

# ***Tabu*, MPA and community: nomenclature and the political ecology of marine conservation in Vanuatu**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines two marine conservation projects from the Republic of Vanuatu, and seeks to contribute to the regional political ecology literature. I question whether Marine Protected Areas (MPA) or *tabu eria* [lit. taboo area] are the most effective tool for regulating inshore fisheries in the Pacific Islands. *Tabu eria* – customary/neo-traditional spatial-temporal marine closures – are regularly presented as socio-historically embedded practices that are more likely to succeed as a resource management tool than MPAs, which are often deemed to be an "outside" intervention promoted by western conservationists. The case studies demonstrate that the adoption of MPA rather than *tabu* does not always question the moral competence of local forms of knowing and doing. On the contrary, the local adoption of an MPA can be a strategic, local appropriation, e.g. to justify territorial claims, resource capture, and/or enhance regulatory sanctions. Examples foreground the analytical limits of 'local' and 'foreign', or a failure to properly address (and locate) human agency. The uncritical valorization of *tabu eria* as local and authentic shows the same prejudice that its advocates purport to critique. An MPA and *tabu* equally prioritize and naturalize the essentialist idea of 'the village-as-community', (re)presenting 'the village' as homogenous and undifferentiated. In short, the reality on-the-ground reiterates that socio-historical specifics matter, and human agency can be difficult to identify. Categories such as MPA, *tabu* and 'community' obscure more than they reveal and can unintentionally erode, rather than enhance, marine conservation objectives.

**Keywords:** Vanuatu, conservation, Marine Protected Area (MPA), taboo area, regional political ecology

## **Résumé**

Cet article examine deux projets de conservation marine de la République de Vanuatu et cherche à contribuer à la littérature régionale sur l'écologie politique. Je me demande si les aires marines protégées (AMP) ou la *tabu eria* [lit. zone tabou] sont l'outil le plus efficace pour réglementer la pêche côtière dans les îles du Pacifique. *Tabu eria* – les fermetures marines spatio-temporelles coutumières / néo-traditionnelles – sont régulièrement présentées comme des pratiques socio-historiques qui ont plus de chances de réussir en tant qu'outil de gestion des ressources que les AMP, qui sont souvent considérées comme une intervention «extérieure» promue par les écologistes occidentaux. Les études de cas démontrent que l'adoption de l'AMP plutôt que du *tabu* ne remet pas toujours en question la compétence morale des formes locales de savoir et de faire. Au contraire, l'adoption locale d'une AMP peut être une appropriation stratégique locale, par ex. pour justifier les revendications territoriales, la capture de ressources et / ou renforcer les sanctions réglementaires. Les exemples mettent en avant les limites analytiques de «local» et «étranger», ou pour aborder (et localiser) correctement l'action humaine. La valorisation non critique de la *tabu eria* comme locale et authentique montre le même préjugé que ses partisans prétendent critiquer. Une AMP et un *tabu* donnent également la priorité et naturalisent l'idée essentialiste de «village-communauté», (re) présentant «le village» comme homogène et indifférencié. En bref, la réalité sur le terrain rappelle que les spécificités socio-historiques sont importantes et que l'action humaine peut être difficile à identifier. Des catégories telles que les AMP, les tabous et les «communautés» obscurcissent plus qu'elles ne révèlent et peuvent involontairement éroder, plutôt qu'améliorer, les objectifs de conservation marine.

**Mots clés:** Vanuatu, conservation, aire marine protégée (AMP), zone tabou, écologie politique régionale

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## Resumen

Este artículo examina dos proyectos marinos de conservación en la República de Vanuatu, con esto, busca contribuir a la literatura de ecología política regional. Aquí cuestiono si las áreas marinas protegidas (MPA) o *tabu eria* (área tabú), son realmente las herramientas más efectivas para regular la pesca costera en las islas del Pacífico. Las *tabu eria* –los cierres espacio-temporales marinos tradicionales/neotradicionales– son presentadas de manera regular como prácticas socio-históricas integradas que suelen tener más éxito como una herramienta de manejo de recursos, que las MPAs, las cuales, son consideradas como intervenciones "foráneas" promovidas por conservacionistas occidentales. Los estudios de caso demuestran que la implementación de MPA en lugar de *tabu*, no siempre cuestiona la competencia moral de formas locales de conocer y hacer. Al contrario, la implementación local de una MPA puede ser una apropiación local estratégica, por ejemplo, para justificar demandas territoriales, acaparamiento de recursos, y/o la mejora de permisos regulatorios. Los ejemplos destacan los límites analíticos de lo "local" y lo "foráneo", o pueden señalar una falla al abordar de manera apropiada (y ubicar) la agencia humana. La acrítica valoración de *tabu eria* cómo algo local y auténtico, demuestra el mismo prejuicio que sus promotores pretenden criticar. Tanto la MPA, como *tabu*, priorizan y naturalizan en igual medida la idea esencialista de "población como comunidad", (re)presentando "la población" como homogénea y sin distinciones. En resumen, la realidad palpable nos reitera que las particularidades socio-históricas importan, y que la agencia humana puede ser compleja para identificar. Categorías tales como MPA, *tabu* y "comunidad", ensombrecen más de lo que realmente revelan y puede, de manera involuntaria debilitar, más que mejorar, los objetivos de conservación marina.

**Palabras clave:** Vanuatu, conservación, áreas marinas protegidas (MPA), área tabú, ecología política regional

## 1. What's in a name? *Tabu eria*, Marine Protected Areas (MPA) and community

Marine resource management practices such as *tabu eria* are associated with what has been called, among other things, "Customary Marine Tenure" (CMT). CMT is found throughout much of the Western Pacific and has been defined as a set of norms or rules that (ideally) regulate who can fish, and for what purposes, in a given territorial sea-space (Hviding 1989). A key aspect of CMT is the periodic closure of a specified marine area – a *tabu eria* [taboo area] – often marked with an insignia of some sort (e.g. *namele* leaf [cycad, *Cycas circinnalis*] in many parts of Vanuatu). Such *tabu eria* forbid people from fishing, swimming and (sometimes) even walking along the adjacent shore – which is to maintain the integrity of the fishing closure and make the fish less wary when subsequently entering the area once the *tabu* has been lifted (Hickey 2006: 11). Regionally, the existence of CMT and *tabu eria* were brought to international attention by Bob Johannes in the 1970s (Johannes 1978, 1982) and they have remained a topic of attention ever since (e.g. Adams 1998; Aswani 1997; Baines 1985, 1991; Hviding 1989, 1991, 1996).

Socio-historically speaking, there were many different kinds of 'traditional' marine resource management practices. Examples from Vanuatu include: species-specific prohibitions (e.g. the harvesting of turtle eggs), seasonal closures (associated with horticultural patterns) and spatial-temporal refugia such as *tabu eria*. The implementation of a *tabu* was typically associated with a specific social event: following the death of a leader or other significant clan member; connected to grade-taking or ranking rites, circumcision ceremonies, the transference of chiefly title; or, in preparation of other similarly important occasions (Hickey 2006: 17-19). Whilst *tabu eria* are referred to by as many different names as there are languages, in Vanuatu today such proscriptions are typically referred to by the ubiquitous Bislama<sup>2</sup> gloss *tabu* or *tabu eria*.

