Engaging Feminist Anthropology in Vanuatu: Local Knowledge and Universal Claims

Jean Mitchell

Abstract: In Vanuatu, where the revival of kastom (custom) has been pivotal in defining postcolonial identity, articulations of feminism(s) are often met with ambivalence. The tension between discourses of individual rights and collective obligations and the tension between universal ideas of women’s rights and local cultural practices such as kastom must be confronted. An engaged feminist anthropology, I argue, resists singular accounts of modernity by locating local knowledge and kastomary practices within a larger context that unsettles the boundaries of local and universal. Disentangling the ways in which contemporary critiques of kastom resonate with missionary and colonial representations of Melanesian violence and drawing attention to the structural violence of everyday life are also important tasks. Invoking the concepts of ‘modest witness’ and ‘situated knowledge’, I discuss what Strathern (1987) has called the ‘awkward relationship’ between anthropology and feminism and consider the possibilities of an engaged feminist anthropology.

Keywords: feminist anthropology, gender, globalization, kastom, Melanesia, Vanuatu, violence

Introduction

Vanuatu is an interesting place in which to consider how an engaged feminist anthropology grapples with understanding the articulation of gender and cultural differences amidst legacies of a colonial past and mesmerizing contemporary change. Vanuatu, an archipelago of 83 inhabited islands located in the Southwest Pacific, became independent in 1980 after some seventy years of joint British and French colonial rule. With a population of 243,000¹ and more than one hundred languages, Vanuatu is characterized by extraordinary linguistic and cultural diversity. In Bislama, the lingua franca, cultural practices are often framed in terms of kastom,² a term that refers to the hybrid discourses and practices that encompass the knowledge, sociality and social processes that are unique to ni-Vanuatu.³ Kastomary practices, while often depicted as stable and timeless traditions occurring in far-off villages, are ‘already modern’ (Piot 1999) given their epistemological entanglements with the colonial past (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Thomas 1994) and their centrality to contemporary life. Since Independence, kastom, along with Christianity, has been pivotal in creating a postcolonial identity among the dispersed and culturally diverse islanders. Kastomary practices, as I shall argue, are read in various and contradictory ways: as nationalist rhetoric; as the postcolonial nation-building strategy; as the source of subordination of women; as the locus of agency; and as a counter-narrative to global economics and neo-liberal development strate-
gies. Of course, *kastomary* practices also refer to a host of activities and articulations that are a fluid part of everyday life.

While I have been conducting ethnographic and applied research in Vanuatu since 1996, this article draws upon my last research visit in 2008 when I had extended discussions with women whom I have known for over a dozen years. Jenny Taleo was working on a short-term consultancy on violence against women and preparing to travel to a regional meeting while Monique Naula was preparing to leave for a six-month term of agricultural labour in New Zealand. Their experiences and insights crystallized for me the ways in which violence, in its various manifestations, presents a challenge for engaged feminist anthropologists. In this article I will explore Jenny’s insight about the links between language and violence against women, and locate these in the context of colonial and postcolonial processes in Vanuatu. I also turn to the gendered social spaces of everyday life in town and to the structural violence that shapes Monique’s life. The key question raised, as I shall argue here, is how to engage the subject of violence, and specifically violence against women, without shoring up notions of cultural ‘otherness’ and without evoking colonial and mission discourses of the essentialized violence that is attached to *kastomary* practices. Drawing attention to the colonial past and to the structural violence imposed by global economic practices further illuminates the complexity of issues related to violence. Colonial encounters, postcolonial contingencies and processes of global capitalism shape both the practices of *kastom* and gender. I shall argue that linking violence against women to *kastom* in Vanuatu has had powerful effects. In the past it furthered the expansion of mission and colonial interests; today such unproblematic linkages may facilitate the extension of neo-liberal economic agendas and modernizing strategies.

