

**THE PRODUCTION, SYMBOLISM, EXCHANGE AND VALUE OF RED MATS  
AND PIGS IN THE TRADITIONAL ECONOMY OF SOUTH WEST PENTECOST  
VANUATU**

**By**

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In Vanuatu the year 2007 was declared the ‘The Year of the Traditional Economy’. The recommendations for Objectives and Activities were listed under 15 sub-headings by the National Steering Committee of which sub-headings two, three, and four, address the promotion of traditional wealth items in custom ceremonies; the promotion of traditional wealth items for the payment of school fees; and the promotion of the production of traditional wealth items and other traditional resources. According to Regenvanu (2007:18) these objectives and activities approved by the National Steering Committee are ‘... intended to safeguard and strengthen the traditional economy, as well as more generally contribute to sustainable and self-reliant development outcomes for Vanuatu.’ Regenvanu makes the distinction between the traditional economy (*kastom ekonomi*), which is focused on the concerns and resources of its members, and a western style ‘capitalist’ or cash economy which focuses on national and international trade. The question to be addressed in this paper is how might a small scale traditional village economy, such as South West Pentecost, remain viable while at the same time take opportunities to participate and benefit from the broader national economy and the inevitable influences of the global market.

An early indication of a medium through which small-scale traditional cash economies could potentially operate effectively at the local and national level while continuing to maintain and strengthen their socio-cultural entities was in the announcement by the National Library of Vanuatu in 2007 that ‘As part of the celebration of 2007 as the Year of the Traditional (Custom) Economy, the Port Vila Public Library is offering “Mat Membership” to those children and adults who wish to become Library members.’ The implication of this announcement is that mats have traditional value that requires some degree of sacrifice if they are exchanged for other items and, furthermore, that there must be some sort of equivalence between the value of mats and that of monetary membership to the museum.

If we are to understand the meaning of value in the exchange of mats in Vanuatu we need a theoretical approach, an approach that Geertz (1973: 141) describes as one

‘... which looks toward the behaviour of actual people in actual societies living in terms of actual cultures for both its stimulus and validation ... to a process of ever-increasing insight into both what values are and how they work.’

Informed by this approach we have turned to Graeber’s definition of value and applied Graeber’s (2001: xii) explication of value to the exchange of mats in south west Pentecost.

‘Value ... can best be seen ... as the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality – even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor’s imagination.’

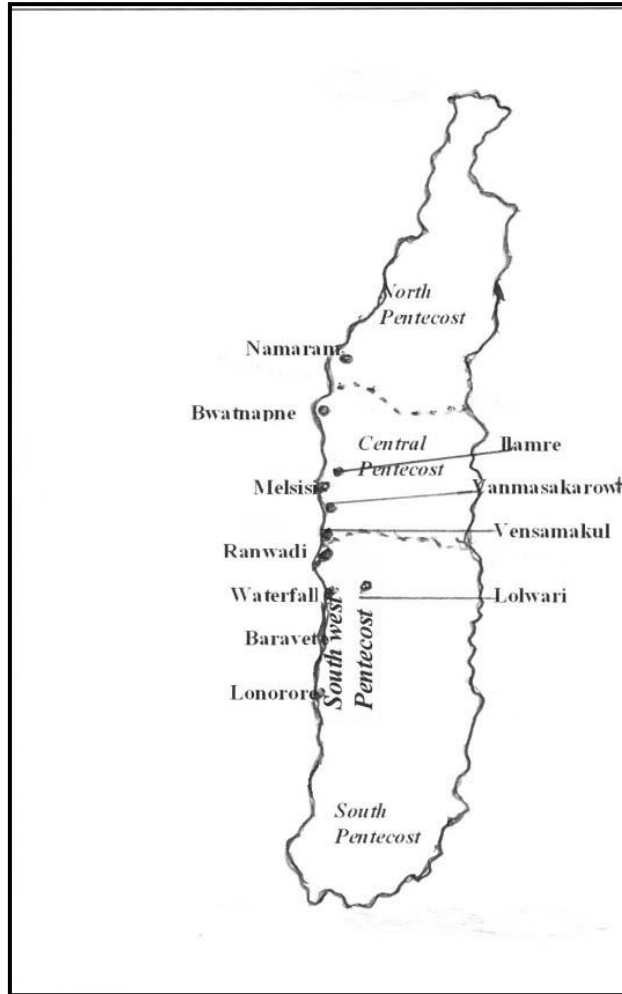
A study of the labour invested in the production of red mats; the agreed monetary value of the mats; the recognition of socio-cultural values, i.e., the ideal personal qualities revealed in the designs on the red mats; and the assumed exchange equivalence to other commodities of mats in South West Pentecost, will go some way to explaining the meaning and value of mats in relevant social totalities or contexts such as a form of a legal tender, i.e. money; a repository for the core values of the society; an agent of social transformation and cultural regeneration, and as a broker of peace. These dimensions of value are not fixed but are compatible with Graeber’s (2001: xii) theory of value ‘... as the “Hereclation tradition” one that sees what seems to us to be fixed objects as patterns of motion, and what seem to be fixed “social structure” as patterns of action.’ An understanding of value will become more apparent in the following discussion of the exchange of red mats as money or wealth in both the secular and *kastom*<sup>i</sup> contexts in south west Pentecost.

