

### **3 Ritualized Homosexuality, Male Power and Political Organization in North Vanuatu: A Comparative Analysis**

THE ISLAND of Malekula, in north Vanuatu, has for long been recognized as a *locus classicus* for the occurrence of organized male homosexuality. Deacon, who carried out his field researches in 1926, was the first to publish a reasonably detailed account (1934:260-69) of the highly institutionalized variety that occurs among the Big Nambas in the north. But it was Layard, who had worked at a much earlier period (1914-15) on the nearby offshore islands of Vao and Atchin, who subsequently incorporated Deacon's data into an early attempt to appreciate the theoretical significance of the practice (Layard 1942:503-22). Though homosexual behaviour as such did not appear to occur in the Small Islands, Layard noted the presence of dramatized representations on the part of ancestral spirits in the context of the boys' compulsory initiation rites. He attempted to provide some explanation for variations such as these but was seriously constrained by the inadequacies of his part-evolutionary and part-diffusionist premises. In a subsequent publication, however, he re-examined not only his own and Deacon's data but also much of the then available material on homosexuality elsewhere in Melanesia (Layard 1959). In the

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intervening years Layard had been greatly influenced by both Jungian and Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and in his article he produced some interesting evidence in support of the then widely held psychological hypothesis regarding homosexual intercourse as a substitute for incest desire.

Since much of subsequent anthropological thinking, not only about ritualized homosexuality but also about male initiation in general, runs counter to the premises of that brand of psychoanalytic thinking that places great weight on incest repression, oedipal rivalry, and castration anxiety, Layard's views, if correct, would have serious and widespread implications. However, it is not my intention here to carry out a reassessment of Layard's analysis, but rather to re-examine the Malekula and Small Islands data, together with some additional information that I obtained myself in 1970 in Nduindui district, west Ambae (formerly Aoba), an island some 40 miles to the north-east of Malekula.

My argument can be put simply: in each of these three areas, homosexual behaviour was believed to have causal effects of an ontological kind; that is to say, the participants were believed to generate a power that can both physically and spiritually transform themselves, and by extension, others also. This highly generalized belief was associated with a culturally specific form of initiation ritual distinguished by such recurrent features as shark symbolism, the use of elaborate hoaxes, and the importance of the male phallus. Beyond this simple level there were major differences.

Among the Big Nambas, homosexuality was a highly organized form of behaviour that occurred in a regular way between senior men and youths who had not yet completed their initiation into manhood. The senior men had the power, physically manifest in their exaggeratedly large penes, to make the juniors grow into mature men, above all into men with similarly strong and effective penes. Though the powerful phallus was undoubtedly believed to be relevant in the context of male domination, especially notable in Big Nambas society, it was also indicative of the capacity of men to contribute to the political welfare of a community dominated by hereditary and polygynous chiefs. In other words, the political function of the power so generated in the context of homosexual

relations was the maintenance both of male hegemony and of chiefly pre-eminence.

In the nearby Small Islands there was, in behavioural terms, no male homosexuality at all. Though male initiation shared many of the features of the Big Nambas' rites, including the pairing off of initiators and novices in couples who referred to one another by terms that meant 'wife' and 'husband' (or more literally, 'woman' and 'sister's husband'), Layard's (1942:503) informants denied that homosexual connection occurred. Nevertheless, the theme of anal penetration was repeatedly enacted in the context of the numerous hoaxes perpetrated on the novices during their thirty-day seclusion immediately after penile super-incision.<sup>1</sup> But instead of penetration by tutors, the novices were often terrifyingly threatened with such action from ancestral spirits. As Layard, I think quite correctly, argued, these ancestral spirits represented to the Small Islanders 'the highest cultural and psychic values that the natives know' (1959:111). The ancestral spirits were the guardians of tribal morality, and it must be inferred that their special power in relation to the novices was, in political terms, the creation and maintenance of a cohesive and solidary group of male agnates. Indeed, the

<sup>1</sup> Though Deacon referred to the Big Nambas operation as circumcision, Layard, who described the full variety of operations found throughout north Vanuatu, coined the term circum-incision to refer to the Big Nambas version. After describing the simple operation of incision, in which a single longitudinal slit is made in the foreskin, and also superincision, in which two such slits are made (as in the Small Islands), Layard described circum-incision in the following manner:

There are, however, two areas where the operation is carried a stage further, in which the foreskin, after having been longitudinally slit, is then cut around laterally on either side in such a manner that the whole foreskin is removed and thrown away into the water. This is the operation to which Rivers, possibly not knowing how it was performed, applied the term 'true circumcision'. It will be seen from the description, however, that it is very different from the operation of circumcision as practiced by the Jews and so introduced into Europe, and for this reason it is necessary to find a distinctive term. Owing to its close connection with the simpler operation of incision, I therefore propose to coin a new term and refer to this operation in future as circum-incision. (Layard 1942:476-7)

I follow Layard in his usage of all these terms.

ancestral power was so great that the mere threat of homosexual action was believed sufficient to ensure the transformation of the youths into effective adult members of the village.

In Nduindui the homosexual theme appeared yet again in the context of initiatory ritual, but instead of providing an idiom for the expression of either chiefly hegemony or lineage solidarity, it was here associated with the power of big men to attract followers by daring to do that which was normally prohibited. As in the Small Islands, actual homosexual intercourse did not occur, and if it should it would be condemned as abhorrent, in much the same way that incest was also condemned. The Nduindui were fully aware of the homosexual practices of the Big Nambas and regarded its occurrence as firm evidence for their view of these people as 'uncivilized black savages.' The homosexual theme occurred in the context of secret rites in which the participants were divided into initiators and initiates; but unlike both the Big Nambas and Small Islands rites, which constituted compulsory initiations into manhood, the west Ambae counterparts were voluntary affairs periodically organized by big men, and which included both male and female participants. As I shall shortly demonstrate, a recurrent theme of these rites was that the initiates, collectively and individually, were believed to generate powers through the public performance of acts that in everyday life were said to be bad (*hati*), bad either in the sense of invoking the presence of dangerous beings, as with sharks or bush spirits, or as contrary to the conventions of everyday life, for example, in penis or vagina exposure or in dramatic representations of incest and homosexual intercourse. For ordinary men and women in everyday contexts, all of these actions and objects were surrounded with tabus and avoidance patterns: in the context of the rites they evoked powers for the benefit of the participants, above all for those high-ranking men who either themselves performed, or sponsored others to perform, the most outrageous acts. I shall now support and develop this argument by examining the extant data for these three communities in greater detail.

## The Big Nambas of north Malekula

Deacon only spent a few days in north Malekula and though he succeeded in collecting a remarkable amount of useful cultural information, his data on social, political, and economic organization are almost nonexistent. We are fortunate, however, in that the French anthropologist Jean Guiart spent some five months among the Big Nambas in late 1950 and early 1951, and published his findings, which included detailed census data (initially in French [1952] and subsequently in abbreviated form in English [1953]).

At the time of Guiart's visit, some 1,137 Big Nambas lived in twenty-five villages scattered over rugged terrain on a high tableland in northwest Malekula (see Table 2). The villages ranged in size from 8 to 98 persons and most contained a number of clustered hamlets. The men of each village were members of a number of named patrilineal clans, the smaller with only some two

TABLE 2 Big Nambas sociological and census data based on Guiart (1952:233-42)\*

Primary localities (villages or village clusters)	Villages	Clans	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Total
Nevinbwis	1	8	32	21	24	21	98
Nevinal	1	2	4	3	-	1	8
Ontowalo	1	4	25	19	3	5	52
Mayak	1	4	18	17	3	1	39
Amox	7	24	148	142	105	27	422
Nevinala	2	9	31	33	14	9	87
Maxawe	1	8	17	18	12	9	56
Bwiter	2	8	43	24	15	7	89
Tenmaru/Varas	4	23	46	43	30	18	137
Tenamit	5	11	52	55	25	17	149
	25	101	416	375	231	115	1137

\*My main fieldwork was carried out from November 1958 to December 1959, September to December 1960, and June 1961 to January 1962. I returned briefly in 1970 and obtained much of the data on the *na nggwatu* and *na nggwai* rites. The main research was jointly financed by the Australian National University and the Colonial Social Science Research Council, and the 1970 visit by Sydney University.

to four clans, the largest with nineteen (averaging four clans per village). The primary political groups were named localities whose members owed allegiance to the hereditary chief of the dominant clan of that locality. There were eight such chiefs, four of whom Guiart designated as lesser chiefs and four as grand chiefs. The localities dominated by lesser chiefs ranged in scale from one to five villages and in population from 8 to 149 persons, those by grand chiefs from three to seven villages and from 137 to 422 persons.

Guiart especially stressed the flexibility of clans in their residential affiliations and even more so in their chiefly allegiances. As he noted (1953:442),

... clans will be vagabond and change their allegiance from one chieftainship to another, or without relinquishing their relationship to one chief, will move easily from one village to another. The important group of Amox, with its seven villages under one chief, is in great part the result of such a reshuffling.

