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# Infertility, Pooled Reproduction and Distributed Agency Among the Big Nambas of Malakula, Vanuatu

Heidi Colleran  \*

*Women's infertility is an invisible problem in Vanuatu. Assisted reproductive technologies are non-existent. State, medical and NGO actors all promote small families, reflecting global anxieties about population growth and climate change, making infertility conveniently forgettable. Narratives about Vanuatu as a 'fertile paradise' make infertility seem uncommon. Anthropological emphasis on flexible kinship suggests that difficulty bearing biological children does not matter. Infertility appears natural or biological but is locally viewed as supernatural or sociocultural. These varied 'abandonments' erase the struggles of infertility among ni-Vanuatu women. Here I explore them among Big Nambas communities on Malakula, where reproduction is 'pooled', but infertility is individualised. Literal abandonment looms if women cannot contribute sons to the patriline. This creates reproductive interdependencies—where women cannot reproduce, others may postpone or abandon their own pregnancies—highlighting distributed agency over and internal politics of reproduction. Thus, in these 'remote' islands, with histories of flexible child-rearing, biological fertility matters.*

*Keywords: Infertility; Vanuatu; Malakula; Distributed Reproduction*

## Nadine's Story

After more than four years of unsuccessful attempts to have a child, Nadine's exasperated father-in-law finally shouted across the family compound, breaking all avoidance norms prohibiting him from looking at or speaking to her.

Why won't you have a son for my son?!

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In northwest Malakula,<sup>1</sup> as elsewhere in Vanuatu, a public and pointed accusation like this is highly disrespectful. Walking away in disgust, at the scene and the occasion for it, Nadine's mother-in-law shook her head. She had long stopped sharing food with Nadine, their relations having deteriorated over her infertility. Enduring regular embarrassment at family gatherings, Nadine now received meatless chunks of the Big Nambas specialty *laplap sörsör*, a stone-oven pudding in which a whole chicken is baked, drenched in coconut milk before serving and pungently flavoured with *nalaslas* leaf. In contrast, the wives of her husband's brothers all received meat, apportioned by the senior woman according to the number of sons and the husband's birth order.

The patrilineal compound had become an unreliable food source for Nadine's six-year-old daughter, her first and only biological child with her husband. Visiting other kitchens before school, the girl would find nothing left for breakfast, leaving little time to boil starchy bananas or other leftovers from a recent garden trip. They would buy sweets in a kiosk on the road to school instead: the child was scrawny, small for her age.

Nadine was relying ever-more widely on her extended kin to borrow cash for food and for *faen* ('fines' in the English-lexified creole of Vanuatu, Bislama; compensation payments). The regular *sori* (restorative 'sorry ceremonies') she performed to help *kilininim fes* ('clean the face') of presumed wrongdoing required small cash transfers for the offended parties of her husband's kin. Transacted by her daughter due to the taboo relationships involved, neither the nature of the transgression, nor the identity of the person transgressed, were clear.

When a young and evidently fertile Big Nambas woman is unable to conceive, the response of the patriline is initially cautious concern, and *kastom* (customary) solutions come first. Lineage members will recruit the services of local *kleva* (traditional healers) and any persons known to be able to *lukluk rod*, i.e. see the 'road' from which the problem stems or the route to its resolution. Preparations of *lif meresin* or *lif* (leaf medicine) are given to dispel supernatural blockages, to smooth the metaphorical *rod* for pregnancy, and to *glis* or 'grease' the literal *rod* or vagina, to welcome the man's *wota* or sperm more easily.

Experienced women will massage the infertile woman's belly or 'give *lif* to *kilininim bel*' ('clean out' the womb) of any bad blood-causing obstruction. Menstrual and sexual activities are discussed to identify taboo contraventions that could have aroused negative feelings among co-residents or ire from ancestral powers of the place. Where and how effectively menstrual blood has been disposed of will be clarified (menstrual pads should be burned away from the household trash heap). Whether she has engaged in inappropriate sex (e.g. in the garden or bush, during a ritual seclusion of males, during menstruation, or with men other than her husband) will be the source of discussion and gossip. Every conceivable infraction of propriety will be smoothed by the performance of *sori* and the transfer of compensation payments. Usually, these are small sums of a few hundred vatu (2–4 USD), but inflation tends to grow as the problem wears on.

In Vanuatu, a plurality of ‘traditional’ healing approaches are often combined with Christian and biomedical ones (Elliott & Taylor 2020). But when it comes to infertility, an ordered hierarchy of preferred healing techniques is apparent. Only when customary methods repeatedly fail will a visit to the clinic be considered prudent. By that time, the discomfort of sustained community attention may convince the woman that a variety of aches and ailments she previously ignored are now firm proof of a sickness preventing her from getting pregnant. Alternatively, she may yet believe the cause is supernatural, but medicines obtained at the clinic (painkillers/paracetamol or antibiotics/amoxicillin) can nonetheless help reduce social pressure, temporarily. Because even if a nurse finds nothing wrong, they will always give some medicine. A vague diagnosis and a course of drugs is a signal to the family that she takes her infertility and her reproductive responsibilities seriously and is doing everything in her power to remedy it.

