

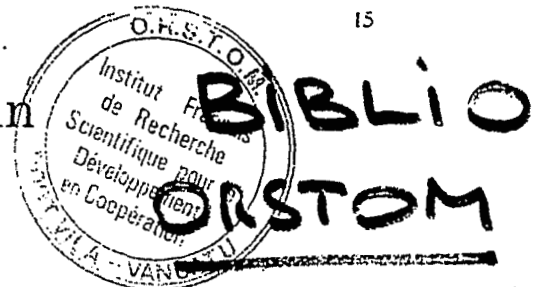
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15

Custom and Politics in the New Hebrides

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FROM the 1914 protocol between France and Britain, until the first national elections in the New Hebrides in 1975, the archipelago experienced the most quaint and sad kind of colonialism. It was odd for foreigners like journalists, lawyers and businessmen, but a sad condition for the New Hebrideans themselves who were without citizenship and nationality, and without legal rights.

Ninety-five per cent of the Melanesian population was colonized by the three per cent of Europeans who owned and held power. The Melanesian communities had a practical freedom to manage their own local affairs through custom chiefs and church leaders but they had no access to politics.

The purpose of this short article is to explain the connections between custom and politics, until the beginning of political life in the New Hebrides in the 1970's.

Custom and the two colonial powers

WHEN at the beginning of this century the British and the French agreed to rule the New Hebrides jointly, they expected to do it passively, just protecting their own citizens: mainly British missionaries and planters. In the New Hebrides, the British have since that time been interested in souls and the French in land. No serious development took place in the Melanesian communities because each administration ruled selected communities, missions or plantation areas. The joint regulations were mainly negative prohibiting drinking and fighting.

The value of custom was still very strong. Except for few changes like churches in plantations, the Melanesians had to face the contact with a customary background. Obviously they were engaged on a long term process from the cultural and economic point of view. But little changed except restrictive rules to end customary fights, war and cannibalism which quickly disappeared.

Some churches, mainly Presbyterian, fought against custom as a kind of different humanism, but even if they were successful in gaining Christians, the social background of daily life remained controlled by customary rules. After years of conflict, many missions started to accept the existence of custom, almost tactically. Christianity and customary behaviour were reconcilable as some Anglican communities proved.

It is hard to say that there is not some suspicion about custom, but the coexistence of Christianity and custom is accepted as a practical reality by a lot of people.

It seems that indirect rule as it is usually practised by the British, and the incapacity of the French to use a direct administration in the New Hebrides Condominium context like in New Caledonia, protected traditional life which is still strong now, in comparison with other Pacific islands. A double colonial administration is the worst basis for development but it protected local culture in some aspects as in daily life the French and the British very often cancelled each



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other's actions out. The size of the archipelago and the lack of easy communications permitted a lot of communities to be in very loose contact with district agents. We can say that custom appears to have been the only Melanesian system before metropolitan administrative control.

Church structures are much more important than the activities of District Agents. When the churches are controlled by the Melanesians themselves they are the only organizations which can compete with custom as a system of rules. In fact in many villages we see a sharing of influence between church and custom. There are custom values for marriage, land, rank and prestige which are all connected with the Melanesian people's history and heredity. There are Christian values for social behaviour such as everyday communication, community development, new social groups and activities which are mainly linked with the kind of modern life imported by the Whites that Melanesians have to face now.

Before the beginning of a Melanesian political life in the New Hebrides, these two kinds of behaviours and values were after some conflicts able to coexist. The gap between an inefficient formal administration and the local community ruled by custom and church leaders permitted the existence of a fairly peaceful relationship between different worlds like plantations, churches, administration and Melanesian communities.

The first element of political awareness in the New Hebrides probably started with the presence of American troops during World War Two. The main impact of their presence was a cargo cult kind but it also expressed small-scale Melanesian dissatisfaction, still far away from any nationalistic feeling. That is

why we must mention some social movements which started before 1970.

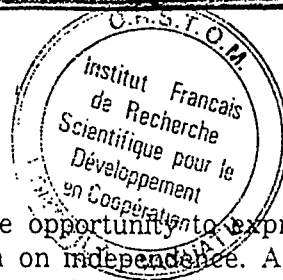
Custom movements before 1970

A PART from some previous "cults" of anthropological interest, the most important custom movement is now the Nagriamel. It was born in 1964 in reaction to land alienation on the island of Santo and quickly extended its influence to many islands in the northern New Hebrides. The main aim of Nagriamel activity was to give back land to the natives by reacting against European land pressure, mainly from French planters and societies. After the Second World War, American roads made Melanesian land, which before was of little interest for copra and cattle, more accessible.

