic groups has increased since 2009 (Pacific Islands Forum, 21 August 2016) and there is a particularly low participation rate among indigenous populations and women (Le Queux and Graff 2015). The deeply entwined relationship between the history of the independence movement and labour activism in New Caledonia add weight to the theory that the situation is unlikely to change unless the country achieves independence in the 2018 referendum.

As a capital city in the settler colony of New Caledonia, Noumea is an outlier in Melanesia. French, conservative, safe, these are all words used to describe Noumea that are not used about Port Moresby. Moresby also is unique among Melanesian towns—the size of its population, the level of security concerns and the ethnic diversity of its inhabitants—mean that it too must be considered on

its own terms. It is thus helpful that in both places the women with whom I have spoken about these matters are all tertiary educated and employed. Most are aged in their thirties or early forties and many have gained at least some of their educational qualifications in New Zealand, Australia or France. A high proportion of those who took part in the research were not in a relationship at the time of interview, though more of the women in Noumea had children. All the interviews took place in English, a disadvantage for some of the Kanak women for whom this is a second or third language and who are less likely to speak English on a regular basis in their workplaces than their Papua New Guinean counterparts.

Educated and employed women in Port Moresby

The majority of the women with whom I spoke in Port Moresby have grown up in town. Many also have parents who have lived there most of their lives. These women know no other home in PNG and even those who arrived in Moresby more recently are not interested in returning to their place of origin.

Beth's story is illustrative. Now 30 and working for an Australian company, Beth first came to Moresby 10 years ago from a village outside Wewak. She moved in with her sister to complete a university degree. Despite the cost of living and restrictions on personal freedom she experiences as a young woman in Moresby, Beth has no intention of moving back either to Wewak or the nearby village in which she grew up. Declaring 'I don't think I'd like to go anywhere else. I'd rather stay here', Beth mentioned as reasons, the opportunities for employment and entertainment afforded by Port Moresby that are not available elsewhere in PNG.

Similarly, when asked about life in Moresby, Melissa said she couldn't imagine living elsewhere. For her, in comparison to the other provinces of PNG, Moresby represents a place of personal freedom where she can wear what she likes without considering how she will be perceived. It is also important for Melissa that Moresby offers a range of consumer and leisure choices. Indeed, for her this means that life in Moresby is akin to life in Sydney.

It's [Moresby] changed at such a fast pace, it almost feels no different if you live in Sydney or Port Moresby, so I've been in Sydney for almost a year for work and it, you just come back to Moresby, it's almost like that. You have certain places to go... you know you can afford it (Melissa, 33, Port Moresby 2015).

Because of her income, Melissa experiences few barriers to accessing a range of venues in Moresby, including places long associated with colonial exclusion. For instance, discussing the Port Moresby Yacht Club Melissa said she went there to eat with her children along with 'the Australians and the Papua New Guineans that could afford it'.

This was not the case among all those I spoke with, however. For example, discussing the Yacht Club, Meg said:

...the first impression you get when you step into the lobby, you see all these white faces of all these white people...there are all these photos of white people. I'm not sure, they must have been the first members of the club and all you see is just white faces. You don't see anything familiar when you go into that lobby area (Meg, 25, Port Moresby 2015).

Susan confirmed that it was usually expatriates who went to the Yacht Club and described it as having an 'old colonial style and feel.' This meant that for her: 'it's safe but it's just that you don't want to go in there and feel uncomfortable' (Susan, 30, Port Moresby 2015).

In other salubrious venues in Port Moresby, security guards use dress codes to exclude Papua New Guineans. This shows that intersecting class, gender and ethnic barriers play a role in shaping the cafes, shopping centres, hotels and gyms that are proliferating in the new Moresby. Nevertheless, the city's urban educated women appreciate having more places they can go.

Despite these changes, concerns about personal security present a daily challenge to women's experience of 'feeling comfortable' (Radice 1999; 2015) in Port Moresby. Women navigate their mobility in the city with assistance from male family members, trusted taxi drivers and in some cases, drivers provided through their workplaces. A few take public motor vehicles but many prefer not to because of concerns about personal safety. Some of those with whom I have spoken have been assaulted and robbed at bus stops and on buses.

