

# Joël Bonnemaïson

## Profession : ethnographe

JEAN-MARC PHILIBERT AND MARGARET RODMAN

**D**URING ALL HIS CAREER, but perhaps even more so in his most recent research project, Joël Bonnemaïson particularly wanted to strengthen linkages with anthropology. No doubt there is much more that he would have done in this regard had his life not been so tragically cut short. However, we wish to point out that he was well on his way to achieving a remarkable synthesis of geography and anthropology. For him, each discipline enriched the other; this was evident in his research, his writing, and in informal scientific exchanges with other scholars. Joël Bonnemaïson's input benefited each of our anthropological research projects in Vanuatu, as he enriched so many scholars' projects. We believe that the linkages he nurtured between anthropology and geography will grow stronger as his work and influence live on over the years to come. We begin with an overview of his approach to Tannese culture and how it allowed him to resolve problems of social organization on Tanna that had caused anthropologists to gnash their teeth. We then move on to show how Joël Bonnemaïson's work contributes, at a theoretical level, to anthropologists' understanding of culture and space and, in practical terms, to improved ethnographic descriptions.

### **Joël Bonnemaïson on Tanna**

Although North American socio-cultural anthropology and French cultural geography belong to different social science disciplines, they nonetheless take culture as the central dimension of their study and this results, as it did in the case of Joël Bonnemaïson, in some overlap. More than once, a laughing Joël said that he considered himself more of an anthropologist than a geographer, though in latter years he came to believe, wrongly in our view, that anthropologists did not like his ethnography of Vanuatu. To anthropologists, his work is at once familiar, almost second nature one might say, yet also strangely offbeat: his descriptions of Vanuatu society and culture belong to earlier, more innocent times in the social sciences. However, to those of us working in Vanuatu, he was a consummate ethnographer writing what many of us would have liked to write, if it had not been for the restrictions imposed by recent canons in our discipline.

In studying a foreign society and its associated culture, a bridge is needed to cover the gap between the understanding, world view, values, and perceptions of the observer and those of members of the host community.

Furthermore, ethnographers are forced to rely on their observations and the information they obtain from a limited number of valued informants. A way must thus be found to move from this limited data to the shared knowledge that alone explains the regulated behaviour of local people in their daily life. This is accomplished by positing the idea of culture, a shared collective reality in the shape of an intellectual map acquired during socialization that subsequently guides the action of people. The attributes the observer gives to this concept, the template used to model the various cognitive, behavioural, and structural processes at work in social life, in other words the way culture is operationalized, all this will markedly influence the shape and content of ethnographic descriptions. Needless to say there is no one right way to conceptualize culture, only different ways as shown in the numerous variants of the notion of culture in use; the validity of the notion can only be measured against the ethnographer's objective, in other words, whether or not it is the clearest way to understanding the social phenomena under study. When it comes to culture, pragmatics matter more than principles.

We would like to explain how Bonnemaïson's notion of traditional culture, *kastom*, *la coutume*, differs from what is used in anthropology today (Philibert 1992). Since we believe we figure among the anthropologist friends whom he considered critical of his work, we thought we should explain the anthropological reaction to Joël's work in Vanuatu, while also pointing out his significant contribution to our knowledge of Vanuatu societies and cultures.

He considered the notion of place or territory central for the understanding of Vanuatu traditional cultures. He was not the only one to have seen that : indeed, many anthropologists recognized the sociological and cultural role played by a sense of place as

seen in the work of R. Rubinstein (1978) on Malo, L. Lindstrom (1990) on Tanna and M. Rodman (1986, 1987) on Ambae. However, what separates Joël Bonnemaïson from these anthropologists is that he did not consider the idea of culture-as-mental-map to be simply a metaphor ; indeed, he took the expression literally. He was convinced that Vanuatu societies are in essence "geographic societies" based on an organic unity of culture and place (earth, land, safe territory, and religious landscape) and that ni-Vanuatu believe that humans grow from the soil like plants. Secondly, a serendipitous meeting of minds took place between a geographer fascinated by island landscapes, for which he later invented the word *îléité*, and the intellectual landscape of the Tannese. This is how he saw Tannese culture :

*« Culture is in a way an extension of the earth, a "law of the earth" inscribed on the territory and bound up with magical powers sprung from the sacred ground ; it can only be practised by men whose forefathers were bred out of that territory. There is thus a profound identification between blood (kinship) and earth (territory), hence the foundation of a very strong territorial ideology... What is called kastom (traditional culture) in the New Hebrides [Vanuatu] hinges on this law of the earth »*

(Bonnemaïson 1980 : 183, our translation).

