Language, Space and Identity in Vanuatu

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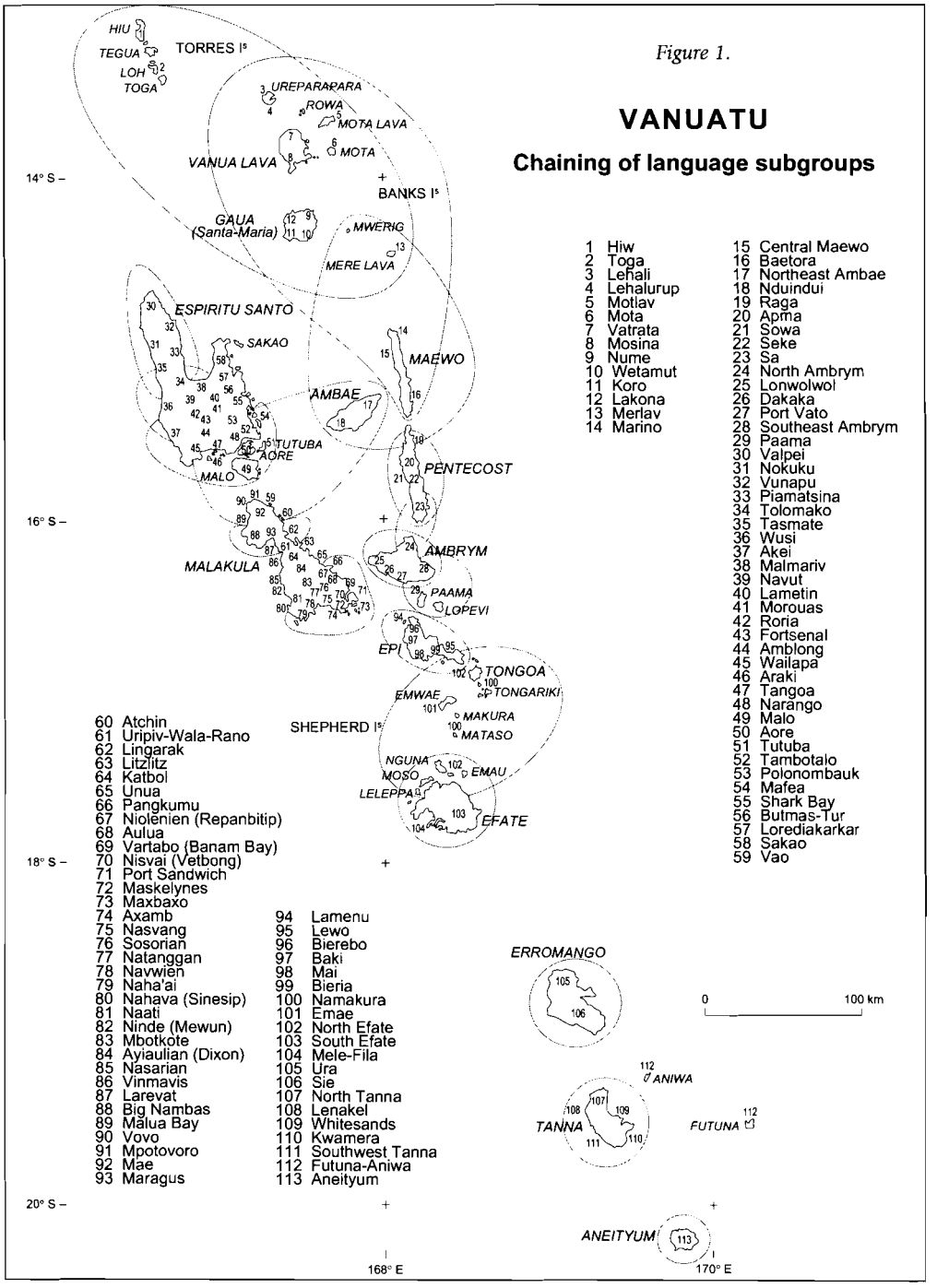
THE QUESTION OF REGIONAL GROUPINGS and identity in Vanuatu society has been central to the interests of geographers, linguists and anthropologists in the South Pacific from the late nineteenth century until the present. Among the leading contributors from the perspective of cultural geography was Joël Bonnemaison, from the time of his earliest work in Vanuatu from the late 1960s until his untimely death in 1997. Bonnemaison (1972, 1974, 1979, 1985, 1986, 1996) covered nearly all of the archipelago, with significant studies of regional groupings and identities in Maewo, Ambae and Pentecost in the north, in central Vanuatu, and especially in his classic study of Tanna society.