Engaged feminist anthropology traverses a demanding terrain that includes attending to difference(s), dismantling the universalized idea of ‘woman’ and coming to terms with the idea that gender may not be a coherent or a unified category of analysis. The intricacies of engaged feminist anthropology are compounded by the need to respond to the sustained critiques that have taken place within both feminism and anthropology and to account for the subsequent shifting parameters of knowledge production. When theorizing places such as Vanuatu, one must also problematize Eurocentric assumptions about the nature of agency, subjectivity, inequality and feminist projects of emancipation that are rooted in the social and political experience of Western societies, as Strathern (1988) and a number of other scholars have noted (Haraway 1988; Mohanty 1988; Abu-Lughod 2006). Given these concerns, I am drawn to Haraway’s (1997) refashioned figuration of ‘modest witness’, which provides a way to think about the ethical, political and epistemological commitments underpinning an engaged feminist anthropology. In keeping with her insistence on situated and partial forms of knowledge, Haraway offers the notion of modesty as a form of engagement that privileges humility, accountability and critical thinking. The figuration of ‘modest witness’ commits ‘to seeing, testing, standing publicly accountable for and psychically vulnerable to one’s visions and representations’ (1997: 268). The author urges us to think about the ‘disembodied objectivity’ (Haraway 1997: 267) that so often informs research.

An engaged feminist anthropology in Vanuatu is charged with grasping local understandings of social relations, including gender, power and agency that are encompassed in the various deployments of *kastomary* practices while taking account of colonial histories and the vortex of global capitalism. I shall argue that theoretical insights about the situated nature of knowledge and the idea of ‘modest witness’ are helpful in crafting an engaged feminist anthropology that effaces authority, underscores mutuality and illuminates the power dynamic.
embedded in the anthropological process. The particular stories of Jenny and Monique point to a key challenge in undertaking an engaged feminist anthropology including violence and the apparent conflict between ‘women’s rights’ and ‘local culture’. The figuration of ‘modest witness’ disrupts the certainty of what constitutes not only violence but emancipation, not only local but universal while underlining the complexities obscured in all of these formulations.

‘The Emergent Present’: Kastom, Land and Change

On my recent field trip to Vanuatu I found that terms such as globalization do not adequately capture what Stewart has called the ‘emergent present’ (2007: 1), a term she uses to convey a sense of the intense hyper-modernity of everyday life. The ‘emergent present’ in Vanuatu is characterized by the deepening of global economic processes that include off-shore banking, tourism, development programmes, neoliberal economic restructuring, land sales and a growing Asian presence in trade, investment and aid (Crocombe 2007) and rapid population growth. Each month islanders host cruise ships that spill thousands of tourists onto the shore of the capital Port Vila and on some outer islands. Land speculation is rife. The booming real estate market is driving an urban economy where gated communities of foreigners and crowded urban settlements of ni-Vanuatu increasingly define the segregated physical and social landscape around the capital of Port Vila on the Island of Efate. Stories and speculations abound about people who are now landless, barred from their ancestral land and denied access to ancestral shorelines due to land deals that provide 75-year leases to people who are most often foreigners. Many of these land deals do not consider ancestral and collective claims that have been at the heart of ni-Vanuatu sociality. While land is becoming scarcer, labour is ever more plentiful and under-valued in Vanuatu. On my last visit, labour recruiters were enticing islanders to work in New Zealand agriculture, while at the same time labourers from China were working on construction sites in the capital where unemployed youth ‘kill time’ in the crowded urban settlements. New Christian church leaders recruiting members and building churches are also part of the dizzying social landscape of contemporary Vanuatu. These developments are paralleled by a resurgence of interest in the kastom economy in Vanuatu (Regenvanu 2007).

While urbanization has been rapid and significant since Independence, 80 per cent of the population still lives in rural villages where kastomary practices are often part of everyday life and evident in social organization and in gift exchanges. There are some important differences among the islands in Vanuatu, particularly between the north and south. For example, the Island of Tanna, as in many places in Vanuatu, is characterized by ‘agnation, male initiations and elaborate yam exchanges’ (Allen 1981: 3) that ‘manifest male power and domination’ (ibid.). There are numerous matrilineally organized localities in Vanuatu. While there are significant differences among and within the various islands, village life throughout the archipelago is also marked by similarities. Village organization still often pivots around a chief and a village meeting place called the nakamal where, for example, disputes are settled and grievances addressed. Despite political and economic changes, the chief as local authority and leader often remains important (Lindstrom and White 1998). The disputes discussed in the open village forum most often concern conflicts about land and conflicts between men and women; given the complex changes occurring, conflicts have been escalating in recent years, particularly as pressure on land increases.

