

Refereed paper delivered at
Australian Political Studies Association Conference
6 – 9 July 2008
Hilton Hotel, Brisbane, Australia

***Rispek* in Vanuatu: Negotiations of Difference and Equality**

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Abstract

Vanuatu is a nation in which difference is ubiquitous. Over one hundred languages and diverse ways of living are to be found within its post-colonially structured borders. As the group of islands drew nearer to Independence however, the highly flexible term *kastom*, or custom, came to provide ni-Vanuatuan an identity arising from their past aside from their converted Christian selves, that they could offer in difference of their colonial oppressors, and which provided a unity upon which they could form a nation separate from their oppressors. However, little work has been done on what values justify, constitute or unify *kastom*. This paper will argue that a foundational value of *kastom*, respect, or *rispek*, based on both Christianity and *kastom*, is used to negotiate social justice issues dealing with difference and equality. This paper will briefly outline the ni-Vanuatuan idea of *rispek* and the complexities it faces from outside forces such as Christianity and Westernization. It will focus on how *rispek* is shaping discourse on some of the current social justice issues dealing with difference, such as women's rights and domestic violence. This discussion will demonstrate how, through this underlying value of *rispek*, ni-Vanuatuan are engaging with another value that grapples with difference, equality. This discussion will allow a further understanding of how *rispek* is operating within ni-Vanuatuan societies and how it is shaping debates and discourse on matters of difference.

Introduction

Vanuatu is a nation comprised of a y-shaped chain of islands. Within these islands there are over 100 languages as well as the linguistic additives from the era of joint British and French colonial rule, English, French and Bislama. Correspondingly, there is a vast array of cultural diversity and difference within the country. Adding greater complexity to this diverse backdrop, Christianity has been firmly integrated within the national milieu, both socially and politically, as it has in many Pacific nations.

Although Western influences such as Christianity have been vastly influential, there has arisen within the islands a greater emphasis and interest in traditional belief systems. When the New Hebrides Condominium was relieved of its uniquely combined French and British rule in 1980, it became Vanuatu, a nation declared to be founded upon Melanesian values and Christianity (Vanuatu 1980). And now in the current era, ideas of custom or *kastom*, comprised of these Melanesian values, circulate within discussions on almost every issue worthy of debate. As ni-Vanuatuans negotiate the array of difference that faces them both from within and from outside the country, *kastom* is often referred to as an identity of national commonality, yet also remains an expression of diversity and difference amongst the islands with the nation. *Kastom* itself therefore, has also been a matter of contention. As the country interacted with Christianity, capitalism, tourism, and other influences from outside its borders, the belief systems arising from within the islands have transformed and transmuted over time. They remain highly diverse and yet are often referred to by this one word: *kastom*.

In daily dialogue, ni-Vanuatuans also make reference to a key value of *kastom*, the idea of *rispek*¹. Both of these words, expressed in the national language of Bislama, contain complexities of meaning and reference and are highly visible in the daily context of the nation. However, while *kastom* and discussions on its various meanings have received much attention in the literature, the idea of *rispek* has not. As both words are highly used in discussions dealing with matters of difference, such as issues dealing with equality and gender, the relationship between the two words becomes a matter of some importance.

This paper will argue that a function of *rispek*, as a foundational value of *kastom*, is as a means to negotiate difference and equality. This will be addressed through two examples given in the paper. These two examples, domestic violence and the Family Protection Bill, address ideas surrounding women's rights and human rights, and put into sharp focus beliefs about difference represented here by gender and equality. The main sources for the research for this paper are interviews conducted for a thesis addressing *rispek* and its impacts on gender identity. The informants, consisting of both men and women², are primarily leaders either in their

¹ Both *kastom* and *rispek* are words from the language Bislama, a language that has evolved through on-going interaction within the region and the West. *Rispek* and respect are used almost interchangeably for the purposes of this paper.

² Some women interviewed declined to have their names mentioned in any written documentation. All the interviews took place during two separate, two month long trips to Vanuatu in April-May 2007 and December 2007 – January 2008. Most interviews took place in Port Vila but some sources were also contacted in the northern area of the island of Pentecost and in Luganville, on the island of Espirito Santo. These trips were made possible due to the award of a Graduate School Research Travel Grant from the Graduate School of the University of Queensland and assistance from the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies.

churches, the government, the chiefly system, or social network. Almost all were educated through various Western systems and through their positions, represent a continuing negotiation of difference in Vanuatu.

Kastom

The most general form of values in Vanuatu, currently are expressed within concepts of Melanesian values. Pastor Kalsakau (2007) of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu described them as such:

In the pre-Christian era, in our traditional societies, socially, economically, politically, our ancestors guarded the value of the life of the ancestors and passed it on ... They ran the life relationships. One of the most valued things in Vanuatu is the relationships that we have within the nuclear family, the extended family and the communal society.