In broad terms, *tabu eria* appear to have much in common with marine protected areas (MPAs), which are conventionally defined as a "management tool" designed to restrict fishing effort and/or access to a given sea-space (Kelleher 1999). As with CMT, there are many different kinds of MPA management proscriptions: some are permanent 'no-take' zones; others are periodic closures; whilst others still restrict specific types of fishing (night fishing) or fishing gear (e.g. spear fishing). Growing concern about fishery decline and food

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<sup>2</sup> Bislama is the national Pidgin lingua-franca of Vanuatu. Throughout this article italicized words are Bislama, with standardized spelling based on Crowley's (2003) reference book. Bislama developed in the 1800s as a medium of communication between ni-Vanuatu and Europeans, and between ni-Vanuatu from different islands and language groups within the archipelago (Crowley 1990). I also use a few Ninde words – from the language of the people referred to as 'Mewun' situated on the northern side of South West Bay, Malekula – and these are represented in italics and underlined, e.g. *nogho*. There is, as yet, no standardized orthography for Ninde.

insecurity in the Pacific, combined with a perceived congruence between MPA and *tabu eria*, have provided a validation for the widespread implementation of MPAs across the Pacific, spearheaded by a plethora of state, regional, and international and regional non-government bodies (e.g. Adams 1998; Aswani 1997, 2000, 2005; Bartlett *et al.* 2009a, b; Drew 2005; Foale *et al.* 2011; Johannes 2002a; Lam 1998).

However, whilst *tabu eria* may appear to have much in common with MPAs, they are qualitatively different. *Tabu eria* are primarily temporary closures only, and are premised on a suite of values, functions and beliefs that are distinct from MPAs. As implied above, *tabu eria* were more directed towards maximizing fishery harvests to support social criteria – such as feasts at special occasions – than they were with conserving/sustaining fisheries or 'nature' as such (Foale *et al.* 2011; cf. Johannes 2002b; Smith and Wishnie 2000). Additionally, socio-historically, the efficacy of *tabu eria* were highly dependent on a belief that infringement would provoke supernatural retribution (Hickey 2007). Thus, whilst *tabu eria* operationally have much in common with MPAs, they are built on a different suite of assumptions.

There has been much debate about the validity and efficacy of each approach, with some individuals and agencies stating that *tabu eria* are more culturally appropriate and effective than MPAs. In Vanuatu, much of the "*tabu eria* is more appropriate and effective than MPA" argument has come from the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VKS).<sup>3</sup> Supported by external donors such as UNESCO and The Christensen Fund, the VKS has promoted "*kastom fasin blong lukoatem envaeromen*" [*kastom* fashion of looking after the environment] (VKS, n.d.). A booklet associated with one of these projects encourages ni-Vanuatu to "use *kastom* fashion and don't depend too much on the techniques/discourse of outsiders which is not our way of doing things and makes us dependent on money and assistance from outside" (VKS n.d.: 9, my translation from Bislama). The document goes on to encourage people to form a committee with representatives of "*everi kaen man*" [every kind of person, e.g. men, women, youth and elders] in *komuniti* [community]. Yet, socio-historically speaking, *tabu eria* were the domain of specific high-men. The document further suggests that a *tabu eria* can "*pulem intres blong ol turis*" [attract the interest of tourists]. Earlier, the booklet had advised that *tabu eria* do not require outsiders or money. The messages are varied and cherry-picked; perhaps this is a consequence of attempting to appeal to both local interests and external donors (who funded the booklet).

Regardless, advocates have promoted the maintenance and/or revitalization of CMT/*tabu* as a means of addressing a myriad of contemporary issues, from enhancing food security, supporting biodiversity conservation and building resilience to natural disasters and climate change (e.g. Baines 1985, 1991; Dalzell and Schug 2002; Hickey 2006; Hviding 1991, 1996; Hviding and Baines 1992; Ruddle and Hickey 2008; VKS n.d.). Proponents of using *tabu* over MPA often argue that the legal codification of CMT and *tabu eria* erodes the "contextual flexibility" and "adaptive capacity" of customary norms/practices (e.g. Hviding 1998). Conversely, for some commentators, customary law is deemed "too flexible" and "traditional" practices such as *tabu eria* are seen as requiring outside legitimization to ensure compliance, especially against poaching from neighboring villages (Aswani 1997; Caillaud *et al.* 2004). For some analysts, this is simply a matter of integrating "traditional practices with the formal legal system" (FSPI 2003: 27). Hence, in some Pacific countries, governments have provided legislative support for local communities to register a 'closed area' (of land or sea) for conservation purposes, e.g. Community Conservation Areas (CCA) in Vanuatu<sup>4</sup>, or Provincial Resource Management Ordinances in parts of the Solomon Islands.<sup>5</sup> However, establishing such "hybrid" co-management solutions is far from straightforward; especially in resource-constrained Pacific island states where enforcement is difficult to police in practice.

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<sup>3</sup> The VKS – *Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta* [Vanuatu Cultural Centre] – was founded on 1959 by the Condominium administration to "promote, protect and preserve the different aspects of the culture of Vanuatu." The VKS has a number of island-based ni-Vanuatu *felwoka* [fieldworkers] who undertake research on a wide number of topics (language, custom, history, material culture etc.) and frequently assist foreign researchers (cf. Bolton 1999; Thieberger and Taylor 2013).

<sup>4</sup> CCAs gives community leaders the right to call upon the state to punish people who have been determined guilty of contravening the conditions of a registered CCA (a maximum fine of 100,000vuv (cUS\$880) or imprisonment for up to two years).

<sup>5</sup> The Western Province (Solomon Islands) has passed the Western Province Resource Management Ordinance (1994), which (on paper) gives some legal standing to community-based resource management arrangements (cf. McDonald 2006).

Although promoted as more locally appropriate than MPAs, as the 'local commons' has increasingly become the "global commons" (Berkes 2007), some scholars and practitioners have questioned the celebratory tone of the pro-*tabu eria* literature (e.g. Foale and Manele 2004; Foale *et al.* 2011; Hamilton 2003; Kinch 2003). A critical argument has been that very low human population densities in Melanesia, rather than some form of "traditional" conservation ethic, was historically a key factor in regulating Melanesian fisheries. Moreover, growing population rates, the arrival of new fishing gear and the commodification of marine resources have provided new pressures that CMT and *tabu eria* were never designed to address (Sabetian and Foale 2006; Foale *et al.* 2011). Another argument suggests that, at least in some contexts, CMT is not an age-old 'customary' practice at all but rather the result of colonial and capitalist intrusion (Foale and Manele 2004; Kinch 2003). Indeed, there is debate about this very point in one of the studies below (the case of Lelepa and Mangaliliu). Additionally, due to the severe depopulation witnessed in rural Vanuatu, concomitant with widespread resettlement to the coast associated with missionization and the colonial plantation economy, land/sea tenure regimes – and the leadership systems on which they depend – have been greatly disrupted (Love 2016). In such contexts, the clan-based character of CMT impinges on people's ability to implement a protected area as many groups are unwilling to "lock up" their own reefs for the "spill-over" benefit of neighboring groups (Foale and Manele 2003). Combined, these multiple factors raise questions about the ability of CMT and *tabu eria* to operate as effective resource management/conservation tools today.

As Bartlett *et al.* (2010) have suggested, the debate regarding *tabu* versus MPA in Vanuatu is very much informed by "experts" and functions at the abstract, more than the grassroots, level. In this and other ways, the debate is more about "symbolism" and "post-colonial ideologies" than it is about the operational specifics of marine management (Bartlett *et al.* 2010: 102-103). For example, whilst cognizant of the limits of local ecological knowledge (LEK) and the multiplicity of drivers affecting the efficacy of *tabu* proscriptions today, Hickey (2006) and Ruddle and Hickey (2008) – among others – argue that *lokol save* [local knowledge and practices] have much more likelihood of succeeding than introduced approaches such as MPAs, which they see as serving to perpetuate the "myth" that the Western paradigm is superior to local ways (Ruddle and Hickey 2008: 578, *et passim*). This highlights the moral and political character of the debate, which is frequently presented as a bifurcated question of 'local' (good) versus 'foreign' (bad).