In other words, in contrast to the great majority of Melanesian societies, where flexibility in clan organization consisted in the ease

TABLE 3 Social Structure and ritualized homosexuality  
in north Vanuatu

	Big Nambas	Vao	Nduindui
Descent units	Dispersed patrilines	Localized patrilines	Dispersed cognatic stocks
Local groups	Multiclan villages and village clusters	Clan-villages and double-villages	Multistock villages
Residence	Patrilocal	Patrilocal	Patrilocal
Leadership	Hereditary chiefs	Lineage elders	Big men
Initiatory group	Inclusive male cult	Inclusive male cult	Voluntary association
Homosexual relation	Between initiator and novice	Between clan ancestor and novices	Between initiator and novice in mock form
Penis treatment	Circum-incised and concealed in big wrapper	Super-incised and concealed in small wrapper	Reddened with powder and concealed behind woven apron

with which individuals could change clan affiliation, here flexibility was rather the ease with which clans could change chiefly affiliation.

The difference clearly relates to the crucial political importance of chiefs among the Big Nambas. Power devolved first and foremost on these hereditary office holders, and it was they who provided the fulcrums about which clans, hamlets, villages, women, and, as we shall see, homosexual boy partners, constellated and formed cohesive groups.

Yet another unusual though important feature of Big Nambas society, especially for a culture in which the patrilineal principle was otherwise so much stressed, was the prohibition against a man living at close quarters with either his father or his elder brother. The rationale for the prohibition was the severity of the avoidance tabu between a man's wife and these two close patrilineal male relatives. Though propriety could be maintained by hamlet co-residence, provided the houses were divided by a high fence without any opening, most men preferred to set up house in different hamlets. The men themselves, that is to say, father and son and elder brother and younger brother, could and did meet and interact freely in the clan's men's house (*namel*); indeed, male children of any age could wander about and enter this building without hindrance. I dwell on these restrictions for it seems most likely that they were interrelated with the correspondingly intimate relationship that obtained between paternal grandfather and grandson. According to Guiart, and he speaks with some authority on the matter, it was these two who regularly established a homosexual relationship. I quote at length from this important passage:

Much more elaborate and peculiar are the relations between two alternate generations, at least as far as a young boy is concerned, the girl leaving the family too soon for great care to be given her. The boys, in the beginning of their teens, are sent to the paternal grandfather, with whom they live for some years, working for him in the daytime, in his gardens, and at night sleeping with him in the *namel*, the men's club house. This homosexual relation between the two is carried on until the young man is old enough to marry and be given a bark belt to wear; until then he fixes the end of his penis sheath to a narrow plaited pandanus belt. ... The relationship between a young man and his paternal grandmother is almost of the same

order. She attends to his sexual education, serves him as a go-between for his intrigues or even sleeps at times with him until he has married or found a younger partner. (Guiart 1953:440)

Deacon, in his account of Big Nambas' homosexuality, made no mention of the grandparental relation, and indeed the implication is that such a possibility would be precluded through the application of incest avoidance and clan exogamy rules that parallel those of marriage:

In the choice of his *mugh vel* (the term by which a boy lover, as also a circumcision candidate, is known) a man is restricted by certain rules. He need not necessarily select a boy from another clan than his own, but he must be careful that no genealogical relationship can be traced between them. To have intercourse with a boy of one's own clan to whom one is allied by known kinship bonds is to be guilty of incest. Further, sexual relations with the sister's son or with any boy to whom one is related by marriage is similarly condemned. Should a man cohabit with a boy of his own clan who is known to be kin to him, the death penalty is not inflicted on the guilty pair as it would be in the event of such incestuous intercourse between a man and a woman, but both parties concerned must kill and exchange a pig. (Deacon 1934:261-2)

It is unfortunate that Guiart did not comment on this seeming discrepancy between these two sets of data. Nevertheless, I think that some resolution is possible. One possibility would be to interpret Guiart's comments to refer to classificatory and not real grandfathers, an arrangement which, of course, would conflict in no way with Deacon's stipulations. However, the manner in which Guiart wrote inclines me to reject this possibility, as also does the widespread occurrence in north Vanuatu of a sexual bond between a youth and his paternal grandmother. Another, more likely, possibility is that Deacon confused exogamic and incest prohibitions. Though marriage with a woman of one's own clan would violate a rule of clan exogamy, it is likely that among the Big Nambas, as in many other clan-structured societies, sexual intercourse with such a woman would only constitute incest if she fell within certain prohibited kinship categories. Throughout much of north Vanuatu, women referred to as grand-daughters, regardless of clan affiliation, are suitable sexual partners, and it would seem



that the homosexual tie reported by Guiart was in conformity with this occurrence.

I will shortly elaborate on what I see as the political implications of the Big Nambas alternate-generation homosexual relationship. But first a comment is in order on another and perhaps most important aspect that Layard made central to his analysis. Layard was concerned, as noted earlier, to provide anthropological support for the psychological hypothesis that links homosexuality with repressed incest desire. In his 1959 article he argued that homosexuality in primitive society is commonly found in association with sister-exchange marriage and that indeed the homosexual partners are, prototypically, related as sister's husband and wife's brother. In support of this contention he noted the widespread occurrence, both in Malekula and elsewhere in Melanesia, of the sister's husband term of address used for the senior homosexual partner. The psychoanalytic argument is of course obvious; the junior partner realizes his repressed sexual desire for his sister through a homosexual relationship with a man eligible to be her husband. Layard took particular delight in discovering that Deacon (1934) noted the use of this term of address among the Big Nambas, but because it was used in jest form he failed to pursue the matter. The possibility that Layard may be correct in thus stressing the incest factor is given further support in Guiart's contention that the homosexual couple were related as paternal grandfather and grandson. There are indeed many features of Big Nambas society that might lead one to predict here the presence of a strong Oedipus complex. As Layard (1942:489) noted, 'The Big Nambas represent an extreme form of patrilineal culture which they have carried to a pitch exceeding all other New Hebrides tribes in the very low status which they accord to women.' It was, in other words, a culture in which a variety of incest prohibitions combined so as to create a relationship between father and son such that any generalized propensity for oedipal rivalry might well be accentuated.

Let me stress, however, that unlike Layard I do not take the Big Nambas as prototypical for Melanesia as a whole—and even less so for that scarcely tangible entity, 'primitive society'. As he himself

emphasized, the Big Nambas are indeed an extreme case, and it is precisely this fact that I find so interesting.

We have thus far established that male teenagers entered into regular homosexual relationships with senior initiated men and that such couples, who were most probably related as either real or classificatory paternal grandfathers and grandsons, referred to one another as 'wives' and 'sisters' husbands', the same terms being used also between guardians and novices during the circum-incision and associated initiatory rituals. Deacon was uncertain whether or not the initial sister's husband (*nilagh sen*) was the same individual who took the role of initiatory guardian (*dubut*), though this possibility seems most likely. Either way, the *dubut* claimed exclusive sexual rights over the lad:

He is now the boy's husband and is extremely jealous of any other man securing his *mugh vel* and having intercourse with him. So much is this the case that he will not allow him out of his sight. The *dubut* himself, however, cannot have sexual access to the boy throughout all the thirty days' seclusion which accompanies the circumcision rites. From the time of the operation until the wound is healed, intercourse is forbidden, and the *dubut* only plays the part of a guardian who cares for the novice's physical needs. But when the wound has healed he resumes his marital rights and continues to have relations with the boy until sometime later the latter purchases his bark-belt. The reason, or rather the rationalization which the natives put forward for their homosexual practices is that the boy-lover's male organ is caused to grow strong and large by the homosexual acts of his husband. The growth of the penis is supposed to be complete by the time that the bark-belt is assumed. (Deacon 1934:262)

The youth, who has now become a 'man,' could take a boy lover for himself.

An important feature of the Big Nambas initiatory complex, as indeed in all other areas where it occurs in north Vanuatu, is the enactment of numerous hoaxes by previously initiated men during the course of the novices' seclusion. But perhaps to a degree unparalleled elsewhere, the Big Nambas hoaxes were so designed as to induce terror in the novices, terror from the imminent threat of painful and possibly even destructive attack by capricious and powerful ghosts. Since the latter were, in most instances, said to be

the ghosts of deceased chiefs, it seems reasonable to infer that such hoaxes were intended to convey to the novices something regarding the nature of chiefly power, a power that novices had now in part acquired and which was located in their exposed penis heads. Deacon described the following hoax as typical of those performed at night:

A man is carefully dressed up in banana leaves and creepers, so that his body is completely covered. His head, especially, is made to appear like a tangled mass of creeper ropes. He is then decked out in all kinds of scarlet flowers such as hibiscus and wild ginger. Thus arrayed he steals at dead of night into the *ghamal* where the novices are lying, and climbs to the top of the lofty centre pole of the house. Here he begins a low weird whistling. The awed novices, crouching on the floor, whisper among themselves and feel their flesh creep. One of the guardians hurries in, tells them hastily that the ghost of a famous fighting chief who was killed in battle is about, and then goes away again. The whistling becomes more and more insistent and seems to come nearer. A light is brought in, and in the dim shadows of the roof the boys discern a fearful figure—unmistakably the ghost. Suddenly it slides down the pole, lands at the bottom, and starts whistling and circling, stamping rapidly and throwing up the dust among the terrified boys. As they shrink and flee from it, it makes as though to clutch and grab them and after a while rushes out of the building and vanishes, again whistling weirdly in the darkness. (1934:264-65)

I would like to stress the important connections that obtain between homosexual activity, the growth of a boy's sexual organ, the belief that a specifically male power resides in the glans penis, and the corresponding necessity both to make evident and to protect that power by the wearing of a huge penis-wrapper. Throughout Malekula, the term *nambas* refers to a penis-wrapper, and the European designation 'Big Nambas' is a consequence of the truly enormous version of that garment that these people wear. As Layard (1942:481) has noted, penis-wrappers are exclusively and solely worn in those north Vanuatu areas where either circum-incision or incision is performed during initiation. Furthermore, the largest wrappers are worn by those who practice circum-incision—that is, where the head of the penis is most fully exposed—while the smaller version is associated with the lesser operation of incision.