The focus then in Melanesian values is clearly on the relationships constituting society. Pastor Kalsakau (2007) went on to say that ideally, people:

share the life together, in the relationships, families, neighbours; they had respect of the people; they live in honour and obedience to the authorities, to the elders of the society, the parents, ... the children have to be respectable, loving, and honourable people. They cannot leave one of their neighbours to go without food or to see him suffering from poverty or whatever; they will lend a hand to anyone and ask nothing.

So there is certainly an emphasis on relationships and respect reflected within Kalsakau's understanding of Melanesian values. But what then is *kastom* and how does it fit within Vanuatu's value system? This question has been a cause of much debate and contention. Jean Tariseisi (1998, 1), a fieldworker at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (the *Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta* or VKS), has described the meaning of *kastom* as follows:

Kastom is a term we use in Vanuatu, in our language Bislama, to mean the way of life in which we grew up and still practice. This is the way of life which comes from our own place ... when people on Ambae today talk about *kastom* they use the word to mean ceremonies, stories, songs, dances, traditional knowledge, sacred places, certain ways of cooking, family organisation (or kinship), traditional leaders or chiefs, Ambae mats, pigs, and other such things.

The complexity of meaning in *kastom* is alluded to in Tariseisi's description. *Kastom* as a way of life incorporates ideas about place, family, food, ceremonies, material products, and knowledge (Bolton 1999; Jolly 2003; Lindstrom 1990; Patterson 1981). When the leaders interviewed were asked what their understanding of *kastom* was, most referred to its functions. Father John Stephen Huri (2007) of the Anglican Church in Tagabe, on the island of Efate, told me that *kastom* maintains "community" through certain 'symbols'; actions that speak to the relationships that constitute the community. Such ways of living are highly diverse according to where they originate and can often denote sacred and specific relationships with place (Bonnemaïson 1984; Jolly 1989, 1999; Patterson 2002; M. C. Rodman 1992). Tariseisi felt she could not comfortably discuss *kastom* with me, unless she could

speak about it in reference to a particular island, if not a particular area on a specific island.

There are however, broader aspects and applications of *kastom*. These reflect relations of similarity as well as resistance to and difference with colonial and post-colonial structures of government, the economy and churches (Jolly 1994, 248). Indeed the very word *kastom* denotes an understanding on the part of ni-Vanuatuans of their inherent diversity of culture and language while also attesting to the 'fundamental similarity of local cultures in the face of the alien cultures of the colonizers' (Jolly 1994, 252-253). For example, *kastom* was initially used in opposition to and as a demarcation of difference from beliefs introduced by the missionaries. The teachings of the missionaries were often coalesced into the Bislama word *skul* (Bolton 2003, 12). These teachings, Bolton says (2003, 12), effectively created *kastom* as a category that reflected "islander ways of living" that could be used to oppose, *skul* or 'European practices conveyed in a package with Christian belief'. *Kastom* as a word, came to demarcate an understanding of a difference of meaning and practice between beliefs originating inside the country and those arising from outside.

In more recent times, a 'synthesis of *kastom* and Christianity has been stressed' (Jolly 1994, 250). However, these ways of living still refer to the basic relationships that constitute communities in Vanuatu and 'the aspects of that knowledge and practice' (Bolton 2003, 51). This ability of *kastom* to permeate the variety of practices and languages still found in Vanuatu is explained as follows:

That urban sophisticate and mountain pagan can find meaning in *kastom* attests to the potency of countless symbols. The diversity of meanings Melanesians attribute to *kastom* underlines the way such symbols do not carry meanings, they evoke them. Their very abstractness and lack of precise content allow a consensus that would otherwise be impossible, among peoples whose material circumstances, class interests, and ethnic affiliations are often deeply divided (Keesing 1982, 299).

Kastom can be understood then through relational categories that can 'intersect and link with each other to provide an intricate mesh of social identity' (Taylor 2005, 76). These relational categories can be either mutual or hierarchal. But both support the other and in this sense, maintain communal aspects. Leaders often stated that leaders of local understandings of *kastom*, currently called chiefs³, often maintain their relationship with their community in a hierarchal manner with more of an 'authoritarian' nature (Kalsakau 2007). Pastor Kalsakau (2007) described this relationship between the community and chiefs as follows:

Politically, our leaders, our chiefs ... emphasise the authoritarian leadership. The chief would command; the chief would judge. The chief would say to his people, do it. And that is very strong.

Relationships within the basic family units are more of a mutual nature, described by Kalsakau (2007) as 'communal'. This form of relationship is extended

³ There has long been debate over the role and nature of chiefs in Vanuatu and in Melanesia. While it can be argued that the idea of chiefs is a colonial construct imposed upon communities for the ease of early European contact, there various representations of leaders who are believed to be worthy of *rispek* in many communities in Vanuatu. The means through which they attain their positions vary widely, reflecting again, the various ways of observing *rispek* and difference. For more see (Facey 1981; Forsyth 2003; Lindstrom 1997; W. L. Rodman 1973; White 1997).

and ‘well vested in the wider community. We participate together, we cooperate together, we support together, and we share together’ (Kalsakau 2007). This is a very simple picture however, of a much more complex interconnecting web of relations that constitutes ni-Vanuatuan societies. Kinship relations and the supportive network they create are another example of the diversity and complexity of Vanuatuan *kastom*.

