Introduction

When women exchange textiles on the island of Ambae in north Vanuatu, they move onto the exchange plaza carrying the textiles in great baskets on their heads. When they reach its center they drop the baskets and take out the textiles, unfolding them and laying them out in piles upon the ground. There is a proper and important order to this. The women first remove and lay out the most valuable textiles, the maraha, according to their kinds, and then on top of them less valuable textiles, the qana, according to their kinds. There is a specified sequence in which each kind of maraha, and each kind of qana is laid out so that either the qana called qana vivi or the clothing textile sakole graces the top of each pile. In east Ambae the most common design decorating both of these textile types is vule (the moon). The presentation represents a moment at which the women’s immense labor in making the textiles, and their commitment to the social relationships in which they are enmeshed, takes visible form. In unfolding and presenting these textiles, the women are not only making a gift in exchange, but demonstrating their knowledge, skill, and labor.

In Vanuatu, in 1992, a program initiated by an organization called the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) made an alteration to national ideology. It extended the practical application of the term “kastom” to include women’s knowledge and practice, making the claim that “women have kastom too.” Kastom is the word that people in Vanuatu use to characterize their own knowledge and practice in distinction to everything they identify as having come from outside their place. Until the early 1990s, kastom in Vanuatu had, for all practical purposes, been treated as referring only to things that men do and know, to men’s dances, stories, rituals, and preoccupations. The cultural centre’s women’s kastom program focused on Ambae, and specifically on
Ambaean women’s skills and understanding related to plaited pandanus textiles; but, in asserting the idea of women’s kastom, the program had a national effect. This book is about the idea of kastom in Vanuatu — about how and why the idea of kastom initially excluded women — and about women’s production and use of textiles on Ambae and how Ambaeans responded to the suggestion that these things now be recognized as kastom. The acknowledgment that “women have kastom too” represented a new and significant alteration in the status of women in the national context.

The introduction of the idea that women have kastom too was driven by the VCC in collaboration with a number of other organizations in Vanuatu: the Ambae/Maewo Local Government Council, the Vanuatu National Council of Women, the Australian High Commission in Port Vila, and Radio Vanuatu. In 1991, the VCC initiated a program called the Women’s Culture Project (WCP), recruiting an Australian volunteer to train a woman to be WCP coordinator. I was this training officer. Thus although much of this book describes the situa-

Fig. 1 Women laying out textiles in an exchange at Boeboe hamlet, Lovonda, east Ambae. The textiles are being presented by a man’s kinswomen to his bride’s family at marriage. May 22, 1992.
tion that led to the Women’s Culture Project, and that the WCP then altered, in describing that alteration itself, I am describing something in which I took an active part.

Anthropology generally involves what is known as participant observation. The anthropologist participates in, observes, and subsequently describes the life of a community or group, but avoids making any changes to it. I, on the other hand, participated in community life in Vanuatu generally, and especially in Ambae, with the express objective of making changes. By agreement with the VCC board, I documented my participation as my doctoral fieldwork, which I subsequently described in a thesis (Bolton 1993). My role might thus be better described as participant engagement. In working for the VCC and collaborating with the other organizations involved I sought to enact their objectives and to reflect their preoccupations, but nevertheless, it was I who developed the Women’s Culture Project, trained its coordinator, and implemented its first program, which was the Ambae Project.

The difficulty that participant engagement poses to the writing of ethnography is the difficulty of acknowledging the effect of one’s own involvement in the events described and yet of not overrating it. In the end, one individual can have little influence on a community unless his or her actions are endorsed and supported by community members. As WCP training officer I built upon the work of or collaborated with a number of people in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the other organizations involved. Each of these people also influenced the formulation of *kastom* in Vanuatu or specifically contributed to its extension to include women’s knowledge and practice. My contribution was to various degrees dependent on what these other people had done or were doing, and in following on from and imitating them I was operating in an established mode within the cultural sector in Vanuatu. My engagement in this project was also an engagement in Vanuatu at that particular period. The various collaborations that led to the Women’s Culture Project were very much a product of their time. To describe them is to describe a specific moment in Vanuatu history: the beginning of the 1990s, a decade after the country achieved independence, when the population was still only about 150,000, and when the achievement of independence, and the ideals that went along with that, were still very much in people’s minds. Things change very fast in Vanuatu; an ethnography of the early 1990s is already history.
This book is thus an ethnographic description of a historical process that culminated in events in which I myself took an active part. I describe it as an “ethnographic description” intentionally. This is description in the sense used by Marilyn Strathern: “description presupposes analysis, and analysis presupposes theory, and they all presuppose imagination” (1999:xii). Description is the end point, not the beginning, of anthropological analysis: all description is, in one way or another, theoretically informed. This book does not concentrate on my role, but rather describes the contexts against which the Women’s Culture Project developed—on local understandings of kastom and women’s knowledge and practice with respect to textiles on Ambae—and on the transformations that the WCP effected to both (in which I was involved). The role of the VCC as a museum with links to the academic disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, and archaeology was important to this historical process: the theoretical understandings that people involved brought to the work of the Cultural Centre have been significant to the constitution of kastom. Equally, my preoccupations, derived from my own museum experience and my anthropological understanding, influenced the form the WCP took. This introduction provides some background to my participation and to this broader museum/academic setting. It also introduces some of the people and the institutions that were active in the initiative to assert that “women have kastom too.”