Nonetheless, a trip to a clinic on Malakula is costly (up to 1200 vt—about 12 USD), and with increasingly skeptical family members unwilling to pay, women put in extra work in advance of the expenditure—making mats, gathering fruit and vegetables to sell at the market, or ‘shelling-out’ copra (dried coconut meat) to support their husband’s kin’s income. Borrowing money from co-resident women or natal kin strains the support system. Resentment spreads. Prolonged infertility can generate a brewing outrage. It may be met with increased demands for physical labour, for garden produce to be shared more widely, for further compensation payments, increased policing of her movements and speech, and eventually the withholding of food, information and social contact. Even among otherwise close female confidantes, pity can turn into suspicion, distrust and resentment if it becomes a longer-term issue.

### **Key Arguments**

In this article, I want to argue that a long-term inability to bring a pregnancy to term among Big Nambas women is not interpreted merely as an (unfortunate) inability to get physically pregnant but also as an *unwillingness* to change one’s thoughts and behaviour in ways that would allow a pregnancy and, ultimately, a child (preferably a boy) to be brought into being. This is why responses to infertility are often negative and unsupportive in character. But to properly understand the interactional dynamics, the ‘technologies’ of reproduction—natural, cultural and supernatural—that are mobilised by a woman’s infertility, requires thinking about reproduction as a ‘pooled’ phenomenon that affects a social body. Agency over reproduction is then properly distributed: across multiple humans, ancestral and magical forces, and an agentic natural landscape that protects the men of the place. In a context of intense competition over land and chiefly titles, infertility also generates internal tensions within patrilineal kinship.

I situate these ideas within ethnographic research in Vanuatu while drawing on the broad conceptual frameworks developed by Michelle Murphy (2011, 2017) on ‘distributed reproduction’, and Sara Ahmed (2014) on ‘reproductive will’. Holly

Wardlow's (2006) analysis of 'negative agency' in Papua New Guinea also strongly informs this work. By putting these concepts to work within the local context of infertility on Malakula, I suggest additional insights on the 'economisation of life' (Murphy 2017) and the 'technology of will' (Ahmed 2014). I argue for a distinctively ni-Vanuatu, and Malakulan, approach to (in)fertility that partially resists or reformulates these ideas as much as they conform to their expectations.

There is a chasm between the high value attached to reproduction within Big Nambas communities (and a deep concern over infertility), and the strongly desired fertility reductions from 'outside' sources (which abandon infertility). Bringing these contradictions to bear on pooled reproduction, I make two further points. First, the economisation of reproduction is not only passively received via interventions and educational programmes that emphasise overpopulation, climate change and so on (Widmer 2013a, 2013b), but economic interpretations of reproduction are also strategically co-opted from within this reproductive community. Narratives about scarce resources and the need to decline provide opportunities to negotiate reproductive activities, to morally justify having fewer children in a context where high fertility is valorised. Second, the ability to negotiate like this implies an 'incipient individualism' among women, in line with Wardlow's analysis (2006, 19), which uneasily co-exists with concepts of partible or 'dividual' personhood (Strathern 1988) on Malakula. I suggest that this reflects a gendered conflict of interest: men benefit from women's dividual contributions to the pooled reproductive body, whereas women increasingly benefit from creating space for themselves as reproductive individuals.

### Research Methods and Fieldsite

This work draws on seventeen months of fieldwork in eighteen Big Nambas communities on Malakula over the course of four years (2016–20). Malakula is the second largest island in Vanuatu, one of eighty-three inhabited islands in this Southwest Pacific nation. Since gaining independence from joint British and French administration in 1980, the population has rapidly increased, with an average annual growth rate of 2.3 per cent (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2020). Malakula's population is about 32,300 people (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2020), with marked socio-cultural, linguistic and political variation.

The Big Nambas people, *m'ertu a nav'ai lil*<sup>2</sup> in the vernacular, V'ënen Taut (Fox 1979a), are the largest single ethno-linguistic community on Malakula,<sup>3</sup> numbering in the region of 5000 people (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2020), and the second-largest speech community after northeast Malakula/Uripiv, comprising around 3350 speakers (François et al. 2015). *Nav'ai lil* refers to the large woven penis sheath traditionally worn by men of the place, in contrast to all other 'Small Nambas' groups on Malakula that wear small penis wrappers made from leaves. The Big Nambas have long exercised a particular fascination on the popular imagination of Vanuatu, both Indigenous and foreign, due in particular to historical

practices of cannibalism, internal warfare and 'ritualized homosexuality' (Harrisson 1937; Layard 1942; Guiart 1953; Allen 1984). Perhaps alongside *kastom* enclaves on Tanna and Pentecost, the Big Nambas have most occupied 'the savage slot' (Trouillot 2003) in representations of the archipelago.

