

BOOK REVIEWS

ANNELIN ERIKSEN. *Gender, Christianity and Change in Vanuatu: An Analysis of Social Movements in North Ambrym*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. Pp. 216. ISBN 978-0-7546-7209-8.

The first Presbyterian missionaries to arrive in Vanuatu in the late nineteenth century were not immediately successful with their mission. Over time, however, Christianity has had an impact on social relations. Annelin Eriksen looks at historical changes in Vanuatu and makes the argument, following M. Strathern, that gender is the difference that organized other differences in this process of change. She argues that there is a competing hierarchy of values, that of men's *kastom*, where a man earns prestige by moving up the ranks in a graded society, and that of women and Christianity, which offers an alternative, more egalitarian option for social relations. Each chapter explores an aspect of how these value hierarchies came to be reversed. The fieldwork for this study was done with her husband, Knut Rio, on the island of North Ambrym and in the capital town of Port Vila over seventeen months in 1996, 1999 and 2000.

Women are on the move in Vanuatu and the first half of the book presents intriguing data about women and place. Eriksen describes the six-class kinship system and the number of ways, or paths, by which a person can choose to trace relations to other kinsmen. People emphasize the original place of the kin group and relations extend out from one location to another through kinship alliances. In particular, women who marry into new places make connections so that their relatives can follow the same path to the new place. Usually this happens through marriage, although increasingly it happens when young women move to the urban area around the town of Port Vila in order to find employment. While women move, men are more rooted to place. Men enter a new place through their connection with a woman, and the brother-sister relationship, while very important, is only important if the sister marries away. It is said that women always marry back to the place their mother's mother left, and thus replace her in that place. Because of this movement, women are regarded as those who make connections. After Christianity became established, a tendency developed for some denominations (such as Seventh Day Adventists) to move with women to new villages when the women married, and therefore to become established in these places. In other words, alliances and religion often follow the paths of women.

Changes in ceremonial practices illustrate the changes in social relations. In chapter four Eriksen focuses on female migration to Port Vila and the new ceremonies that have developed around bride-price and marriage. On the one hand, wage labor in town has made a woman more important as a contributor to the family economy in the village and her value has to be acknowledged when she marries. On the other hand, the cost of entering the ceremonial economy—where one should have pigs and yams—is too high for many townspeople to meet. Traditionally, a man gathered goods from all his relatives in order to pay the bride-price but this pattern of collecting a 'societal fund' is now largely ignored. Bride-price is paid in money according to a national standard. In a new ceremony, the bride's brother gathers together gifts for the bride such as calico, mattresses, kitchen items, and garden tools. Money and presents, however, 'do not grow' in the same way as pigs and yams, and buying presents is a one-time affair. The pattern of ceremonial prestations that

should take place all during the life-cycle between brothers and sisters, and their children, is giving way to this one-time marriage gift.

In the second half of the book, Eriksen develops her argument regarding the hierarchical relation of female and male values (which she calls social forms). Whereas traditional authority had been granted to men who achieved the highest grade in the graded society, and thus excluded women, Presbyterianism has offered the women of Ambrym a new venue for action and a new model for thinking about themselves through church activities and the Presbyterian Women's Mission Union (it also demonstrates how the Scottish model is realized very differently in a non-European context). Eriksen argues that today the church is the most important social institution in North Ambrym, with considerable change, therefore, in women's rank in the community. Men have not become so influential in the church, she claims, because men's prestige was based on the great man concept, whereby one man stood out from, and above, the social whole. She argues that the church does not allow men to ellipse the social whole, thus opening the way for women's agency and a clash between these value systems. In her analysis of various cults and movements since 1960, the most interesting claim is that the men's graded society existed external to the social order. According to Eriksen, the great man type of authority never altered the social reality of everyday life (women's realm), existing as a purified version of reality, outside of it. Following this, she claims provocatively, "Historically and today, movements break out of everyday life to either challenge or to purify the values on which routine life is governed" (p. 142).

One wishes the author had pursued this idea about purifying values. Instead, the final chapters turn to a discussion of recent development projects and leadership problems—which loses sight of the women—and finally, to a comparative perspective on social dynamics. In the conclusion about social dynamics, Eriksen discusses Dumont's theory of hierarchy (and other authors' reactions to Dumont) and makes her argument for a reversal of the hierarchy, from male graded society to female church values. I was not totally convinced by the comparative argument, in part because much of the book talks about relations (on the ground) whereas Dumont's notion of hierarchy/value is based in structural analysis—and somehow these two lines did not come together smoothly. Additionally, Dumont and others (e.g., Tcherkézoff, Godelier) link authority to notions of the sacred, and the discussion is not entirely convincing that such connections are not happening in Vanuatu. My other small complaint is that the book desperately needs editing for clarity and for spelling (e.g., Clastres is spelled wrong on several pages). However, as an analysis of place, exchange, and women on the move, the book is a valuable contribution to comparative ethnography. It would be appropriate for research or in a course about place, about changes as a result of the introduction of Christianity, or for a comparison of changing gender relations in Melanesia, and beyond.

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