Beginnings

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre is an umbrella organization that in the early 1990s incorporated a museum, library, and archives. Founded in 1956, it appointed its first salaried museum curator in 1976, and from this time onward, the museum became the leading Cultural Centre department. Housed in a purpose-built structure on the main street of the small national capital, Port Vila, the VCC was a dominant public institution both through the last years of the colonial era and during the decades after independence.

The first curator was Kirk Huffman, an English anthropology student. Huffman, who took up his appointment in 1977, had been working in the archipelago since 1973, doing research on Malakula for postgraduate studies in ethnology at Cambridge University. The lineage of his interest in the region went back to the anthropologist John Layard (1942), whose work had drawn him to Malakula. Like Layard before
him, Huffman became deeply involved in the practice of the community in which he was based. Coming to the VCC from extended fieldwork in central Malakula, he brought this involvement, rather than a commitment to anthropology, to his curatorship. He also brought his very considerable linguistic skills and a phenomenal memory, enabling him to operate very much in an oral tradition. Having some resources of independent income, and significant skills in making and using networks with people all over the world, Huffman acted with a degree of autonomy in his work as curator, helping out both the museum and the fledgling nation in diverse ways. He became deeply involved in the independence movement during the 1970s and was, in his advocacy of the importance of kastom, influential at national and local levels through the country.

In 1976, just before joining the Cultural Centre, Huffman spent six months as acting Pacific curator at the Australian Museum, Sydney. A strong connection between the two institutions was forged during that period, and the Australian Museum has offered the Cultural Centre training and assistance of various kinds over the ensuing decades. Huffman himself was never preoccupied by the conventional work of a museum—by the care of objects—but focused his attention instead on the creation of a network of local men recruited to work as volunteers in their own islands and districts, documenting and reviving kastom. These men were and are known as fieldworkers. Huffman’s enthusiasm and commitment to kastom was the driving force behind the establishment of the fieldworker program.

In 1985, five years after achieving independence, the Vanuatu government imposed a moratorium on all social sciences field research in Vanuatu. Although there were a few exceptions to this ruling, in general no expatriate field research was permitted for the following nine years. Instead, a distinctive kind of research developed locally through the Cultural Centre. Huffman recruited a New Zealander, Darrell Tryon, a linguist based at the Australian National University, to direct annual two-week training workshops for the fieldworkers, providing them with basic training in linguistic and anthropological recording techniques. The workshops provided opportunities for fieldworkers to discuss kastom in considerable comparative depth and to debate ways in which local knowledge and practice could be maintained and developed in a climate of ongoing social and economic change. Tryon, who had completed a survey of the 113 languages of Vanuatu during the 1960s
(1972, 1976), has returned to Vanuatu every year since 1981 to direct the training workshops and has himself substantially contributed to the fieldworkers’ understanding of the nature of kastom. His consistent commitment to the fieldworker program has been of inestimable value to the formulation of kastom in Vanuatu as fieldworkers have transmitted workshop outcomes throughout the country. Under his and Huffman’s care, the fieldworker group grew steadily during the 1980s; by 1991 there were about forty-five men fieldworkers (see Huffman 1996a; Tryon 1999).

Although Huffman added to the museum’s object collections over the period of his curatorship, these remained uncatalogued and were rather haphazardly displayed and stored in the Cultural Centre building on the waterfront in Port Vila. When family circumstances forced his resignation in 1989, Huffman set in motion a project to catalogue the collections. He invited the Division of Anthropology at the Australian Museum to set up a collection cataloguing system and train Cultural Centre staff in its operation. As Pacific collection manager at the Australian Museum, I was among those who went to Vila to undertake this task. In 1990, after Huffman had resigned, Darrell Tryon arranged Australian funding for me to return and continue the cataloguing and training process.

**Museums and Material Culture**

I had by this time been working with the Pacific collections at the Australian Museum for more than a decade. Working at the Australian Museum during the 1980s introduced me to three significant debates about museum collections of ethnographic objects: the question of the relationship between object and meaning; the idea of “art”; and, using what were then newly introduced terms, the relationship between indigenous people as traditional owners and their cultural property—the objects in museums. All these debates affected the way in which I subsequently set up the first WCP program, the Ambae project.

The Australian Museum Pacific collection contains one of the great collections of Melanesian material internationally, and I was always entranced by the objects I looked after. But to work with such material is to become conscious of the artifice of museum collections, of the way in which they have been constituted by considerations such as the portability and durability of individual objects. It is objects that could
survive the rigors of international transportation that became part of museum ethnography collections. Objects whose size defied transportation, such as dancing grounds, and those whose fragility defeated it, such as leaf and flower decorations, were usually not included.