In 1970, Nagriamel was the main group involved in land conflicts. Its monopoly of land fights, the support of 10,000 to 15,000 members and one man leadership, made this movement very attractive, especially for the numerous people with land claims.

The Nagriamel was born as a custom movement. Customary ideology is the basis of its legitimacy and it started with the support of custom chiefs from the Santo bush area. Leadership was given to a half-caste who was able to convey Melanesian frustration and to start an efficient resistance to the planters protected by the law and District Agents.

Nagriamel is a contradictory movement. It has realistic aims such as land return and development, but at the same time there is a strong cargo cult atmosphere in it. Nagriamel members were politically progressive when they claimed land and titles or when they fought against planters and were dealt with by the law but its leaders and members are from amongst less educated New Hebrideans. Lack of education makes



them easy to trap. Nagriamel stands for a custom revival and promised a "flag for natives" at its outset. If land claims against foreign owners were a matter of cohesion among the New Hebrideans, the strong custom background of Nagriamel's activities quickly separated the movement from many churches. All the churches were accepted inside the Nagriamel but to magnify the importance of custom made the churches suspicious, probably not about the aims but about the method of the movement. The churches did not support the movement and some of them openly criticized Nagriamel activities. Nagriamel success quickly appeared to be in competition with church leaders.

The lack of understanding between Nagriamel's non-educated members and newly educated church leaders has had serious consequences for the New Hebrides. To clarify the meaning of this custom movement we can say that it did not start with any kind of political awareness. In 1970, Nagriamel asked for independence. This independence was not intended to be independence for the New Hebrides but independence for Nagriamel to have land and make plantations on it.

This fact is understandable if we remember that Nagriamel members and leaders are uneducated and primarily interested in freedom for small communities. They have a strong cultural awareness. That is probably the main difference between a custom movement and a nationalistic political party. It is a political shame when custom movements become the puppets of conservative interests in an independence context.

Custom and the 1975 elections

IN November 1975, the New Hebrideans elected a representative Assembly. For the first time Melanesians

had the opportunity to express their own opinion on independence. As the National Party was the only party for a short-term independence, with a coherent clientele mainly composed of members of the Anglican and Presbyterian communities, conservative forces had to build a coalition seeking a middle-term independence. This appeared to be a political alibi used because of fear of a short-term independence. The initiative was European when MANH (Mouvement d'Action Néohébridais) started in Santo in 1974, and UCNH (Union des Communautés des Nouvelles Hébrides) began in Vila. Party members were small businessmen, planters, and some of their workers. They had no programme except "Us or confusion". The parties were short of Melanesian troops and had to win support from people who were against the National Party. These people were followers of custom movements like Nagriamel and the John Frum movement which for many years had been in conflict with the Presbyterian and other churches.

Their dissatisfaction made them easy to catch and to guide politically. Often the less educated people are, the more conservative they are. Custom is potentially conservative in itself, especially when there is no way to express a local and cultural feeling to an urbanized elite of government. The gap we have already described between church leaders and the people was deeply exploited by European leaders of MANH and UCNH.

The MANH party of Santo connected itself with the Nagriamel movement and a small "so-called" customary party, the Tabwemassana, established by a European with urban workers. Criticizing together the Condominium Government they joined on a development programme which only seemed to operate with European political presence giving

satisfaction to European small business and to Nagriamel's cargo projects.

In fact the Nagriamel's leader was the only one concerned by this mixture of European fear, half-caste interests and Melanesian frustrations; because Nagriamel followers never understood or made a choice about this alliance. Elections remained for them "white man's business".

The famous John Frum cargo cult received some shirts and watches from the UCNH, and many promises about local development and facilities after elections. Sponsored by a wealthy conservative political leader from New Caledonia UCNH expanded its attention to all customary people mainly in the south and the MANH party concentrated in the north of the archipelago. Some local customary movements like the Capiel on Tanna were created just a few weeks before the elections as a result of involvement by the District Agent. In the middle of 1975, UCNH and MANH were the centre of many expectations and promises. They became a new political cargo cult or a political use of cargo expectations.

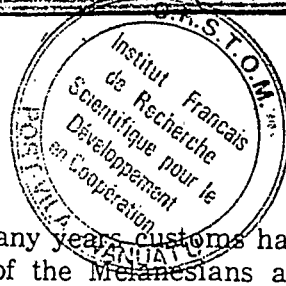
Urban elections for town councils were a success for this coalition as they involved mainly Europeans, half-castes and some urban workers under pressure from their bosses and the urban atmosphere dominated by Europeans.