The Big Nambas reside in two adjacent areas of northwest Malakula known colloquially as the 'head of the dog' (on maps, Malakula resembles a sitting dog): the rugged and dry 'Northwest A' area heavily missionised by the Seventh Day Adventists, and the wetter 'Northwest B' area where Catholic missions predominated, although numerous other denominations are now also present. Patrilineal or *amel* (*nakamal* in Bislama) are organised into twelve segmentary patrilineal descent groups, or 'tribes' as they describe them, each containing a number of 'lesser' patrilineages known as *amel pa* or *smol faea* (small fire) and a paramount patrilineage known as *amel lil* or *big faea* (big fire). Patri-clans are clustered in variably endogamous phratries that use brother-brother and father-son terms to represent historical and contemporary alliances between lineages. In the early 1950s, Jean Guiart estimated an average of four *amel* per *nasara* (Guiart 1953). *Nasara* are clan affiliations as well as sacred ancestral sites in the interior of the island where monumental stone structures were erected (Bedford 2019). Also known as *ples blong tanis*, these are dancing grounds where men acquire status via four graded ritual initiations in communal mass pig-killing ceremonies or *nimangki* (Guiart 1953; Layard 1942). Each patriline has a named *amel* or men's club house and shares a named *nasara* with a cluster of other patrilineal groups. All Big Nambas people share a common language and set of customs (with local variations) but do not claim a single common ancestor: patrilineages claim a non-human origin associated with the geographical features of their *'vanu* or place.

Until the 1980s, in some areas, men resided separately from women, with boys moving into the men's house around the age of five or six, where they were paired with a 'mentor' in a homosexual partnership until their circumcision ceremony and subsequent marriage to a woman (Layard 1942; Harrisson 1937; Allen 1984).<sup>4</sup> Women were regularly betrothed and transferred as prepubescent girls to their future husband's household, reared by his mother and father's mother, on some accounts also involving same-sex 'training' (Harrisson 1937), with ritualised tooth ablation, thought to facilitate pregnancy (Fox 1979b), still common upon or before marriage up until the 1970s.

The collective fates of Big Nambas communities, as in much of Vanuatu, are politically controlled by men. Margaret Jolly frames this as an encompassment or eclipse rather than a simple exploitation of women's reproductive capacities (Jolly 1994; 2001b). Thus, historically, as in the present day, 'women's autonomy in bearing or not bearing babies was ultimately eclipsed by philosophies of growth and fertility that privileged the violent control and spiritual transcendence of men' (Jolly 2001b, 284). The Big Nambas had unusually extensive power over the productive and reproductive lives of women. John Layard (1942, 489) described them as 'an extreme form of patrilineal culture which they have carried to a pitch exceeding all

other New Hebrides tribes in the very low status which they accord to women'. Tom Harrison (1937) states that the Big Nambas had the highest numbers of children of any 'tribe' on the island.

Little has been written from the perspective of the women of this place, and almost all academic accounts of Big Nambas history and *kastom* have been written by men. The work I present here is part of a broader mixed-methods study of the demographic and cultural history of the Big Nambas people. During my fieldwork (2016–20) I lived and interacted intensely with a number of young women trying to conceive. I myself experienced long-term infertility throughout this time. I was open about this and my interests in learning and writing about Indigenous family planning both in the past and present. I spent time with a variety of healers and people knowledgeable about infertility, informally interviewed a *kleva* specialising in infertility, and took part in some local treatments. As part of the broader study, I formally interviewed 158 Big Nambas women, asking structured and semi-structured questions about various aspects of reproduction. I organised a week-long workshop with the women fieldworkers of the Malakula Cultural Center, in which we discussed many of the issues raised here. I do not present any quantitative data but instead draw on the lived experience of infertility in this part of Malakula, informed by these varied methods and experiences. Given the sensitivity of the topics discussed, pseudonyms are used throughout the text, and the ethnographic narrative combines multiple stories.

### Abandonment of Infertility

There is a large body of anthropological literature on infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ART) (Ginsburg & Rapp 1995; Inhorn & Patrizio 2015), focused mainly on high-income countries. But the ethnographic literature on Vanuatu, and Melanesia more broadly, has not examined infertility in detail, despite intensive focus on reproduction and fertility and on men's appropriation of women's reproductive capacities through culture (e.g. Tuzin 1997; Bonnemère 2018; Wardlow 2006).