Bonnemaison's geographic interests found their linguistic complement in the work of the present writer, whose linguistic enquiries in Vanuatu began at the same time as Bonnemaison's. In fact, as a result of Tryon's (1976) classification of the languages of Vanuatu, a close personal and professional relationship developed, resulting in a number of joint projects, not the least of which was the series of interrelated articles which appeared in Vanuatu Océanie (Bonnemaison, Huffman, Kaufmann & Tryon, editors, 1996, 1997).

Looking at Vanuatu from a linguistic standpoint, there are 113 extant indigenous languages spoken today for a population of only 170,000 (Tryon, 1997). What does this mean in terms of linguistic space and identity? One might be tempted to think of a very fragmented society or set of societies with distinct and defensive boundaries. In some senses this is true, in that language is seen in Vanuatu as a kind of badge or emblem clearly demarcating one group or society from another. Ni-Vanuatu are alert to and fully cognisant of language similarities and differences, right down to the sub-dialect level. This language awareness is enhanced by the multilingual character of almost every Vanuatu society, where exogamous marriage is the norm, with the result that children grow up speaking the languages of both parents, and normally the languages of neighbouring areas (plus English or French, and the Melanesian pidgin Bislama).

This language awareness springs from another source, too, namely an awareness of the existence of chains of societies which amount to linguistic subgroups. These chains have striking cultural correlates. What are these

Figure 1.


VANUATU
Chaining of language subgroups
HIU
TEGUA
TORRES Is
LOH
TOGA
UREPARAPARA
ROWA
MOTA LAVA
MOTA
VANUA LAVA
BANKS Is
GAUA
(Santa-Maria)
MWERIG
MERE LAVA
ESPIRITU SANTO
SAKAO
MAEWO
AMBAE
TUTUBA
AORE
MALO
PENTECOST
AMBRYM
MALAKULA
PAAMA
LOPEVI
EPI
TONGOA
TONGARIKI
EMWAE
MAKURA
MATASO
SHEPHERD Is
NGUNA
MOSO
EMAU
LELEPPA
EFATE
ERROMANGO
ANIWA
TANNA
FUTUNA
ANEITYUM
0
100 km
14° S
16° S
18° S
20° S
168° E
170° E
1 Hiw
2 Toga
3 Lehali
4 Lehalurup
5 Motlav
6 Mota
7 Vatrata
8 Mosina
9 Nume
10 Wetamut
11 Koro
12 Lakona
13 Merlav
14 Marino
15 Central Maewo
16 Baetora
17 Northeast Ambae
18 Nduindui
19 Raga
20 Apma
21 Sowa
22 Seke
23 Sa
24 North Ambrym
25 Lonwolwol
26 Dakaka
27 Port Vato
28 Southeast Ambrym
29 Paama
30 Valpei
31 Nokuku
32 Vunapu
33 Piamatsina
34 Tolomako
35 Tasmate
36 Wusi
37 Akei
38 Malmariv
39 Navut
40 Lametin
41 Morouas
42 Roria
43 Fortsenal
44 Amblong
45 Wailapa
46 Araki
47 Tangoa
48 Narango
49 Malo
50 Aore
51 Tutuba
52 Tambotalo
53 Polonombauk
54 Mafea
55 Shark Bay
56 Butmas-Tur
57 Lorediakarkar
58 Sakao
59 Vao
60 Atchin
61 Uripiv-Wala-Rano
62 Lingarak
63 Litzlitz
64 Katbol
65 Unua
66 Pangkumu
67 Niolenien (Repanbitip)
68 Aulua
69 Vartabo (Banam Bay)
70 Nisvai (Vetbong)
71 Port Sandwich
72 Maskelynes
73 Maxbaxo
74 Axamb
75 Nasvang
76 Sosorian
77 Natanggan
78 Navwien
79 Naha'ai
80 Nahava (Sinesip)
81 Naati
82 Ninde (Mewun)
83 Mbotkote
84 Ayiaulian (Dixon)
85 Nasarian
86 Vinmavis
87 Larevat
88 Big Nambas
89 Malua Bay
90 Vovo
91 Mpotovoro
92 Mae
93 Maragus
94 Lamenu
95 Lewo
96 Bierebo
97 Baki
98 Mai
99 Bieria
100 Namakura
101 Emae
102 North Efate
103 South Efate
104 Mele-Fila
105 Ura
106 Sie
107 North Tanna
108 Lenakel
109 Whitesands
110 Kwamera
111 Southwest Tanna
112 Futuna-Aniwa
113 Aneityum

chains and how are they constituted? Put simply, languages often diversify by dialect differentiation, which occurs when a language has spread geographically so that it is spoken in more than one settlement. Evidence for dialect differentiation consists of innovations shared by all members of the group and/or innovations which link communalects in a chain or network. In a chain, language/dialect A shares one or two innovations with B, B with C, C with D, and so on. This situation arises because an innovation may arise in any communalect of the chain and spread to its neighbours, so that the geographical domains of the various innovations may overlap.