Since fully institutionalized homosexuality is found only in association with circum-incision and the big wrappers, it is evident that these three phenomena are meaningfully associated with one another. In short, the homosexual act not only makes the penis grow to exceptional size but also to be filled with impressive 'power', a circumstance that in turn warrants the major operation of circum-incision and the associated wearing of outsize wrappers and impressive bark belts. One might indeed describe much of Big Nambas culture as constituting a highly exaggerated celebration of male power, a feature no doubt itself generated by complex historical and environmental factors of which we are in almost total ignorance. Whatever these factors may have been, I would suggest that they were intimately associated with the parallel development of a most unusual (that is, for Melanesia) system of hereditary chieftainship. In other words, the power generated in the context of institutionalized homosexuality was not just generalized male power, as is commonly the case elsewhere in Melanesia, but specifically that form of male power associated with the persons of chiefs.

The link that I am here proposing between chiefly power and penis power would, of course, be self-evident if it were only chiefs, (or perhaps members of chiefly clans) who entered into homosexual relations, underwent circum-incision, and wore large-wrappers. Though the facts, insofar as they can be ascertained, do not conform to this simple pattern, there are nevertheless strong indications of the centrality of chiefs. The published material on the Big Nambas suggests that all males entered into homosexual relations, initially as 'wives' and, after acquiring the right to wear a bark belt (which itself succeeds the operation of circum-incision), as 'sister's husbands'. But the same sources also describe marriage as a generalized phenomenon, with no direct statements indicating that some men miss out. I suggest that it is in fact possible to infer from Guiart's detailed census material (see Table 2, p. 63) that the dominant men of the leading clan in each village succeeded in establishing a near monopoly over the sexual and other services provided by both the women and the unmarried youths. For example, Vixambat, the young grand chief of Amox, a confederacy of seven villages whose members recognized his chiefly status and

accepted his leadership, is listed as having seven women who 'belonged' to him, while his father's brother, the old ex-chief Kali, had as many as twenty-seven. The following comment of one of Layard's Small Island informants on the Big Nambas chiefly system, though possibly somewhat exaggerated due to the Small Islanders awe of the Big Nambas, nevertheless provides some indication of the kind of power relations that underlie Guiart's bald figures:

Each village has a chief, whose title is *Mulon*. The chief has absolute possession over all the men, women and chattels in the village. Every man's pigs belong to the *Mulon*, who can demand them at any time. No man will sell a pig without the *Mulon*'s consent. All yams also belong to him, as does every kind of possession. Though the *Mulon* himself has only one wife, yet all women also belong to him, and no woman may be bought or sold (i.e., married) without his consent. He has, however, a right over all women until they are married, but once a woman is married he does not interfere with her. The *Mulon*'s word is law. He never eats any flesh except human flesh, and orders the death of any man he may fancy to eat. He never gives his orders direct but always through the medium of officials called *mako*. The office of *Mulon* is hereditary; he is succeeded by his son, who even if a small child, assumes immediately on his father's death absolute command of the whole village, old men and all. (Layard 1942:740)

Guiart's later observations in no way conflicted with those of Layard's informant. He noted that all of a chief's subjects must keep their heads at a lower level than his, and all women, other than his own, must use a special deferential vocabulary in addressing him. The chief's wives, presumably all of those designated as his 'women,' must never be seen by commoners:

To be sure, the frontal roll of their mat headdress is pulled down on the face. If a man was found in the yard where the chief's wives have their houses, he would be strangled on the spot unless he could immediately pay a heavy fine in pigs. A woman who comes and stays in these premises has to stay and cannot be reclaimed by her husband. (Guiart 1953:444)

Whatever inadequacies there are in the accounts of Layard and Guiart, it is quite evident that the Big Nambas' chiefs wielded very

considerable powers and that these were intimately connected with their capacity to control both the productive and reproductive capabilities of women. Unfortunately, there are few comparable data concerning the political and economic dimensions of the relationship between chiefs and their boy-lovers. There are, however, strong indications that chiefs again exercised a comparable monopoly. Deacon, for example, began his account with this observation:

Among the Big Nambas, as in North Raga, homosexual practices between the men are very highly developed. Every chief has a number of boy-lovers, and it is said that some men are so completely homosexual in their affections, that they seldom have intercourse with their wives, preferring to go with their boys. (Deacon 1934:261)

He then goes on to describe how senior men permitted their boy-lovers to have intercourse with other men provided the latter presented the boy with

... some calico, fowl's feathers, or other ornament. This the boy then hands over to his *nilagh sen*. Boys are 'sold' in this way only for short periods of time: after a few days they always return to their real 'husbands,' who have use of them as before. (Deacon 1934:261)

Such an arrangement clearly depicts a market situation wherein some men had a surplus of boy-lovers, while others were obliged to pay for favours in a piecemeal fashion. It would thus seem more than likely that, as with women, only chiefs (or perhaps by extension all male members of chiefly clans) had proprietary rights over the sexual and other services of boys. I should add here that a chief benefited not only sexually but also productively, through the labour provided by his 'boys,' just as he also gained through the labour of his women. Deacon, for example, noted:

The bond between *mugh vel* and *nilagh sen* is, however, not only a sexual one. The boy accompanies his 'husband' everywhere; works in his garden (it is for this reason that a chief has many boy-lovers), and if one or other of the two should die, the survivor will mourn him deeply. (1934:261)

Guiart's 1950 census figures provide further support for my contention that chiefs exercised a significant monopoly over the homosexual and other services provided by boys. For example, in Amox, the important village cluster dominated by Vixambat and Kali (the two leading chiefs), there were in that year 105 boys as against 27 girls. Since these two men had between them 34 wives, it would seem reasonable to infer that a large proportion of the boys were their grandsons. If Guiart was correct in his assertion that grandsons entered into a homosexual relation with their paternal grandfathers, it must be concluded that these two men exercised a most significant homosexual monopoly. In other words, it is not just undifferentiated male power that is imparted to the novices in the form of semen and is responsible for the production of large circumcised penes encased in huge and impressive wrappers, but important male chiefly power.

The political significance of the Big Nambas chiefs was especially evident in the way they dominated the local version of the graded society. As in Lambumbu district on the north-west coast, where hereditary principles also greatly modified the otherwise democratic features of the graded society, there were four main ranks recognized among the Big Nambas. Only men of the two highest ranks could eat at sacred fires located in the men's house, an arrangement that clearly placed the members of the lowest ranks in a liminal world between that of 'true' men and women. Deacon, who unfortunately failed to get much detailed information on the Big Nambas graded society, nevertheless wrote:

There seems to be some reason for supposing that in the *Nimangki* of the Big Nambas there is a 'class distinction' as there is in Lambumbu, and that *Vilvil* and *Meliun* (the two top ranks) are entered only by chiefs and the sons or near relatives of chiefs. (1934:372)

In the Lambumbu district there are also

... groups of people in the community who are never allowed to enter the *Nimangki* at all. They are not permitted to acquire any pigs, or at most a very few, and should their stock rise above the prescribed number, the surplus must be given to the chiefs. Further, while not allowed to obtain wealth for themselves they are expected

to help others in its acquisition by working for the 'privileged class.' These depressed people eat apart from other men at a fire of their own ... which is not inside the *amel*, the house of the *Nimangki*, but in the village near the women's fire. Just as the privilege of eating at the *naam ruhvaru* (the chiefly fire) is handed down from father to son, so these disabilities are inherited patrilineally. ... These fires then ... appear to have been bound up with a stratification of society which is reminiscent of feudal conditions. (1934:347)

A final comment on the actual method of homosexual intercourse practiced by the Big Nambas is in order. Deacon (1934:261), in a footnote, observed that 'the act of coition, when intercourse is homosexual, is carried out standing up, not lying down as is usual when cohabiting with a woman.' Though the wording is not without some ambiguity, I think it reasonable to infer here that the method referred to is that of anal intercourse. Layard, possibly relying on this statement of Deacon's (or on the basis of his own independent evidence), consistently referred to anal penetration, a method he regarded as universal within homosexual relationships in Melanesia. As we shall shortly see, it is with anal penetration, not by ancestral spirits but by chiefly men, that the Small Island novices are constantly threatened during their thirty-day period of seclusion after penile incision. In Nduindui also, the theme of buttock presentation is prominent during the secret *na nggwatu* rites.

The evidence would indeed be overwhelmingly in favour of anal penetration were it not for Guiart's (1953:440) contrary observations: 'I must say that technically the grandfather and his grandson are not homosexuals in the true European sense, of which the natives know. It would be better to say that they masturbate one another.' Despite the seeming authority of this statement, I would be inclined to give greater credence to Deacon's evidence. A possible basis for confusion on Guiart's part is that the boy's guardian may be expected, as in the nearby district of Lambumbu, to sleep beside his charge in the men's house during the period of seclusion and to hold 'the lad's penis in his fingers, which he warms from time to time at the fire' (Deacon 1934:253). But during this period homosexual intercourse also is strictly prohibited.



significant was in the regulation of marriage through the rule of clan exogamy. The point to be stressed is that at each of the three important levels of Vao local organization—the village-section, the village, and the double-village—patrilineal descent and local-group exogamy together provided the basis both for male residence and the dispersal of women.