As has often been observed, in the very beginnings of the discipline of anthropology, objects were seen as a crucial source of information about other places. In 1895, W. H. Flower, president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, observed, “One of the most potent means of registering facts, and making them available for future study and reference, is to be found in actual collections of tangible objects” (Flower 1895:764). This importance of collections to early anthropological research has left a theoretical legacy, which is the idea of material culture—objects—as a distinct subject within the discipline. Museums have thus been instrumental in creating a category of theoretical analysis, material culture, on the basis of largely practical discriminations about what could and could not be collected and displayed. Anthropology collections (often described as “ethnographic collections”) were generally built up during the last century of European colonialism: anthropology, and ethnographic collections, mostly relate to the indigenous inhabitants of European colonies and of settler/colonial states such as Australia.

The development of fieldwork methodologies for anthropological research at the beginning of the twentieth century demonstrated the limits to what could be learned from objects, as Malinowski observed in 1922:

A canoe is an item of material culture, and as such it can be described, photographed and even bodily transported into a museum. But . . . the ethnographic reality of the canoe would not be brought much nearer to a student at home, even by placing a perfect specimen right before him. . . . For a craft . . . lives in the life of its sailors, and it is more to a sailor than a mere bit of shaped matter. To the native . . . a craft is surrounded by an atmosphere of romance, built up of tradition and of personal experience. It is an object of cult and admiration, a living thing, possessing its own individuality. (Malinowski 1922:105)

As fieldwork became increasingly important to the discipline, most anthropologists turned aside from an interest in objects. For most of
the twentieth century, research focused, so to speak, not on the canoe, but on “the life of the sailors” of which the canoe was just a part. Anthropology and museology diverged (see Strathern 1990:38). While anthropologists focused on field research, museum curators, the canoe in their storerooms, remained attentive to objects and developed questions posed by their materiality, questions about technology, form, style, distribution, and provenance. These questions did lead to fieldwork, but fieldwork of a particularly focused kind. During the 1980s, for example, the Australian Museum implemented two field-documentation projects. Photographs of objects in the collections were taken back to their place of origin in search of further documentation about the manufacture, use, and significance of the objects. I was the junior partner to one of these projects, documenting collections from the Lower Sepik, Papua New Guinea (Barlow, Lipset, and Bolton 1988; Barlow 1990).

The experience of taking photographs of objects back to their places of origin was very instructive. In the storeroom, there is a sense in which all objects are equal. Some may be better documented and some may be aesthetically more striking or historically important, but all require the same care and the same documentary attention. All have the potential to be revealed as significant—by a research project of one kind or another. Returned to their place of origin as photographs, objects fall into a different set of relations with each other. Things that people still make (grass skirts, cooking pots) may not interest them, and things that people have forgotten their ancestors made may be regarded similarly as irrelevant. On the other hand, photographs of objects that embody ritual or social power—clan symbols or religious paraphernalia—may be of great interest and emotional significance to a community (see Barlow 1990:18).

Collection-based research is an honorable tradition, one that is now being given new impetus by the theoretically sophisticated initiatives of authors such as Nicholas Thomas (1999) and Michael O’Hanlon (1999), who both interpret objects found in museum collections in the light of historical and anthropological texts and images to offer new perspectives on their meaning and purpose. However, my experience of field documentation made Malinowski’s comment about the canoe real to me, demonstrating the widely made observation that meanings are invested in objects by people, so that a different human context may
allocate an object an entirely different meaning. I became interested in
the possibility of field research that focused on objects in context—on
the significance of the canoe to the life of the sailor.

Museums made another contribution to the constitution of the cate-
gory material culture through the development of the art gallery as a
specific museum type. Western society in the twentieth century has
invested considerable value in the idea of art and in the art museums
that display it and has established a system by which objects deemed
suitable to be displayed in art galleries are granted an especially high
status. It is thus not just that material culture has been created as a cat-
egory, but that this category exists within a system of relative value.
Objects displayed in art galleries are counted as having a higher value
(both financially and in terms of cultural capital) than objects in other
kinds of museums. Generally it is objects from the Western art tradition
that are displayed in art galleries, so that ethnographic collections labor
under the linked disadvantage of being from outside the Western art
tradition and being displayed in ethnographic museums. In response
to this, curators have often sought to draw attention to the aesthetic
power of objects from their artifact collections, asserting their suitabil-
ity to be displayed as art (see Stocking 1985:6).

This move to define ethnographic objects as art was echoed in
recent decades by a concomitant move, on the part of some indigenous
artifact producers, to be represented in art galleries rather than in
ethnographic museums. This has been the case for many Aboriginal
Australian makers of objects, for example. The politics of this is easily
understood: it is a claim to a high-status position in the dominant cul-
tural milieu. Indeed, as Fred Myers pointed out, Aboriginal people pro-
duce some objects—such as acrylic paintings—specifically to sell them
into the art world, both for the high prices they afford and as a way of
“representing culture”—representing aspects of their knowledge and
practice to the wider community (Myers 1995:56–57). Howard Morphy
made this role further apparent in his discussion of Aboriginal art. He
commented, “The recent history of Aboriginal art has been a dialogue
with colonial history, in which what came before— . . . with its empha-
sis on affective social and spiritual relationships to the land—is contin-
ually asserting itself over what exists in the present” (Morphy 1998:4).