One reason for this lacuna is that ethnographers have been busy reclaiming ni-Vanuatu and other Oceanian fertilities from colonial narratives of 'bad' or 'indifferent' motherhood, and from demographic narratives of 'natural fertility' (Jolly 1998ab, 2001b), both of which neglect the importance of Indigenous forms of family planning via sexual segregation, postpartum abstinence, birth spacing and protracted breastfeeding, and the Indigenous pharmacopoeia used to abort, prevent or promote pregnancies (Jolly 2001b; Bourdy & Walter 1992). Historically low fertility desires, and deliberate efforts to induce infertility via abortion, infanticide and Indigenous contraceptives, were not celebrated as evidence of Indigenous control over reproduction. Instead, they were denigrated by European commentators as an 'insouciant' unwillingness to reproduce the future, as part of a general 'cultural malaise' (Jolly 1998a, 2001b; Dureau 1998). In much demographic research,

Indigenous family planning also tends to be demoted to ‘proximate mechanisms’, lumped in with bio-physiological constraints on fecundability such as spontaneous abortion and nutritional status, under a still-naturalised model of reproduction (Colleran, *forthcoming*). Despite the recognition that reproduction in Vanuatu and other Oceanian contexts was neither unregulated nor necessarily locally concerned with high fertility in the past (Jolly 2001b; Dureau 1998), unanswered questions remain about infertility. While noted by ethnographers of the region, infertility is broadly assumed to be ‘much lamented, but regularly assuaged by pervasive practices of adoption’ (Jolly 2001b, 289). Local perceptions have not been explored in detail, however.

Another occlusion, perhaps, is the tendency for infertility to slip under the radar as a biological problem, both in the literature on ARTs and in more localised ethnographic work. The World Health Organisation (2020) defines infertility as a ‘disease of the male or female reproductive system’ (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility>), framing it squarely as an abnormal deviation from a natural biological equilibrium, a mechanical dysfunction in a specific embodied location. In contrast, on Malakula, infertility is primarily understood as a deviation from social and interpersonal responsibilities rather than a biological problem *per se*. Nor is infertility limited to individual bodies: it is distributed in the sense that Michelle Murphy (2011) theorises, and which Alexandra Widmer (*forthcoming*) expands on for women on Efate, and in the more localised, pooled sense I will argue for here. As a result, infertility is not limited to individual agency, as argued by John Taylor for other disease etiologies in Vanuatu (Taylor 2015), although within communities women are often blamed. Instead, infertility implicates and influences numerous bodies and agencies, both natural and supernatural (see also Taylor 2015).

In the conjoined global efforts to reduce human numbers and slow down catastrophic climate change, women, through their curation of appropriate (i.e. reduced) reproductive activities, are cast as moralised ‘reproductive stewards’ of the future (Sasser 2018; see also Widmer 2013a). As Widmer (*forthcoming*) argues, there is a continual process of (re)constructing ‘moral figures’ in Vanuatu—those that enumerate populations and those that constitute subjects and agents via appropriate reproduction—that reveals the values of colonialism and development in the efforts to discipline or control reproductive outcomes. Infertility is, under this model, conveniently forgettable, not a priority for development agencies, and is inevitably reckoned within local communities that operate below the level of the state, in what Joao Biehl termed ‘zones of social abandonment’ (Biehl 2013). Population control, development and climate change narratives therefore simultaneously render invisible the struggles of infertility and the significant efforts that go into remedying it, while locating reproductive responsibility in the bodies of individual women.

Yet even as global narratives, state policies and the economisation of life (Murphy 2017) intrude ever deeper into ni-Vanuatu daily routines, ideas about growth and



fertility remain centrally important. In the post-colonial context, high-stakes land disputes (McDonnell 2015; McDonnell, *forthcoming*) (re)invigorate local ideologies of population growth and demographic competition (Lind 2014). Protracted land disputes are pervasive on Malakula and, as Siobhan McDonnell shows, these ‘are never simply about land; they are integral to relational social kinship patterns and embedded in identity’ (McDonnell, *forthcoming*, 24). Local narratives concerned with increasing fertility are starkly opposed to global population narratives, sometimes harnessed to revivals of *kastom* and to pride in local cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. They also generate internal competition among brothers vying for control of the lineage. The broader cultural memory of historical depopulations wrought by colonial contact (Jolly 2001b; Bedford & Spriggs 2014) further contributes to a sense of regeneration through fertility, an ‘insistence on survival’ as Laura Burke (2022) describes for families in Timor-Leste (this volume). The relational and geo-political importance of reproductive activity among the Big Nambas is evident in the universal maxim that ‘the *amel* must grow’. Infertility cannot be abandoned in this context, even though the individual women who manifest it may eventually be. Its political ramifications are too great.

### Pooled Reproduction Among the Big Nambas

The global political, demographic and development agendas discussed above are all negotiated via women’s bodies (Sasser 2018). Put another way, women’s bodies are ‘discrepantly enrolled, altered, and announced as alterable by processes and structures that exceed the body proper’, what Murphy calls ‘distributed reproduction’ (Murphy 2011, 26). Here I want to emphasise a more localised version, pooled reproduction, that similarly enlists women’s reproductive labour, but in the politics of local demographic concerns and ambitions.

In patri-virilocal and patriarchal Big Nambas communities, women’s reproductive activity is pooled among a set of brothers. In-marrying women are collectively referred to as *unien a marndel* (mother of *our* children<sup>5</sup>), since a wife may bear children for a number of brothers via levirate marriage conventions. Widows remarry ‘down’ the male birth order, i.e. to a younger brother of the deceased husband, but never up, which simultaneously keeps their reproductive capacities within the patrilineage and historically freed up first-born men to contract politically advantageous polygynous marriages (polygyny is rare today).