Leaders however can be contentious in their own right⁴. This could be partly because chiefs are often referred to as the maintainers of tradition, the figureheads of *kastom*, yet may not necessarily be fully immersed in the tradition they represent. For example, Father John Stephen Huri (2007), described chiefs as “agents of *kastom*” with their role being to “take care of the people”. However, Dickenson Levi (2008), who works for the National Council of Chiefs in Vanuatu, claimed that this is sometimes incorrect, as it is:

the assumption that chiefs who are suppose to be following *kastom*, know all these things. Today, that is not true. Today a lot of these chiefs, they call themselves chiefs, but they don’t know all this.

Over time, some have noted (Huri 2007) that chiefs have become “figureheads” in villages, while leaders of different expressions of status and respect have been appearing in the villages. For example, the leaders of various churches are often seen alongside chiefs, reflecting newer constructions of respectful relationships. As we see then, *kastom* is expressed and represented through different relational ways and means. What governs the relations?

Rispek as a core value of kastom

As with *kastom*, there are many different explicit ways of expressing or performing *rispek*, and therefore, many different meanings associated with it. A report (Tor 2004, 12) on domestic violence in Vanuatu describes the value of *rispek* in this way:

A very important concept of Vanuatu culture is Respect. Lissant Bolton, in a presentation on Gender Development (Tues 23rd March, 12:00 pm, VKS conference room), reported that when she did a survey with fieldworkers of 46 languages, she found that in every one of them, there is at least two words for respect ... each different word did not have the same meaning and there are several meanings for different kinds of respect. Some of them mean “to show respect”, some mean something more like love, and some describe the action that demonstrates respect. All these concepts of respect are important. There is some form of respect shown to practically everybody in different ways, according to who they are, what their status is and what their relationship is to that kin.

In her book, *Unfolding the Moon: Enacting Women’s Kastom in Vanuatu*, Bolton (2003, 3-4) further claims that the ‘preoccupation with rank and status is allied today with a widespread concern with the idea of respect (Bislama: *rispek*) – the showing of honor and respect to others’. She identified (Bolton 2003, 4) ‘the way of

⁴ When I discussed *rispek* with Morris Kaloran, the acting Director General of the Ministry of Social Justice, he took exception to the approach to my research. One aspect he didn’t prefer was my focus on leaders. Instead he suggested that I should talk to families as they were the progenitors of values; of *rispek*. Leaders merely reflected those values put forth by families.

respect' as 'a firmly indigenous concept' often identified by ni-Vanuatuan as 'a defining characteristic of *kastom*'.

Selwyn Garu (2008), secretary for the Malvatumauri, the Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs, stated that *rispek* 'will influence your relationship, your conduct, to the person you are dealing with', as it requires 'heavy thinking' about the person. He said that the way one lives with others is 'defined by *kastom*' and relationships of *rispek* (Garu 2008). This relationship he describes (Garu 2008) as follows:

In Vanuatu, everything, if you want to do something, there's a respectful way of doing it. And I can say that a different way; there is a correct way of doing it. Now that correct way is the respectful way. Now if you do it any other way, you can have it done, but then it's ... the impact of the process that you have taken, would be negative on other aspects of the life, of the totality, of everything, you know, life.

With even more emphasis, Garu (2008) stated that *rispek* was 'doing something at the right time in the right way. I'll say that again. It is doing something at the right time in the right way'. It is only then, Garu (2008) said, that '*rispek* is maintained' and there is balance in nature and relationships. But of course, the question is then, which is the right way?

As *kastom* has evolved, it is only natural to question these meanings of *rispek* and ask how they have evolved. Such questions reflect the amount of *kastom* that has been re-integrated into different ni-Vanuatuan societies. That depends on how much *kastom* knowledge remains within a community, left over from its interactions with outside influences over time. Myriam Abel, the Director General of the Ministry of Health for Vanuatu, is from Tamoia, and the daughter of a 'big chief'; a woman balancing her *kastom* with a demanding job. She stated to me that she felt that *rispek* in a customary sense, was 'still there' on her home island, but it had changed within the realm of 'work' (Abel 2008). This new use of *rispek* demonstrates an adaptation of meaning in response to Western approaches to labour.

While *rispek* and *kastom* have adapted, ceremonies and rituals are still important aspects of traditional understandings of *kastom*, and are situations where *rispek* as a form of recognition is publicly expressed. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre has produced a publication dealing with women fieldworker's local understandings of *rispek* which focuses mainly on traditions and rituals in various communities⁵. Leaders often explained *rispek* in a performative sense, through either a ritual or ceremony. These actions convey recognition of status, and have 'a meaning of respect. And people know' (Levi 2008). For example, Ms. Abel (2008) mentioned to me that:

if there was any customary event, where there is an exchange of food or something, and some gifts, I'll be there, because they will be thinking about me as well. It may be a small thing, but if it is something to be preformed and I know understand why, because you know I come from this family; so this is where the recognition is and the respect is ... so this

⁵ Each year fieldworkers for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre meet in Port Vila to discuss current projects. An outcome for the women's project one year was the production of a book on *rispek*, reflecting the various ways *rispek* is enacted in the different communities represented (1999). When I asked why the men fieldworkers hadn't produced one on the same topic, I was told that they expressed it through other topics such as chiefly matters.

is what counts really. You have to always be able to attend or be there for your chiefs.