In Vanuatu, kastomary land tenure ‘is the heart of the operation of the cultural system’
Like much of the rest of Melanesia, land tenure is a fluid and complex system of kastomary practices that entail collective obligations and individual rights (Rodman 1987; Fingleton 2005; Naupa and Simo 2008). Kastomary tenure balances group and individual rights and obligations through land ownership held at the group level and land use exercised at the household level (Fingleton 2005: 4). Such land practices have been central to the discourses of egalitarianism, identity and attachment to place (Rodman 1992) that often define the distinctive sociality of Vanuatu. Subsistence food production, selective cash cropping and the production of yams and pigs that are essential for exchange ceremonies are part of everyday life in many villages and contingent on access to land. Collective obligations and an ethos of egalitarianism have become central in framing the contrast between kastomary practices and the ‘foreign’ concern with individual rights. Ni-Vanuatu continue to negotiate cultural and social processes that produce constructs of selves and others and that identify certain practices that are emblematic of kastom and modernity (Thomas 1992: 82).

**Disembodied Objectivity**

The social relationships that are contingent on the kastomary practices of land holding have had an extraordinary capacity to buffer ni-Vanuatu from the vagaries of colonialism, capitalism and the failed promises of postcolonial development. Rapid change is registered in a variety of ways but nowhere more clearly than in the contestations over land and between men and women. Despite the complexity and the social dynamism of rural localities, they are often depicted as isolated and static places. The centrality of gender to understanding rural economies is also routinely overlooked. This is evident in a footnote in a recent report on the economy of Vanuatu7 which did, in fact, recognize the importance of the rural economy: ‘Although the growth of Vanuatu’s formal GDP has not been spectacular, it must be realised that its traditionally, largely non-monetarised, rural economy has successfully supported a 90% increase in the rural population since Independence’ (Bazeley and Mullen 2006: 7). Delivered in factual terms, this footnote does not probe the transformative developments taking place, rather it represents the ‘disembodied objectivity’ of narratives (Haraway 1997: 24). Such narratives, according to Haraway, ‘lose all trace of their history as stories, as products of partisan projects, as contestable representations, or as constructed documents in their potent capacity to define the facts’ (ibid.). In the footnote and in more general assumptions about the economy, the ‘traditionally non-monetarised rural economy’ is unmarked, disembodied and un-gendered, obscuring its social, political and economic processes. How is this folding of people into the land constituted through gendered relationships? What are the unacknowledged costs for women? How are family and community being re-constituted within the nation-state? In this footnote there is an erasure of the contestations at the local level, especially in those areas where there is a shortage of land or in places where unauthorized land deals are taking place. Erased, too, is any recognition of the dynamic connection between rural villages and the urban settlements that have long been linked through migration and remittances. The complex social and spatial relationship connecting rural and urban economies are embodied by the young migrants moving between villages and urban settlements.

Kastomary practices that are embedded in the rural economy do not stand outside of modernity but are rather contemporary, fluid and capable of providing an accommodation to or a critique of capitalism and globalization. Articulations of kastomary practices that insist on the local and on the collective, however contested, provide a place for ni-Vanuatu to challenge ideas about the inevitability of the commodification of land and particular kinds
of economic development that produce marginality. After several years of living in an urban settlement where many people lived on the margins of global capitalism, I was attracted to the poetics and politics of kastomary practices that counter the trend in some areas to privatize the land and to commodify the social relations upon which so many depend in Vanuatu. It is for this reason that I found Jenny’s comments about kastom and violence against women jarring. She interrupted my thinking about kastom as a critical, imaginative and political response to those economic processes, a representation that, in Jenny’s view, downplayed its discursive violence.

