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Today is not the same as yesterday, and tomorrow it will be different again: *Kastom* in Ambae, Vanuatu

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Introduction

I come from the island of Ambae in north Vanuatu, though since 1992 I have lived in Port Vila, the capital, and worked at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, where I am coordinator of the Women's Culture Project. In this paper I discuss *kastom* ('custom') in my island, its importance for women, its relationship to Christianity and politics, and the recent upsurge of interest in women's *kastom* encouraged by the Women's Culture Project. My role is to revive, preserve and promote women's *kastom*. In my work I travel to many islands, including Ambae.

Ambae is a volcanic island about 40 kilometres long. The people live in villages in a number of districts. They are subsistence farmers who grow their own food in gardens and keep pigs, chickens and cattle. They also have coconut plantations from which they make copra to earn a little money. There are two main languages. Today, people travel in and around Ambae on trucks, small boats and aeroplanes. In the north, travel is very difficult because a volcano makes the land very steep. Many people from Ambae live in other parts of Vanuatu, especially Port Vila and Santo. There are many primary schools in Ambae and three secondary schools.

Kastom in Ambae

Kastom is a term in Bislama, the national language of Vanuatu, that means the way of life in which we grew up and which we still practise. So the *kastom* of Ambae is the things we do that come from Ambae. This is hard to explain in English, because the term 'custom' lacks the idea of close association with a place. People today are trying to find ways to fit *kastom* together with the new things that have come into our lives. So the *kastom* that we now practise is not the same as it was before. People are changing it and adding new things. One of the most important influences on *kastom* has been the churches.

People in Ambae use the word *kastom* to mean ceremonies, stories, songs, dances and certain ways of cooking; traditional knowledge and sacred places; family organisation (or kinship) and traditional leaders or chiefs; as well as Ambae mats, pigs and other such things. The main ceremonies practised are welcoming ones for newborn babies, adoptions, marriages, rank ceremonies based on pig-killing, rank ceremonies based on mats, and funerals. Many take place over a number of days, which we count in groups of five. This is especially so in funeral ceremonies, when for 100 days after the person's death we mark

each fifth day by cooking special food: on the 50th day, for example, we cook things we have caught in the sea, such as fish and crabs. Food is a very important part of *kastom*. So is our vernacular language, which has words to describe all the *kastom* things we do that are hard to express in English.

Women and *kastom*

Mats, which are very important in all these *kastom* ceremonies, are the main work of women in Ambae. Before Western influences came, women mostly made mats and took care of pigs and babies. The main work for men was growing food and protecting the community. Once children grew big enough to walk about, small boys became the responsibility of their fathers, while girls were cared for by their mothers, who started to teach them how to make mats and the other things that girls needed to learn. Today, women do most of the work within the family and the community, while men are more often also involved in politics and business.

Marriages were arranged when girls were quite small, sometimes even before they were born, and when they reached the age of about 12 years they often went to live with their husband's mother in order to get used to their new family. But they did not marry or live with their husbands until they reached puberty. We Ambaeans divide ourselves into two groups named Tagaro and Merumbuto, which anthropologists call moieties: people must always marry someone from the other group. Parents tried to make sure their daughters married into a family that was close both in terms of place and kinship. It was hard for a married girl to move to a place a long way away from her own parents. Ideally she should marry into her mother's family in order to keep the family and the land together. Today, most young people choose their own partners, and sometimes girls marry to faraway places and not into their mother's family. This often causes problems with marriages, because they have not followed the correct *kastom* road. In such cases, there are often disputes about land and much talk, gossip and other trouble.

Churches and *kastom*

Virtually all Ambaeans, like most ni-Vanuatu, are members of a Christian church. Historically, and still today, the attitudes towards *kastom* of the various denominations have varied widely. The Anglican Church established the first Christian mission in Ambae in the 1870s. The Anglicans did not make too many

changes. They stopped some things which were not good, such as murder and cannibalism, and some things that were hurtful, such as the tattooing of young girls. They also tried to change aspects of the men's rank system, *huge*. Today, *kastom* is still strongly alive in Anglican communities. The Catholic Church arrived next. They settled in only two areas and did not spread beyond them. Their impact is mainly on language because they mostly use French. They did not oppose *kastom* strongly in other ways, apart from harmful aspects.

The Churches of Christ were the third church to arrive, in about 1900. They became the second largest denomination in the island, spreading into many areas. They stopped almost every traditional practice, such as *kastom* dances and pig-killings. They did allow *kastom* marriage ceremonies to continue, including central aspects such as the bride's pig-killing and the exchanges between the two families. Because pig-killing was an integral part of the marriage exchanges, the Churches of Christ permitted women's participation in the rank system to continue, at the same time that they stopped men's participation in the graded society. During the independence movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the pro-*kastom* Nagriamel movement had a significant impact on the Churches of Christ in Ambae, and as a result they became much more supportive of *kastom*. Nowadays, church members are trying to bring back men's pig-killings.

The Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church was the fourth to arrive in Ambae. The SDAs are not widespread, but their effect on *kastom* was worse than that of the Churches of Christ. They banned everything except the weaving of mats. It is good that weaving is permitted, because at least it enables SDAs to continue to participate in ceremonies organised by Ambaeans belonging to other denominations. They can thus be involved in the marriages of family members outside the SDA Church, because they can still contribute to the exchanges by giving mats.

The next church to come was the Apostolic Church, in about 1960. It is mainly limited to one district. Members do not even know how to weave Ambaeans mats, although they make floor and sleeping mats in a different style. Women learn how to weave in the women's groups organised by their church, and they make baskets, mats, table mats and purses in styles not just of other islands in Vanuatu, but also of Fiji and other parts of the Pacific.

After independence in 1980, and especially since 1990, many small, mostly pentecostal churches have arrived in Ambae, almost all strongly opposed to *kastom*. There have also been splits in the existing denominations, especially the Churches of Christ and the Apostolic Church. Anglicans, by contrast, tend to switch parish affiliations rather than leave the church. As a result, there are many small churches in Ambae today, but the main ones are Anglican, Churches of Christ and SDA. The Anglican Church achieved its own independence from expatriate control in the 1980s and now all church officials are ni-Vanuatu. The Churches of Christ and the Apostolic Church are also mainly managed by ni-Vanuatu but are influenced by visitors from outside the country, as is the SDA Church. The Catholic

Church now also has local staff, both priests and nuns, but a few European nuns and priests continue to work throughout the country.

Women in island organisation

Vanuatu has six provinces. Ambae is in Penama Province, along with the islands of Maewo and Pentecost. The provincial headquarters are at Saratamata in East Ambae. The Penama Provincial Council has 15 elected and seven nominated members. The elected members are almost always men, because there are few female candidates in elections and even fewer are successful. The nominated members include one women's and two youth representatives, as well as representatives of the chiefs and the churches. There is a Women's Office and a Youth Office at Saratamata. As well as the Provincial Council, Ambae has an Island Council of Chiefs, the members of which are elected by the chiefs of all the villages around the island. Chiefs are always men.

Women have their own island council called *Vavine bulu*, meaning 'women together'. Women in all the villages elect representatives to the council, which meets three or four times per year, according to need. The executive of *Vavine bulu* meets more regularly, and representatives from *Vavine bulu* attend the biannual conference of the Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW), a non government organisation. The VNCW runs various awareness programmes to promote women in the villages, and to help them with health, business, sewing, water supply, and so on. The VNCW is mostly concerned with women's development, but Ambae women are also interested in their *kastom*. *Vavine bulu* promotes mat-making and this is important, because as long as you have mats you can take part in ceremonies.

At the village level, women's groups may be organised by the churches or by the women's network, but usually there is only one women's group in each village and it is that group which sends representatives to *Vavine bulu*. In Ambae, the government works closely with the church organisations and people do not notice much difference between church and government. They are more interested in what both can achieve.

Kastom today

The character of *kastom* is always the same, but the ways in which we practise it change. For example, in *kastom* marriages in the past, we exchanged women for just a few mats and pigs. But nowadays we pay for women with pigs and up to 20 of the most valuable mats. We also have church ceremonies as part of the marriage so that now we make two feasts, one for *kastom* and one for the church. This makes it hard for some people, because marriage has become very expensive. Since not every woman can make a mat, marriage is sometimes even more expensive because people have to buy mats.

The education of children in *kastom* ways used to take place at home. From an early age, children were taught how to do

things like weaving and dancing. But now children go to school and lack the opportunity to learn all these skills. Today, some schools are trying to introduce *kastom* into the classroom. In one village, the teachers have invited some older people to come and teach *kastom*. The children are now learning how to weave mats, as well as learning *kastom* stories, songs and dances.

Today, in Ambae, *kastom* is being revived in many such ways. The effect of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre programmes has been to renew people's interest in *kastom*. The Women's Culture Project programme, which Lissant Bolton and I implemented in Ambae in 1991–92 and have since introduced to other islands, has helped legitimate the things women do as true *kastom*, whereas previously it was regarded as men's business. This has increased the self-esteem and self-confidence of women and in Ambae has encouraged them to revive styles of mats which they had stopped making. Ambae people now recognise the need to

use more mats in ceremonies, instead of money, and this in turn enhances the reputation and self-respect of women.

In the future, I think there will be more new ways to teach *kastom* to our young people. However, it is hard to know what the effect of the new churches will be. Many of the new denominations are very strongly opposed to *kastom* and will try to defeat these attempts to stimulate it if they come to Ambae. If there is no opposition from the churches, *kastom* will continue to be revived, even though it will continue to change. People are changing *kastom* in order to try to make it relevant to life today. It has to fit in with church, government, education and development. The work of the cultural centre is to try to make sure that *kastom* remains a strong force in the lives of ni-Vanuatu. We believe that it is a strong foundation of our identity. If we don't have *kastom*, we are nobody – we don't know where we come from or where we are going.