Questions about what is and is not art are constantly debated within
the frame of the Western tradition. Because the category is essentially a
category that assigns value, its flexibility is crucial to its operation, and its parameters are consequently hard to identify. One frequently proposed account of art has reflected this in proposing an institutional definition: art is what is displayed in art galleries and acknowledged as such by the art world (collectors, dealers, critics) (Danto 1964). Alfred Gell very neatly explained the currency of this perspective, observing that it “has arisen precisely to accommodate the historic fact that western artworks no longer have an aesthetic ‘signature’ and can consist of entirely arbitrary objects, like dead sharks in tanks of formaldehyde” (1999:210). The pertinence of these debates here lies in the fact that textiles have, in the Western system, generally not been defined as art but rather as craft. And although art galleries may be willing to display the works of artists such as Damien Hurst (who put the dead shark in the formaldehyde), they are still often resistant to the display of textiles, and especially of textiles such as the plaited pandanus textiles from Ambae. Despite the fact that most ethnographic objects circle uneasily in the system of relative value established between museums, some objects are even less successful there than others. Often damned with the classification “craft,” textiles, and especially non-loom-woven textiles, are among the least well regarded.

There is nothing inherently wrong about the Western system of assigning value to objects as art: it is as much a local cultural practice as any other. However, with the partisanship that most collections staff develop for some apparently underrecognized part of their collection, I began to take exception to an art-based approach that focused on sculptural and painted materials and overlooked textiles and other kinds of objects made by or associated with women. At the end of the 1980s, as I began to plan my doctoral research, I was determined to work with a group of women and to focus on the significance to them of a group of objects they both made and used.

The 1980s was a decade of upheaval for anthropology museums in Australia. In 1978 UNESCO organized a regional seminar in Adelaide that brought together indigenous Australians and anthropology curators (Edwards and Stewart 1980). Indigenous delegates argued forcefully for the right of Aboriginal people to influence the curatorship of collections of Aboriginal material. They advocated the employment of Aboriginal staff to manage Aboriginal collections and greater indigenous involvement in the development of exhibition and education
programs. They also raised concerns about the management of secret/sacred or restricted objects and the management and reburial of collections of Aboriginal human remains. This seminar was enormously influential, and over the following decades most Australian museums accepted and implemented most of the seminar recommendations. The Australian Museum Division of Anthropology, under the direction of Jim Specht, responded quickly to the seminar, employing Aboriginal staff and seeking the advice of Aboriginal communities about the management of collections. As Pacific curator, Specht had already initiated collaborative programs with museums in Melanesia and continued to do so during the same decade (Specht and MacLulich 1996).

To work at the Australian Museum in the 1980s was to be continually drawn into interaction with traditional owners of collections and to learn and come to terms with their specific and not necessarily curatorial priorities for their cultural property. It was an opportunity to learn how to work, as a colleague, with people whose priorities for that work were not the same and whose emotional investment in objects was often quite different from those of academically trained curators. As I have discussed elsewhere, there were significant differences between the response of indigenous Australians to collections and those of Melanesians, differences that relate in part to issues of colonial history and political autonomy (Bolton 2001b). I developed some sense of Pacific Islander perspectives through training Pacific museum staff over a number of years, both in programs offered at the Australian Museum and through the Australian National Council for UNESCO. By the time I first worked in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, cataloguing the collections, I had learned to assume that my ideas about the importance of objects were quite unlikely to be shared by the people with whom I was working.

**The Inception of the Women’s Culture Project**

When I returned to Vanuatu in 1990 for the second cataloguing and training program, Kirk Huffman had left the Cultural Centre. The new curator was Huffman’s former deputy, a ni-Vanuatu from the island of Aneityum called Jack Keitadi. (The indigenous citizens of Vanuatu are known as ni-Vanuatu, rather than as Vanuatuan, or any other such construction.) Keitadi had received some training in museum work and
anthropology in both Papua New Guinea and Sydney, but Huffman was an extremely hard act for anyone to follow. The Cultural Centre museum had a slightly disconsolate air, and there was in fact not really anyone in the museum for me to train. Keitadi was assisted by Jacob Sam Kapere, a young ni-Vanuatu from the island of Tanna. Kapere had trained as a filmmaker in Melbourne and had been brought into the Cultural Centre by Huffman in about 1988, to look after the substantial audiovisual archives. A skilled cameraman, Kapere was also deeply committed to the VCC project to document and revive *kastom* and was a strong supporter of the fieldworker group, providing assistance to them as he was able.