**Jenny: Talk at the Nakamal**

Jenny, as noted, was working on a consultancy on violence against women for an international agency when I arrived in Vanuatu. She was deeply preoccupied by the issue, having travelled to several islands interviewing women about the violence they face in their everyday relationships with men. Jenny discussed the island of Tanna, which has a reputation for adherence to kastom and for male domination, at some length. In Jenny’s view, violence against women there is encoded in the language used at the nakamal, where the chief settles disputes. Women’s subordination in Vanuatu is located in the restrictions placed on their public speech in places like the nakamal but Jenny was more concerned about the content of men’s talk at the nakamal. She explained that her experience at such meetings is that men are often enjoined ‘to teach the woman’ and ‘to train her to submit like an unruly horse which needs to be domesticated and controlled or an unruly plant which needs to be trained and cultivated’. Such language, replete with references to animals and plants, according to Jenny, is the source of the problem, for it is a language of domination that facilitates and normalizes violence against women. Jenny was particularly troubled by the unacknowledged violence in the language of the nakamal, for any possibility of justice is contingent on acknowledging the violence within language (Derrida 1978: 117). Jenny’s attention to discursive domination was a powerful reminder of how language, gender and violence are interwoven.

In Vanuatu there is a strong preference to settle issues of conflict and violence at local levels. Within the compensatory logic of local dispute mediation, fines are often given to both parties – the offended and the offender. The restorative logic of kastomary mediation suggests how relational ideas of self and other differ from the Western framing of subjects and objects. However, it is argued that violence against women may be compounded by their lack of recourse to formal judicial systems; kastomary mediation may not attain Western standards of gender equality since it privileges the male perspective and the collective over the individual rights of the woman (Fukuyama 2008). Jenny’s concerns are compelling and the failure to contain violence against women at the family, community and state levels requires serious reflection and action (Mason 2000).

At the same time, the commitment to the local contained in kastomary dispute mechanisms serves communities in accessible, flexible and reliable ways that cannot be matched by an under-funded, over-extended legal system that is located in a far-off capital. Questions that emerge include: Do such interventions inevitably deny women fair treatment? What possibilities can the emphasis on relationality, so central to the logic of these local processes, offer to women? Jenny’s concerns point to a persistent and complex issue for feminist anthropologists: how to address violence against women without undermining local practices or reproducing the idea of the traditional other who is outside of modernity.

Concerns about violence against women resonate in Vanuatu where women’s speech and mobility have been the subject of anxious and strident discourses that seek to stabilize male
authority through the control of women. In ongoing conversations with a kastomary chief visiting from a northern island in the urban settlement where I lived, he often expressed his deep regret that women had been granted equal rights in the constitution at Independence. His statement was not delivered as a diatribe against women; rather he saw the extension of rights to women as evidence of the ongoing erosion of the authority of kastomary leaders since Independence. Similar views have been repeated to me over the years by senior men underlining how authority, nation-making and gender are intimately related.

Feminist approaches that promote women’s individual rights in Vanuatu are often sharply contrasted to the local practices and collective obligations articulated in kastomary discourses. Margaret Jolly has shown how the appeal to rights in the context of domestic violence in Vanuatu tends ‘to situate men on the side of tradition and cultural relativism and women on the side of the human and universalism’ (1996: 183). Merry has also argued that those promoting universal standards such as human rights for women often view local contexts as irrelevant or as an impediment to addressing issues related to violence against women (2006: 226). The particular framing of the issue of violence against women through gendered oppositions of traditional and modern, relativism and universalism, underlines a key tension within feminist anthropology. Some feminists critically analyse male domination and advocate legal and social change in places such as Vanuatu. On the other hand, anthropologists feel compelled to defend cultural practices, such as kastom, through their commitment to the local and to cultural relativism. Strathern (1987) has suggested that the relationship between feminism and anthropology is ‘awkward’, for each discipline organizes their knowledge production in different ways and each draws boundaries between self and the other in different ways. Tsing (2005) has argued for a displacement of the polarities of the universal and the culturally specific. Both, in her view, have been produced by colonial knowledge that foregrounds the superior claims of the West, invariably defined against the lesser knowledge of Others, even as unequal encounters between them reshape both of them (Tsing 2005: 5).