Patrilineages and residential compounds have shared stakes in women’s reproductive capacities and, indeed, women powerfully shape the collective fate through their reproductive labour. Pooled reproduction emphasises the cooperative and complementary contributions of men and women, supernatural forces, *kastom*, and the land to the shared, internal goals of lineage continuity, which are not defined by global movements. Women who contribute sons will ‘grow the *amel*’, projecting the lineage temporally into the future as well as spatially within north-west Malakula. Their daughters will leave the community and either ‘cut’ or

follow the *rod* of collaboration and exchange with other communities (see also Lind 2014).

Pooled reproduction establishes a socio-political commitment to patriline continuity. But the internal dynamics are not always harmonious. For example, where a boy is collectively desired but a girl is born, close kin may voice complaints. One woman explained in 2017 that: ‘if I have a girl, they will complain on and on ... they’ll complain about it ... and on and on they will say they don’t want a girl’. These complaints have supernatural power: they are registered by ancestral forces associated with the land, which have agency of their own. This can have negative consequences for subsequent births, as recounted by another woman in the same patrilineage, but married to the firstborn son:

they kept complaining ... the second born child was disabled. Because they complained about [the first one being a girl] ... at this time [the mother] **felt bad** ... later, the [second] child was disabled and could only sit down [couldn’t walk]. They made the father go to a woman who can pray [to *lukluk rod*], who said ‘your family has to say sorry to you’ ... later [the family] shared a *laplap* with a chicken inside [*sörsör*], but his father [the Chief] had to say sorry to him. They then did this, brought a *laplap* and said sorry to the [child’s] father. Every household [in the patrilineage] said sorry to them, and the little girl immediately got up and walked.

Bad feelings (which include sadness, frustration, resentment, etc.), caused by the complaints of kin, create socio-emotional disharmony, which arouses these negative consequences via supernatural intervention. The actions, speech and emotions of all patriline members matter for harmonious reproductive outcomes. And these kinds of socio-emotional lapses can also cause infertility. Restorative mechanisms like *sori* are the first port of call when such disturbances occur within a reproductive social body.

### Strategic Infertility

A second aspect of pooled reproductive dynamics in this particular context is within-lineage reproductive competition. Big Nambas communities follow strict birth-order-based succession rules, with first-borns entitled to a wide range of priorities and privileges. But those rights are compromised without a son to carry on the patriline, and sonless men are easily supplanted in disputes over land and title. Infertility, therefore, has clear political ramifications for individual men, quite independent of the broader aim to grow the *amel*, which creates an amorphous tension with younger brothers, who may consider themselves better positioned, via their wives’ reproduction, to take up the vital leadership work of the patriline.

On one visit to Malakula, I noticed that an infertile woman’s sisters-in-law were pregnant, though they tried to hide it. Pregnancies are not announced in Big Nambas communities, and even heavily pregnant women become embarrassed when their bellies are alluded to. If you ask the due date they may lie. Men do not openly share news of their wives’ condition. Pregnancy is simply not a topic for public discussion (although it is of course a source of gossip). I first thought the

secrecy was to avoid sorcery attacks, but I later realised how important secrecy is for the internal politics of reproduction within a residential compound. The fact is that women often find themselves in strategically pressurised situations to either speed up or slow down their reproductive activities, and to closely monitor each other, depending on the reproductive status of the first-born's wife. If the first-born has no son to take his place, he has the right to 'take' his brother's son as his own, or risk being sidelined in the political hierarchy.

A follow-up visit revealed that one of the pregnancies had been terminated by *prestem bel*, a well-known abortion method, though rarely admitted to. The mother already had a son, but the infertile woman, married to the first-born, had put him at risk: if a second boy were born, the first might be transferred to the first-born's household. I was told that in such cases, a termination is preferable to the risk of losing the son and, in this case, it was recommended and apparently carried out by the senior couple in the compound. Better to wait until the infertile woman showed evidence of an established pregnancy before trying again. This strategic activity not only prevents a biological child from being moved into another household. It also increases pressure on the first-born while holding on to a politically advantageous position for the lower-order brother and his wife. It involves the key political actors of the patriline. During such an impasse, the second son may be temporarily prepared to take on a leadership role should his older brother fail to produce a son.

There is thus a distinction between the need for 'sons for the patriline', which reflects the broad agenda of patriline growth, and the need for 'sons for the first-born', which reflects the internal politics of Big Nambas society, although of course they are intertwined.

### **Infertility and the 'Reproductive Will': Refusal, Willfulness, and 'Negative Agency'**

Though it is an embodied process, fertility and infertility are not understood to be determined purely by, or even importantly by, physiological limitations among the Big Nambas, as in many Melanesian places (Bonnemère 2018; Wardlow 2006). The origin of infertility is, therefore, not to be found in the body per se. Instead, willful appropriation, abuse or rejection of reproductive agency by women themselves may be suspected.