During my visit there was a staffing crisis. The first female professional staff member (as opposed to secretarial and cleaning staff), Nadia Kanegai, whose return from tertiary education in Australia to take up a position as education officer had been long awaited, started work but resigned two days later, citing the absence of an education program budget as a reason. Although Kanegai’s position was as an education officer, the fact that a woman was to take it up had become increasingly significant as the Cultural Centre waited for Kanegai to return from her studies. As I will set out in more detail in chapter 3, the male bias at the Cultural Centre had been more and more criticized within Vanuatu, and the appointment of a woman had therefore become more and more important.

My experience in training Pacific-region museum staff had convinced me that in-country training is far more useful than anything that can be offered overseas. Overseas training, based on the expectation of significant funding and infrastructural support—such as Kanegai had received in Australia—does not equip staff to work in contexts where salaries are low, equipment inadequate, and operational budgets dependent on external aid. Moreover, overseas training in museum work is often based on nonindigenous priorities and sets professional standards devised in Western institutional and academic contexts. In 1990 I was planning a doctorate in anthropology, based on fieldwork in Melanesia on women’s material culture. Until the turn of events in Vanuatu that year, I had anticipated doing research in Papua New Guinea, knowing that Vanuatu’s research moratorium would prevent my working there. However, in discussing Kanegai’s resignation, and the importance of in-country training with Cultural Centre staff and some mem-
bers of the management board, I eventually suggested that I come to Vanuatu for a year, to work without salary as a training officer for Kanegai’s replacement. In return, I asked to be granted an exemption from the research moratorium and allowed to undertake a project, with the appointee, about which I could subsequently write my doctoral thesis.

It is here that both Huffman’s and Tryon’s roles in the Cultural Centre become relevant. As expatriates deeply committed to ni-Vanuatu notions about kastom, they had established a precedent that made my proposed role as training officer both comprehensible and appealing to VCC board members. My status as an Australian Museum staff member—and the fact that I had been introduced to the country by Huffman and brought back by Tryon—enhanced my credentials, as did my familiarity with the Pacific region and the fact that by then I already spoke the lingua franca, Bislama. I proposed that I implement the training program through a research project, negotiating the details with management board members. I declared my interest in women’s material culture; the board accepted this focus but themselves decided on the subject of the project. The choice of an area—the island of Ambae—and the specific focus of the project—textiles—were both decided by the Cultural Centre management board. In making their decision they were influenced both by Kirk Huffman, who retained a considerable influence (albeit from Spain, where by then he lived), and by a very influential board member, Grace Molisa, then personal private secretary to the prime minister. Molisa herself was from Ambae and wanted to see research undertaken into the importance of Ambae textiles in the regional trade that had once characterized the north of the archipelago. The starting salary for Kanegai’s position had been provided by the Australian High Commission, which accepted with good grace a further delay to the appointment of a woman staff member, until such time as I was able to return to begin work as training officer.

When I returned to Vanuatu as training officer in August 1991, Jack Keitadi arranged the appointment of a trainee women’s culture project coordinator. Kirk Huffman, who was visiting Vanuatu at the time, contributed to the selection process. They chose Leah Ture Leo, a young Ambaean who had previously worked as Cultural Centre secretary. Ture Leo had left Ambae about eight years previously, at the age of approximately fifteen. By 1991 she had married a man from the island of Pentecost who worked in the Vanuatu Mobile Force, and they had a
small child. A capable secretary, charming and slightly frivolous, Ture Leo did not find the Ambae project congenial. She was nervous about sorcery in villages other than her own and was worried by and about her husband and son, left behind in Port Vila. Eventually, in January 1992, she resigned from the project.

In advocating Ambae as a focus for the first WCP project, the VCC board member, Grace Molisa, had originally recommended that a woman called Jean Tarisesei be appointed as trainee. When Ture Leo and I started visiting villages in east Ambae, looking for a place to base our project, we quickly met Tarisesei, who was the leader of the women in the coastal wards of the Ambaean district of Longana. When Ture Leo’s discomfit in the Ambae project became evident, the Ambae/Maewo Local Government Council and villagers in Longana all urged me to replace her with Tarisesei. When Ture Leo resigned, I learned that Tarisesei was one of the privileged few who had attended the British Secondary School in Port Vila, as had Jack Keitadi. She was thus well known to him, and he was very happy to support her appointment as the new WCP trainee.

Fig. 2 Jean Tarisesei. 1998.
Jean Tarisesei was ideally suited for the position of Women’s Culture Project coordinator, a position that, in 2001, she still holds. In 1991 she was a widow in her early forties with five children, the youngest of whom was then about six years old. She had married an east Ambaean, Lawrence Tarisesei, soon after completing her English O-level exams at the British Secondary School, at the age of about twenty-one. Her husband worked for the Vanuatu Education Department, and they lived for most of their married life in Port Vila. In 1986 he had died suddenly, possibly as a result of poisoning related to a land dispute on Ambae, and Jean had returned, with her children, to live with her parents in Longana, east Ambae. Raised in Longana, she was well versed in Ambaean knowledge and practice; educated to secondary level, she understood the documentary concerns of the Cultural Centre. She was used to town life, but also to living in a rural area, and she was well able to understand the problems and concerns that rural ni-Vanuatu women have. Partly because of her keen interest in the Ambae project, Ture Leo and I had selected Lovonda as our base on Ambae, so that when Tarisesei was appointed to the project, she and I were already living in adjacent hamlets. I was, and am, extremely privileged to work with her.