Appeals to universal and anti-discriminatory programmes such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and international human rights offer some women agency and the opportunity to participate in the global community. However, appeals to universal rights are doubled-edged: ‘human rights discourses may well contain assumptions about oppositions between rights and culture that were fundamental during imperialism and are still embedded in human rights rhetoric’ (Merry 2006: 220). While universal human rights discourses may be essential to expanding opportunities for women to act, those same discourses are instrumental in producing modern subjects and citizens that fit more readily with current capitalist economic requirements (Otto 1999). Human rights discourses that promote individual autonomy may inadvertently undermine collective claims to land, for example, which are already highly contested in places such as Vanuatu. Merry has argued, ‘It is clear that human rights language is a powerful discourse to promote women’s status, yet a critique of culture that marginalises poor, or rural people or immigrants risks replicating colonial discourse’ (Merry 2006: 100).

In order for human rights discourses to effectively address issues such as gendered violence, their universal claims need to be localized. Merry, for example, argues that human rights are ‘better imagined as cultural practice rather than a form of global law’ (Merry 2006: 227). This displacement of the primacy of the global suggests that local kastomary and universal human rights practices are both cultural practices, and both draw on knowledge from elsewhere. Universal claims, such as those of
human rights, ‘do not actually make everything everywhere the same’ (Tsing 2005: 7) and they may also be read as cultural, fragmentary and partial (Merry 2006). These views resonate with Haraway’s (1988) insistence on situated knowledge(s) that erode the dualistic and polarized positions that exist between universal and relativist claims.

Jenny’s identification of discursive violence in *kastom* at the *nakamals* suggests the ways in which *kastomary* practices are implicated in economies of discourse that are by no means always egalitarian (Rodman 1987) or just local. They register differences and inequalities from elsewhere. *Kastomary* practices in this sense are not self-contained but rather bear the discursive markings of other places and ideologies. From this vantage point, the language of domination attributed to *kastom* may also have been shaped by Christian texts and colonial and mission practices. Tanna had been subject to intense missionization since the 1840s and after sustained resistance, Christianity, with some important exceptions, has been indigenized and is now integral to both the national and personal identity of most ni-Vanuatu. While some authors have pointed to the significance and importance of Christianity as a source of agency for women (Douglas 2002; Eriksen 2008), others have argued that interpretations of the Bible such as St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians may, in fact, be used to dominate women (Dureau 1998; Jolly 2000). The language of the *nakamal* that concerns Jenny may well resonate with Pauline tenets. At the moment there is a new wave of Christianity sweeping Vanuatu promoting particular ideas of personhood, family and community and offering a sustained critique of the values embedded in *kastomary* practices.

### Locating Violence against Women

There is a long history of the colonial and mission representation of ni-Vanuatu women as brutalized and downtrodden by violent men (Jolly 1996, 2000; Douglas 2002) and many such representations continue to circulate. Since the earliest missionary and travel accounts, the treatment of women has served to index Melanesian primitivism (Thomas 1994: 101). The violence of colonialists and explorers, according to Jolly, has been downplayed while the warlike nature of the Islanders has been exaggerated and linked to violence against women (Jolly 1991). The abject state of women underpinned the need to emancipate women from the oppression of local practices through conversion and through the expansion of the mission.

I have noticed the tendency, particularly in Port Vila, to link violence against women to *kastom* defined as timeless tradition, or, more subtly, to attribute it to the essentialized predisposition for violence among ni-Vanuatu and more generally among Melanesian men. Such violence is also attributed to the failure of modernity which appears to be signified by the persistence of *kastomary* practices. I have argued elsewhere that violence in Vanuatu is modern in its effects, suggesting that gendered violence should be located within the broader context of the violence introduced by ‘civilizing’ and ‘modernizing’ practices such as the plantation economy and indentured labour (Mitchell 2000).

Given the complexities of the past and present, how can a feminist anthropologist engage with the issue of violence against women? Ticktin (2008) in a recent essay has argued that while discourses on violence against women ‘allow women to name and struggle against violence, they can also serve to perpetuate such violence as part of larger nationalist and imperialist projects’ (2008: 865). The author summarizes the dilemma faced by feminist anthropologists as one of recognizing the very real violence that women face without contributing to those discourses that may get recuperated as ‘discourses of cultural otherness’ (2008: 884). Just as the violence of *kastomary* practices
was linked to furthering mission and colonial interests in the past, linking violence against women to *kastom* in contemporary Vanuatu has powerful effects: it may subtly facilitate the extension of neo-liberal economic strategies that erode collective provisions that have so effectively insulated people from poverty. Engaged feminist anthropologists have an important task to ensure that their ethnographic descriptions do not trade in generalizations about others that stabilize the boundaries between self and other rendering other people ‘simultaneously more coherent, self-contained and different from us’ (Abu-Lughod 1990: 7, 2002). Haraway’s figuration of ‘modest witness’ is useful here in undermining the easy assumptions about who is traditional or modern and who is entitled to make local or universal claims.