The solution, in this case, concerns the reigning-in of 'deviant' behaviour, thoughts and speech by women, the righting of her will and social comportment. Senior family members may consider that junior women enjoy uncomfortable amounts of agency over the collective's reproductive fate. Wardlow (2006) describes the refusal to engage in sexual and reproductive propriety among Huli 'passenger women' in PNG as an expression of 'negative agency'; a 'refusal to be encompassed' (Wardlow 2006, 14). In her analysis, women who violate the roles and responsibilities inculcated by bride-wealth transfers, engaging in casual and taboo sexual behaviours, often do so in

protest over poor support from kin, particularly in conflicts with their husbands and after being victims of assault for which no compensation was sought. Women refuse to participate in proper reproduction and sexuality that advances others' interests and agendas. The response to such refusals is, in turn, often negative.

While Big Nambas women are often involuntarily infertile, they are also often met with threats of abandonment—being replaced by another woman, sent back to their natal kin—and with simmering resentment, especially if her husband's place in the political hierarchy is at risk. This is because infertility is seen as a potentially deliberate attempt to block the continuity of the patrilineage, which does not properly 'belong' to women. As Jolly (1994) explains, women's gestational labour is essential to lineage continuity, land claims and power. But since women are not transactors of lineage politics, alliances and so forth, their labour is eclipsed by the political work of men. Thus, 'while the value of singular maternity is acknowledged, it is ultimately transcended through the logic of the collective paternity' (Jolly 1994, 150). Women nonetheless remain the essential conduits, the instruments, of the production of men and male power. The greatest danger a woman can pose is the refusal to reproduce. Infertility is easily interpreted as such a refusal, with individual women viewed as threatening the interests of the lineage they married in to.

This logic provides justification for monitoring and even subjugation of women. In Wardlow's analysis (2006) negative agency is assumed to be latent in all women, and a great deal of energy, both metaphorical and literal, is put into making sure women will not, or cannot, use it to thwart lineage ambitions. This mirrors broader ideas in Melanesianist anthropology about the inherent, uncontrollable, natural powers attributed to women's reproductive capacities, and the male anxieties and efforts to control, conceal, or harness them into 'culture' (e.g. Tuzin 1997; Bonnemère 2018; Wardlow 2006).

### Individualised Infertility

At no point was Nadine's husband thought to be the locus of the problem. Big Nambas women tend to be individually blamed for their infertility, which Jolly (1994) also mentions for South Pentecost. Why, when reproductive fates and efforts are pooled, is infertility individualised? Why are men not implicated?

Certainly, women's conceptive capacities are less visible, more internal, and therefore more mysterious than is visible male ejaculation. Infertility can also be argued to break the *rod* that women create through marriages and movements between natal and postmarital residences. Women's kin receive *braedpraes* compensations for her reproductive capacities, creating a sense of unfinished business if a wife has not produced enough sons (see also Servy 2020). But infertility also highlights a deeper separation of assumed male from female commitments to the collective, as much as it highlights their different biological and affiliative generative capacities.

The rituals of circumcision and seclusion that 'make' men simultaneously make them the future genitors of lineages. These rites, and the entire male life course,

fuse male identification with patriline continuity. Because men assume the capacity to ritually, as well as biologically, procreate (Jolly 1994), it is an inalienable quality of male power to want to continue the lineage. No man could be 'unwilling' to reproduce. Male infertility is, therefore, largely unthinkable because infertility is not primarily about biological inability but about refusal. During an early visit, I asked a Big Nambas chief what would happen if a man simply could not produce a child, biologically. He replied that in such a case, his wife may have sex with his brother, but that any child born of that union would still be considered his own, and he would not suffer suspicion, repercussion or loss of status (especially important for first-borns).

Since it is the collective will of men that the lineage must grow, a key block on this ambition is the counter-will of in-marrying women. According to Sara Ahmed (2014), to be willful is to become a problem by not performing a function that benefits the whole (or 'general will') since 'the willful part is that which threatens the reproduction of an order' (Ahmed 2014, 99). It is perhaps this possibility of willful refusal among infertile women, in contrast to the impossibility of such a refusal by men, that locates blame in individual women. And as Ahmed (2014) writes, 'when the will of some parts is accomplished by the general will, those parts acquire freedom *not to be supportive*' (2014, 105, emphasis added). It is precisely because men's will to reproduce cannot be brought into question that men acquire rights to target negative responses at women.

An important corollary here is that in-marrying Big Nambas women, even those originating in the 'twelve tribes', are considered *man kam*: immigrants who, over the course of their reproductive careers, become more deeply connected to the place. An in-marrying woman represents a 'not-yet-subject' (Ahmed 2014, 126) to her husband's kin, a community member in-progress. Strangers can become members if they are willing in the right way. Membership is an invitation to join the collective project encompassed by men's demographic ambitions. Women do this by bearing lineage-propelling children. Ahmed argues that reproductive citizenship is a 'technology of will' (2014, 127), in the sense that accusations of willfulness, refusal or negative agency (Wardlow 2006) can be used to make strangers responsible for not being assimilated. That infertility is interpreted as a gendered lack of commitment clarifies why infertile women are intensely monitored, berated or eventually abandoned.