This ceremonial aspect of *kastom* and *rispek* does extend into other areas of the acknowledged interdependent ni-Vanuatuan life, such as church activities. All sides of life must be present; must be given attention and recognition. As Ms. Abel (2008) described it, she had:

been given some responsibility, different kinds of committees for this and that; I always try to assume some of this responsibility because in a sense you are okay with the chiefs and you are okay with the church, you are trying to give whatever time or whatever you have, you know? So that is where that that respect comes back in.

These few examples demonstrate how *rispek* is a path or a way of enacting *kastom*. Respectful actions are those where recognition is given to the formative relationships involved. These relationships might be with people but they might also be with land or a tree upon which a community depends. Relationships form the foundation of a community living with understandings of *kastom*. Recognition of these mutual and hierarchal relationships strengthens one's own position and works to ensure recognition from others in return. Furthermore, while based firmly within understandings of *kastom*, ways of *rispek* also connect to newer social formations such as working women and urban living. However, along with these on-going and evolving expressions of *rispek*, there is a concern in ni-Vanuatu society about the loss of traditional knowledge, and along with it, the loss of the ability to demonstrate proper *rispek*.

Ideas about *rispek* being lost

As with concerns over the loss of *kastom*, there are concerns as *rispek* is being lost. Garu (2008) explained it this way:

When people are talking about respect being lost, it is because these proper and right ways of doing things, people don't know how to follow them. They want something done; they just go ahead and do it. Maybe they do it really not the right way, but they want it done. And you find if you do it the wrong way, the process impacts other things on the environment ... I said well this is the problem; if you don't know, if you talk about respect so much and you just don't know how to practically do something about it, then it is just a word for you to say but people just don't know how to go about that ... Now its just I can say that out of the majority of people in Vanuatu, that is exactly what it is like. A lot of people just talk about it.

An example of this loss of *rispek* that was mentioned repeatedly by both women and men, was the new behaviour of calling family members by their proper name as opposed to their relational name. For example, Ms. Abel stated (2008):

Somebody who is related to you ... you will not be able to call them, him or her, by his or her name, so you say either uncle or aunty ... that means that you have respect for that person, even if you don't know him or her. You say aunty or uncle. That explains the way; how you treat the person.

Morris Kaloran (2008), the acting Director General of the Ministry of Social Justice said that by referring to someone by the relationship, you bring ‘attention, privilege, and respect to the relationship’. The loss of this practice was in many interviews noted as both signifying and contributing to the loss of *rispek* through the lack of recognition given to these mutual relations. Some of the reasons that were mentioned or blamed for the loss of *rispek* ranged from Western-style education, to Christianity, to the encroaching global, capitalistic and competitive economy. Western education in particular, has been targeted for separating children from their parents and making it far more difficult to teach *kastom* ways and *rispek*. Len Garae (2007), a reporter for the Daily Post in Port Vila, reflected that his father:

was a storyteller. He would tell me *kastom* stories. He would sing long *kastom* songs that he would sing for twenty minutes; for one song! And he knew them all! And I only wish that he was still around because when I look at that, I think, he taught me the songs and then I went to school and I forgot most of the songs.

Paradoxically, Garae (2007) noted that parents would still make any sacrifice to keep their children in school as they recognised the ability of education to provide a ‘good house’ and a ‘good job’. However, all the factors which were mentioned include Western ideas of individualism, which conflict with the interdependent and relational foundations of *kastom* expressed through ideas of *rispek*.

Ms. Abel (2008) talked about the effort in maintaining *rispek* this way:

I have to teach my son to understand the *kastom* to know where I come from, my tribe, and to teach my son because he is going to become a new chief for replacing his father. So he needs to understand his *kastom* and his functions and so forth. So it is all about that. So ... you have that clear with your children; that respect stays. That respect stays.

One of the problems in maintaining *kastom* and *rispek* is again, significant according to place, reflecting the greater mobility of some communities. According to Ms. Abel (2008):

the reason people are thinking about respect is because we have multiplied so that we do not see our relatives, or our very close cousins or first cousins or whatever for so long, ... that kind of respect or recognition, being able to relate to somebody; I think that is where people are talking about the *kastom*; the recognition needs to be there, the respect needs to be there; but work back from zero, you need to know your roots. You need to know your roots. I mean, there are some times that my son tells me, Mum, you have so many children to support. I mean, for schooling and so forth. And I try to make him see okay why I am supporting this person, this person; it is not because of the money. I come from this background and I am linked to this, I am linked to that ... it is all about recognition.