Meg outlined some of the ways women in Moresby navigate personal safety:

One of the things about working for an organisation that is really high on security. For instance, if we were to stay after 9pm then we have the privilege of getting a UN escort so we get to contact them and where we are. They get our location and trace us and lead us all the way back home. That is like the extreme of how bad it gets at times. For us, it's a must because it's the privilege. But in most cases where I have to get my family members to pick me up after 9 or 10 then one of my brothers would have to be driving...there must be one or two boys sitting in the car to come pick me up. Just to ensure if anything goes wrong then the boys are there with us (Meg, 25, Port Moresby 2015).

Meg's reliance on her male relatives is replicated by many women in Moresby (Spark 2014). This is made easier because most continue to live with their families of origin well into their thirties, primarily because of the high cost of living. While they may receive relatives from 'the village' into their homes, particularly if they still live with their parents, most are less likely to do so once their parents die. Women in this cohort typically construct their obligations as being to their children (if they have them), parents and siblings (Spark 2017).

Despite the colonial feel of some venues and the challenges with navigating personal security, it is inappropriate to represent Moresby as a place that is always hostile to women. For women who possess the markers of class—a salary, education, the capacity to buy and rent houses—the city is home, ‘in and through vicissitudes and not just despite them’ (Casey 1993). As Marie said: ‘I feel comfortable in Moresby wherever I am’ (Marie, 33, Port Moresby 2015).

Veronica, a Papua New Guinean woman who has worked in Noumea for 10 years but who returns to Moresby on a regular basis, supported this perspective:

It's not so bad now in Moresby. A few years ago you wouldn't feel safe to take a walk in the evening or go to go out and drive, but it feels much safer. It feels better. It's really positive how things have changed there. I think there's lots more things that you can do at night and that gives people more freedom to move. There's still places you wouldn't want to go at night and so on. But I feel much better being there than a few years ago when we moved out. Being able to move at night and so on (Veronica, 42, Noumea 2016).

For Veronica, Noumea may be safer and have better schools to which she can send her children, but Moresby is more comfortable because it ‘feels Melanesian’. For her living in Noumea is ‘like you’re living in Australia or somewhere...it’s not Melanesian.’ Kanak women concur with this perspective, indicating the significance of independence in shaping the experience of comfort and belonging in urban areas. This difference also demonstrates that while colonised people necessarily assert their identity through links to land, in an independent nation, identity acquires new dimensions and citizenship itself becomes an authentic identity.

Educated and employed Kanak women in Noumea

The majority of the women with whom I spoke in Noumea had spent time in town as children. Because of limited access to schooling in their places of origin and a generalised preference among their parents to live in tribou or outside Noumea, most had come to Noumea for schooling rather than because their parents were based there. A number had lived in boarding schools or with other family members as teenagers, going home on weekends or school holidays.

Some of the women discussed the discomfort Kanak people experienced in Noumea before the signing of the Noumea Accord, the 1998 agreement with France that acknowledged Kanak people’s right to a greater degree of political power. Gladys, for example, said:

Before that the Kanak people were, it's not that they were not allowed...they were absolutely not allowed into the city except for work. In those times, the feeling was still there...they were allowed to come and shop and everything. But the feeling was

still there. You couldn't stay with Kanak people in a group in the middle of the city. You had to move. Because it was for white people. No one used to go, none of the Kanak people used to go to the beaches. Baie de Citron, Anse Vata Bay, not one Kanak person on the beach at that time. Impossible. It was not forbidden by any law. It was just the way it was. So, after the Noumea Accords, it changed. It changed (Gladys, 42, Noumea 2016).

Because it is seen as ‘white’ and ‘French’, Kanak women have little connection to Noumea. While life in town does not present the challenges to personal security that women in Port Moresby experience, Kanak women describe Noumea as unhomely. The following quotes are illustrative:

Here in Noumea, it's a white city. I mean, it's a mini Paris in the Pacific. So I guess, I don't know, you don't have that sense of being in the Pacific, being in Noumea (Rose, 33, Noumea 2016).

Noumea is very much more French, also. Not exactly have the same values as locally. So that's why I think also there is this, they [Kanak] don't connect that much to the cities here. Cities around the Pacific Ocean, like in all the other Pacific islands, especially the Melanesian countries, they're really Melanesian cities. It's not European. Here it's really a western city...That's the big difference. So yeah, it's normal for me that we don't connect to Noumea city, because it's too westerner. It's not like the rest of the Melanesian countries' cities (Gladys, 42, Noumea 2016).