Cutting across these otherwise discrete and solidary patrilineal groups was a division of the population into two unnamed kinship groups that consisted of alternate generations of co-resident male agnates. In village-sections, these lines were known as the 'sides of the lodge,' and each had its own men's house and cemetery; in villages, by contrast, they were known as 'the sides of the stone,' and the members acted collectively in the two important contexts of grade-taking and initiation.

Let me add a few brief comments on the *maki*, the Small Islands version of the ubiquitous north Vanuatu grade-taking institution. Though the ceremonial act was the same throughout the area in which grade-taking occurred—the slaughter of tusked pigs on a ceremonial ground, accompanied by the acquisition of titles and insignia, and succeeded by the eating of sacred food cooked at a tabu oven—each community differed in the selection of individuals, or categories of individuals, who carried out these and other important acts. We have already seen that among the Big Nambas the highest of four ranks were reserved for members of the chiefly clans. Elsewhere in Malekula, and also throughout the matrilineal islands to the east, the focus was again on the individual, but without any formal exclusion of certain sections of the male community. The Small Islands *maki* differed radically from all of these versions, a fact long ago recognized by Layard:

One of the chief characteristics ... that distinguishes the *Maki* in all the Small Islands from any recorded variants of the rite is that, whereas in all other districts of which we have adequate record, advancement in the hierarchy of ranks is achieved by individuals sacrificing purely on their own account, here the whole male community in any given village takes part, each 'line' or marriage section consisting of alternate generations in the male line of descent performing the rite in alternating generations. (Layard 1942:271)

Similar kinship considerations were operative in the context of male initiation. The same village-wide alternate generations of male agnates initiated one another's youths in ceremonies that occurred approximately every six to nine years. However, as Layard noted:

This disparity [in the age of novices], is yet further increased by the fact mentioned above that youths of one 'line' only are initiated at once, by which reason the actual time elapsing between the rites for which any given novice is eligible is twice that mentioned, namely anything between twelve and eighteen years. Thus, at the initiation rite in which I myself took part on Atchin the youngest novice was about 4 years old and the eldest about 22! (1942:495)

Each novice had a special tutor 'detailed to look after him to tell him what he must do, to tend his wound and share his beatings' (Layard 1942:503). The tutors, who would have participated as novices at the previous ceremony, were necessarily no more than six to nine years older than their charges, a marked contrast with the grandfather-grandson relationship among the Big Nambas.

Approximately a year before the main initiatory ceremony was performed, special gardens were established on the mainland, and numerous journeys inland were made to collect materials for the construction of the initiatory house close to the village's main ceremonial ground. On each such occasion, both when the materials were landed on the beach and later when they were transported to the dancing ground, the novices and tutors were beaten with sticks by older initiates. In this context and in many others as well, it would seem that tutor and novice, rather than standing in a relationship of differentiation and opposition, instead identified with each other as supportive fellow sufferers. Throughout, the emphasis seemed to be that those who suffered either pain or terror did so for the good of the novices and hence, by extension, for the whole community.

When the materials had been collected, which would take many months, the initiation house was erected: 'This took several days, with long intervals between them. The same beatings and ritual were performed, but on a grander scale, and on each occasion when the work was finished the novices and their tutors feasted off puddings made by the novices' mothers' (Layard 1942:505).

When the house (known as *n'ime na mbagho* [house shark]) was complete, all of the six villages of Vao came on separate nights to perform a dance, known as *ro-mbulat* ('the dry banana leaves dance'), on the nearby dancing ground. In view of the terrifying Big Nambas hoax previously described, in which a man wore dry banana leaves as part of his disguise as a chiefly ghost, the following comment of Layard on the Small Islands dance is of considerable interest:

This word (*ro-mbulat*) means 'dry banana leaves,' referring to the fact that formerly the dancers clothed in such leaves, which rustle when moved, to represent ghosts. Now, however, for some reason that I do not know, they no longer do so, but instead often carry leafy branches in their hands, holding them over their heads so that the body of dancers resembles a moving forest. (Layard 1942:321)

From Layard's detailed description of the dance it is clear that there was no hint of either ghosts or terror; moreover, the illumination for the performance was provided by the novices themselves, who danced in two rows while holding torches.

The main initiatory ritual, that of penile superincision, was performed exactly seven days after the last of the six villages has performed the banana leaves dance. On the morning of the operation, the boys, blindfolded and accompanied by their tutors, were taken to the beach where expert operators cut their foreskins in such a manner that the skin hung, thus exposing the head of the penis. After the operation the solicitous tutor ritually addressed his ward with the interesting words, 'Look down, see, your *ghavigo* ('malay apple') is red' (Layard 1942:508).

For the next thirty days, a period that the Vao people directly linked with the thirty-day seclusion of a mother and child after birth, the novices and their tutors remained in the initiation house where numerous hoaxes were carried out, at first of a very severe kind but gradually easing over the period. Many of these hoaxes concerned the healing of the wound, whereas others were of a terrifying kind and commonly included the threat of homosexual attack on the novices by ancestral ghosts.

Layard, fully conversant with the Big Nambas homosexual practices, carefully probed for the possibility of a similar

relationship between tutors and novices in the Small Islands. After noting that the Vao novices and tutors were referred to by the terms *mov ghal* and *to-mbat*, both clearly related to the terms found in conjunction with a homosexual relationship in the north Malekula rites, he suggested:

Between these two a special relationship exists, which at first sight would appear to indicate the same homosexual relationship as obtains between novice and tutor among the Big Nambas. Thus, in the ritual terminology of the Vao the tutor is said to be 'married' (*e lagi ni*) to the novice, who refers to him sometimes as *teme natuk*, one of the terms used by a wife for her husband. Older initiates not acting as tutors are referred to as 'unmarried.'

It was, however, repeatedly denied by the Small Islanders that this terminology implied actual homosexual connection between tutor and novice, and being usually lodge-brothers, there is here no possibility of the two belonging to inter-marrying kinship sections such as would appear to be the case by the more specialised terminology in use between men and their boy-lovers among the Big Nambas. Indeed, so far as I could learn, though homosexuality is not unknown in the Small Islands, it is rare, and such relationships as exist almost always consist in a Small Island boy being the passive partner in a temporary union with an adult native from the Malekulan mainland, for which he is rewarded by the present of a money-mat in the same way as men throughout the group make such gifts to their girl-lovers. The Small Islanders attitude towards such relationships are a comic look and they remark 'What a waste of time when there are so many women.'

On the other hand, as will be seen below, the novices are being constantly threatened with homosexual attacks by ghosts, and in so far as during the hoaxes the tutors and other initiates often take the part of ghosts they may be said to have at least a spiritual connection of this nature. (Layard 1942:503-4)

Though Layard devoted pages to descriptions of hoaxes performed during the thirty-day seclusion, only one included an attack by ghosts, and it is only by inference that such an attack might be understood to have been of a homosexual kind. Nevertheless, he reiterated that many of the hoaxes, especially those performed during the first five days, were 'based on terrorising the novices and in particular, frightening them with the alleged homosexual appetites of ghosts.' In reference to the often repeated

hoax that included the threat of anal penetration by the ghosts, he elaborated in his 1959 paper with the further observation: 'To make this all the more realistic, the tutors and other previously initiated make scrabbling noises on the sloping roof of the initiation lodge which the novices are told are made by the ancestral spirits trying to "get in"' (Layard 1959:111).

Though the seclusion of the novices ended after 30 days, a final rite was held 107 days after the operation. An unmarried initiate 'climbs up inside the house to the apex of the roof, calling out to all those who have died a violent death (*ta-mat-oamp*) to come and have homosexual intercourse with the new initiates' (Layard 1942:519). Layard made no comment on this rite, but since it occurred so long after the seclusion of the novices had ceased, I doubt very much if it was intended to terrorize them; indeed, it seems that the rite may well have been performed with a view to directly influencing the ancestors.

## **Nduindui<sup>2</sup>**

When I first immersed myself in the early literature that focused on the great variety of elaborate male rites found in north Vanuatu (Allen 1967), another ethnographic feature of much of this area, a matrilineal dual organization, also interested me, for, according to my central hypothesis, this complex should have a number of consequences for the diacritical features of male ritual. A somewhat ironic fate awaited me a few years later when I went to north Vanuatu to carry out field research for my doctoral dissertation. I selected Nduindui, a district in north-west Ambae, an island which, according to all the old ethnographies, was located in the matrilineal moiety area, had an elaborate version of the public graded society, and could boast of a number of secret societies. Yet I spent many long months searching, largely in vain, for any sign of these fascinating institutions. Part of the trouble was just a matter of

<sup>2</sup> My main fieldwork was carried out from November 1958 to December 1959, September to December 1960, and June 1961 to January 1962. I returned briefly in 1970 and obtained much of the data on the *na nggwatu* and *na nggwai* rites. The main research was jointly financed by the Australian National University and the Colonial Social Science Research Council, and the 1970 visit by Sydney University.

radical social change—early conversion to Christianity and cash-cropping, and a direct substitution of the church hierarchy for the graded society (Allen 1968). But if the matrilineal moieties had ever existed in west Ambae, it had been in some remote period long before the arrival of the first Europeans. For many months I thus searched diligently and suspiciously, and it was not until almost a year had passed that I regretfully began to think in terms of cognatic descent and preferential male agnatic affiliation, in other words, the by then fashionable Melanesian structural mishmash: poorly defined descent ideology, somewhat hazy and flexible kin categories, and saddest of all, a prosaic and rather thin ritual corpus; no dramatic male initiation rites, no well-defined sacrificial notions, no male homosexuality, no splendid erect penis-wrappers, and no secret societies.