Ms. Abel again emphasises the importance of maintaining relationships and knowledge of those relationships in order to recreate recognition and *rispek*. A prominent woman leader⁶ pointed to the impact of individualistic politics both within

⁶ This was an interview with one of the women who did not wish to be identified. The interview took place on May 24, 2007, in Port Vila.

government and the churches upon yet another concern, that of urban drift, saying that:

before Independence, the island was developed very well. There was a good system of governance; the French and the English. And the people respected the chiefs. Today, politics come in, and the church come in, and the people get lost. That is why many of our people come to town.

Although churches and politics are often excuses given as explanation for division and disrespect within societies in Vanuatu, such challenges offer a chance for *rispek* and *kastom* to renew and recreate their meanings. Ms. Abel (2008) argued:

I don't think we should use the church or use the differences between the chiefs to say that the respect and unity is not there. I don't think that we should use that; or the politics for example. We should still use our integrity, our roots, as one family. I have a brother who is a member of this political party, I can be a member of this political party or this church and my brother can be a member of this church, but that does not mean that okay because you are there, I am no longer your sister. No, no, no. But some people are trying to do that. And they have differences. And that's when the disrespect and everything comes.

The recreation of *kastom*, and therefore *rispek*, is a matter full of contention. While *kastom* has undergone many changes, the retention of the word itself is recognition of a need to 'hold tight' to what it represents. Chief Murrur (2007), chief of the village of Mangililu on Efate, reflected that *kastom* for him, has a 'ceiling'; it can not change, increase or decrease. However, recreating the meaning of *kastom* which conveys *rispek*, is possible and even necessary in the view of others. Garu (2008) explained:

sometimes the ways may have to adapt; because of the changes. But then the spirit, of the act must be maintained in the new adapted way. That is something that we need to be careful about.

A darker understanding of *rispek* was also mentioned in some interviews. One woman⁷ reflected that to her, *rispek* often simply denoted a requirement of obedience; 'you do what you are told'. This situation she felt was primarily for women, though she acknowledged that men might experience it as well. She believed one had to ask whether an action was done out of either '*rispek* or fear'? Furthermore, her viewpoint held that men were 'manipulating' the current situations and systems 'for themselves'; that 'contemporary *kastom*' has changed into a system where 'men have all the rights'.

Problems with *kastom* and *rispek* are associated with Western ways of living and doing; they either lead one astray from a respectful path or at times disallow the continuation of respectful ways. How to re-establish respectful ways within new social constructions is a question arising within many issues facing Vanuatu. How then ni-Vanuatuans approach challenging issues such as domestic violence and the Family Protection Bill offer an insight into how ways *rispek* is shaping change and is itself allowed to change.

⁷ This interview, with another woman who did not wish to be identified, took place on December 12, 2007, in Port Vila.

Social justice issues – negotiations over ideas of equality

There are arguments that *kastom* has in the past and now, kept women silent, with the burden of the work of child-rearing and the daily work of tending the gardens. Other arguments favour a picture of egalitarianism expressed through complimentary roles; of equal but different work for men and women⁸. For many people interviewed, there is a strong belief that there was and continues to be this latter understanding of equality already in *kastom*. Ms. Abel (2008) expressed her thoughts on equality and human rights:

if we have to try to implement these issues of human rights, you will have to get this convention or this law to go all around Vanuatu and teach them all about this, this and this. But the chiefs will laugh. The chiefs will laugh because they will say well that is what we have been trying to do!

The Bishop of the Anglican Church of Vanuatu, James Ligo (2007), explained the prior existence of equality in Vanuatu as follows:

I personally believe, that equality existed even before Christianity came. I believe that very strongly; that equality existed in our traditional societies even before Christianity came; before the missionaries came. I'll explain why. There is this chief, who lives with his ten wives. He treats his ten wives differently and he also has respect for them in different ways ... All these women, when Christianity came and told the chiefs that you are only allowed one wife, all these other nine became prostitutes. They had no support. They had to do something. But not forgetting, the chief divided the land that he owns according to the wives that he had. Now when he left them, they had the land to plant and to grow on; he did not just throw them out or away his *nakamal*; no. He gave them; he divided pieces of land between them. Now that to me is a sign of equality.

Bishop Ligo, along with several others, offered various examples of actions that demonstrated an idea of equality that denoted equal recognition for different rankings. But most firmly, there exists (Tor 2004, 13) the idea of an egalitarian approach; an idea of equality as reflecting fairness and equal work:

Women had their work and men had theirs, women had their properties and possessions and men had theirs. In traditional societies, men and women were relatively equal.

There is however, a differentiation expressed over the kind of equality that relates to equal work and equal ideas of *rispek*; equality within decision-making. Bishop Ligo (2007) put it this way:

when you talk about equality in the sense of decision-making, that I can agree with, that the Western term and its relation of equality has affected or maybe has brought in a new way of interpreting and also a new way of understanding what equality really means within a community or within a family. Say for example, if the chief interprets equality, his interpretations would end by saying the chief is the last person to make the decision, or the husband is the head of the home. And he is the one that says yes or no.

⁸ For more on this debate, see (Bolton 2003; Douglas 2002; Jolly 1994; Mason 2000).