**Localizing Agencies**

While recognizing and attempting to respond to gendered violence, it is important that women are not ‘evacuated of agency’ (Haraway 1997: 32). In Vanuatu identifying women’s agency in *kastomary* practices is an important point of analysis for an engaged feminist anthropology. I became interested in how *kastomary* practices, including ceremonies and exchanges, embodied possibilities for such agency. Every time I attended an exchange ceremony, I was struck that each was a particular and singular experience shaped by ongoing social-economic changes and various contingencies. The rituals associated with male initiations in Tanna complicate Allen’s observation that they exhibit ‘male power and domination’ (1981: 3). While exchange ceremonies and initiation rituals that are central to *kastomary* practices in Tanna may be read as ‘typical prestige activities of males’, it seemed to me that they also create relationships between cross-gender siblings, who are often at the centre of those exchanges. These exchanges displace the Western logic of the centrality of the conjugal couple and complicate gender relationships in interesting ways by centering the relationship between brothers and sisters. Paying attention to the range of gendered relationships and the making of relationships in such exchanges unsettles fixed ideas about the relationship between gender and *kastomary* practices. Following Strathern in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), Western notions of agency cannot simply be transposed to places such as Vanuatu. Agency, in Strathern’s reckoning, is located not within the person but rather in the relations people have with one another through which differences such as maleness and femaleness are construed (Strathern 1988). Because forms of personhood are shaped by gift economies, persons are, according to Strathern, better conceptualized in relational terms as composites and pluralities rather than as autonomous and individual. This is not to say that gift economies operate outside of the wage and market economies that also shape personhood but rather to underline the complexity of personhood in contemporary Melanesia. Bolton has argued that the idea of ‘singular identity’ (2003: 55) is alien in Vanuatu where she suggests it is the specificity of relationships that must be analysed. The constitutive processes that generate and reproduce systems of gender are best understood through such relationships. Bolton (2003) in her work with women on the northern Island of Ambae in Vanuatu has identified the ways in which *kastom* affords women agency. The argument that ‘women have *kastom* too’ is crucial for, following Independence, *kastom* was considered the work of men, resulting in the exclusion of women (Bolton 2003: 57). Bolton, however, found that while nationalist rhetoric about *kastom* displaced women from its public space, there was interest at the local level in reformulating ideas of *kastom* that included women.
Monique’s Passport: 
Globalizing Agencies

While I have been describing the complex and contested articulations of *kastomary* and gender practices in rural areas, I want to return to the connections between urban and rural areas. Migration and other socio-economic processes that link villages and urban areas are redefining those spatial and social spheres. In my work with urban youth in Port Vila, I have been struck by the ways in which discourses of *kastom* figured in the lives of young people who were also drawing on aspects of global youth culture. Young men were often extending *kastomary* practices to accommodate their urban situation by trying to pry open possibilities for livelihood by, for example, performing *kastom* for tourists. Young men also expressed a desire to have local chiefs settle their conflicts in town in order to avoid the violence of the police and the permanence of court records. There were distinct gender differences in the ways in which *kastom* was articulated in town, and young women such as Monique often eluded or flaunted the restrictions imposed on their speech and movement.

Monique, whom I first met in the urban settlement in 1996, had grown up on a small northern island but she has remained resolutely committed to living in the crowded settlements of town. Monique, however, did not make a choice that renders *kastomary* practices less important in her life. She is still active in her kin group and has taken her children back to her island for ceremonies that ensure that they belong to her lineage and its land. But Monique, for her own particular reasons, did not want to live on her natal island and she did not marry someone from her own island or language group. On each successive field trip to Vanuatu it seemed to me that Monique’s livelihood in town had become more tenuous. We had lived in the same settlement for several years and I saw her first relationship, riven by violence, end ten years ago. Her partner’s financial support for their children had been erratic and is now non-existent despite the time Monique spent to acquire child support through the formal court system. Monique may have moved away from her village and from the daily demands of *kastomary* practices but that move has entangled her in the structural violence embedded in economic marginality.

