

## Before Geosymbols... Tongoa, 1969-1970

RICHARD BEDFORD

JOËL BONNEMAISON commenced his field research in Vanuatu in the late 1960s. Our paths crossed at an early stage of what was to become Bonnemaïson's life-long interest in the cultural geography of ni-Vanuatu's diverse Melanesian societies. We both carried out village-based inquiries on the island of Tongoa in 1969-1970. One of the products of this coincidence was a debate which appeared in the literature in the 1970s about processes of population movement in Vanuatu. This debate contributed to the development of Bonnemaïson's ideas about the place of population movement in the cultural and economic transformation of ni-Vanuatu societies. The paper is about an early stage of Bonnemaïson's journey into and substantial contribution towards an exciting intellectual discourse about social and spatial transformation of Pacific societies in the late twentieth century.

### **A context**

In common with David Harvey, one of the most influential British geographers of the twentieth century, Joel Bonnemaïson's intellectual journey has some distinctive stages. In

1969 I had the privilege of meeting both Harvey and Bonnemaïson for the first time. During the first half of 1969, soon after my arrival at the Australian National University as a PhD student in human geography, David Harvey was a visiting lecturer teaching a course on quantitative methods. This was the pre-Marx Harvey (Patterson, 1989). During the second half of 1969, while in Vanuatu carrying out field work for my doctoral thesis on internal migration, I met Joel Bonnemaïson. This was the pre-geosymbols Bonnemaïson (Bonnemaïson, 1981).

In their very different ways, both Harvey and Bonnemaïson were to have profound impacts on my own intellectual journey. In the 1970s, Harvey cemented his reputation as one of the leading late twentieth century Marxist social theorists in the English speaking world. During the same decade Bonnemaïson established a reputation amongst both French and English speaking academics interested in population mobility in the Pacific Islands for his innovative research into the cultural meanings of journeys in contemporary Melanesian society. My own work on mobility in the Pacific was to draw inspiration from both the British Marxist geographer and the French cultural geographer.

This paper is not about my career, however. It is about a small episode in Bonnemaïson's intellectual journey where our paths fortuitously crossed in that most fertile of environments for the tropical geographer : "the field". For a brief time in the early 1970s the ideas which Bonnemaïson and I drew from our respective studies of ni-Vanuatu mobility around 1969 captured the attention of a wider academic audience. This paper reviews briefly these perspectives and contextualises them with reference to the very different geographies which we were writing at the time. My geography emphasised migration behaviour of individuals and families in "peasant" societies, and was heavily influenced by the writings of British and American geographers working in the Pacific and Africa. Bonnemaïson's geography was much more in the French tropical geography tradition of "man-land" relationships ; the study of what he called "geostructures".

By the mid-1970s Bonnemaïson was moving away from geostructures into a humanistic world where *"the purpose is to find the places where culture is expressed and, also, the sort of secret and emotional relation that links men to their land and grounds their cultural identity"* (Bonnemaïson, 1981 : 15). I have left this part of Bonnemaïson's intellectual journey to those who know much more about cultural geography and his examination of geosymbols. My purpose is to recall an earlier contribution ; one which stirred up some interesting debate amongst Pacific geographers and demographers in the 1970s, and which signalled the arrival of Bonnemaïson as a significant intellectual force in the late twentieth century historiography of geographical inquiry in the Pacific Islands.

### **A meeting**

In September 1969 I commenced intensive field inquiry into processes of population

movement in the anglophone village of Lumbukuti on the west coast of the small, central island of Tongoa in Vanuatu (then the Condominium of the New Hebrides). At this time, a French geographer was making a detailed study of society and economy in the francophone village of Itakuma on the east coast of Tongoa. It was not long before we met ; Tongoa is a small island.

We did not spend a lot of time in each other's field bases (or each other's "villages" as we possessively termed our research domains in the style of expatriate academics of the 1960s). Tongoa village society was quite strongly divided between the "British" and « French » sides ; indeed it was a microcosm of the Condominium, with the favoured meeting places between British (New Zealanders were in this category) and French being the bars of "third parties". In the case of Tongoa, it was Felix's bar in the centre of the island, close to the airport – the main source of imported foods, fuels and beer. Felix was a Tahitian. The three of us communicated in the common foreign language for all of us : bislama, or ni-Vanuatu pidgin. This was the "neutral" language for English speakers and French speakers in Vanuatu. My very poor French, and Bonnemaïson's rather better English (it improved enormously in subsequent years) were rarely used in our conversations on Tongoa.