Bishop Ligo also argued for an understanding of equality that was understood, but not actively expressed within decision-making. Most church leaders said that things were changing, but along with almost everyone else when describing the situation of women and equality, they said things would change ‘slowly’. The Bishop (2007) explained current understanding of equality as follows:

The levels of equality that men and women should see themselves on is changing. It is changing. It is not like it was before. If we had a occasion this afternoon, this evening, that you were invited to come to, instead of hearing the master of ceremonies stand up and say okay, this is the order of how we shall be served, the men come first; instead of that you would hear mothers please serve the children, then serve yourselves, and then the men. That is how it is happening in many, many places now. It is slowly changing, the mentality is slowly changing. The practical aspect of equality is the problem, but not the understanding of equality.

When women leaders explained their understanding of equality, they often referred to understandings of ranking and the acquisition of status in *kastom*. Depending on what island they live, women in Vanuatu are sometimes able to attain different levels of equality as men are, through *kastom* means; that is, through ceremonies that acknowledged their standing in the community. However, it was not as important for many women to have a public and vocal position of leadership, such as a political leader. For many women, one of the ways they express their knowledge of *kastom* is in the role of an advisor. Ms. Abel (2008) argued that, ‘we women in our own way, are leaders in our own way’. She viewed women being more effective as ‘technical’ persons within the government, who could then properly advise their Minister of correct courses of action.

Equality was also associated with ideas of independence. A woman leader⁹ in Port Vila said that she didn’t think that women were equal:

The women are not independent. The word “independence” is global for the whole nation, but individually, women are not independent. They are still under male control.

Bishop Ligo (2007) explained that this lack of equality women in Vanuatu were experiencing was perhaps due more to a lack of practical applicability rather than a lack in knowledge:

In our traditional community; the husband and wife depend a lot on each other. It is true that in some of our cultures in Vanuatu, the women do more work than the men. That is true in some cultures in Vanuatu. But that does not mean it puts away the respect the men has for the women as I look at it. The respect is still there. Probably the treatment, probably the practical aspect of equality is something that has to be finger-pointed all the time, the practical aspect; but I believe that within the mentality of each individual ni-Vanuatu chief and husbands it is there; they know they are equal with women and women are equal with them.

If then the practical aspect of equality is a problem, then perhaps one can ask the question that might address the practical, active expression of equality. Is there a problem of the practical application, or active expression of *rispek*? In order to

⁹ This woman did not wish to be identified; the interview took place on May 24, 2007, in Port Vila.

explore some of the parameters of this question, we will now move on to the social justice issues at the forefront of many discussions and debates in Vanuatu, women's rights and domestic violence.

Women's rights

The situation of women in Vanuatu has received some attention over the past decade with several government and NGO reports written as well as scholarly attention given to women's participation in church groups and in *kastom*. Vanuatu has also signed the CEDAW initiative and has formally recognized children's rights¹⁰. However, from the Western perspective on women's rights, it would appear little has changed for women since Independence was granted in 1980. Discussion of such issues brings into uncomfortable proximity the differences between Western ideals of women's rights and *kastom* understandings of community and *rispek*.

Father John Stephen Huri (2007) stated that the situation of women's rights in Vanuatu was as follows:

There is a lot of noise about the human rights. It's more of a foreign thing. It is really one of the things that is foreign in Vanuatu. But we accept it you know, that we are living in a global village. So changes have to come. So I think the good side of it is that it opens up some new windows and doors where we can now see new things, good things, about the human rights issues.

However, Father Huri (2007) did note that the 'only thing about the human rights issue that really affects the traditional values or traditional belief systems, is that about women's rights'. Some men in Vanuatu have responded to the topic of women's rights through fear; that the idea of women's rights reflected women desires to have women be 'over men'; higher in status and *rispek*. One woman¹¹ I talked to vehemently denied this was the intent and described women in Vanuatu now as having 'to work harder and harder. The young men, they just go around, they just feel free to go out and just drink kava and come home late'. This view could be argued to be a common one of women in Vanuatu, which in the end, only serves to portray them as victims of culture and circumstance, and further denies their own inherent value in their communities.

Beliefs, whether justified or not, about the 'respectability' of the first women bold enough to speak out and push for women's rights in Vanuatu, also taint (Huri 2007) the meanings of words such as gender and equality:

And now it is also an issue because, sorry to say this, but the first women to talk about the rights of women in Vanuatu, were the first, well they were not people who were not faithful in their own lives. You know, they mess it all up! So when you go out to talk about these things, their version goes with it. The local people at home, it is like their defence ... we don't want to talk about things that these people talk about, you see?

During the discussions with leaders in Vanuatu about women's rights, one recurring theme in every interview was the topic of marriage. It can be seen as a rare

¹⁰ The Republic of Vanuatu "ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women without any reservations on 13, April 1995" (Piau-Lynch 2004, vi). Vanuatu signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 (t. G. o. Vanuatu 1998, x).