It was not until I had begun my second period of fieldwork that I discovered that in fact two varieties of secret-society ritual had been practised, but because the participants had indulged in so many 'bad' actions they had been abandoned during the early decades of conversion to Christianity. It was quite clear that despite this early and total abandonment, the rites had once been of considerable importance, as could be simply inferred from the numerous small plots of land scattered throughout west Ambae known as *sarai na nggwatu* and *sarai na nggwai*. *Sara* means ceremonial dance ground; hence, these were evidently spots on which rites known as *na nggwatu* and *na nggwai* had once been performed. I also discovered that the word *nggwatu*, which literally means 'head,' is a local variant of *kwat*, the name of an important class of secret society found in the Banks, Mwaevo, and north Raga (Codrington 1891:84-94; Rivers 1914, 1:115; Layard 1942:492-94). Likewise, *na nggwai* is the Nduindui name of a particular class of spirits known generically as *tamate*, which is also the inclusive name for all Banks Island secret societies, the *kwat* societies included. For a long time I could discover nothing of what had once been performed on these grounds, other than the contemporary judgment that they were both bad (*hati*) and powerful (*huirana*) deeds. Despite the shortage of cultivable land in Nduindui, the great majority of these plots, some as big as football pitches, were covered with large trees and dense growth and were regarded as tabu places. Unwary trespassers were

believed to risk illness caused by the still-lingering power of the 'bad' deeds performed many years earlier.

It was not until a fourth brief visit in 1970, some eleven years after my first arrival, that I succeeded in obtaining reasonably detailed accounts from three old men who had attended *na nggwatu* rites as novices, and two somewhat thinner accounts from men who had done likewise in *na nggwai* performances. Since these men, all of whom were over sixty years of age, were attempting to recollect events that took place some forty to fifty years earlier, it is evident that I am here indulging in tenuous reconstructive ethnography. I was, nevertheless, impressed with the consistency of the accounts and hence feel reasonably confident regarding the crucial features of the rites. Before proceeding to describe the rites, however, I must first provide a brief overview of relevant features of Nduindui social and political organization.

The Nduindui are a community of about 2,000 people who live in a densely settled area that extends about three miles along the northwest coast and about the same distance inland (to the highest settlements with an altitude of about 1,500 feet). Homesteads are scattered throughout the district, each standing on its own clearing and separated as a rule by thirty or more yards from its nearest neighbours. The district is divided into twenty-two named parishes, each with its own central clearing on which are commonly located a church, store, men's meeting house (*vale*), and ceremonial ground (*sara*). Larger parishes are divided into named sections, usually again distinguished by their men's houses and ceremonial grounds. Section members frequently claim that in the past their sections were fully autonomous parishes, but, either through inadequate leadership or insufficient numbers, they were obliged to join forces with a more powerful neighbour.

There are no named descent groups in Nduindui, though unnamed dispersed cognatic stocks are recognized. The minimal enduring descent unit consists of a co-resident core of male stock members, most of whom are related as agnates, together with their families and dependents. These groups are drawn from the cognatic stocks by a process of patrification operating in conjunction with a preference for patrivirilocal residence and patrilineal inheritance. Though most sons choose to remain with their fathers and both

dwell on and cultivate land that has passed through a line of male ancestors, they do so as substantially autonomous individuals constrained by considerations of self-interest, rather than as group members acting in conformity with structural prerequisites. As P. Blackwood (1981:53-4) has neatly put it, 'The actualisation of the patrilineal principle in the formation and identity of groups is related to the material conditions of life, rather than as an expression of descent group structure.'

The cognatic stocks provide extensive and overlapping kinship networks that extend far beyond the boundaries of a single parish. By contrast, the localized descent groups are shallow in depth, small in size and, with very rare exceptions, confined to a single parish-section. There is, indeed, a substantial overlap between parish-section and descent group, just as there is also a high incidence of male agnatic continuity within descent groups.

The contingent and statistical nature of the localized descent group is evident in that it is the parish-section, not the descent group, that is exogamous. Indeed, the members of most parishes, including those with a number of semi-autonomous sections, also prefer to avoid intra-parish marriages.

The key to understanding Nduindui social structure lies in the system of leadership. Whereas in the Small Islands one could say with some truth that leaders, insofar as they exist at all, emerge in a predictable way as representative members of groups that are themselves predefined in conformity with established structural principles, in Nduindui leaders are by contrast self-made men who emerge in an unpredictable way as the representatives of groups that they have themselves in large measure created. I am, of course, deliberately exaggerating the differences between these two arrangements. No doubt there are 'big-man' features of both Small Island and north Malekula leadership, just as Nduindui sons quite often succeed their fathers as leaders of similarly structured groups. The difference in emphasis is, however, quite clear; whereas the Big Nambas leader is the hereditary headman of a particular clan, and the Small Island leader is a high-ranking and senior member of a 'dominant family,' the Nduindui leader may emerge in competitive contexts from any locality or any descent group. Though sons quite



often succeed fathers, they do so in ad hoc and contingent manner, rather than in conformity with structural principle.

The Nduindui graded society (*na hungwe*), which ceased to operate throughout much of the district during the 1920s and 1930s, was a variant of the highly individualistic and competitive version that continues to flourish throughout east Ambae.<sup>3</sup> The *hungwe* consisted of a number of ranked grades, entry into which was gained by the ritual slaughter of pigs, the transfer of payments for insignia and services, and the performance of elaborate dances. Members of the eight main grades were marked off from one another by their exclusive right to certain insignia, titles, and privileges. For the lower grades, the complications were minimal and entrance no heavy drain on the individual's resources. For the higher grades, the requirements became progressively more complex and expensive. Men who attained the highest grades were believed to gain access to supernatural powers, which they could then utilize in their attempts to control the political aspirations of those beneath them.

The movement of individuals through the grades was based primarily on achievement in a competitive entrepreneurial context and was only in relatively minor ways influenced by ascriptive considerations. All men had to begin at the bottom, and there were no formal barriers precluding men of a certain kind from the top grades. Though a high-ranking father or mother's brother might speed a boy through the lower grades, the requirements for entry into higher grades were such that additional and wider support was necessary. Put in slightly different terms, one could say that though kinship status played a significant part in the acquisition of low titles, for the higher titles, the actions of title-takers, sponsors, and donors were only marginally influenced by kinship considerations. The rule whereby a man aspiring to a given grade must find a sponsor of that grade or higher ensured that those near the top of the hierarchy must calculate their chances in political rather than kinship terms. One could therefore describe the Nduindui version of the public graded society as a highly institutionalized context for the

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the *hungwe* in east Ambae see Rodman 1973, and for a reconstruction of the Nduindui version see Allen 1964:240-79; 1969:85-110; 1972:270-82 (reproduced as Chapter 1 of this volume). See also P. Blackwood 1981:42-60 for a comparative analysis of the two versions.

selection and legitimation of big men, and for the formation of predominantly personal networks of followers and supporters.

I have described elsewhere (Allen 1981:108-9) two alternative tactics open to men who aimed to achieve the highest grades. On the one hand there were those men, and they were undoubtedly in the majority, who might be described as the conformists. The conformists were those who sought to attain leadership status by attempting to persuade their fellows that they best represented in their goals, actions, and values, established precedent and traditional custom. Such men made political capital out of their readiness to play the relevant games according to established norms and conventions—in *hungwe* contexts, by rising through the grades in an orderly progression and in conformity with an idealized code of conduct known as the 'road of the pigs' (*'hala na boi'*). The nonconformists, by contrast, were men who sought the same goal of social and political pre-eminence by daring to depart from precedent, some by attempting minor cultural innovations, others by the more daring tactic of rule breaking, and yet others by participation in rites in which awesome powers were generated by the performance of 'bad' acts, that is, by participation in *na nggwatu* or *na nggwai* rites. I have published elsewhere (Allen 1981:115-26) a detailed description of these rites and will here confine myself to providing an outline of their main features, with particular attention to the occurrence of homosexual themes in the *na nggwatu* performances.

The two ritual complexes were alike in a number of important ways. Both constituted elaborate sequences of events that extended over many months and involved the participation of large numbers of men, women, and children. They were held whenever a man of substance or, more commonly, two or three such men, decided to sponsor the rites and in large measure provide the substantial wealth required in the form of pigs, mats, and garden produce. The rites were said to be his or theirs, and such men gained a great deal of prestige from sponsorship.

Though I could gain no clear idea as to the frequency of either *na nggwatu* or *na nggwai* performances, I am reasonably confident that they were both infrequent and irregular, possibly only a few each decade in Nduindui district. Furthermore, though participation, even

as a novice, conferred considerable prestige, there was no rule of compulsory attendance. Neither was initiation a necessary prerequisite to either marriage or adult status, as it was among both the Big Nambas and the Small Islanders, nor to high rank in the graded society, as it was in the case of the *tamute liwoa*, the principal secret society in the Banks Islands (Rivers 1914, Vol. 2:95).