Whilst I sympathize with and recognize that the arguments in support of *tabu* over MPA are part of well-intended advocacy acknowledging and celebrating local knowledge, practice and ingenuity, the binary frame and absoluteness of the argument can elide some very important considerations. Some of these important factors have been noted in the brief review above. Another key point, which is surprisingly undernoted in the literature, is the novel character of 'the village' in much of island Melanesia – especially in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. As elucidated below, this has profound impacts on the efficacy of both MPA and *tabu eria* to operate as effective inshore fisheries regulatory systems.

As Stasch (2010) and some others have highlighted (e.g. Rodman 1992: 641), the 'village' in Melanesia is not some "pre-existing natural entity" but rather a "historically and culturally specific form" that stands as the "incarnation of specific values, ideas, narratives, feelings, political and moral projects" (Stasch 2010: 43). The villages where I conducted my fieldwork are socio-material examples of Sahlins' (1985) "structure of the conjunction"; the conjoining of colonial, missionary and local agencies (1985: 125; cf. Kaplan 1995). Before missionaries and colonial intrusion, in contexts such as South West Bay people lived in small, dispersed, family hamlets along the mountainous hinterland rim; post-World War II, after four decades of 'encouraging' people to resettle on the coast, the majority of people were residing in large, more densely populated settlements – the 'mission village'. This has substantive implications for 'community' conservation objectives today.

In his influential work *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, Raymond Williams (1985[1976]) traces the polymorphous particulars of community from the fourteenth century to the present. Williams (1985: 76) notes that the term 'community' incorporates both ideational and functional attributes – a 'community of interests', a 'sense of common identity', a 'quality of relationships' etc. (cf. Allison and Ellis 2001). He further notes that unlike all other terms of social organisation (e.g. clan/tribe, state, nation, society, etc.) community "seems never to be used unfavourably." Community stands as a virtue; a moral category and quality. These 'warm' notions of community were forged amidst the backdrop of urbanisation, industrialisation, and changing socio-economic particularities in Europe. Community was situated against society. Thus, 'community'

(*Gemeinschaft*) is genuine and organic, while 'society' (*Gesellschaft*) is a "mechanical aggregate" (Tönnies [1887] 2001: 21). This romantic view of community was echoed in the colonies.

One of the earliest uses of community by missionaries in the regional literature is found in Kay's (1872) anti-slavery treatise, where several Presbyterian missionaries spoke of newly Christianised 'natives' and their 'communities' being destabilised by the labour-trade. Rev. Macdonald – the resident missionary in Havannah Harbour (Lelema, see below) – uses the word 'community' only in reference to mission-villages (see ANL MS 1784). This opposition between savage and civilised, seen through the prism of community, is well expressed by Rev. Milne who, after ordaining eleven 'chiefs' in northwest Efate in 1900, wrote that this marked the area's emergence from the "disintegration of tribality [*sic*]" into the "cohesion of a community" (Milne cited in NHBS 1/1/vol. 3/233/1938; cf. Facey 1981: 304, 1988). Such specificity and false ideals of the "village-as-community" intensified under the post-World War II rise of international development – e.g. the "communities approach to economic development" (Belshaw 1955) – and continues, unabated, to this day.

In the context of natural resource management, numerous scholars have noted that "the term community hides a great deal of complexity" (Berkes 2004: 623). Discussing various conservation and sustainable development programs in the near-by Solomon Islands, Edvard Hviding (2003) elucidates how what he calls "projects of desire" disseminate new "moral concerns", such as

... egalitarian representation in village meetings (meaning [...] that ordinary women and men must have as much say as chiefs) and community focus (implying that there be, in a village, correspondence between residential and land-holding groups) which] run counter to indigenous notions of hierarchy, leadership, land tenure, and kinship structure. (Hviding 2003: 41)

As Rose (1999, cited in Li 2011: 100) further elucidates, in the context of these kinds of projects "community" functions as a means for "creating something new" and – as with the state (Scott [1976] 1998) – is a way of making collective existence "intelligible and calculable" (Rose 1999 in Li 2011: 100). 'Community-based' conservation aspirations – whether *tabu* or MPA – are confounded by such socio-material realities, posing all sorts of collective action challenges; e.g.

- Who has the right to impose a *tabu eria* in such contexts?
- Who regulates such sanctions and punishes transgressions?
- How does a disparate group of tribes/clans reach consensus about such matters?

These are just some of the many questions that such developments raise.

To ground this and other points, I first present a case-study of the *Fire-Beach Eco-Tourism Projek*; a locally-driven marine conservation and livelihood diversification program from southwest Malekula, Vanuatu. I then examine the *Grace of the Sea* project; a "partnership" marine conservation and livelihood diversification program led by the Japan International Cooperative Agency. These two case-studies are followed by a discussion that provides some further contextualization to reinforce my point that the neat demarcation between local (*tabu*) and foreign (MPA) is redundant and distracting, ultimately depreciating rather than enhancing both local agency and marine conservation objectives.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The main data for this article was collected during dissertation fieldwork undertaken in 2009-2010, with a six week follow-up trip in 2011. Fieldwork was made possible through the generous support of the Wenner-Gren Anthropological Foundation through Dissertation Fieldwork Grant No. 7901.

## 2. The Fire-Beach Eco-Tourism Projek: South West Bay, Malekula (Labo village)

The Fire-Beach Eco-Tourism project is located in Labo, South West Bay (hereafter also "SWB") which is situated – as its name suggests – in southwest Malekula; the second largest and third most populated island in the country (VNSO 2009) (Figure 1). At the time of primary fieldwork (2009-2010, and 2011) SWB had a resident population of 732 people, belonging to around 30–32 *nakamal*,<sup>7</sup> whilst Labo a population of 120 people, residing in 30 households and belonging to 7 *nakamal*.

There are currently four coastal villages in SWB – Wintua (established in 1895), Lawa (est. 1946), Labo (est. 1938), and Lorlow (est. 1960s) – three inland villages – Lamlo (est. 1990s), Mahapo (est. 1993) and Enimb (est. 1994-5) – and a growing number of smaller "hamlets" located in the mountainous hinterland rim. A series of expatriate missionaries and a host of teacher-catechists (first Polynesian, then ni-Vanuatu) spent nearly four decades attempting to "pull" people from their small, extended family settlements in the hinterland down to the coast (e.g. Rev. Boyd in NHM no. 30 Oct. 1908, *Qrtly. Jott.* no. 42, 1903 and *Qrtly. Jott.* no. 99, 1918; Rev. Gillan, *Qrtly. Jott.* no. 167, 1935). Until recently, all the coastal settlements were exclusively Presbyterian, however, many of the newer hinterland settlements contain non-Presbyterian denominations.

The Fire-Beach Eco-Tourism project has its origins in an "awareness" tour by the Vanua-Tai Resource Monitors (VTRM) to SWB in 2003. VTRM are part of *Wan Smol Bag* (WSB), a local (but expatriate-managed and donor funded) development theatre group (see Hickey and Petro 2005). The troupe promotes marine conservation – focusing on inshore reef fisheries and turtles – by performing a play, which is often followed by a facilitated village discussion. The WSB facilitator then asks for a village volunteer to undertake marine resource monitoring in the village. Every year or so, many of the active VTRM volunteers gather for an annual meeting to share their ideas and experiences. In Labo, the visit certainly had the requisite effect; the nominated village-based monitor ["Bill"] proved to be very active and a local marine management regime was eventually enacted.