¹¹ This woman did not wish to be identified; the interview took place on December 12, 2007, in Port Vila.

sign of unity within a community and is performed often both within Christian and *kastom* ceremonies. It brings as a topic, ideas of men and women together and is pivotal to beliefs and actions surrounding the two social justice issues this paper is exploring. Debates still abound over whether or not divorce should be allowed. And as such, the issue of marriage points to a junction and a distinction of difference from practices and beliefs brought in from outside the country and those arising from within. Ideas of *rispek*, caught in the middle, are used to negotiate the differences between genders and cultures. Both domestic violence and the Family Protection Bill point to this junction of difference as well.

Domestic violence

The topic of domestic violence in Vanuatu, immediately stirs up ideas of both how things are specifically handled within *kastom* means compared with those being introduced from outside the country. Within *kastom*, there were specific guidelines on how to handle conflict, including domestic violence. This is considered a serious matter recognised by chiefs as one that threatens the peace in a community (Tor 2004, 40). *Kastom* means of solving domestic violence relied upon paths of *rispek*, respectful of privacy and the maintenance of specific relationships. Ms. Able (2008) explains the path in her *kastom*:

In our *kastom* way to think of violence is, that when there was an argument and a woman ran away and go to, and we know very well, when you run away from our own house, we have to go to a place where, we know very well, well lets say I have run away from home because I have a problem with my husband. So I go to an uncle, or my aunty, because I know exactly that these two are going to take my case; I cannot run away to any place else. But I have to go to my aunty or uncle.

So ... my case can be taken to a round-table of the chief's in his nakamal. And then my husband can be asked to make some fine. And the fine will be a mat, a kava or something; okay, a thousand vatu or something, pending on cases.

The introduced Western ideas presumably allow women more choices and other paths, as individuals, when they are faced with a situation such as domestic violence. Ms. Abel (2008) reflected on where problems arise within this model and conflict with some of the 'new' ideas from outside, such as divorce and human rights:

Where it goes wrong a bit I think, in our way of looking at things in the *kastom* way, is that our chief will always want to restore peace in the house; in the family unit. That's the mandate of the chief. So sometimes, whenever the woman or the man asks but 'I don't want peace, I want to be divorced, I want to be separated, I want to be this, I want to be that'; that's when the chief will not allow; he will not facilitate that, will not help; because he wants everyone to [stay together]. That is overlooked many a times.

And that is when the issue of the human rights comes in here ... because the chief wants peace in the home ... [he] will always want to keep the family together. Even to the point that one month later, they go apart.

This topic is understandably a difficult one and one that was delicately addressed by interviewees. Reasons for the assumed increase in domestic violence were mainly attributed to misunderstandings of Christianity and Western messages of individualism. A report on domestic violence (Tor 2004, 38) revealed that the top four reasons for domestic violence occurring were, '1. men paid the bride price 2. it is *kastom* 3. women are disobedient 4. women answer back'. An appeal either to rules of *rispek* or a lack of *rispek* being demonstrated is made in each of the reasons given by men. The idea that women are part of the 'property' of the men is a belief held by many men and some women, and domestic violence is often accepted as a normal experience of married life (Tor 2004, 38-39). This is because the report says (Tor 2004, 40):

Many men confuse obedience with respect. They claim that women do not respect them when in fact, women respect men. It is the men who do not respect the women.

Most leaders interviewed saw the causes for domestic violence, which was assumed to have increased in comparison with levels that existed before Western contact, connected to the influx of ideas from the West. A general sense of confusion seems to exist over how to behave with *rispek*, as well as how to resolve conflict or demonstrations of disrespect, with *rispek*. Men maintain certain confusions and 'misunderstandings' of the churches' teachings, which were noted in the interviews and in the report (Peach 2007; Tor 2004, 41), as further justifications for domestic violence, as was the variety of life-styles available. Almost all the church leaders said the churches must do more to help such situations, but that they must do so 'slowly'.

Family Protection Bill

The Family Protection Bill, initiated in 1995, is a 'reflection' of women's concerns over the past two decades, ranging from 'rising tensions in the home and an increase in family problems including domestic violence and the rising numbers of single parents struggling to cope on their own' (Simon 2005). Since it was initiated, it has languished in Parliament, continuously sent out for discussion, while other Bills were seen to pass even when Ministers had not had a chance to read them ('Family Protection Bill' 2005). I was not able to obtain a copy of the Bill for my own perusal; the Vanuatu National Council of Women did not have one to observe, nor did the Vanuatu Women's Centre, or the Department of Women's Affairs.

As with domestic violence, the topic of the Bill suffers from a general tension, as it sets in opposition problems arising out of *kastom* with Western approaches to resolving conflict. The Bill, it is widely believed (Peach 2007), maintains too much of a Western perspective and as such the suggestions it offers are rejected roundly as it is feared it will be harmful to both women and families:

they're fearful that it erodes men's power, and that it will undermine the sanctity of the family, that it gives women too much power and they are likely to abuse that ... it is fairly entrenched in local thinking and that's firmly bolstered by the church.