The participants in both ritual complexes fell into three distinct categories known as *valiu*, *nggwatua*, and *taviri*. The *valiu* were the novices, and though there were no restrictions based on age, sex, locality, rank or any other kind of formal criteria, the majority were either boys or young men from the parishes within the sponsors' area of influence. The inclusion of girls among the novices was, so far as I am aware, unique for north Vanuatu and rare for Melanesia as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately my informants, all men, were very vague about the girl participants, especially as to how numerous they were.

The term *valiu* (which is clearly related to the Small Island term for novice, *mov ghal* or *mohewal*, and the north Malekula term *mugh vel*), literally means 'the other half,' with the common implication of

<sup>4</sup> The Orokaiva, Koko, and Mundugumor of Papua New Guinea initiated girls as well as boys into certain secrets. The girls, however, were not accepted as full members of the ritual associations and were not permitted to act as initiators (Allen 1967:7). In Malekula, Deacon described in some detail an elaborate and in part secret women's graded ritual association known as *lapas* in Seniang, and *langambas* in Lagalag (Deacon 1934:470-97). It is of considerable interest that Deacon also noted the widespread occurrence of lesbianism in north Malekula. For Lambumbu and Lagalag districts he noted that:

Between women... homosexuality is common, many women being generally known as Lesbians, or in the native term *nimomogh iap nimomogh* ('woman has intercourse with woman'). It is regarded as a form of play, but, at the same time, it is clearly recognised as a definite type of sexual desire, and that the women do it because it gives them pleasure. (Deacon 1934:170)

He also noted that in these two districts homosexual practices between men were only occasional and sporadic. However, among the Big Nambas, it would seem that lesbianism was again common, but unfortunately he failed to record any further information.

some kind of inversion, reflection, or abnormal representation of an everyday phenomenon. The designation of the novices by this term indicates that they were thought of as 'the other half' of a pair that included the *nggwatua*. Since *nggwatua* is clearly related to *nggwatu*, a word that not only refers to the whole ritual complex but specifically to the crucially important exposure of penis heads in the concluding dance, the possibility arises that the *valiu*, as the 'other half,' are in some way associated with the vagina, or at least with some kind of female counterpart to the penis. I do not regard it as too far fetched to see in these terms some hint of a sexual bond between *valiu* and *nggwatua*. The *nggwatua*, in fact, comprised all those who had been *valiu* on some previous occasion, and it was they who were responsible for most of the hoaxes performed on the novices. *Valiu* and *nggwatua* were not, however, paired off in fixed couples, as was the case in the Small Islands and on Malekula. The third category, the *taviri*, were those who had participated on some previous occasion as *nggwatua*. They were entitled to wear special insignia during public graded ceremonies, to eat at a special oven in the men's house, and to receive special ritual treatment at their own mortuary ceremonies.

### *Na nggwatu*

The main events (as in the Small Islands) began with a long preparatory period during which the novices and tutors made large gardens for the senior sponsoring *taviri* men, cleared a special ceremonial ground in the bush some distance from habitation, and finally built three large houses, one for the *taviri* men, another for the male novices and tutors, and the third for the female novices. Informants were uncertain as to who, if anyone, acted as tutors for the female novices. There was also uncertainty as to the location of the women's house; some were of the opinion that all three houses were located at one end of the ceremonial ground, while others stated that the men were at one end and the women at the other.

During this initial preparatory period, the *nggwatua* arranged a number of hoaxes for the novices, mostly of a mild and somewhat humorous kind, in which they enacted stereotyped inversions of everyday normative behaviour. If the novices should succumb to laughter, they were obliged to pay stiff fines to the *taviri* men. They

might, for example, be duped into thinking that the evening's meal of pork was in fact human flesh, a food normally reserved only for those men of very high rank who had dared to sacrifice a human victim in a *hungwe* ceremony. The aim of these hoaxes seemed to be to make fools of the novices, whereas in the Small Islands and even more so in north Malekula, it was to induce terror, primarily through the threat of dangerous ghostly action.

When the houses were complete, the whole area was tabu to non-participants, and during the next month the *nggwatua* and *valiu* together constructed a number of large screens known as *ndindi*. These were made of coconut bark stretched across rectangular wooden frames about eight feet tall and painted with vivid representations of the sun and its rays, surrounded with huge shark's teeth. When complete, the sponsors arranged a payment ceremony which was succeeded by various dance dramas.

In the first of these performances the novices, entirely naked, ran from the surrounding bush onto the clearing and then through a corridor of initiators and sponsors armed with sticks which they used with sufficient vigour on the novices' backs and legs to make them cry out. The novices then sat down in the centre of the ground while the others withdrew some distance and formed into two companies. Then suddenly one of these companies danced in a fast and aggressive manner back toward the novices. Some dancers, moving in a jerking manner imitating sexual intercourse, were armed with arrows strung in bows aimed at the novices, while others appeared entirely naked with their buttocks directed toward the novices. After the second company did likewise, a number of solo performers might dance up to the novices and either invite sexual intercourse or address them with words such as, 'Where is my mother, old friend, I am very thirsty and I want to drink milk from my mother's breast' or, 'Good, big penis, penis in the vagina, penis around the fence, around the rubbish man who wants to copulate. Very well, I will give you a hermaphrodite pig.' The first statement is curiously suggestive of the Sambia (Herdt 1981:234-35) initiatory practice of fellatio in which the novices should drink their initiators' semen in the 'same way' that they once drank their mothers' milk, only here the relationship is reversed, with initiator asking to drink the novices' milk. However, no such action will occur for this

reference is just another of the disturbing or amusing 'lies' directed at the novices. The second utterance, though somewhat more enigmatic, is clearly an invitation to the novice to engage in copulation with the initiator, since the hermaphrodite pig is the ideal payment a Nduindui man would give a high ranker for the privilege of copulating with one of the latter's wives. The day's events concluded with the whole company participating in a major dance/song complex known as *bile bolo*, 'the vagina song.' The sponsors and initiators danced in a phalanx with fiercely stamping feet right up to the squatting novices and, after forcing the latter's mouths open, they turned their buttocks toward them and then danced rapidly away.

Later that night all of the novices, both male and female, were gathered together in the female novices' house where they were visited by a group of dancing male initiators. The latter danced along the row of male novices with their buttocks turned toward them and then out the other direction. They thus danced the whole night while continuously singing a song believed capable of seducing women. This performance was undoubtedly related to the ancestral homosexual threats enacted in the Small Islands, but here there was no hint of spirits of any kind, and it was seemingly the novices who were invited to take the male role with the initiators presenting themselves in a female manner. I say seemingly, for clearly there was ambivalence in that it was the initiators, not the novices, who sang as though they were the male seducers. The fact that female novices were also said to be present during these performances added yet further ambiguity. Unfortunately, my informants were very uncertain as to the part played by the female novices.

After this performance the novices remained some days in a naked and unwashed state in their house under the charge of a single *taviri* man. The male novices were then given their woven aprons (*malo*), while the females were given their grass skirts. Dressed now as junior adults, they left the communal house and proceeded to build their own individual huts around the edge of the ground. They remained in these for a considerable length of time, at least some weeks, during which they manufactured various items they would wear at the grand concluding dance drama, the *hakwa na nggwatu*

(literally 'dance the head'). During this period the novices and initiators periodically went on the rampage in surrounding villages, stealing pigs and garden produce from non-participants. They also spent much time rehearsing the dance, while the initiators periodically organized various hoaxes designed either to humiliate the novices or to provoke them to laugh and thereby to incur fines.

Toward the end of this period the initiators and sponsors brought out the huge *ndindi* screens and hung them on a tall fence constructed right across the ceremonial ground so that the men's houses were concealed from public view. They then retired into these buildings, where they secretly constructed the headdresses that many of them would wear on the final day. These magnificent structures (called *na nggwatu*) were made to resemble black sharks with white teeth.

Meanwhile, news spread throughout the district and perhaps even farther afield, that the powerful *hakwa na nggwatu*, the 'dance of the head', would be performed the following day. By early morning, a large audience assembled at the non-tabu, open end of the ceremonial ground. Proceedings began dramatically when the whole company of *taviri*, *nggwatua*, and *valiu* came dancing out from behind the dividing screen, with its brilliant suns and shark's teeth, the *taviri* wearing their huge shark headdresses and the rest with insignia appropriate to their grade. But a few ambitious *nggwatua*, perhaps those who aspired to join the ranks of the *taviri* at the next initiation, performed an act that above all else was regarded as the source of the *na nggwatu* power—the power that made the ground on which it was performed a tabu place for many subsequent generations. These men appeared entirely naked and, having reached a prominent position in front of the other dancers, held their penes erect, pulled back the foreskins, and let red powder (which had been previously concealed) fall to the ground. They then danced for a short while before the audience exposing their red organs, their *karai nggwatu*. It should be stressed that the term *nggwatu*, used to designate both the whole ritual complex and this final dance, also linked the initiators, their shark headdresses, and the exposed penes. Occasionally a female *nggwatua* also danced naked and performed the *karai nggwatua* act, in which she inserted her fingers into her vagina and thereby released previously inserted red powder. Such

women, whom I suspect would mostly have been the wives of high-ranking men, thereby earned the right to join the *taviri* at any subsequent initiation. A few informants stated that other participants seeking fame and notoriety would symbolically copulate in public with close kin such as sisters, with whom they must normally practice total avoidance. Again, the sponsors must pay such persons good quality pigs. The payments were in recognition of the awesome power generated by such *hati* performances.