The term chain is commonly used to describe the situation where communalects have spread along a coastline, each most closely related to its neighbours on either side. The term network is normally used to describe the situation where communalects are scattered over a land area or archipelago, having neighbours on more than two sides and often sharing innovations with several of these.

In Vanuatu this chaining phenomenon is illustrated in Figure1.

In terms of identity and allegiance, ni-Vanuatu distinguish a number of levels which reflect linguistic and cultural realities. The primary level is obviously one's immediate family, clan and home village and/or nakamal, depending on which area of Vanuatu is being considered. However, there are higher levels recognised, and it is these levels which correspond to the chaining phenomenon described above. Thus, for example, Figure 1 shows that there is a language grouping, defined by the chaining mechanism just discussed (based on shared linguistic innovations), which includes all of the Torres and Banks Islands in the far north of Vanuatu. There is another which includes only the Banks Islands (Ureparapara, Mota Lava, Mota, Vanua Lava, Gaua, Mwerig and Mere Lava). Yet another links all of the Torres and Banks Islands together with Maewo. A fourth overlapping group links the southern Banks Islands (Mwerig and Mere Lava), Maewo, Ambae and north Pentecost. The overlapping chain phenomenon then extends west across to Santo and Malakula and south through Pentecost and Ambrym as far as Paama.

Each of these groupings has cultural and societal correlates. Thus, for example, the Banks and Torres Islands recognise a common culture hero, Qat. In terms of the graded society (*nimanggi*) which links all of north and central Vanuatu, the Banks and Torres group does not indulge in great pig-killing sacrifices as a prerequisite for rank-taking, but rather makes a much more modest use of pigs, compared to Ambae, Santo and Malakula. On the other hand, shell money is used extensively throughout the Banks and Torres for ceremonial and ritual purposes. It is hardly used at all outside this group. Ambae, Maewo and north Pentecost share a common culture hero also, namely Tagaro, whose home was reputedly Maewo. Ni-Vanuatu are very much aware of these larger groupings, within which there is often shared ritual (as for example between north-east Malakula and Ambae), trade and exchange of ritual goods.

Huffman (1997), Tryon (1997), and Bonnemaison (1979, 1985) discuss this phenomenon for northern and central Vanuatu, the main lines of which may be summarised as follows:

— shell money was traded, mainly for pigs, throughout the Banks and Torres Islands and between the Banks Islands and Maewo, Ambae and the north of Santo.

— pottery was traded from west Santo right around Santo and south via Malo and Vao, and along the east coast of Malakula and beyond, as far as Lamenu Island (Epi).

— pigs were traded between Malakula, Ambrym, Pentecost and Ambae, for grade-taking purposes and for the purchase of women.

— nambas, bark belts and plaited belts were traded for pigs between northern Malakula and Ambrym.

— mats were traded between Pentecost, Ambae, Malo and north Malakula.

— dye, especially red dye, was traded from south Santo to north Malakula.

— foodstuffs, especially yams and taro, were widely traded, especially between inland and coastal regions.

There were a number of major trading centres through which goods flowed. These included Rowa (for the Banks Islands), north-east Ambae (with Maewo and Pentecost), west Ambae (with Pentecost, Malo, Vao and east coast Malakula), Malo and Vao (probably the largest trading crossroads), west Ambrym and south-east Malakula, and Lamenu (Epi). Of course trading was not confined to an inter-island network. On the larger islands, especially Malakula and Santo, there were well-established trade networks. Bonnemaison (1974) has further documented intra-island trading for Ambae and Maewo.

While trade networks are better documented for the central and northern areas of Vanuatu, well-established networks also existed in the southern islands, between Efate and Erromango, and throughout the five southern islands (Erromango, Tanna, Futuna, Aniwa and Aneityum).

Returning to the theme of larger language subgroupings and their correlates in terms of common identity and allegiance in Vanuatu, while there are indeed chains of communities or social groups linked by overlapping sets of linguistic innovations (lexical and grammatical), there is fairly clearly a tripartite division of Vanuatu languages (and societies). The languages of Vanuatu are more closely related to one another internally than to any language group outside. The Vanuatu Subgroup of the Austronesian languages falls into three internal groupings, a Northern, a Central and a Southern Vanuatu group. The Northern and Central Vanuatu groups (all of the islands north of and including Efate) are more closely related to each other linguistically than they are to the Southern group (see Figure 2).