But learning to 'will' in the right way involves learning to connect with the land, imbued with male ancestral power. ni-Vanuatu men are often cast as 'roots' in the ground and women as 'birds' that fly from place to place (Bonnemaison 1985; Jolly 1982): women put those roots down by bearing sons who will be buried there, will become ancestors. Sons root a woman too, over time, to her post-marital *amel*, augmenting the *rod* she created from her natal place (Lind 2014). As *man kam*, in-marrying women are discouraged from going *wokbaot*, wandering on the land. Pregnant women especially are expected to *stap kwaet* (stay quiet; stay put), secluding themselves increasingly as their pregnancies progress. Alexandra Widmer (2013a) describes women on Efate wanting to be invisible during pregnancy,

similarly emphasising the need to *stap kwaet*, as does Maggie Cummings (2008). Wandering Big Nambas women can become sick or infertile, miscarry or even die. I was told this was because *graon i no luksave yu yet* ('the land does not recognise you yet'). Being unrecognisable, not-yet-rooted, *man kam*, is a dangerous state to be in. Protecting pregnancies from watchful ancestral powers that do not yet recognise women as reproductively rooted members provides grounds for expecting them to be reserved and restricted in their movements. And *stap kwaet* encompasses both physical movements, but also feelings and speech that are 'out of place', for example complaints or gossip about family members. Women's thoughts and emotions, if they are negative, can incur supernatural punishment, just as can the complaints of kin described earlier.

All of these social facts involve kin in a distributed form of collective socio-emotional management, the aim of which is proper reproductive citizenship in harmony with the agency of the place (a fuller description of the critical importance of land will be presented in a dedicated publication). But a gendered difference in inherent commitment to patriline growth underwrites the blaming of women when infertility strikes.

### Supernatural 'Warfare' over Reproduction

A final cause of infertility involves malevolent forces or deliberate sorcery attacks, and solutions here involve counter-sorcery. For example, a ritual is still variably practised and was undergone by a large proportion of the older women I interviewed, which involves tying a specific vine, found in the forested interior of Malakula, around the heavily pregnant belly. It is then cut with a specific seashell held in one hand, accompanied by *singsing* or incantations which remove any *kastom* that has been sent the woman's way before the birth. Most women I interviewed suspected at least one of their pregnancies had been targeted, evident in difficult or unusually long labours, or where babies were born with umbilical cords wrapped around their necks. Most women were given *lif*, before or during their deliveries in the clinic, by family members or local *kleva*. Many women were fearful of pregnancy and childbirth, and this reduces their desires to have large families.

When I suggested that sorcery attacks over reproduction might be a recent phenomenon, related to post-colonial land disputes and male competition, I was flatly contradicted. Yes, many patrilineages were *finis* (extinguished) in the *taem blong faet* (the many decades of warfare between Big Nambas clans, which continued right up until the 1960s), and yes, the memory of these losses lives on in a contemporary ideology of population growth and competition. But supernatural warfare over reproduction, driven by *jelus* (jealousy, envy, competition), harnessed to the broader agentic forces of the land, invoked through calling on ancestors while drinking kava (*piper methisticum*), or based on calculated sorcery attacks, has always been important in regulating and levelling the reproductive playing field (see also Taylor 2015). Using contraception or abortion (Indigenous or bio-medical) to temporarily

induce infertility must therefore also be understood partly as a gendered strategy for avoiding the sorcery attacks that make childbirth painful or life-threatening (see also Taylor and Araújo 2016). These tactics are a key part of between- as well as within-lineage demographic competition and a fact of daily life. Indeed, most people assured me that this was one of the oldest and most feared elements of Big Nambas *kastom*, key to understanding both the dynamics of ancestral lineage competition and the low fertility rates (and desires) of women in the past.

### Between Encompassment and Abandonment

This sketch of infertility describes some of the technologies of reproduction—political, social, supernatural and bio-medical—that maintain collective continuity in Vanuatu. Corralled within the hierarchical structure of Big Nambas communities, this work involves women and men, natural and supernatural forces, and implies both reproductive cooperation and conflict closely tied to local politics of succession and place. Under this reproductive regime, infertility is not abandoned but is a deep source of collective concern.

Yet women face directly opposing moral imperatives: to increase reproduction and secure the future of the patriline, to decrease it and secure the future of the world. These tensions are negotiated within a pooled reproductive order that extends reproductive accountability beyond the individual, but which concerns a particular scale of aggregation and action below the state's primary intrusions (although of course, not immune to them), defined by the interests of the patrilineal group and reliant on reciprocal relations. As Widmer (forthcoming) argues, 'the reproduction of life has continued to exceed economization but not the need for reciprocal relations' in Vanuatu (Epilogue, 11). Women's reproductive activities, on this account, include and are influenced by the reproduction of other local women. Such a 'distributed agency' (Enfield & Kockelman 2017), including non-human agency associated with the land (see also Taylor 2015), starts from the ground up, differing from the 'top-down' enrolments of women's reproductive labour in state and other macro-level processes (Murphy 2011).