At the end of the dance all of the performers retired behind the screen to deposit their headdresses and other regalia in the *taviri* house. They then ran around the building banging coconut fronds on the ground to scare away the spirits, set fire to the building, and finally run home to their villages. All male participants, but most especially those who either wore headdresses or made *karai nggwatu*, were then required to remain for some months in the men's house and avoid any close contact with their wives and children. Male participants were especially required to refrain from sexual intercourse in order to protect their wives from the power of *na nggwatu* still embodied in their penes. Indeed, some insisted that the power was so great that it would remain in the penis until finally discharged in coitus; hence the requirement that such men should render themselves safe for their wives by first having sexual intercourse with a strange woman from an outside community. It is this same power, the *huirana na nggwatu*, that is believed to remain for many generations on the dance ground where the red dye fell, where the shark headdresses were worn, and where either real or symbolic incestuous intercourse took place.

## Discussion

It is, I think, quite evident that *na nggwatu* was the Nduindui version of precisely the same ritual complex that constituted initiation into manhood in the Small Islands and in north Malekula. That this was so is evident because in all three areas shark symbolism was of central importance, the novices and initiators were referred to by variants of the same words, hoaxes figured prominently throughout the ritual period, spirit beings were believed to be in close proximity to specially built initiatory houses, homosexuality was a recurrent theme, and the key ritual event was



the exposure of reddened penes heads, an event that was everywhere believed to generate power. But whereas in the western islands it was the 'heads' of all novices that were permanently exposed through the cutting of their foreskins, in Nduindui it was the heads of just a few initiators that were temporarily exposed by the pulling back of their foreskins. Furthermore, whereas the power so generated in the western islands was exclusively male (which among the Big Nambas was most evident in the persons of hereditary chiefs, and in the Small Islands a solidary group of male agnates), in Nduindui not only was the power itself not exclusively associated with men—as seen in the presence of female participants, some of whom themselves generated power by vaginal exposure—but it was particularly associated with the persons of self-made leaders of the big-man variety and their *ad hoc* collectivity of supporters.

Let me rephrase this most important point in a slightly different way. I have stressed that the dominant theme in the *na nggwatu* rites was the belief that by daring to do what is normally prohibited, by turning conventional morality on its head, and by invoking the presence of potentially troublesome and even dangerous spirit beings, the participants thereby generated a ritual power of great intensity and endurance. What I am now suggesting is that this kind of power was especially appropriate in a polity based on big-manship and factionalism. The idiom of power employed in these rites was analogous to that wherever charisma was an important component of leadership, and as such it differed in important ways from the kind of ritual powers associated with other kinds of polities. Just as the Nduindui big man might, in secular contexts, marry women who fell within the bounds either of incest prohibitions or exogamic rules, or in graded society contexts might skip grades, import or invent new grades, or kill men, shark or bullock instead of pigs, so too might they decide to sponsor either the *na nggwatu* or *na nggwai* rites. These rites were, as we have seen, performances that were in many ways predicated on values that were the inverse of those subscribed to in everyday contexts, and hence all of those who dared to participate were believed to be literally imbued with a dangerous power of unusual intensity.

All informants agreed that by far the most powerful act was that known as *karai nggwatu*, the public exposure of reddened penes by

naked men and of reddened vaginas by naked women. The full significance of these acts can only be grasped when we realize the great lengths to which the Nduindui went to conceal both male and female genitalia in everyday life. All males over the age of six or seven wore beautifully woven pandanus aprons that passed between the legs and looped over a belt in front and behind, while women wore an equally concealing mat skirt. These dress styles contrasted with the entirely naked men and women found in some of the neighbouring matrilineal areas, and the equally contrasting male penis sheaths and female fringed petticoats found in the patrilineal islands to the west and south.

Another recurrent theme in the *na nggwatu* rites was the enactment, either real or mock, of sexual intercourse, in which the male initiators directed their attentions either at the novices, close female kin, or other men's wives. In each instance the sponsors were obliged to pay such men pigs and mats for performing acts deemed both powerful and bad in the sense of prohibited or unthinkable actions in everyday contexts. This was especially so where naked siblings publicly related to one another in a sexual manner. To most Nduindui such rites were truly mind-blowing in their defiance of the normal canons of behaviour for, to a degree perhaps unparalleled in the ethnographic literature, these people practiced total avoidance between even remote classificatory siblings of the opposite sex. Much less converse together, they should avoid even seeing one another, and this rule still holds today after almost a hundred years of missionary criticism (see Allen 1964:226-7).

I would interpret the presence of homosexual themes in the *na nggwatu* rites from the same perspective. Whereas in the western islands, ritualized homosexuality was linked to a classic form of compulsory male initiation in which the novices were transformed into men, in Nduindui it was simply yet another inversion of normative behaviour performed for the glorification and legitimation of aspiring big men. In the overtly patrilineal western islands, male homosexual behaviour did not take the form, as in certain Western contexts, of what might be termed a kind of effeminacy among men, but rather its form was that of highly exaggerated masculinity. Such was obvious in the use of exceptionally large penis-wrappers in those communities in which

male homosexuality was also most pronounced. In such communities, the novices were believed both to be weakened by female fluids, above all menstrual blood, and to be strengthened by the injection of semen through homosexual intercourse. In Nduindui, the pattern was entirely different: men wore aprons instead of penis-wrappers, descent was cognatic instead of patrilineal, leaders were big men instead of lineage elders or clan chiefs, and all forms of male homosexual behaviour were regarded as dangerously abhorrent rather than as beneficially normative. I could, indeed, find no evidence for the occurrence of any kind of homosexual activity in Nduindui, and hence I interpret its symbolic representation in the *na nggwatu* rites as an attempt by the participants to generate ritual power by turning conventional morality on its head.

Another notable feature of these rites was the presence of female participants, including novices. One might be tempted to link this feature to the somewhat higher status of Nduindui women compared with that of their sisters on Malekula. That the Nduindui women had indeed such higher status is evident in a number of contexts; they were subject to somewhat less rigorous tabus when menstruating and giving birth to children, they manufactured, owned, and publicly distributed highly valued mats, and they occasionally even killed pigs and took subsidiary grades in the *hungwe*. Unlike in north Malekula and the Small Islands, where men of rank slept and ate permanently in the men's houses, in Nduindui such men only left their families for short periods during and after ritual performances. I would not, however, like to exaggerate the difference too much, for the Nduindui heterosexual relationship was simply a weaker, in some ways a very much weaker, version of the extreme hierarchical dichotomy found in north Malekula. My interpretation of the presence of female participants in these rites is, as with so many other features, by reference to the belief that inversions of the norm generate great ritual powers.

Yet there is another and altogether more complex dimension to male/female relationships and their significance for understanding all three versions of the north Vanuatu initiatory complex. I have thus far stressed that the compulsory Big Nambas and Small Island rites were first and foremost performed with the specific intent of

transforming the youths into mature adult men. The use of male semen, the threat of intercourse by male ancestral spirits, and the subsequent wearing of huge penis-wrappers all seemed to convey an unequivocal message of male identity—of boys who have now become men with big and powerful phalluses. There is, however, another and, in part, concealed theme—that of their continuing feminine identity. That men attributed such an identity to the boys prior to initiation is evident in that they regarded them as being ‘only women’ or ‘like women’ (Layard 1959:110). In other words, the ritual transformation was not just of boys into men, but of ‘boys who are like women’ into men. The question is, what kind of men?

Layard repeatedly stressed that in his opinion a great deal of both Small Island and north Malekulan culture focused on the key problem of integrating a continuing feminine component into the masculine psyche as a man progressed from boyhood to high *maki* rank. The initiation rites constitutes the first major attempt to deal with this transformation but it also pertained to the symbolism of boar sacrifice in the *maki* rites (Layard 1955:7-32). In other words, men, and in some ways most especially those of highest rank, continued to identify both with women as persons and with female reproductive functions and capabilities. I quote here from Layard, in the context of a discussion of boar sacrifice in the Small Islands:

Finally, as yet further sign of the kind of new spirituality that he has acquired, men of the highest grades ... often assume titles such as Lord Mother or Mother of the Place. They have become spiritually hermaphrodite. (1955:24)

Further evidence comes directly from the context of initiation itself. Again I quote from Layard:

The concept of the novice’s femininity and therefore potential (though psychic) pregnancy is however very evident in that the whole period of initiation lasts nine months—the period of a woman’s pregnancy—and the intensive period during which the boy is super-incised (a modified form of circumcision consisting of slitting the foreskin but not removing it, making him bleed like a menstruating woman) and many other trials are undergone lasting precisely a month, which is the period of the menstrual cycle. (1959:110)

Elsewhere, Layard (1942:179) notes that a mother remains at home for thirty days after childbirth.

Though the evidence is not, unfortunately, as detailed as one might wish, especially as regards the beliefs and sentiments of the participants themselves, I do not think that I am being unduly speculative in asserting that among the Small Islanders the generative and reproductive power believed to reside in the penis and in semen were themselves directly modelled on the reproductive powers of women. It was most especially in the context of the compulsory male rites of initiation that the novices symbolically identified with women and their 'powers'.