Thus, for Kanak women, Noumea is a functional place, a place to work and send children to school but not a place with which they have a positive affective connection. As Christianne said:

We live here, we work here, but in Noumea it's like, I live in Sydney or I can live in Dubai or Auckland... there is nothing, there is nothing in Noumea (Christianne, 42, Noumea 2016).

Rose echoed this, adding that for her ‘home’ is the island of Ouvea, where her family comes from:

Noumea is mostly where I work, where my children go to school. But if we talk about home, home would be the islands, home would be Ouvéa, home would be Goosanah, home would be my parent's place (Rose, 33, Noumea 2016).

As Rose’s statement makes clear, Kanak women have a markedly different relationship with their familial places of origin than their counterparts in Port Moresby.

All of the Kanak women to whom I spoke explained this connection saying that while of necessity they must spend much of their working lives in Noumea, they return to tribou to regenerate themselves.

Going back to Lifou for custom ceremonies is like a force, energy, spiritual regeneration. It is the same for my daughters’ (Karen, 42, Noumea 2016).

I need to come back to Lifou. It's like a resource. It's energy for me. I must survive here because we have to work, to pay too, it's life. But when I want to be me, to be my identity and my fight, my energy, I come back to my sweet home Lifou (Lily, 45, Noumea 2016).

You are defined first from the earth you are linked to. The piece of land you are linked to. So it's extremely important. Even if you live in the city, when you meet someone, you say, "Where are you from"? It's where, which piece of land are you from, that means. Because that's your identity (Gladys, 42, Noumea 2016).

The strength, regeneration and identity that urban based Kanak women gain from returning to *tribou* confirms that forms of traditional connection are given greater priority in colonised places that have not become independent. Port Moresby women, born and raised in an independent nation, are able to forge new versions of identity based on their experiences as urban inhabitants of a challenging but politically free environment. Conversely, Kanak women locate belonging outside the town that has been forged by and remains under French rule. As noted above, in colonised places, indigenous identity must of necessity reference links to land while in an independent nation, there is space to create identities based on new forms of belonging including in and to urban areas.

Before concluding, it is important to note another key difference that emerged in the discussions with Kanak women. Far more than their Papua New Guinean counterparts, Kanak women were concerned about the place of Kanak men, especially their sons. Noting that tribal connection mattered less for women in the city, because 'in the Kanak culture the girls are to be married and they don't have land' they said 'land is belonging to the man' (Ruth, 45, Noumea 2016). It was particularly challenging for single mothers to try and ensure this connection because they sometimes struggled to maintain their sons' relationships with their fathers. Some women solved this by forging adoptive bonds between their brothers and their sons, thereby ensuring their sons would have a place. For instance, Yiiciipo, who was separated from her sons' father, said:

When my son born, and I choose to keep my son with me... I introduce him to my brothers, and told them that one is my son, I will keep him with me, and you are like an anchor, and one, the first one told me that I don't have any boys, I don't have any sons, I will just take your gift and I will take your son as my son (Yiiciipo, 37, Noumea 2016).

Ruth is also a single mother of two boys and was planning to do the same with her brothers:

I'll give my kids to my brother. Like in the clan he's my brother's son, but he stay with me. That's the solution I find to know that I can be sure that he's got his place somewhere in the Kanak society (Ruth, 45, Noumea 2016).

For the Kanak women with whom I spoke these matters were of considerable concern. Conversely the educated women in PNG were raising their sons to be successful in the modern world of Port Moresby, rather than as individuals who needed to connect with their 'traditional origins'. Indeed among this cohort in PNG, versions of masculinity associated with distorted (and for some outdated) views of gender are often seen as 'customary' and in need of revision.

Conclusion

The unique histories of these two Melanesian places continue to shape women's relationships with both urban and village places in the present. Where middle class women in Moresby feel at home in most places (with the exception of venues dominated by expatriates) despite concerns about personal safety, Kanak women locate identity in *tribou*.

Moreover, there is a political dimension to Kanak women's connections with their familial places of origin that is less relevant for women in Moresby. Overall, urban women in PNG are more inclined to frame their urban challenges in relation to inequalities of class and gender, whereas Kanak women affirm their bonds with Kanak culture and are more cautious about discussing gender and class. As Rose said, when asked to comment on the differences between Noumea, Suva and Port Vila, the latter 'are in independent countries'.

As Kanaks in New Caledonia approach the 2018 referendum, their vexed relationship with the city of Noumea will be one of many threads they are likely to consider in deciding whether or not to vote for independence.

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