The outside pressures to reduce fertility have heightened links between demographic and geo-political competition between patrilineages, making it locally more important than ever to increase fertility. Pooled reproduction is about the 'dividual' contributions women make to the reproduction of this social body. As Melanesian 'dividuals' (Strathern 1988), women's reproduction is ultimately encompassed (Jolly 1994, 2001b) by a male-dominated 'whole' with a growth agenda and supported by supernatural forces that notice and often punish inappropriate movements, departures from collective goals. Negative reactions to infertility, the individualisation of blame, gossip about the causes, and threats of abandonment all engage the pooled reproductive social body in the reassertion of this reproductive regime, whether through *sori* payments, the emphasis on *stap kwaet* or counter-sorcery.

This then reveals a potentially gendered conflict of interest over personhood itself: men are inclined to maintain women's 'dividuality' in the reproductive domain, just

as women claim a ‘nascent individualism’ (Wardlow 2006, 3) that resists it. Women constantly told me that ‘life is hard now’, that there is insufficient land to live on (and off), that school fees (and therefore children) are prohibitively expensive, and that smaller family sizes are preferable. These new concerns, emerging as women are increasingly constructed as private property (Servy 2020; Jolly 2015) and told to *stap kwaet* while men increasingly *travel* or *go wokbaot* (to engage in wage labour), are indicative of an increasing sense of possessive individualism (see also Wardlow 2006). Women regularly voiced their dissatisfactions with their lower-status and especially their financial dependence on men. Worries about land scarcity, awareness of population growth and the ratcheting costs of education are inflecting women’s discourse. This ‘individualising’ talk begins to set the costs and benefits of women’s reproduction above the overarching agenda of the collective, which instead emphasises the male-dominated social whole.

This is not to say that to women, concerns about local collective strength and the role their future sons will play in it are unimportant: they still offer long-term security, respect and power in a changing environment. Young women frequently raised anxieties about rooting themselves in the patriline via sons and about the insecure status of marriages producing only daughters. This ambivalent set of reproductive ideals places them under ever-greater reproductive scrutiny and pressure. An encroaching reproductive and possessive individualism, therefore, co-exists, uneasily, with the ‘partible personhood’ (Strathern 1988) that illuminates so much of ni-Vanuatu cultural and social life (Jolly 2001a).

In these ‘zones of social abandonment’ (Biehl 2013) where ARTs are unavailable, basic medical interventions can still be useful in unexpected ways, as when women visit faraway clinics purely to demonstrate commitment to rectifying infertility: pooled reproduction helps make sense of this behaviour. More broadly, pooled reproduction shows us *how* the economisation of life (Murphy 2017) can permeate reproductive decision-making in this context: population control and climate change narratives can be used to legitimise desires for fewer children, or even welcome infertility. Some women are successful in establishing moral grounds for *not* reproducing as many sons as senior patriline members may want, using a reproductive logic from outside to resist and reframe an internal one.

Ultimately, Big Nambas women are caught ‘between encompassment and abandonment’ (Biehl 2013). One of these abandonments is anthropology’s own. The celebration of flexible kinship has left a gap in our understanding of the significant efforts that go into producing biological children in Melanesia (or at least, on Malakula today), efforts that are of no inherent interest to population decline movements. Exploring these dynamics reveals a rich set of Indigenous technologies of reproduction. At the same time, this analysis reminds us of the sheer power of women’s reproductive capacities in creating men (Bonnemère 2018): that much is clear from the intensive attempts to mitigate their potential refusals to be encompassed.



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## Notes

- [1] The spelling of the island's name is contested. Prior to Independence in 1980, the official British government spelling was Malekula (with the official French spelling being Mallicolo). In 1980 the Vanuatu government changed it to Malakula. On the island itself, spelling and pronunciation varies considerably. Here I follow the post-independence convention, which received renewed support in July 2020 following a Malakula-wide Chiefs forum held at Lit-zlitz, near Lakatoro.
- [2] In *V'ënen Taut*, apicolabial articulation, in which the tip of the tongue touches or approximates the upper lip, is denoted with a following apostrophe (see Lynch and Brotchie 2010).
- [3] Two languages are represented in the text of this article: Bislama (italicised) and the local language *V'ënen Taut* (italicised and underlined).
- [4] While there has been considerable academic debate about how to properly characterise these relationships, in the post-missionary context there is a great deal of shame about these once centrally important practices in Big Nambas culture. Nonetheless, local interlocutors described it to me as a form of 'training' for heterosexual marriage.
- [5] Future research will have to determine whether this inclusive plural is a form of politeness or a collective kinship term. Thanks to Miriam Meyerhoff for pointing out this distinction.

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