Concerned by a noted decline in local marine resources, Bill organized a meeting in Labo, and also invited members of the neighboring villages to attend. A plan to instigate rotating reef closures all the way from the Bay north to Tumaseh (south of Letokhas) was raised as an objective, but ultimately rejected as over-ambitious – there were simply too many *ded nakamal* to deal with and disputed tenure rights associated with some of these areas.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, Labo focused on its own discrete initiative and in 2004 and 2005, with the support of the Melaii land/reef owners, the Labo village community [*komuniti*] placed a 10-year fishing ban on 16 hectares of reef adjacent to the village. A committee was formed and Bill suggested connecting the *tabu* to a community-based tourism project. Cognizant of contemporary development discourse, the initiative was labelled an "eco-tourism project" and the closed-area specifically referred to as an MPA rather than a *tabu eria*.

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<sup>7</sup> *Nakamal* is a pan-national Bislama term that refers to people whom share common descent from some real or mythical apical ancestor (a 'segmentary lineage system'). Membership to a *nakamal* in the Bay is based on patrilineal reckoning (see Deacon 1934; Larcom 1980, 1982, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> A '*ded nakamal*' refers to an area of customary ground/sea scape that has no living male decedents associated with it. Such cases are associated with depopulation from (primarily) disease during early colonial intrusion. In the Bay – as in much of Vanuatu – depopulation was substantial. In the early 1990s, the missionary at Wintua, Rev. Boyd, estimated the population of the Bay as 4,000-6,000 (in Miller 1989: 477). In 1937 it had fallen to 650 (NHBS 1/1 vol. 3. 246/1930) and in 1942 it had fallen further to just 300 people (NHBS 7/ii/27/4).

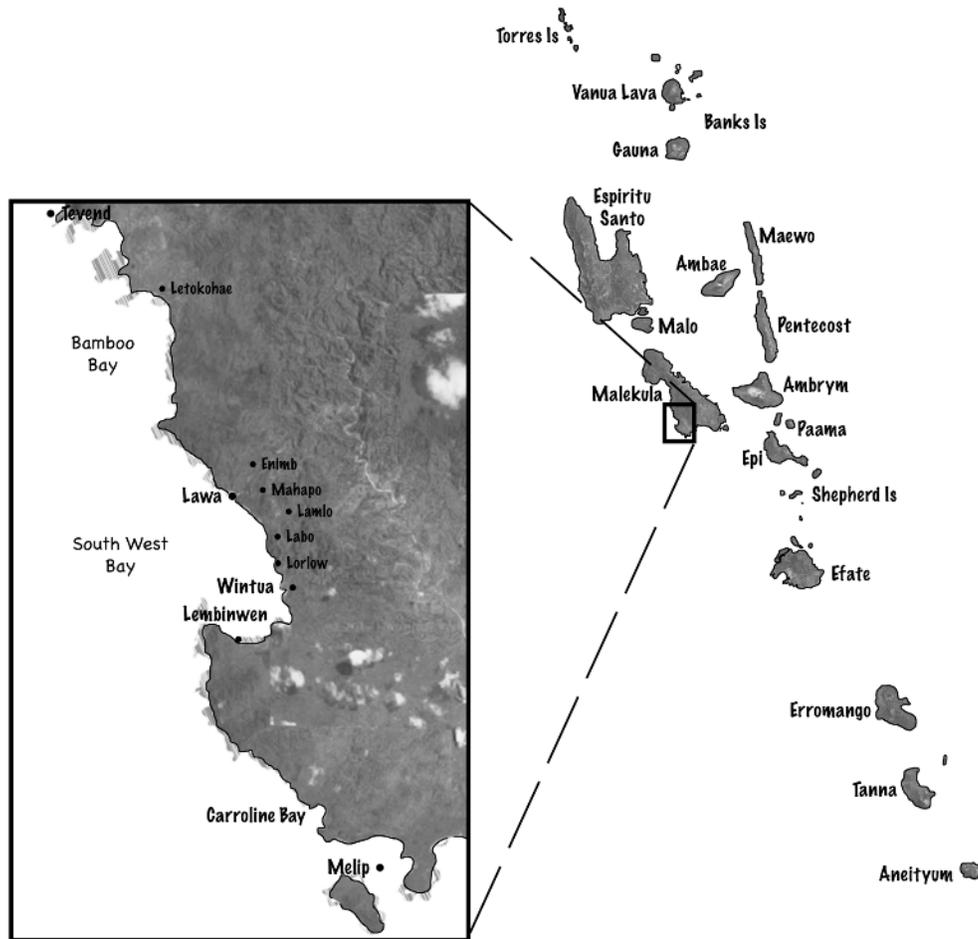


Figure 1: Central-north Vanuatu (inset, South West Bay). Source: J. Love (after Google Earth and VanGov. map no. 16116707, Ed. 1- VDLS)

A foreshore beautification program was begun, consisting of: coastal planting; the construction of fences, paths; a public dance-ground; seating; and, several "tourism information" and "handicraft" sales shelters. The project was officially opened on 29 October 2005, with numerous local and national dignitaries present (several local Members of Parliament and Area Council of Chiefs, as well as Provincial tourism officials). In 2007, the first tourist boat, *MV Oceanic Discoverer* (Coral Princess Cruises, Australia) visited Labo, and it has returned nearly every year since (Figure 2).

In early 2008, leaders in the *komuniti* requested a "business" oriented Peace Corps Volunteer, who arrived in late 2009. After receiving some funds from the Global Environment Fund Small Grants Program in 2010, the construction of a tourist bungalow commenced. As part of the funding application the MPA was extended and 10 hectares of coastal-hinterland forest [*dak bus*] was also set aside as a "conservation area" (no hunting or clearing the vegetation for gardening). The project has also attracted funds from elsewhere: The Australian government provided some small support (under their Regional Economic Development Initiative), an MP from the east coast of Malekula supplied one ton of cement and two toilets for the eco-lodge, whilst the local Member of Parliament from SWB provided a water tank and two taps.



Figure 2: *Nalawan Nei* performance, Fire-Beach, Labo (MV Oceanic Discoverer in background).  
Source: Love, 2009

Overall, the project has been fairly successful in meeting many of its stated goals – economic enhancement and marine conservation improvement – although the economic benefits have not been as great as most people initially hoped for. Of interest is how the *projek*, at least for a time, proved to be a productive modality for promoting and objectifying 'social-unity'. While projects can become a conduit for animating extant local grievances, in this instance it offered a productive means for manifesting 'the good' in collective terms. As several village leaders astutely noted, having a community project provided an opportune means for politicians and donors alike to allocate funds as it is a clear motif of the 'collective good' ("*blong yumi everiwan*" [belonging to everyone]).

Additionally, the fishing sanction has been relatively well respected. Trochus (*Rochia niloti*) and octopus can be seen in the MPA area (but are almost impossible to find elsewhere in SWB), a bump-head parrot fish spawning site was also protected within the MPA (and is in clear evidence), and reef fish diversity and density appear to be much more abundant than in many other reefs in the area (author, *pers. obsv.* 2009 and 2011). Furthermore, when surveyed, 80% of respondents stated that the fishing sanction was "respected" ( $n=24$ ), which is a much higher perceived compliance rate than in my comparative case-study sites (Lawa, Natapau) (cf. Love 2016). This is also supported by personal observation and interviews. In instrumental terms, this relative "success" is related to Labo's small demographic size, the proximity of the MPA to the village (which offers a 'clear line-of-sight' to the MPA) and the comparatively "homogenous" character of the village (measured in terms of Church affiliation and attendance rates as well as intra-community cooperation, e.g. committee participation, fundraising etc.) (*ibid.*).

The project was also generally evaluated positively by local residents, although many women complained that they did not receive as much financial benefit as the men, whilst some young men complained that the compulsory community work associated with the project was burdensome; several informants complained that they did too much work, the older men too little, and a select few young men almost none at all. The bulk of the monies generated from the *projek* have been spent on collective enterprises, such as a hydro-electric power system (which unfortunately did not work).