The Cultural Centre goals for the Ambae project were documentation and revival—both to record information about women’s production and use of textiles and to encourage them to retrieve knowledge and skills that were being lost and to pass them on to the next generation. In implementing the project Tarisesei and I took different responsibilities. While Tarisesei did learn new information about textiles during the project, for her this was revival rather than documentation: she did not need to write it down. It was I who was forever making notes and then attempting to make sense of what I was learning. The documentation for which Tarisesei took special responsibility was audiotaping stories, songs, and other information for use on the VCC radio program and for storage in the audiovisual archives. She also made a major contribution to several filming projects for which Kapere came to Ambae. As I will discuss later, these aspects of the project were also very much focused on revival. This division of labor continued through the decade after the Ambae project, as both of us maintained our commitment to the Women’s Culture Project. Tarisesei is continuing to produce radio programs, to make films, to run workshops. While I have
had an ongoing involvement in the development of a women fieldworker program, I have devoted considerable energy into transforming all those notes into documentation of various kinds, and notably into this book.

**Previous Research**

In setting out to study women’s production and use of textiles on Ambae, I joined a research group that had been largely stalled by the research moratorium. Academic study moves forward by a process of interaction and stimulation, through the influence that information and analysis in one project has upon the next. Without the stimulus of new data and new theoretical perspectives arising from new fieldwork, Vanuatu studies had slowed. Research in the archipelago has had a somewhat checkered history, so that the moratorium was in this sense only the next occasion on which a developing dialogue halted.

Michael Allen commented in 1981 in his introduction to the first collection of essays on the region, “Anthropological research in Vanuatu has, thus far, been afflicted with a curious tendency towards non-publication” (Allen 1981:xiii). In fact, the area was the subject of some of the earliest published ethnographic surveys in Melanesia, notably those by Codrington (1891 [1981]), Speiser (1913), and Rivers (1914). Several of Rivers’ Cambridge students followed him to the archipelago. Of these John Layard (1942) and Bernard Deacon (1934) made the only two extensive focused field studies during the first half of the century, both on the island of Malakula. Both Deacon and Layard were particularly interested in what they described as graded societies, ritual cycles that dominated life in both the areas in which they worked and for which north Vanuatu is (ethnographically speaking) famous. Neither Deacon nor Layard was able to continue making substantial contributions to anthropology. Deacon died shortly before completing his fieldwork (his notes were edited for publication by Camilla Wedgwood), while Layard suffered an extended period of ill health on return to England, which much delayed the publication of his research. Others of Rivers’ students, such as T. T. Barnard, never published the results of their fieldwork.

From the 1950s several French researchers, notably the anthropologist Jean Guiart and the cultural geographer Joel Bonnemaison, began working in the archipelago, generally under the auspices of the French
Government research organization ORSTOM. At the end of the same decade, Michael Allen worked on Ambae (then known as Aoba) for a doctorate at the Australian National University (1964). Although Allen has never published a monograph on the region, it is as a result of his efforts that some further research took place, for not only did he direct a series of students to Vanuatu from Sydney University, but he drew together their work and that of a number of other then-new anthropologists in his edited collection (Allen 1981c). The majority of papers in this volume address political process and leadership, through graded societies, hereditary chieftainship, or colonial processes. Only a few of the anthropologists who worked in the archipelago in the 1970s and early 1980s have published substantial ethnographies. Peter Lovell, William Rodman, and Margaret Rodman all worked in east Ambae in this period: while both Rodmans have published many articles, only Margaret Rodman has published a monograph about Ambae (1987a). Communication between French and English-speaking researchers has never been extensive.

The moratorium brought the impetus from Allen’s collection to a halt, and there was little ongoing dialogue among anthropologists who had worked in the country. Only a few of the major theoretical debates in Melanesian anthropology have engaged with ethnographic data from the archipelago. The notable exceptions to that have been the literature about the “invention of tradition”—kastom—which has been a consistent focus of publications since the early 1980s, and literature about leadership and hierarchy. Both Margaret Jolly and Lamont Lindstrom, in particular, have brought information about north Vanuatu “graded societies” and south and central Vanuatu chiefly systems into the latter debates (Jolly 1991b, 1994b; Lindstrom 1997; see also Guiart et al. 1973). Jolly has also addressed debates in gender studies at a number of levels (1989, 1991a, 1991c).