It was clear to me from our early meetings that Joel Bonnemaïson was a man with a passion for research in the tropical world. He had already had considerable field experience in Madagascar. Tongoa was one of a number of islands he was "exploring" as possible field sites for intensive inquiry in Vanuatu. We were both treading on territory which the influential French anthropologist, Jean Guiart, had already claimed was "his". Academic imperialism was rife amongst the social sciences in the 1960s. Indeed, Guiart laid claim to many of the most "interesting" islands in Vanuatu which

were subsequently to attract considerable attention from Bonnemaïson (especially Tanna and Malekula). In the true Condominium style of the late 1960s, we agreed that we could avoid precipitating Anglo-Franco tensions by keeping out of each other's "villages", and letting the "British" and "French" styles of field research proceed independently.

### **An argument**

In 1969 there was considerable interest in patterns of population movement in Vanuatu, and in the Pacific in general. A major question was the extent to which internal migration was contributing to the rapid expansion of Pacific towns. There is no tradition of urban places in the Pacific Islands – towns in all of the island countries are an artefact of colonialism. At the time of Vanuatu's first official population census in 1967, the two towns of Port Vila and Santo (or Luganville) had a combined population of just over 5,636 out of a total population of 76,582 (only 7.4 percent of the total). In the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea the situation was similar: less than 10 per cent of the total population lived in towns. These Melanesian societies, as they entered the last third of the twentieth century, were very much rural societies. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that research into population mobility placed great emphasis on rural sources and rural destinations.

Yet there were challenges to this rural focus. After all, this was the time when "modernisation" theory was the dominant paradigm in the burgeoning literature on socio-economic change in the so-called "Third World". Modernisation was premised on an urban-industrial revolution; as one eminent Pacific geographer, who worked closely with Bonnemaïson from the late 1970s, said about Papua New Guinea in 1970: "if the towns are stunted, so will be the nation" (Ward, 1971, 107). The question which

intrigued many expatriate researchers at the time was: were the Melanesians who had moved into the towns likely to stay as urban residents, or were they still really rural residents who circulated between village and town, taking advantage of different sets of opportunities for social and economic advancement in two (or more) locations?

On the basis of evidence I collected on the mobility behaviour of ni-Vanuatu living on Tongoa and in Port-Vila in 1969, I concluded that they remained "villagers" much more than "town dwellers" in terms of their orientation to places they termed "home" (Bedford, 1971; 1973a; 1973b). Circular migration from rural bases, rather than rural-urban migration seemed to capture the essence of their mobility behaviour. There were logical reasons for such behaviour, notwithstanding an argument by some economists that circular migration was a transitory phenomenon (Bedford, 1971). Another very influential Pacific geographer of the day, Harold Brookfield, had developed a convincing argument that Melanesians were "risk minimisers" and circular migration was a highly rational risk-minimising strategy (Brookfield with Hart, 1971). I concluded that circular migration would continue to dominate internal migration in Vanuatu for many years to come.

### **A challenge**

Bonnemaïson's research on Tongoa in 1969 was not so much concerned with migration per se as a process. In his own assessment of his intellectual journey he writes about his research in the 1960s as follows: "I was attempting to ascertain a geostructure by measuring its components wherever possible: population, fields, habitat, production, soil analysis, and so forth. Such an approach was deliberately based on a survey of the system of production and the relevant conditions vis-a-vis the natural environment... The agra-

*rian system was considered from all angles*" (Bonnemaïson, 1981 : 27).

Bonnemaïson was concerned much more with the cultural ecology of ni-Vanuatu rural society. In this he was closer to writers like Brookfield than to population geographers like myself. The centre of my interest was mobility; the centre of Bonnemaïson's interest was a production system. Bonnemaïson was more attuned to the considerable diversity in "human-environment" relations in Vanuatu than I was. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that very soon after my interpretation of ni-Vanuatu population mobility as circulation appeared in print he began to raise questions about the generality of the phenomenon I had described.

In a series of articles published in French and English, he challenged the ubiquity of circular migration from a rural base, especially after the Vanuatu cash economy went into sharp recession in the early 1970s (Bonnemaïson, 1974a; 1974b; 1976; 1977a; 1977b). He developed a model of migration which placed much more emphasis on the extent to which island worlds were "small and full" (as in the case of Tongoa) or "large and lightly populated" (as in the case of Malekula). In the case of the "small, full" worlds, there had been much greater cultural disintegration and by the early 1970s a form of "wild" or "uncontrolled" rural-urban migration was replacing the circular forms of mobility I had emphasised in my research. In the "large and lightly populated" worlds, there was much greater cohesion of traditional societies, and circular migration remained the predominant form of population movement (Bonnemaïson, 1977a : 131).