Of particular note is the overt embrace of 'modern' over '*kastom*' [customary/traditional]<sup>9</sup> techniques and discourse in Labo relative to most other locales in SWB. For example, Labo has a memorandum of understanding (MOU) and a community by-law that stipulates that decision making about development in Labo village lies not in the hands of members of the Melaii *nakamal* – the land owners of the area where the village is situated – but rather with the village council and the wider, multi-*nakamal* community. This situation is

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<sup>9</sup> *Kastom* is a complex and much discussed term in the anthropological literature, the details of which are beyond this article's scope (see contributions in Keesing and Tonkinson 1982). For my purposes, the translation of *kastom* as simply 'custom' or 'tradition' will suffice.

unique in SWB. In terms of the Fire-Beach eco-tourism project, this embrace of the 'modern' is further evident in the references to MPA, eco-tourism, and conservation rather than *kastom* or *tabu eria*. This is another outlier relative to other closed areas in SWB (e.g. in neighboring Lawa village, see below) as well as elsewhere in Malekula and further afield, where *kastom* and *tabu eria* tend to be used ubiquitously to refer to any closed fishing areas. This speaks volumes about the heuristic limits of either 'foreign' or 'local' to adequately capture social reality. Moreover, it questions the dominant characterization of MPAs as hegemonic, neo-colonial interventions. I will return to these points, but first it is instructive to examine another project; this time a donor-instigated marine management and livelihood diversification program from northwest Efate which, compared to Labo, was very much a "top-down" project.

### 3. The Grace of the Sea project: Lelepa Island and Mangaliliu village (northwest Efate)

The "Project for Promotion of the Grace of the Sea in Coastal Villages" was located in Havannah Passage, west Efate, in central Vanuatu (Figure 3). The project initially involved four communities but ended up working with just two: Natapau village, located on Lelepa island, and Mangaliliu village, northwest Efate. Lelepa is a small, near-shore island located close to Efate, home to the national capital, Port Vila. Along with the nearby uninhabited island of Artok (or Retoka), Lelepa forms the western margins of deep-water Havannah Passage or Harbor. Mangaliliu village, situated on the adjacent mainland of Efate, was established by emigrants from Lelepa in the early 1980s. Lelema residents are socio-culturally organized by *naflak*; a matrilineal kinship system somewhat analogous to *nakamal* (Ballard 2009; Facey 1988; Guiart 1973). Natapau village, located on Lelepa island, was (re)established in the 1860s as inter-tribal conflict intensified on Efate, resulting in the abandonment of various mainland settlements as people sought refuge on Lelepa (Ballard 2010). Today, Natapau is the largest of several villages along the southeast side of the island. Once separated by gardens and bush, today these settlements form a near-continuous stretch of houses to constitute a single village. Both Lelepa and Mangaliliu have their own village council and (ideally) a shared Paramount Chief (*Jif*). Key leaders from both communities are members of the combined "Lelema Council of Chiefs." For expediency, I sometimes use the local contraction "Lelema" as a term inclusive of both locales. The population of Lelepa during my fieldwork was approximately 450 people, residing in 89 households. Mangaliliu is slightly smaller, with a population of nearly 300 people. Both villages are predominately Presbyterian but a small number of households, in both locales, are now adherents of the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church.

The "Project for Promotion of the Grace of the Sea in Coastal Villages – Phase 1" (hereafter GoS) was a three-year "partnership" project between local communities (Mangaliliu, Lelepa, Tassiriki and Sunae villages); the Vanuatu Fisheries Department (VFD); and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Badged as a "pilot program", it commenced in 2006 and ran for three years before being taken over by the VFD (a second phase ran from 2011-2014 and a third phase commenced in 2017) (see JICA n.d., 2006, 2018). The stated goal of the GoS project was that: "Livelihoods of coastal communities are improved through community based resource management at model sites and [through] the resource propagation effect of target species" (Shirase and Markward 2008: 1; JICA 2006: 95). This was to be achieved through the application of mariculture propagation techniques (ocean-based brood-stock replenishment of select invertebrate marine species (trochus and green snail [*Turbo marmoratus*]), community-based "farming" of giant clams (*Tridacna spp.*) in grow-out cages and sold to the aquarium market, and through the implementation of an area-wide "participatory coastal resource management system" (JICA 2006: 95). The propagation approach built on extant VFD programs and objectives (e.g. Amos 1991; Jimmy 2006).

The resource management component of the project drew explicitly on an amalgam of both "traditional" and "modern" resource management practices; "customary" practices such as the temporary closure of reefs (*tabu eria*) and contemporary management practices such as an "area wide marine resource management plan." Indeed, one of the projects stated aims was to "revive indigenous management methods such as the 'taboo area'" (JICA 2005, n.p.). Other goals, as outlined in the project Working Group document (the Lelema Management Plan), included the placement of a Fish Aggregating Device (FAD), the resumption of the local Fisherman's Association and the strengthening of the *tabu eria* at both Lelepa and Mangaliliu (Lelema Working Group n.d.).