During and despite the moratorium, a second collection of essays about Vanuatu was brought together, this time by a consortium of Anglo-French editors, in association with the touring exhibition Arts of Vanuatu, which was organized by the Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel, and the Musée Nationale des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, Paris (Bonne-maison et al. 1996). These mostly short essays focus on various aspects of the material culture of the archipelago, broadly interpreted, and draw on library and archival research, earlier field research, and some proj-
ects undertaken under the auspices of the Cultural Centre during the moratorium. The collection includes an essay by Annie Walter, a French anthropologist and ethnobotanist, who worked for many years on the island of Pentecost (which lies adjacent to Ambae in the archipelago). Walter studied women’s knowledge systems, focusing in part on the production and use of Pentecost mats. Her work is immediately relevant to the Ambae project but had in 2001 not yet been published in any depth.

Since the lifting of the moratorium in 1994 a new generation of doctoral students has begun projects in Vanuatu. Among these Susanna Kelly completed research on the central island of Tongoa, writing her doctorate about the pandanus mats women make and use there (1999). A small collection of articles describing new research in anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics was produced in 1999. This latter publication, which I edited, emphasized the impact the moratorium has had on research agenda, demonstrating the influence of the Cultural Centre, and especially the fieldworkers on the development of new research projects (Bolton 1999).

**A Word on Terminology and Construction**

In building upon the existing literature about Vanuatu, this book takes two terminological departures from established conventions. Both these innovations are descriptive strategies: they are designed to provoke new ways of thinking about the material I am discussing. The first of these is that I have chosen to describe what Ambae women make as textiles rather than as mats. “Mat” is the word used for these objects when English is spoken in Vanuatu, and they have been described in the literature as such by a number of authors, myself included (Bolton 1996). “Mat” is also the Bislama term for them. Moreover the term “mat” is used to describe plaited pandanus fabrics made in various parts of the Pacific, notably in Samoa and Tonga, where it is particularly associated with what are known as “fine mats”—high-status valuables, which often have personal names and histories and which are kept for many generations (see Herda 1999; Kaeppler 1999; Schoeffel 1999).

My decision to break with this established precedent has a number of motivations. First, the English term “mat” refers to a coarse textile used as a protective surface of some kind, as a floor covering or as a sur-
face on which to sleep or sit. Ambae textiles are by no means accurately described as mats in this sense, since they are used for a variety of purposes and are by no means all coarsely made. In fact, as I will argue in more depth, these objects are not, on Ambae, classified into a single category at all. They are not all the same kind of thing. It is useful to describe them as textiles precisely because the term “textile” implies no single set of uses: it depicts a material form without suggesting how it is used or classified. Moreover “mat” quite misleadingly allocates these objects an extremely low status in the system of relative value established by museums in the Western popular imagination. The parallel with mats and fine mats in Polynesia is also unhelpful. It implies an equation between the two systems where no such equation can be made. There are many crucial differences between the two. My intention in altering the terminology and writing about these objects with the more neutral term “textiles” is to dislodge some of the many assumptions that attend the word “mat” and to introduce some new perspectives.

There is some disagreement among textile specialists about the terms used to describe different fabric construction techniques. Several authors describing “mats” have chosen to use “weave” to describe how they are made (Buck 1926; Ewins 1982). However, the verb “to weave” refers strictly speaking to fabrics produced on a loom of some kind; another term should be used for textiles produced without a loom. Irene Emery, in her survey of textile techniques, describes the construction technique for Ambae textiles as “oblique interlacing” (1980:62), while in her survey Annemarie Seiler-Baldinger terms it “diagonal or oblique plaiting” (1994:38). My compromise, in deference to these debates, is to use “plaiting.”

My second terminological innovation relates to what are commonly known in the Vanuatu literature as graded societies. “Graded societies” are systems of ranked status grades through which men (and sometimes women) climb, commonly achieving each specified status position through rituals in which they kill or exchange pigs. These systems have been described throughout north Vanuatu (see Blackwood 1981; Bonnemaison 1996). There are also many references to similar systems, commonly described as “secret societies,” that usually exist in tandem with a central public male graded society, and that offer other avenues for status enhancement through the performance of prescribed rituals
What is less well described in the literature is the widespread existence of equivalent systems by which women achieve status: such women’s systems do occur throughout the whole of north Vanuatu, and are often very important. Some women’s systems, such as the lengwasa practiced in central Maewo, are explicitly paired with a male ritual system that in the literature would be described as a secret society; lengwasa is paired with the Maewo men’s ritual complex known as kwatu. In other places, such as east Ambae, the women’s ritual (huhuru) is explicitly linked to the male public graded society (huke). While some women’s systems involve accession to a series of higher and higher ranks, in other cases they do not, and while some might accord with the criteria for defining “secret societies” this is not always the case.

In fact, the existence of these women’s rituals throws into question the terminology generally used for men’s systems. What is common to all these rituals is the achievement of status, but this status is not always a matter of an explicit movement upward through a series of named grades. Sometimes there is no specific sequence in which the individual rituals must be performed, and an individual’s negotiation of them is a matter of opportunity and ambition. Classification of men’s systems as either graded societies or secret societies seems to constrain understanding of how they may in fact operate. More specifically, this terminology does not allow for the variety of forms that women’s sys-

Fig. 3 Qana vivi (strictly a qana mwaho) with a stencilled vule (moon) pattern. The lengthwise central seam divides the textile into two “sides”; the imposition of the stencil completes the textile. Drawing © Rebecca Jewell. L: 158 cm; W: 46 cm. Photo: British Museum.
tems take. For this reason I prefer to use “status-alteration systems” as an umbrella term that includes all the various forms these rituals take. I use this term throughout this book.