The November 1975 elections for a Representative Assembly were organized by a joint regulation typical of the Condominium's contradictions. Apart from members from the universal suffrage, four custom chiefs had to be elected by all the custom chiefs. Economic concerns like co-operatives and businesses had to elect members too. So the Assembly appeared to be a mixture of democracy and pater-

nalistic behaviour. The conservative coalition had already received a strong defeat in front of the National Party which won 57% of the quoted votes. John Frum followers helped UCNH to reach 20%, but the MANH and Nagriamel alliance appeared to be a failure with only two seats. The most surprising aspect of these two seats was the victory of a European planter's son from the bush near Santo, one of the most remote areas in the New Hebrides without any Europeans. A new vote had to be organized later after many objections about improper practices, especially in Santo.

After this vote interest about custom started again when it appeared that the National Party would possibly lose its majority with the election of four conservative custom chiefs. From September 1975 to June 1976, the election of these four custom chiefs had been at the centre of New Hebrides political life. The two governments, through the French and British District Agents, with their own concepts of custom, interfered a lot with the election without any legitimacy. Elected members were refused by District Agents for lack of valid customary genealogy or on other such pretexts.

At that time a "customary terrorism" started in Santo. Custom was called upon by anybody in the New Hebrides. Tabwemassana followers badly injured 40 National Party members during a demonstration in Santo. This first political fight between Melanesians was done in the name of custom. Tabwemassana troops used customary rationalisations to block a political march. This 1976 event is politically important for the New Hebrideans and it is a clear symbol of the involvement of customs in politics. As the two governments were totally unable to help the election of custom chiefs, but of-



ten divided people on the local scale, the Assembly started its work in June 1976, seven months after its elections and without custom chiefs.

From 1976 to 1978

AFTER the work in the Representative Assembly started, many claims about elected chiefs' legitimacy carried on, but the main event was the creating of a Council of Chiefs with 20 members called Malfatu Mauri in July 1976. The Council had its first meeting in February 1977, and a young politically mature man, Willy Bongmatur, was elected chairman.

From the beginning of 1977 it appears that apart from comments and photos about custom and customary festivals in the French newspaper, the problem of custom and its legitimacy started to be slightly useless in the new political context. The Council of Chiefs includes traditional custom chiefs wearing customary dress who are very often sceptical if not disappointed with politics, as well as politically involved men such as priests or non-traditional leaders, elected as chiefs.

During that time, the most important fact had been the Vanuaaku Pati's (the former National Party) attitude about new elections and the first independence government. Custom was not concerned with these questions.

Nagriamel, John Frum, Tabwemassana and Natatok Efate carried on with their activities or ceremonies but these movements were unable to modify national politics with their local feelings and there were no more important conservative groups to manipulate them.

Custom and political comment

POLITICS, started in the New Hebrides with the National Party activities and programme for independence.

During many years customs had been the business of the Melanesians and politics the responsibility of the European. That is why many Europeans, including the two governments and some Melanesians, were making a strong contrast between custom which would not be political and politics. After two years manipulation of custom and customary movements for electoral and political purposes, it appears that this formal opposition between custom and politics had been made by two governments without a clear evaluation of the custom as non-Melanesian, and it had been utilized by conservative forces to break a potential national unity.

To contrast custom and politics seems to be naive or dishonest because, on the side of government officers, a formal respect permitted a lot of abuse and manipulation mainly by conservative forces.

During the last few years Europeans have invoked custom against politics as a kind of illness. It is time for the New Hebrideans to see their own custom without the eyes of foreigners. Pig killing ceremonies performed for District Agents or high-ranking political leaders are not customary but buffoonery and "mise en scene."

Two years of political involvement of customary movements between 1975 and 1977 shows that it is often an embezzlement when custom is proclaimed to be non-political. During these two years, custom as an ideology lost a large part of its credibility because of much misuse and excessive involvement with political parties.

In December 1978 the Assembly refused, by a large majority, to vote again for the budget for the Council of Chiefs as the Council was criticized for being inefficient and non-representative of a custom which

is only valid locally, in one area or one island, and meaningless at the national level. This important decision confirms the end of custom involvement in politics and may be the beginning of mature and responsible politics based on custom in the New Hebrides. At the same time suspicion about custom from church leaders becomes outdated when national unity is to be created.

The political process is already operating in the New Hebrides. Customary movements which are involved with custom revival could be useful in a future nation. This is the only way to keep them away from conser-

vative confusion between custom revival and political revival which a few expatriates wanted in 1976 and which nobody wants now.

It seems that New Hebrideans are grasping their own problem, which is their own society with an alien history. Educated people or not, this political process will go ahead and it will become obvious that there are not two kinds of values and men: one traditional and conservative (custom), and the other modern and progressive (politics). Because custom was politics before, custom is politics now, and politics could be custom tomorrow.