Since I have known her, Monique has been trying to find work in town. Her sustained efforts have resulted in mostly short-term work in Chinese-owned retail shops, in domestic service and in an abattoir until, it seemed, she had exhausted all of the possibilities to make enough money to live in town. When I last saw Monique she was living with several of her children in another settlement in another rented room in another crowded row of corrugated steel makeshift housing without a job. There were no prospects of finding one. Her housing arrangement was temporary as she lived with her younger sister who also had children. The labour recruiters who had been scouring Vanuatu for mature, preferably married couples, to work in the agricultural harvest in New Zealand had caught the attention of Monique. She was attracted to this possibility of work, particularly since her older sister had already signed on to work for six months. During the course of my field visit, Monique attempted to raise the $300 (American) necessary to acquire a passport and to meet the additional costs such as x-rays that were part of her entry requirements to New Zealand. She succeeded with much difficulty and showed me her passport on the day that she collected it from the Government office. She was overjoyed. The seemingly impossible had materialized by way of the passport in her hand, which she imagined would open up the world to her in new ways. She could not, however, access those new opportunities without relying on her extended kin group in Port Vila.
and her island village to care for her children in her absence.

Monique's choices and conflicts tell us something about the present configurations of gender in Vanuatu and how its 'emergent present' is embodied in particular ways. The changes connected to globalization are localized in particular places, hinting at how imagined locations coincide with, contradict or extend the articulations of gender and kastomary practices amidst the globalizing developments taking place in Vanuatu. Her actions are all the more interesting given the ways in which women's mobility has been disciplined in Vanuatu. Monique's exercise of agency cannot be considered separate from political economy or external to everyday meanings. The particularity of Monique's story and her exercise of agency undercut easy generalizations about women in Vanuatu. Her agency, however constrained in the new circumstances, allows Monique to reposition herself and to undermine her sense of marginality in the wage and discourse economies of Port Vila. Her participation as a migrant agricultural worker in the global economy opens up new possibilities as well as new forms of marginality. While measures to address violence against women in Vanuatu often focus on kastom or culture as the source of women's oppression, it is equally important to recognize other sources of violence stemming from inequalities in the relations of production and global processes that now target cheap female labour.

Conclusion

I have considered some of the complexities of an engaged feminist anthropology by exploring ethnographic encounters in Vanuatu that brought not only different manifestations of violence to the forefront but the complex issues of collective entitlements and individual rights. I have made a case for privileging situated knowledge, and attending to the specificity of the 'emergent present', which is informed by the colonial past, kastomary practices, an intensification of commodification, demographic changes, universal human rights discourses and evangelical Christianity. While often contradictory and excessive, kastomary practices, I have suggested, can challenge the logic of global capitalism by insisting on gift exchanges and that land can be imagined in terms of the collective that encompasses ancestors and future generations. While often conflated with notions of the past and tradition, kastomary practices are fluid and contemporary in their privileging of relationships and heterogeneity. It is from this perspective that I query the relationship between violence against women and local practices of kastom, arguing that it is crucial to be aware of the effects of framing kastom as outside of modernity and somehow given to violence. Attempts to enlarge the agency of women through rights discourses that are not localized may well erode the collective basis of social relations and reconfigure ideas of personhood and community to better suit neo-liberal economies; such attempts will not protect those positioned in the margins of global capitalism. It is also critical to ask how violence against women is structured and silenced in domestic and public economies against the backdrop of commodification of land and relationships, and in view of demographic shifts such as population growth and migration to town that have occurred since Independence.