When women make textiles on Ambae they make a long starting edge by joining pandanus threads side by side and plait outward from this edge, creating one panel or side of the textile. Then they join new pandanus to the starting edge and plait outward in the other direction to create the second panel, or side. The starting edge remains visible as a longitudinal central seam through the length of the textile and is a positively valued feature of it. After the textile is plaited it is still considered as unfinished until it has been dyed, either with a single block of color or with a stencilled pattern imposed onto it. Plaited and dyed it is completed, and can be used. The structure of this book replicates this process: the structure of my argument follows the structure of the textile. One “side” of my book, chapters 1 through 3, addresses one “side” of my topic; that is, in these chapters I consider ideas about kastom in Vanuatu. I then join to this the second “side” of my argument, an ethnographic account of Ambae textiles, in chapters 5 to 7. The two sides are linked by chapter 4, which discusses the ideas about place that are integral to the arguments in both. In chapter 8 I describe the progress and effect of the Ambae project, and in 9 I draw together a conclusion, in both chapters imposing on the two sides of my discussion an account that joins them and makes them complete through an analysis of the redefinition of textiles as kastom.

Unfolding the Moon

In calling this book Unfolding the Moon, I am making a shift similar to this parallel between constructing a textile and constructing my text. The phrase “unfolding the moon” refers to the way in which east Ambaean women unfold a qana vivi with the vule (moon) design, to lay it on the top of the piles of textiles they are presenting in exchange. Although the title is thus descriptively correct, it is not an Ambaean phrase. To me the title invokes many of the issues the book discusses. But both Jean Tari-sesei (who helped me to find the title) and I have discussed it with women in east Ambae and have been met only with bemusement. They argued that it does not make sense linguistically—that one cannot speak of unfolding the moon but rather only of its rising. Translated into English the title works metaphorically: it describes the movement
in which women unfolded an aspect of their knowledge and practice and laid it out in the national arena, asserting and defining it for the first time as *kastom*.

There was a specific moment at which this movement could be said to have happened. At the end of the Ambae project, in June 1992, Tarisesei and I organized a workshop, held at the local government headquarters at Saratamata, east Ambae, to which we invited women from all the different Ambae districts. The workshop, which lasted five days, was an opportunity for women to share with each other the knowledge and skills they had in relation to textiles. The fifth day was devoted to a day of public festival. Not only was this the first time in more than sixty years that women had danced on Ambae wearing their traditional costume, plaited pandanus textiles: it was the first time a public occasion in Vanuatu had been marked by the performance of women’s *kastom*. Chief Simon Garae, a new VCC fieldworker, who was based in Atava, a nearby village, attended the public occasions of the Saratamata workshop. A month later he attended the men field-workers annual workshop at the Cultural Centre in Port Vila. At that workshop Jacob Sam Kapere screened a video about Ambae textile production that he, Jean Tarisesei, and I had just completed editing (Sam, Bolton, and Tarisesei 1992). After it was screened, Chief Simon made a speech to the other fieldworkers.

Chief Simon described the effect of the WCP Ambae project on Ambaean men. He recalled that at the time of the tenth anniversary of independence celebrations in 1990, when the Vanuatu government had called for people in every area to perform *kastom* dances, he had tried to find men who knew about *kastom* dances and to persuade both men and women to dress in textiles and to learn the dances and their meanings. He had failed, he said, to find ten young men who knew about such *kastom*. When Tarisesei and I came to run the textile workshop at Saratamata, he reported that there were men who said that we had come to steal *kastom* and to make money from it. But Chief Simon himself and several others, along with the local government council, had tried to clear away this talk. When the workshop opened with a public ceremony at the local government headquarters, men from Chief Simon’s village—Atava (although he was probably also referring to the adjacent settlements of Navonda and Lovatmemea)—attended the opening as if it were some kind of celebration. Minister Sethy Regenvanu,
the deputy prime minister, came to close the workshop (also a public occasion), and there were dances. Every man smiled and was glad. That night we showed some of the video (footage Kapere had recorded earlier in the year and that he had edited roughly). The next morning, Chief Simon reported, the men said that the WCP was a good thing and that they must try hard to help women with their *kastom*.\(^5\)

Although, in this account, Chief Simon makes some comments on *kastom* in general, what he makes clear is that the WCP, and specifically the Ambae project, made a difference to how people defined women’s knowledge and practice. It altered the contexts in which that knowledge and practice could be presented, and it did so in a national context, before the deputy prime minister. By dancing in their textiles that day, Ambae women brought forward their knowledge and practice as *kastom*. This book describes *kastom*, and describes Ambae textiles, in order to then describe how this happened—how, in my metaphor, Ambae women unfolded the moon.