The Northern Vanuatu group includes all of the languages of the Banks and Torres Islands, Santo, Maewo, Ambae and the northern part of Pentecost. The Central Vanuatu group comprises the languages of central and southern Pentecost, Ambrym, Malakula, Paama, Epi, Efate and the Shepherd Islands). The Southern Vanuatu group consists of the languages of Erromango, Tanna and Aneityum.

It should be noted that there are three languages in Vanuatu which remain outside this higher level grouping. These are the three Polynesian Outlier languages spoken in Vanuatu, namely Futuna-Aniwa (in the south) and Mele-Fila and Emwae (spoken on Efate and in the Shepherd Islands just to the north). These languages belong to the Samoic-Outlier subgroup of the Polynesian languages (which in turn are members of the Central Pacific subgroup of the Oceanic languages).

Interestingly, the three major subgroups of Vanuatu languages correspond to three major cultural areas, recognised as such by many Ni-Vanuatu. There are many manifestations of overt cultural markers which serve as emblems of identity in each group, the most striking of which are:

— In the Northern subgroup (see Figure 2) traditional male dress consists of rectangular dyed woven mats, whereas in the Central and Southern Vanuatu subgroups, nambas (penis-wrappers) are worn (There is a transitional zone in central Pentecost).

— In the Northern subgroup, drums are horizontal, while in the Central Vanuatu subgroup, right down to Efate, the southern limit of the subgroup, they are upright. In the area cove-