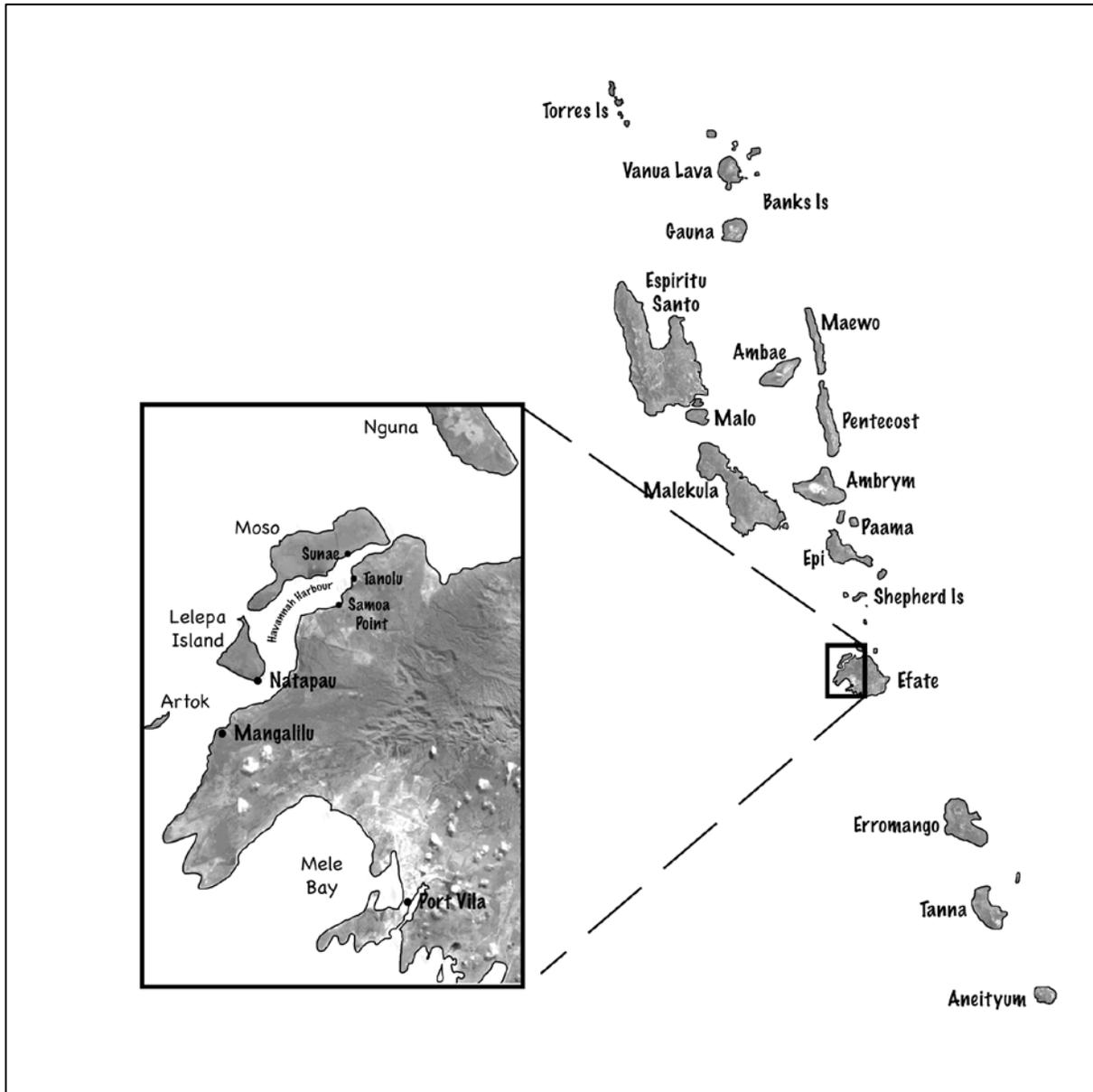


Figure 3: Vanuatu (inset, Lelepa and Mangaliliu). Source: J. Love (after Google Earth and VanGov. Map no. 1716809 721 Ed. 1- VDLS)

In 2005, after the site selection process but before the formal start of the project, the village Chief of Mangaliliu killed a pig to mark the opening of a *tabu eria* in the Mangaliliu. In Lelepa, at the start of the project, the existing village "banned area" (as it was called) was extended. Within the project's first year, both Tassiriki and Sunae were dropped as "model sites" after the project became a "trigger for land [and sea] disputes" (Shirase and Markward 2008: 13). Following this, Lelepa and Mangaliliu became the prime focus.<sup>10</sup> In 2006, a Lelema

<sup>10</sup> In phase 2 (2011-2014) the project continued to operate in Lelema but further expanded to include Malekula and Aneityum islands.

working group (LWG) was established with JICA, VFD, the Lelema Council of Chiefs and the World Heritage Tourism Committee as members. The LWG was tasked with developing a *Management Plan* under JICA and VFD "guidance." A community project representative was appointed in each village, tasked with gathering and managing a suite of community volunteers, overseeing and cleaning the clam grow-out cages and monitoring trochus and green-snail re-seeding and growth rates. A Peace Corps volunteer based in Mangaliliu (who had a marine biology degree) was also tasked to assist with the project.

Trochus and green snail brood-stock were released in various parts of the harbor (the sites identified using ocean current and GIS data). Eight community giant clam "grow-out" cages were installed (including one for the Lelepa Primary School). Two boats with outboard motors were procured; one for the VFD, the other for the "community" (based in Mangaliliu). Several "manuals" were produced, numerous community workshops undertaken, signs erected in the villages, and the Lelema *Management Plan* was published (Figures 4-6).



Figures 4-6: JICA Manual and "Grace of the Sea" *tabu eria* signs (Natapau and Mangaliliu).  
Source: Author, 2009

Giant clams were harvested and sold on numerous occasions. The monies were to be divided as follows: 50% to the GoS project for maintenance costs; 30% to the two key village representatives; and 20% to the community. However, while some payments were made, the resultant income was not of the scale or frequency expected by Lelema residents. According to numerous respondents, the fiscal short-fall was primary due to the fact that the VFD "shared" the mariculture technology and pet aquarium market contacts with a ni-Vanuatu businessman in Port Vila. The international aquarium market is small and the transport and regulatory mechanisms complicated. The local view was that VFD had supported the businessman at the expense of the villages. Moreover, after JICA personnel had left and the project came under the remit of the VFD, the income dried up completely. For example, the monies from the primary school's giant clam nursery cage (which reportedly yielded around 700 [5 cm diameter] clams worth over US\$1,000) never reached the school.

Numerous challenges beset the project. Within the first 18 months the number of community volunteers dwindled. In 2008 and 2009 people from "outside" the immediate area poached trochus from the management area. The FAD broke free in mid-2009 (many people said they could not afford the petrol to get there anyway), and early the same year 55 clams were found dead inside a single cage from a lack of regular cleaning. Communication between VFD and the community broke down, and VFD personnel stopped coming to the LWG meetings and liaising with the project representatives and Peace Corps volunteer. When asked about this, a VFD representative simply stated that "people should come and see us at the office in Port Vila if they have a problem." No one did.

In terms of resource management objectives, the project also seems to have failed to meet its goals. Poaching of marine resources in both the Lelepa and Mangaliliu *tabu eria* was high. According to numerous Lelepa residents, poaching incidents increased over the course of the project. The Management Plan, which

identified fishing gear restrictions (Step 2) and proposed that a "security network" be established to "police" the resource sanctions (Step 3), simply did not work: 31 of 32 surveyed respondents stated that "no one respects the *tabu*." In Mangaliliu, where the *tabu* area is out of the sight of the village, people regularly went spear fishing to source fish for *laplap*<sup>11</sup> which was sold at the Port Vila market.

Despite these issues, the Final Project Evaluation concluded that the impact of the project was both "positive" and "high" (Shirase and Markward 2008). I met the JICA team and attended their farewell party at the VFD but did not see much of the project in full swing under the active auspices of JICA. My analysis is based on interviews and three months participatory observation after the project was transferred to the VFD. Yet multiple interviews elucidated that within the first 12 months of the GoS project, enthusiasm had already waned.

According to the two Lelema community project representatives, the JICA evaluation team spent three hours in Mangaliliu and even less time in Lelepa. They could not speak Bislama and spoke only rudimentary English. Moreover, they reportedly never explicitly asked if the management plan was actually working. Indeed, the evaluation criteria were highly diffuse, with the key indicators based on the simple existence of a Management Plan and the number of workshops conducted, the number of participants that attended, and the number of species that had regulations placed on them (Shirase and Markward 2008: 15-16). That the project could subsequently be represented as a "success" speaks to how "heterogeneous elements", under the aegis of development projects, can be drawn together and made to adhere even when they do not (Li 2007).

In Tanya Li's (2007) analysis of "development as assemblage" she notes how "failure and contradiction" are elided by re-positioning failure as "rectifiable deficiencies" and "reposing political questions as matters of technique" (2007: 265). Thus, when Tassiriki and Sunae were dropped as "model sites" this was re-presented as an "opportunity" to focus more fully on Lelepa and Mangaliliu (Shirase and Markward 2008: 17). Another characteristic is how development agencies and their agents forge "alignments" between "those who aspire to govern conduct and those whose conduct is to be governed" (Li 2007: 265); in this case, the Lelema community, VFD, JICA, and the Peace Corps volunteer. In design and function the project essentialized and over-estimated community homogeneity and the ability of Chiefs and the council to shape social action. The LWG was a motif of, rather than a mechanism for, "partnership" (see Cooke and Kothari 2001). "Lelema" was taken as a conglomerate of inter-connected and homogenous communities rather than the symbolic and lexical abstraction that it is. Numerous village residents suggested that it would have been better if the cages had been operated by discrete families rather than the "community." Melanesian communalism was romanticized. Several respondents said that JICA should have had "someone in the village all the time rather than based in town and visiting only for meetings, research and workshops." Conversely, a VFD member stated that the project should never have been based on Efate in the first place as people already have "too much experience with projects here" and do not appreciate the opportunity being given to them. A New Zealand consultant working on a different project, in the same village, said that people were simply not "poor or hungry enough."