Anthropologists now use models of culture that are partly or wholly confrontational. They take note in any social group of varying understandings of a given culture ; they witness the introduction of new meanings that displace old ones ; they observe people competing with others to ensure that their own perspective becomes the established communal view. A heightened sense of historical contingency and a greater attention to the politics of culture characterize recent anthropological descriptions. Such a dynamic model of culture is a long way from the cultural *longue durée* that

Joël Bonnemaïson used when he looked upon unchanging Tannese landscapes as the guarantee of an undying traditional culture. L. Lindstrom (1990) offers a very different view of Tannese society in which geographical and cultural knowledges are a political tool for maintaining social disparity among Tannese, rather than being a collective production devoid of sectional interests. It may seem ironic that the island of Tanna should be the locale in which such opposite views of culture are argued, but we are fortunate that it is so. While Bonnemaïson's ethnography may seem a little old fashioned to some, it nonetheless offers a totalizing view of Tannese culture at a time when anthropologists seem to have lost the secret of such descriptions.

Bonnemaïson's work had a direct bearing on the ethnography of Vanuatu as he helped solve riddles that had eluded anthropologists. Until the publication of his *Les fondements d'une identité*, vol. 2 : *Tanna : Les hommes-lieux* (1987), the only monograph on Tanna was Jean Guiart's *Un siècle et demi de contacts culturels à Tanna* (1956) which described a complex social organization in which kinship, economic, political, and religious institutions combined in mysterious ways. Tannese society was organized around a very tight spatial/social grid controlling the movement of people and goods and a hierarchical system of titles devoid of real social authority. Jean Guiart had counted 1,100 titles on Tanna in 1953 when the estimated adult male population was 1,790 (as reported in Brunton 1979 : 103). The paradox about Tannese social organization was that of "an atomistic society with a lot of structure" (Brunton 1979 : 102), far too much institutional structure for the little it did. Bonnemaïson used ethnogeography to reconstruct the inner logic accounting for Tannese social organization. He first mapped the *swatu* (roads) linking over 200 *nakamals* (dancing places) and the mythical roads followed by *kapiel* (magical

stones) until they came to a stop ; he tied this to the myth documenting the killing of a sea monster *semo-semo* and the dispersal of the pieces of his body over the island that accounted for the name and territory of Tannese political groups ; finally, he linked the above to the idea of first appearance whereby each group is attached to a root-place where founding ancestors are said to have emerged. He made solving the problem of Tannese social organization look so simple that our admiration for his work was coloured by the tiniest bit of irritation that it should be a geographer who managed that.

### **Joël Bonnemaïson's contribution to the anthropology of space**

Bonnemaïson's work goes beyond the simple ethnography of Vanuatu to complement recent trends in anthropology. Of these, we single out two here : his emphasis on the power of people's attachment to place, and the combination of precision and poetry in his approach to understanding the meaning of territory.

#### ***Power of place***

« Place attachment » is an interdisciplinary concern of environment and behaviour studies that crosses into anthropology and geography. To the best of our knowledge, Joël never used the phrase, but his work directly addressed the issue in a particularly productive way. The power of place on Tanna, as he described it, resides in rootedness, boundaries, and bridges. He understood attachment to a place at a deeply personal level. Any of us who saw him at his home in Gascony could appreciate at first hand the bond that connected him, despite all his travels, to those sun-drenched hills. He understood the Tannese attachment to place in part because of how much his own home in the French countryside, perfidiously called Waterloo, meant to him (he tried once to change its name, but gave up in the face of local

attachment to the old name). He also understood people on Tanna for two additional reasons : he explored their territories on foot and he listened attentively to their stories.