I would like at this point to elaborate on the theme of male-to-female identification for the Melanesian initiation data in general. In my earlier comparative study (Allen 1967:18-27), I noted that the most elaborate rites were significantly correlated with a prolonged and intimate relationship between mother and son. The postpartum sex tabu commonly lasted for two or more years, and boys spent the greater part of their pre-initiation years in the company of their mothers and other women. It does not require any profound psychological insight to hypothesize that under such circumstances boys were likely to identify with their mothers as powerful and supportive persons. But these same societies were also those in which armed male aggression was a common occurrence, in which hunting was a highly valued male activity, and in which political unification was predicated on male agnatic solidarity. Hence the boys, nurtured in female company, must nevertheless mature into powerful and effective adult males. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the highly elaborate initiation rites were intended to facilitate this difficult yet necessary transformation.

Dundes (1976), inspired in part by psychoanalytic theory, especially the envious male hypothesis of Bettelheim (1955; see Allen 1967:15-27 for a detailed assessment of Bettelheim's theory) has argued that while the rites undoubtedly made the boys into men, they did so in a seemingly paradoxical way, by feminizing the initiates. Broadly speaking, this process occurred in two alternative ways. In many areas of Papua New Guinea, but most especially in the Sepik and in the Eastern Highlands, boys identified with women

by equating penile incision with menstruation, while the senior men identified with mothers by making possible the novices' 'rebirth.' In (RH) semen-ingesting areas, where initiators and novices were linked through homosexual relationships (parts of Irian Jaya, the Trans-Fly, the Papuan Plateau and the Anga societies, see Herdt 1984a), novices might identify with the female role through their passive intake of semen.

Hage has recently rejected Dundes's argument on the grounds that the ethnographic facts suggest otherwise:

The relation between these rites and female physiology is based not on envy or identity but on analogy, that is, a perceived connexion between the onset of menstruation and growth, or on generalisation, that is, between initial and subsequent provisions of semen—if it induces growth in the foetus then it may also be thought to induce growth subsequently at adolescence. They are magical acts which make a man more like a man. (Hage 1981:272)

Hage's argument is impeccable insofar as the growth of the novices was indeed a central concern of the participants. Both penis bleeding and semen ingesting were explicitly believed to be necessary and effective ways of making the boys grow into mature adult males. But, one might ask, why should the men choose to use women as their model for a paradigm of growth? The most obvious answer surely is that the men must have perceived the women as having superior growth capabilities. Read (1952:15) has indeed documented that this was precisely what the Gahuku-Gama thought. There is, I would contend, a great deal of evidence that this high male evaluation of the growth capability of women was but part of a more broadly based perception of women's power, a power that was manifest not only in their visible and early physical maturity but in their monthly bleeding, reproductivity, and nurturing capabilities. In other words, contrary to Hage, I am firmly of the opinion that a great deal more than simple analogic thinking was at work when boys bled their penes and referred to this as 'mens' menstruation,' when senior males orchestrated rites in which novices were reborn, when novices were referred to as the 'wives' of their homosexual partners, and when the latter were believed to make their charges grow by

offering semen-filled penes in a manner likened to that of mothers offering milk-filled breasts to infants.

The two initiatory syndromes, that is, the blood letting and the semen ingesting, had the same ontological objective; the transformation, by magical means, of female-associated boys into strongly masculine adult men. But whereas the blood letting practitioners achieved their goal, at least in the first instance, by getting rid of female components acquired during childhood, which were now seen as impurities, the semen-ingesting practitioners did it rather by the positive tactic of adding extra maleness. Such a difference is suggestive of parallel differences in male/female relations. In the blood-letting syndrome, the power of women with which men especially seemed to identify focused on menstruation and birth, while in the semen syndrome the emphasis was rather on a woman's capacity to receive semen and to give milk. Put in different terms, the female roles that men identified with in the blood-letting areas were those of 'menstruating woman' and 'reproductive mother,' whereas in (RH) areas the roles were rather 'wife' (sexual partner) and 'nurturant mother.' In Chapter 5 I further explore some of these issues in the context of Papua New Guinea.

The Big Nambas, along with Highlands' Anga groups (see Herdt, 1984:67), are unique insofar as they seemed to have been doubly concerned with masculinizing boys, using both blood-letting and semen-ingesting. But if the simple role equations suggested above have any validity, then it must follow that the men of these two communities also extended the range of their female identification over an exceptionally wide range of roles and attributes. Sadly, an almost total absence of information on male/female relations in north Malekula precludes any further analysis.

## **Conclusion**

The Big Nambas, the Small Islanders, and the Nduindui are three neighbouring communities whose members have been in frequent contact with one another over a very long period. As a result, their contemporary sociocultural systems share numerous features in common. Following Layard, I have argued that one of the most important of such features is a ritual complex of a highly specific kind distinguished by such recurrent themes as shark symbolism, the

initiation of novices, the use of elaborate hoaxes, the symbolic importance of penis heads as loci of power, the representation of ghosts or spirits by initiators, and the occurrence, either in reality or in symbolic form, of male homosexual behaviour. Wherever this ritual complex occurs it is regarded as an efficacious means of generating power, of gaining access to or controlling a force that is believed capable of effecting socially valued ontological changes. It is, however, at this point that similarities cease and differences become apparent. I have argued that the major differences in the three local versions of the ritual complex are significantly correlated with further differences in political structure. Among the Big Nambas, whose hereditary chiefs of patrilineal clans exercise a significant hegemony, it is essentially male chiefly power that is evoked in the context of the rites. In the Small Islands, where leaders are of less consequence and political power is rather a function of male agnatic solidarity, the rites are first and foremost clan affairs in which boys are transformed into mature and effective adult males. Among the Nduindui, where politics are of the big-man variety, the rites are voluntary occasions during which powers of an unconventional kind are evoked for the glorification of aspiring leaders.

In support of this general argument, I examined in some detail the recurrent use of homosexuality as a power theme in the context of the rites. Among the Big Nambas, male power, but most especially male chiefly power, was physically transmitted to the novices in homosexual intercourse; among the Small Islanders, generalized male agnatic power was transmitted to the novices through the threat of homosexual attack by clan ancestral spirits; while among the Nduindui, daring individuals invoked extraordinary big-man type powers by mockingly inviting the novices to engage with them in homosexual intercourse.

A second most important feature of the rites is the belief that ritual power resides in the head of a man's penis. But beyond that simple assertion, major differences again exist. Among the Big Nambas, where such power was, as I have just noted, initially generated in boys through the intake of chiefly semen, the head, after full exposure through the operation of circum-incision, was then concealed in an eye-catching and outsize wrapper. Among the



Small Islanders, where there are no homosexual or other procedures for inducing penis growth prior to initiation, the lesser operation of superincision preceded the wearing of a more modest wrapper. Finally, among the Nduindui, the theme of penis power was restricted to the voluntary exposure of penis heads by a few ambitious initiators.

A third distinctive feature of the rites is the enactment of numerous hoaxes by previously initiated men during the course of the novices' seclusion. Though Deacon was uncertain as to the real purpose of the hoaxes among the Big Nambas, apart from their obvious effect in frightening the boys, he nevertheless noted that 'the importance of *bagho* (initiation) lies, not in the circumcision itself, but in the series of performances or 'hoaxes' which take place during the thirty days seclusion'(1934:264). Deacon himself viewed most of the north Malekula hoaxes as trials and tests of endurance, though trials of what is not made clear. A brief comparison of the three areas indicates again the important variations that occur in conjunction with political differences.

Throughout north Malekula, the emphasis is on the terrifying representation of supernatural beings who attempt to get into close and threatening contact with the secluded boys. Among the Big Nambas such beings are commonly said to be the ghosts of deceased warrior chiefs killed in battle, but for the Small Islanders they are the altogether more benign spirits of clan ancestors. While the Big Nambas ghosts attempt to terrify the novices through their abnormality and destructive intent, the Small Island ghosts, though no doubt also inducing terror, are believed to act with the good of the novices in mind. In Nduindui yet another theme emerges in which the stress seems to be rather on making fools of the novices for the benefit of the sponsoring big men. By contrast with the western islands, there is little evidence of terror-inducing activity on the part of supernatural beings.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to re-examine the nature of the correlation advanced earlier between ritual performance and political structure. The link between these two elements is provided in the notion of power. The rites are believed by the participants to generate transformative powers which can in turn be used to the political advantage of those who can lay claim to them. Power

generated through ritual context is thus directly transferred to the political arena. In linking the two forms of power I am asserting a causal and not just a functional connection. By this I mean that if the two elements should be in a dysfunctional relation, as, for example, when an egalitarian community without prominent leaders purchases and begins to perform a ritual in which chiefly-type powers are evoked, then change of some kind must follow fairly rapidly. If the balance of political forces within such a community are for the maintenance of the *status quo*, then I would predict a transformation of the ritual powers into a form compatible with the pre-existing polity. But it is perfectly possible to imagine the cause and effect relationship put into reverse. If the internal power circumstances of a community should be in a state of flux, it might well be that an imported ritual could be utilized to give legitimacy to the power claims of an emergent group, class, or category. I have no doubt that this reversal has occurred in Vanuatu with great frequency in the turbulent period initiated by European colonization.

It should be evident that the kind of causality that I am postulating here is of that highly restricted kind in which a phenomenon undergoes change, transformation, or modification. It is the kind of causality that is inherent in the notion of historical process rather than of Durkheimian structuralist sociology. I am not, in other words, asserting that political structure generates ritual practice or vice versa. The various component elements of the north Vanuatu initiatory complex undoubtedly resulted from an extremely ancient and complex history, and it is within the depths of such opaque complexity that the final causes of its ritual lie, and will no doubt continue to lie, deeply buried.

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