The Vanuatu Women's Centre, whose primary focus is domestic violence, is considered itself very 'western' in its approach and focus. This perception itself, distances it from ni-Vanuatuan society and *kastom* understandings in general. One

woman¹² interviewed stated that the Family Protection Bill suffered from this lack of regard for *kastom* from its very beginning, claiming that the writer did not follow a respectful path:

the Family Protection Bill; why it takes too long to be passed, because they wrote it without concern of the people ... as a local woman, ... she should at the time have consulted a chief. She didn't do that.

Another woman¹³ who worked within a church organisation proclaimed that virtually no one was behind the Bill. She said the Vanuatu Christian Council and the Chiefs in the Malvatumauri, as well as the Ministers in the government, all wanted it re-written. She referred to the understanding that there hadn't been much divorce before Independence and now, with the introduction of rights in the Constitution, 'things changed. There is now a high rate of divorce'.

Divorce, is a major area of contention. Not generally permitted under *kastom*, it is now allowed under Vanuatu law. It is generally seen to be associated with disruption of families and something to be avoided. As marriage rituals bring honour and *rispek* to the relationships formed between families, divorce does the opposite. The woman within the church organization stated that the Chiefs and the VCC both wanted respect for the family to feature in the Bill to denote the respect that should be afforded to the family; 'this respect existed before Independence and it should come back'. She mentioned in further support for her argument that respect for the family is also a Christian principle.

However, how this *rispek* is passed on has been affected by Westernisation. For example, the report on domestic violence found (Tor 2004, 62) that a major factor was the inability for women and men to deal with their issues that then lead to the violence, such as 'issues of sexuality'. Such a topic is a delicate matter in *kastom* and was often discussed in *nakamals*, or 'sacred houses'; today these sacred houses no longer exist and learning occurs primarily in the schools (Tor 2004, 62).

A lack of recognition given to concerns of women also features in this issue. Louise Peach, an Australian woman working for the Department of Women's Affairs¹⁴ as their Gender Advisor. She pointed out (Peach 2007) some constraints on the deliberation over the Bill:

what they really wanted to do, because many of them aren't very well educated, was to actually understand it enough so that they could translate it to their constituencies so that they wouldn't feel threatened by the results of it. But it is pretty much stopped because I know that the ad-hoc committee met last week, the officer that was dealing with it in this department was in Ottawa ... But there wasn't much we could do because we are very short staffed here.

The Family Protection Bill is a crucial point of contention within Vanuatu. It represents a crucial point of conflict between *kastom* beliefs and ideas permeating

¹² This woman did not want to be identified; the interview took place on May 24, 2007, in Port Vila.

¹³ This woman didn't want to be identified; the interview took place on April 24, 2007, in Port Vila.

¹⁴ At the time of this interview in May 2007, the Department of Women's Affairs was located within the Ministry for Social Justice and Welfare. Besides Louise Peach, there were five other ni-Vanuatu women on staff. I was suppose to talk to two of the women the afternoon I interviewed Peach; however the women were unavailable as they were attending the funeral of the Catholic Bishop Michel Visi, who had unfortunately passed away the previous weekend.

Vanuatu communities from outside the country. As well, it reflects the importance of *rispek*, of recognition and honour, to men and women in Vanuatu.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that as *rispek* is a core value of *kastom*, its function is to negotiate difference and equality within ni-Vanuatuan communities. *Rispek*, is a core value in *kastom*. Its functions are focussed mainly on informing ni-Vanuatuan of the correct paths to take and which behaviours to sustain within the relationships. Through ceremonies and rituals, the foundations of *kastom*, *rispek* is a guiding and sustaining force that enables connection and reconnection with *kastom* beliefs and familial structures. It allows for connection between different roles through a web of relationships, it negotiates differences in the roles of women and men as well as varying levels of status and equality.

Problems and conflicts begin to demonstrate where *kastom* has been forgotten and *rispek* lost. Differences have either overwhelmed *kastom* practices, as in Christianity, or distracted ni-Vanuatuan from *kastom* understandings, as with the perceived effects of alternatives offered through Western education and human rights. By observing some of the discussions around two social justice issues, domestic violence and the Family Protection Bill, *rispek* is again pivotal in the negotiation of difference. It is both appealed to in its absence and decried in its abuse.

It is an informative value to ni-Vanuatuan that establishes the basis of *kastom* and relationships with things and persons from 'outside'. As it foretells the correct path to take in life, it forms the identity of ni-Vanuatuan as relational people, connected to their beliefs and each other. Ms. Abel (2008) sums it up as follows:

you cannot run away from church and chiefs; you can't. It is embedded within you. How to be ... you really have to abide by all this you know. If I don't go to church, I feel yuck; I need to go. I want to be fixed with the above. I want to be okay with my chief; my role as a mother; as a consular to my daughter, to my children, to my son, I can do all this. It is all embedded in you; how to be is in you. And that is where respect comes again. You have your *kastom*, your culture is behind you, you have your family and your culture, your tribe and your church, and then you have your job. So you have to put everything together to make it an abundance kind of life that you have ... in this world.

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