The power of place to shape and express people's identity was clear in his work on Tanna. But rootedness was only half of the story : without movement to provide contrast, rootedness would be meaningless. Mythic movements of stones and heroes on Tanna described paths and intersections, roads and nodes, fundamental to contemporary as well as traditional social organization. Relationships between attachment to a particular place, on the one hand, and movements of people, objects, and even ideas in chains of human connectedness, on the other, gave rise to a relatively egalitarian society on Tanna. Joël Bonnemaison characterized it as "reticulated" and dispersed rather than hierarchical and centralized.

He drew attention to the dynamic importance of boundaries and edges of territories, and to border crossings as pathways for social and material exchanges that linked groups while reinforcing their separate identities. In this regard, his work integrates an older, structuralist approach to anthropology with current interests in the socio-cultural construction of boundaries (e.g., Pellow, 1996) and the relationship between rootedness and movement in the meaning of place (e.g., Feld and Basso, 1996 ; Jackson, 1995 ; Rensel and Rodman, 1997 ; Weiner, 1991).

### ***Precision and poetry***

A tireless field researcher, Bonnemaison used methods that included those of anthropology as well as geography. Further, we believe that he nudged the anthropologists with whom he came in contact in the direction of greater methodological rigour. The precision of his fieldwork on Tanna was remarkable. He could describe in detail the complete agricultural

cycle, how to grow a yam, raise a pig, and how to make the drink from the kava plant that sustains Tannese male social life. He understood kinship systems, the distribution of language groups, and the cultural differences between Tannese who came from different regions of the island. His work was predicated on a thorough grounding in ethnohistory and the history of contact with missionaries, government, traders, and settlers. Anthropologists like to claim as their *modus operandi* the holistic approach used by Bonnemaison, but few in practice follow it as comprehensively and successfully as he did.

Maps were fundamental building blocks of his analysis. In this regard, he was a consummate geographer and his example is one from which anthropologists have much to learn. The maps he used were not necessarily pre-existing ones, but rather maps that he made *sur le terrain*, often in conjunction with a surveyor. His conviction that such maps were crucial for anthropologists as well as geographers was evident, for example, in the fact that he provided Rodman with the services of one of the ORSTOM survey teams to help her map land holdings in the Longana district of Ambae island. He felt, rightly, that only with the assistance of a surveyor would the maps be topographically accurate, and that this went hand in hand with ethnographic accuracy. The maps in his posthumously published *Les Gens des Lieux* (1997) were made during intensive fieldwork on Tanna in the late 1970s. They are as useful twenty years later as they were when they were drawn, perhaps even more so.

Joël Bonnemaison's maps of group territories juxtaposed with his maps of the mythic movement of stones, suggest the skill with which he combined precise data with poetic interpretation. This was especially evident in his prose. His writing is often beautiful and powerful, as when he summarizes the

ephemerality of nineteenth century English traders on west coast Tanna :

« *The horses of White Grass have multiplied into wild herds since they were introduced by the English ; there are also some abandoned cotton plants, and a few memories that the Tannese did not care to turn into myths, so insignificant was this episode in their eyes* » (1994 : 198).

In his combination of rigorous method with lucid, empathetic prose, Joël Bonnemaïson sets a standard to which anthropologists can and, we feel, should aspire. Too often in current Anthropology there is a gulf between empirical research and interpretative, narrative analysis. This is a gap that this master ethnographer knew how to fill seamlessly.

Joël Bonnemaïson, the ethnographer, judged harshly the recent anthropological theories according to which his description of Tannese culture was too normative, too well-integrated. He dismissed it as an "anthropology of suspicion", a trend that was demeaning both to the observer and to members of the host community. Time will tell if he was right in this respect. What is sure, however, is that his work in Vanuatu will stand the test of time and will become an irreplaceable source of knowledge for future generations of ni-Vanuatu. Anthropologists say jokingly (and sometimes half-believe) that societies get the anthropologist they deserve. If there is any truth to this, then it must be said the Tannese could not have found a more perceptive and generous interpreter than Joël Bonnemaïson.

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