Li (2007) notes that alliances are always tenuous because each "party to the assemblage" has different interests (2007: 265). JICA, for instance, was interested in field-testing their expertise and, as an organization, considers itself distinct from many other donors because it prioritizes "self-help" and knowledge and technology transfer (Sawamura 2004: 28-29) and focuses on sustainable development more than conservation *per se*. However, whilst the project made much of "enhancing livelihoods", delivering economic benefits was in reality a low priority. Yet for ni-Vanuatu this was their core interest. Step 1 of the Management Plan was to support activities to help "*winem moni*" (win money). In addition to farming clams, the Management Plan also mentions marine tours, handicraft production/sale and tourist bungalows as socio-economic priorities. For the Peace Corps volunteer, it was conservation rather than livelihoods that was the priority (as manifest in a published booklet and awareness games and activities undertaken in the local schools). In short, these heterogeneous positions were not "made to cohere."

Again following Li (2007: 270-273), another key characteristic of the GoS was "rendering technical"; that is, neatening the messy veracity of the social world by extracting "a set of relations that can be formulated"

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<sup>11</sup> *Laplap* is a national pudding consisting of grated yam, taro or manioc which is topped with pork, chicken or fish, wrapped in leaves and cooked in a stone oven. Some women from Mangaliliu regularly sell *laplap* at the market house in Port Vila.

as diagrams, metrics, reports, manuals, and so on. Perception and representation are central to de-politicizing and validating interventions. Hence, T-shirts promoting resource management, signs erected in the villages, and the production of instruction manuals, ensuring a media and police presence at the inauguration ceremony of the *tabu eria* (the launch of the Management Plan in Nov. 2007). All facilitated the chimera of coherence and success. These were all cited in the evaluation as ensuring the project received "good recognition" (Shirase and Markward 2008: 10).

Lastly, another attribute of the GoS project was "reassembling"; that is, "grafting on new elements and reworking old ones; deploying existing discourses to new ends; [and] transposing the meanings of key terms" (see Li 2007: 265). The use of *tabu* as a euphemism for the management area is a key example of this. In Lelepa and Mangaliliu numerous respondents – including older, locally acknowledged 'experts' – stated that whilst temporary *tabu* closures might be *kastom* in some parts of the country, in Lelema there were no temporary *tabu*-like controls at all (*nating olsem*). Tarisesei and Novaczek (2006), who also conducted fisheries research in Lelepa, similarly found no socio-historical evidence for the existence of *tabu* in Lelema.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, calling the JICA management area a "*tabu*" is a strategic act of "reassembling" to bolster compliance through "grafting (...) old discourses to new ends." Although GoS paid lip-service to local interests (*winem moni*) and discourses/practices (*tabu*), it ostensibly followed a pre-determined path based on a suite of scientific/technological, educational and legalistic approaches that did not reflect local values or practices.

Below, I explore what light the JICA and Labo examples might shed on the debate about whether MPA or *tabu* stand as the optimal marine management tool in the Pacific.

#### 4. *Tabu* versus MPA: authenticity and/as resistance

In 2009, during a two-week VKS fieldworker (*felwoka*)<sup>13</sup> workshop in the capital of Port Vila, I witnessed an informative dialogue about the MPA versus *tabu eria* debate. An expatriate marine biologist associated with the VKS presented an overview of climate change to the local *felwoka*. After the presentation, one of the *felwoka* asked if the VKS would assist him in registering a Community Conservation Area (CCA). The VKS representative said it would not, stating that the government (through the national Environment Unit and the VFD) were going in the direction of "outside management" ideas such as MPAs and, in his view, the problem must be dealt with at the level of community: "Chiefs must take up their responsibility" because CCA were "*olsem wan floa nomoa*" (pretty but impractical, in reference to a flower). "*Kastom loa*" (customary law), he argued, "*stap iet*" (exists yet) and does not need a "volunteer" or "money" to be established.

Several of the *felwoka* replied "but young people don't have respect (*respek*) today (for *kastom loa* or *Jifs*)" and that "it is too hard to go back" (to *kastom*/the past). The VKS representative replied, "*no save go bak, luk bak*" (not go back, look back). He summed up by saying that at the level of the VKS the solution was to "*stanap wan leda we i holdem respek*" (put in place a leader that has respect). Afterwards, several of the *felwoka* told me that whilst they agree with the sentiment they just do not know how *respek* can be re-invigorated, and *kastom* used, to deal with these issues. Some people hoped the National Council of Chiefs might help.<sup>14</sup>

As with the appropriation of *tabu* by JICA, it could be said that the VKS representative's argument does not reflect grassroots realities or even, in some cases, socio-historical particulars. Here, the MPA versus *tabu* debate is very further revealed as a terminological battle hinged on identity politics and built not only on populist notions of self-reliance but also the notion of authenticity as resistance (Bartlett *et al.* 2010). The "local" is counterpoised against the "foreign", "tradition" to "modernity", "western individualism" to "Melanesian

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<sup>12</sup> The exception is the *tabu* over and around Artok island (the burial place of Roi Mata), a *tabu* at a small reef called 'false rock', close to the mainland, and a *tabu* at Mautiuralma associated with *namarae* (eel). However, these are not close to Lelepa

<sup>13</sup> The VKS hosted annual fieldworker workshops for many years, but they recently ceased.

<sup>14</sup> The National Council of Chiefs – or Malvatumauri – was established under the Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu, chapter 5, and also operates under the *Chiefs Act*, Number 23 of 2006. The Council consists of custom chiefs elected by the Island Council of Chiefs and the two Urban Council of Chiefs, and aims to preserve and promote culture and languages, support and encourage customary practice, and uphold custom and tradition. In practice, however, much of the Council's work has focused on land disputes and chiefly title issue.

collectivism", and so on. These bifurcated views are commonly found not only in conversation but also in Letters to the Editor in the local press (e.g. Daily Post no 2687, 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2009). As Membe (2000) has noted for Africa – where the valorization of "tradition" has similarly been used as a discursive bulwark against "outside" hegemonic forces – the notion of "authenticity as resistance" is not the "reversal of colonial modes of classification and ascription" but rather an endorsement of their "principal terms" (Membe 2000 in Marshall 2009: 39).

As elaborated above in regards to Labo, at the rural level people certainly appear to be more adaptable than some "experts." To solidify my argument that the decision by Labo residents to foreground MPA over *tabu* can be said to be a creative and agentive appropriation rather than a passive or uncritical adoption, I close with some micro-examples of other efforts to instigate *tabu eria* regulations in and around SWB during this temporal period.

In the Ninde-speaking part of SWB people were, socio-historically speaking, not considered "true" *man solwora* (saltwater people) by outsiders (see Norman-Taylor and Rees 1964: 2-3). Nevertheless, there were norms regulating access to the sea and inshore fisheries were important both culturally and practically. At the time of re-settlement to the coast in the 1930s and 1940s the reefs were considered "opened to all." Later, during the heyday of the Lawa and Lorlow Cooperative Societies (from the 1960s to 1980), fin-fish and shell-fish were commoditized and marine tenure re-introduced and solidified (Love 2016). Whilst not as crucial to people's income stream as in some other places in Vanuatu, reef gleaning and fishing remain important to basic subsistence needs and, for a handful of people, income. Moreover, reef gleaning and inshore fishing remain central to village ceremonies, such as marriages, mortuary feasts, circumcision ceremonies, and fundraising activities.<sup>15</sup> People whose customary tenure does not incorporate *solwora* have found strategic ways to access it through recourse what is called a *ded nakamal*; that is, land/sea areas where there are no direct living patrilineal kin within a *nakamal* to regulate tenure norms. In the context of saltwater, reefs within a *ded nakamal* area are referred to as *kompani rif* (company reefs) because, without clear and consensually agreed 'owners', they are deemed "open" to fishing for all.