In the 1980s the debate about patterns of migration in Vanuatu was taken a step further by Gerald Haberkorn (1987, 1989). Haberkorn spent 16 months in Vanuatu collecting data on mobility from villagers on the islands of Paama and Pentecost and their urban-resident

relatives and descendants in Port Vila and Santo. The title of his doctoral thesis sums up his primary research question : *Port-Port Vila : Transit Station or Final Stop ? Recent Developments in Ni-Vanuatu Population Mobility* (Haberkorn, 1987 ; 1989). His conclusion is summed up well in the following sentence : "*the emergence of towns as principal destinations for ni-Vanuatu migrants in recent years, in conjunction with the trend towards more permanent rural-urban relocations, should remind planners and politicians that assumptions about the eventual return of migrants, even if they cannot find adequate employment or proper housing, may reflect wishful thinking rather than any grasp of reality*" (Haberkorn, 1989 : 153).

Circular migration of the kind I had described in the late 1960s was seen to be a stage in the development of mobility systems in Vanuatu, much as Wilbur Zelinsky (1971) had argued would be the case in his classical paper on the "*Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition*". Indeed, Zelinsky, who was one of my doctoral thesis examiners, felt that my challenge to his general mobility transition was a bit like trying to look at the world from the wrong end of the telescope (Bedford, 1973a).

### **A new direction**

At a conference of Pacific mobility specialists in 1978 convened by Murray Chapman, the undisputed champion of circular mobility studies, Bonnemaïson questioned whether it was appropriate to examine circular migration in terms of flows, periodicity and statistical indices if the object was to understand the meaning of movement between places for ni-Vanuatu (Bonnemaïson, 1979 ; 1984 ; 1985 ; 1986). The question of more or less permanence of residence in town was not the critical issue for Bonnemaïson. Much more important was the continuity of time-honoured

cultural and spiritual relationships between ni-Vanuatu and their land. He concluded :

*"Mobility in Vanuatu is thus predominantly circular and shall remain so as long as the actual relationship between people and territory endures. Circular mobility continues to be structured by the existence of routes, old or new, which link local groups to some plantation areas, urban enterprises, or suburban locations... To attempt to account for social and cultural transformations in purely economic terms is clearly inadequate. Present patterns of mobility show both a series of rapid changes [such as the «wild» migration he described in the early 1970s] and some remarkably enduring features that can only be explained by a continuing cultural heritage; by, in particular, a profound sense of land and places. In this way, circular mobility appears a compromise between two sets of influences. There is, on the one hand, a cultural – if not religious – view of the world held by traditional society whose territorial links, principles of implantation, and forms of cultural fixity provide the general framework and, on the other, the pressures and attractions of an external economic and social space whose main components are the fluidity of people and goods" (Bonnemaïson, 1985 : 79).*

It was in unpacking this "compromise" that Bonnemaïson was to make his greatest contribution to the literature on ni-Vanuatu mobility in cultural context. His classic paper "The Tree and the Canoe : Roots and Mobility in Vanuatu Societies" (Bonnemaïson, 1984 : 117) outlines his resolution to the apparent contradiction between the ni-Vanuatu man as "*a tree that must take root and stay fixed in its place*" and the local group to which he belongs as "*a canoe that follows 'roads' and explores the wide world*". Bonnemaïson had left the world of geostructures and entered the world of geosymbols ; a world which he was to explore with great imagination and feeling in his higher doctoral dissertation (Bonnemaïson, 1986) and

through the remaining years of his academic life.

### **A little goes a long way...**

Late in 1970 Joel Bonnemaïson came to visit us in Canberra. Field work on Tongoa had been completed, at least for me, although for Bonnemaïson I sense his work in the villages was never complete. It was Bonnemaïson's first visit to Canberra, I think, and it was his first introduction to some strange customs of New Zealanders. One of these customs is to spread a yeast extract, Vegemite, on toast in the morning. Bonnemaïson had never come across Vegemite before. He was keen to try this new taste, but he was not prepared to listen to our caution that a little goes a long way.

In the enthusiastic way with which he was renowned for approaching the kava bowl in Vanuatu, he dug deep into the Vegemite jar and spread the black substance liberally across his toast. Within seconds of the toast reaching his mouth there was an explosion of bits of toast all over the table, a great deal of Gallic swearing, and a very distressed man fled to the bathroom and sluiced out his mouth with liberal quantities of cold water. Needless to say, he never touched Vegemite again.

Bonnemaïson was a man of great passion and feeling in his research. He was a man who was strongly motivated "*by a taste for adventure and travel and a search for a new style in human relations*" (Bonnemaïson, 1981 : 26). He could never have enough field work, and it is perhaps fitting that his untimely death in New Caledonia was while he was "in the field". As far as his writing is concerned, Bonnemaïson's ideas have had a powerful influence on research into population movement in Melanesian societies, both amongst French speaking and English speaking academics. It is clear from the liberal citations to his work in the literature on Pacific societies in the late twentieth century

that, like the Vegemite, a little of Bonnemaïson's potent intellectual contribution goes a long way.

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