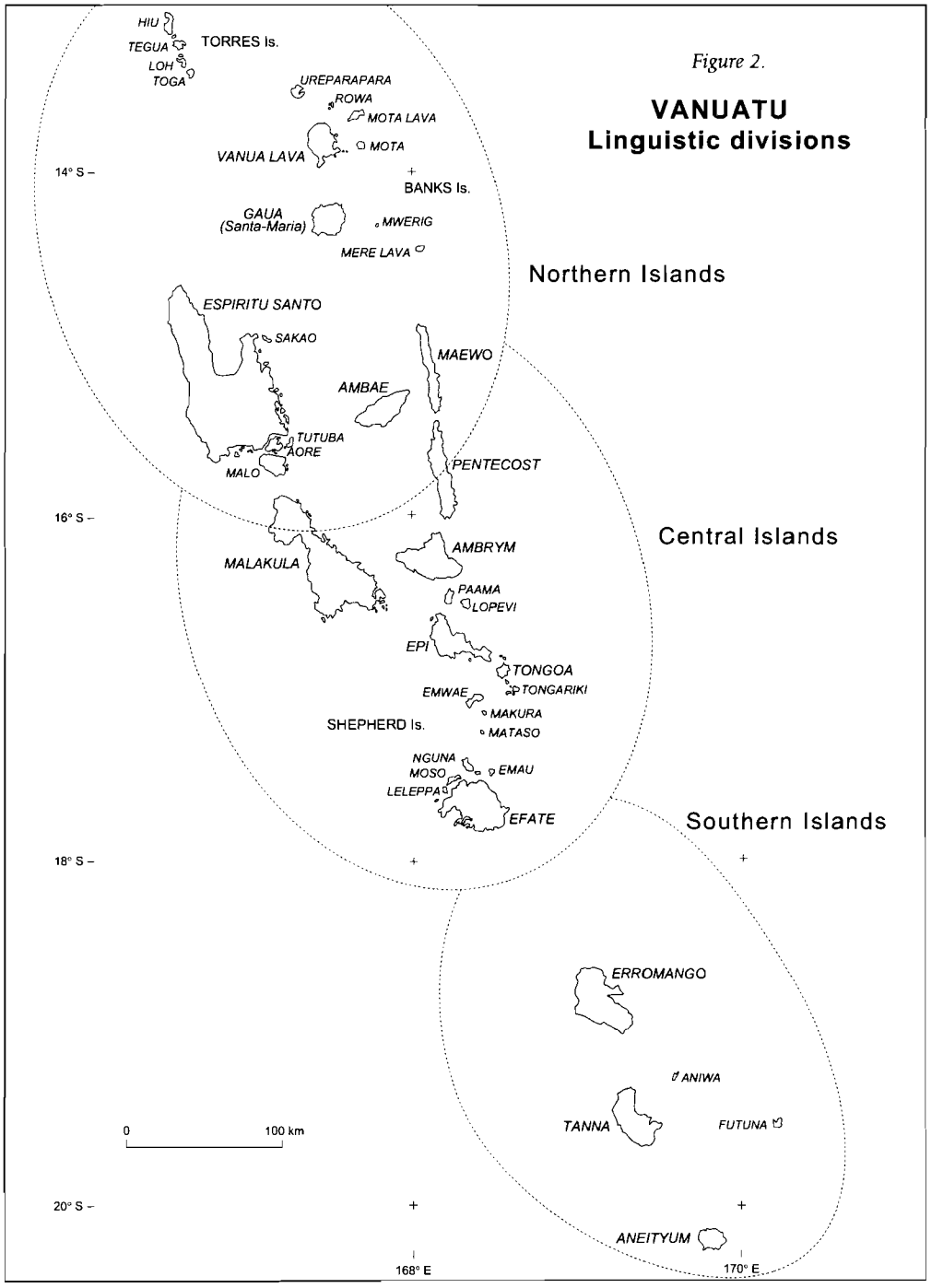


Figure 2.

VANUATU
Linguistic divisions

red by the Southern Vanuatu subgroup there are no slit-drums at all.

In addition, in the Northern subgroup the graded society (sukwe) is matrilineal, whereas in the Central area, where it is practised (everywhere except Efate and the Shepherd Islands), that society (nimanggi) is patrilineal.

It is evident, therefore, that in Vanuatu there are a number of different levels with regard to the use of geographical space and identity, which are recognised by all Ni-Vanuatu and which operate simultaneously, the level in focus at any given moment being determined by the political consideration in view.

This brings us to consider the impact of the languages of colonialism in Vanuatu, English and French, the identities which they create vis-à-vis identities based on traditional language and community divisions, and also the role of Bislama, an English-based pidgin, proclaimed as the national language in the Vanuatu constitution ; for these languages occupied a different geographical space and create quite different identities from those generated by language in traditional Vanuatu societies.

There has been until now, and still today, perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, a linguistic and religious nexus which in more recent times has had political ramifications. In the nineteenth century, first the Presbyterian and Anglican churches and later the Catholic church evangelised the greater part of what was then the New Hebrides, an Anglo-French condominium from 1906 until independence and the emergence of the Republic of Vanuatu in 1980.

There was no government schooling provided in Vanuatu until the 1960s, education (and, for the most part, health) being the exclusive province of the churches. The anglophone churches used English as the medium of instruction (Mota, a language of the Banks Islands, being used in the Anglican church from 1864 until 1931), while the Catholic church, which was established in Vanuatu only in 1887, used French in its mission schools. What in fact this created, was a dual society in which Presbyterians and Anglicans spoke English as well as local vernaculars, while products of the Catholic mission system spoke French. This set of identities, which transcended traditional language boundaries, was compounded with the development of politics and ultimate independence in the 1970s. For political parties at independence, and even at the present time in a more limited way, were aligned with linguistic and religious affiliations. The Vanuaaku Party consisted almost entirely of Anglophone Presbyterians and Anglicans, while what turned out to be the opposition party in the first governments after independence, the Union of Moderate Parties, was very largely Francophone. Considerable bitterness erupted between political parties as the Francophones, especially those employed in the various branches of the public service, were seen to be increasingly marginalised. This situation was not redressed until a Francophone party won government in 1991.

There is no question even today that being Anglophone or Francophone creates an identity, a group allegiance which in many cases cross-cuts traditional groupings, in spite of the fact that strenuous efforts have been made to develop common school curricula. However, this should not be viewed negatively. It is quite normal and fundamental, not just in Oceania, but worldwide, that the fact of speaking a certain language automatically creates a group identity for speakers of that particular language.

There is only one language in Vanuatu which is spoken nation-wide, namely Bislama, an English-based pidgin which developed in the nineteenth century, as a maritime, trade and plantation language which provided a common medium of expression in an area of the world characterised by a vast number of

different languages. It is this language which was declared a national language in the Vanuatu constitution, although it is not used as a language of education. The first Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Father Walter Lini, made every effort to use Bislama, especially on radio, to create a feeling of nationhood in Vanuatu. Bislama is still very much a spoken medium, and with the passage of time some feeling of common identity as a nation state has been engendered by its use in all situations throught the country, especially as Ni-Vanuatu have become much more aware of the world beyond their shores.

In conclusion, there are multiple and sometimes contradictory levels of space and identity, and therefore allegiance, predicated on language in Vanuatu today. Some of these reflect traditional societal groupings, while others reflect the colonial history of this former Anglo-French Condominium.

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