There are various *kompani rifs* located in SWB, with the exact number disputed. Since the post-Cooperative solidification of tenure, and amidst growing concern about marine degradation, there have been numerous attempts to re-assert control over marine resources through the placing of *tabu* areas. These have met with varying degrees of success. Lohkbangalou *nakamal* members<sup>16</sup> placed a *tabu* on their sea area adjacent to Lawa in 2000, restricting non-*nakamal* members from fishing and reef gleaning. This was instigated not long after the death of the Lohkbangalou patriarch, Serao, but is not considered a *kastom tabu* because Lohkbangalou members (and their close relatives) were still permitted to fish. Serao possessed the *nogho* to 'make' trochus and octopus, and the periodic closures he implemented were generally respected. However, this was much less the case during fieldwork, with over 65% of respondents in Lawa stating that the *tabu eria* was "not respected" (*n* = 40).

The passing of a generation (of men) regarded as "closer" to *kastom* (relative to the current generation) was the most oft-cited reason for why people thought the *tabu eria* here, and elsewhere in SWB, were not respected. The loss of *kastom* equals the loss of respect and order. Areas which are not "*ded*" but which have ongoing disputes attached to them, were the second most noted reason for why people fished inside a "closed area." For example, Ahmo – an inshore reef a little north of Lawa – was said by some to be an "open area" because it was considered to be a *ded nakamal*, even though there were numerous people who claim direct patrilineal linkages to Melpmes (the *nakamal* under which Ahmo sits). Numerous attempts to close this area have been unsuccessful.

A further example is Ventiktik, located north of Lawa on the edge of the Ninde language border. "Henry", a Ventiktik high man, died in 2003. A few years after his death his children put a "*kastom tabu*" on

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<sup>15</sup> Village-level fundraising is a frequent and crucial component of local life-ways, and has its basis in missionary activities. Originally, the primary focus of fundraising was to help pay Church-related expenses (purchasing Bibles, paying Pastors' salaries, raising money to travel to Church events, etc.). Today, fundraising is used to support village-level activities under the remit of various committees and the village-council (cf. Love 2016)

<sup>16</sup> Custodians of the land where Lawa village is located.

the waters from Ventiktik all the way down to Tumaseh (near Bamboo Bay). Whilst not technically a *ded nakamal*, its low population density (which means there is a lot of uncultivated land) has fueled land/sea disputes, as members related through *laen blo woman* (matrilineal reckoning) have attempted to wrestle a stake in it. When a fresh *tabu* was put in place in 2007, some of these people harvested lobster at night and destroyed the *kastom* leaf insignia marking the closure. In retaliation, one of Henry's sons went to Labo and broke the notice board marking the Fire-Beach MPA area.

Yet another example is Lethokas village, located in Bamboo Bay (situated a little north of SWB). Under the influence of a resident at Tumesah who is also a Vanua-Tai resource monitor, the residents of Lethokas closed a large part of the Bamboo Bay to turtle egg harvesting. Bamboo Bay is a renowned hatchery for green turtles and has attracted considerable extra-local interest and donor funding. Several marine biologists have undertaken research here and in 2008 *Wan Smol Bag* gave 100,000vuv (US\$900) to the community for their conservation efforts. The people of Lethokas, "*man Nobwal*" (or Noval)<sup>17</sup> are classified as *man bus* ('man bush' – bush people who have their ancestral origins located inland as opposed to people living on or near the coast [*man solwora*]) and are said by many to have "no right" to be settled on the coast. The chief of the village is the custodian of the "*eye*" (source) of the Metanwoi river system and responsible for a series of freshwater *tabu* in the river. These are widely accepted. But his legitimacy to regulate saltwater resources or reside on the coast is not. According to some, "*oli no save nating hao nao blong lukoatem gud solwora risos from hemi no kastom blong olketa*" (they don't know how to look after saltwater resources, it is not their *kastom*). The residents justify their claim to the coast through recourse to a *kastom* story associated with a hole in a rock in the mountains which travels underground and leads all the way to the coast. The dispute has gone to village court and the Lethokas residents lost their case, but still refuse to relocate. Some people argue that the residents of Lethokas are not interested in conservation at all but simply use the "protected area", and the benefits that flow from it, for their own ends – to "*stap long graon blong nara man*" (reside on someone else's land).

In the examples provided, people have enacted *solwora tabu* through recourse to *kastom* but have found little conservation success. These particulars highlight that changing circumstances require dynamic responses. Heterogeneity is the order of the day. In a question asking people to rank "who owns the reef", 80% of respondents in Lelepa put "*lan ona*" (land owner) first ( $n=38$ ), whilst in Lawa and Labo 95% of people put "God" first ( $n=52$ ). Perspectives on solutions were similarly mixed. In Lelepa, over 90% of people said it was the *Chiefs, community* and/or the *village council's* role to "fix the problem" of fishery decline, whilst in Lawa 21% of people explicitly stated that the council had no role to play at all. In short, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to ever find traction (cf. Aswani *et al.* 2017; Bartlett *et al.* 2010; Love 2006).

## 5. Conclusion: beyond binaries

The examples of marine resource programs examined above contribute to political ecology scholarship in a number of areas. First, the particulars of "the village" – the novel character of the mission-village combined with wider socio-cultural and historical specifics such as *ded nakamal* and *kompani rif* – are a reminder of the necessity of taking micro-regional and historical particulars seriously; especially the reverberations of colonialism, missionization and incorporation in the global economy. There is never one resource regulation and/or development 'model' that can be neatly replicated across sites; even within a discrete cultural area such as SWB.

The realities of local-global interconnections cannot be ignored; the micro cannot be siloed off from the macro. The variety and kinds of appropriation and innovation evidenced above, even in so-called 'remote' locales such as SWB, complicate the heuristic utility of well-heeled binaries such as 'modern' and 'tradition', 'foreign' and 'local', 'MPA' and '*tabu eria*.' In the case-studies examined here, both MPA and *tabu* are seen to complicate the cultural and historical particulars of local realities. Whilst supposedly 'customary', *tabu* can no longer function the way it once did; supernatural forces must compete with and operate under an omnipotent God, Chiefs must work alongside village councils using community by-laws, tenure is complicated by social and demographic change, and more besides. Today, the government, law, and money are essential to both

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<sup>17</sup> For more on the Noval, see Jean-Michel Charpentier (1982: 41-44).

regulatory approaches. Whether *tabu* or MPA, each must be inscribed in booklets, reports and signs, supported by extra-local agencies (such as the VKS, VFD, NGOs), legally articulated (through a CCA and/or village by-laws) and fiscally coupled (with eco-tourism and alternative livelihoods). Most notably, both resource proscriptions draw attention to the novel and constructed character of "village-as-community", reinforcing and disrupting "community" as a social motif standing in for 'the social whole.' Both MPA and *tabu eria* equally underscore the novel socio-historical character of contemporary life-ways.

Importantly, what the Labo case-study highlights is that the application of MPAs are not always and everywhere a hegemonic imposition that questions the moral competence of local forms of knowledge, practice, and/or order. On the contrary, MPAs can be an agentive appropriation for all sorts of reasons, e.g. legitimizing territorial claims, resource capture (attracting capital through tourism or donors), or an alternative means to impose sanctions. In this way, Labo's use of MPAs could be said to be a creative and strategic response to local particulars. Moreover, the strategic "reassembling" associated with the GoS project's attempt to graft '*kastom*' onto a contemporary project is revealed as instrumental and shallow considering that *tabu* appears to have never been a customary practice in this locale. Given the specifics of the Labo and Lelema cases examined herein, it is easy to conclude that the uncritical valorization of *tabu eria* over MPA, in practice if not in intent, can perpetuate the same kind of essentialist, simplified and reactionary ideological hegemony that it purports to critique. The result is the reinforcement of an oppositional and populist frame that can delimit social alternative and overlook local agency. Conservation practitioners, law makers and analysts alike must be more cautious in their deployment of expedient tropes such as "community."

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