An engaged feminist anthropologist in the context of Vanuatu recognizes that kastomary practices are situated and multiple; simultaneously occupying spaces of domination and violence as well as offering powerful counter-discourses to the neo-liberal regimes of global capitalism. One of the difficulties of feminist anthropology is to figure out how to describe such complex locations without resorting to either universalism or cultural relativism that is associated with local knowledge and practices. Since there is no place outside of such
dilemmas, and since we cannot rely on a disembodied objectivity translated as transcendence, an engaged feminist anthropologist must continuously ‘witness’ the local nature of all standpoints (Braidotti 1991: 270). Such an approach does not preclude political engagement, for location ‘is also partial in the sense of being for some worlds and not for others’ (Haraway 1997: 37). For example, articulations of *kastom* that insist on the local and on notions of the collective, however contested, defer the inevitability of commodification and particular kinds of economic development that produce marginality. An engaged feminist anthropology contests the inevitability of violence located in *kastomary* practices while critically assessing the ways in which the universal claims of human rights, which are often pitted against such local cultural practices, may be usefully localized.

Feminist anthropologists are acutely aware of violence and particularly violence against women, for this issue has a way of shattering epistemological certainties. Jenny’s attention to discursive violence and its capacity for domination also contains a cautionary note for feminist ethnographers, whose language may confront but at the same time reproduce discursive violence. The appeal to modesty serves to nudge us away from the finality and force of generalizations about otherness. The ideas encapsulated in Haraway’s figuration of ‘modest witness’ impede reliance on an overarching system of explanation, whether it is *kastom* that shorthands the domination of women or globalization that shorthands those forces that shape social, economic, and cultural lives. Partial perspectives are favoured over global theorization as are new ways of constructing affinities across differences that refuse static and power-infused oppositions of self and other. Rethinking relativist-universalist oppositions allows us to view human rights discourses as cultural practices that can, in that light, be usefully deployed at the local level (Merry 2006). This point underlines the partiality and the situatedness of all discourses, even those that claim a universal and global status in opposition to local knowledge claims. Engaged feminist anthropology remains committed to recognizing and living with differences without flattening, absorbing or reducing them to cultural otherness. ‘Modest’ claims may require living with more uncertainty and taking responsibility for ‘what we learn how to see’ (Haraway 1997: 153).

An engaged feminist anthropology, following Haraway’s figuration of modest witness, is about ‘making a difference in the world of differences’ (1997) in partisan projects and with language that is always contestable. Engaged feminist anthropology attends to the gendered social spaces made tangible in the talk at the nakamal that Jenny described, in the *kastomary* exchange ceremonies that are staged, in the passport that Monique desired and in the erasures of gender in the economists’ footnote. Jenny in her work as a consultant for a foreign agency and Monique in her proposed work as an international migrant labourer, occupy new locations and embody new spaces of agency, however constrained. Engagement is attending to the impulse to trace the stories within these stories and to query ways of knowing and the stability of subsequent knowledge production.

Jean Mitchell is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada. Her broad research interests are colonialism, migration and modernity in the Southwest Pacific. She is also engaged in long-term research with urban youth in Vanuatu. With extensive experience in health-related research of women and children in Asia and the Pacific, she is particularly interested in gender. Her most recent research explores the connections between popular culture in Prince Edward Island and colonial and missionary projects in southern Vanuatu. Email: mjmitchell@upei.ca
Notes

1. This population figure is from the 2009 National Household Survey conducted by Vanuatu National Statistics Office.
2. I shall refer to *kastom* throughout the essay rather than translate it as custom. I shall also use the phrase *kastomary* practices as it suggests its manifold deployments.
3. There is a rich and extensive literature on *kastom* in Vanuatu and the Pacific region including Rodman (1977); Tonkinson (1981); Rodman (1987); Jolly and Thomas (1992); Bonnemasion (1994); Bolton (2003); Lindstrom (2008) as well as many other sources.
4. The Government declared 2006 the year of the *kastom* economy, suggesting the way in which *kastom* is used to frame the distinctive nature of postcolonial Vanuatu (Regenvanu 2007).
5. Margaret Critchlow Rodman (1987) has shown the ways in which inequities are integral to *kastomary* land practices.
7. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre now has a Women’s *Kastom* Project which documents women’s knowledge and practices. Lissant Bolton and Jean Tarisesei established the project in the early 1990s.

References

Engaging Feminist Anthropology in Vanuatu: Local Knowledge and Universal Claims