### **Geographical and historical overview of south west Pentecost**

For administrative purposes the island of Pentecost, situated in the north of the archipelago of Vanuatu, is divided into three areas: North, Central and South Pentecost. North Pentecost stretches from the northern tip of the island to just north of Bwatnapne situated on the west coast. Christianity was introduced into this area mainly by English speaking Anglican missionaries c1880. Central Pentecost is the area bordering North Pentecost from Bwatnapne extending south to the villages of Vanworki. Christianity was introduced into this area by the French speaking Catholic missionaries who set up a mission at Melsisi in the final decade of the 19th Century. Melsisi lies on the western

side of the island approximately half way between Bwatnapne and Vanworki. South Pentecost is the area south of Vanworki to the southern tip of the island. Bordering the French villages, and therefore the most northerly settlement of South Pentecost, is Ranwadi College where the Church of Christ established an English speaking mission in the early years of the 20th Century. The villages south of Ranwadi to Lonorore are mainly Church of Christ villages. The *kastom* of the far south of the island differs from that of the remainder of Pentecost. Villages of the far south of South Pentecost such as such as Bunlap and Wali resisted the introduction of Christianity. (Jolly, 1982).

The area of our study, south west Pentecost, stretches from Melsisi in the north to Lonorore in the south overlapping the administrative areas of Central and South Pentecost. We describe this area by its geographical location – south west Pentecost. This area is further delineated by the narrow western coastal plain and the western slopes of the steep central mountain range that runs the length of Pentecost. In south west Pentecost the majority of villages are situated on the western slopes and coastal plain. Our informants represent both the French speaking Catholic villages of Central Pentecost where *kastom* continues to be practised, and the Church of Christ villages where *kastom* was restricted to practical exchanges within Christian guidelines. However, wherever *kastom* is practised in south west Pentecost, and *kastom* has been revived in Church of Christ villages in the last 10 years or so, it remains consistent amongst the villages, and unchanging over time from our earlier research in 1990 and 1992, and descriptions in the earlier documents of researchers such as Codrington, and Speiser and the early Church of Christ missionaries, as well as the correspondence of the Marist missionaries of Melsisi.



**Figure 1.** Villages of Pentecost

### **The production of red mats in south west Pentecost**

Throughout the islands of northern Vanuatu the items of exchange in the traditional economy are pigs and mats. The people of south west Pentecost require red mats as both a traditional form of exchange and a modern monetary equivalent. Red mats may be used for diverse purposes e.g., to ensure peace or reconciliation; to facilitate a person's rise through the ranks of the graded society; to pay fines or school fees. Codrington (1891: 324) observed that 'Mat-money is also lent at interest, and so becomes a source of wealth; there is no fixed rate of increase, the lender gets what he is able to insist upon, up to double return.' A century later the late *kastom* chief, Resis, explained<sup>ii</sup> that the giving and receiving of red mats and pigs is similar to an international business society, such as The World Bank, where credit is advanced but has to be repaid with interest.

Codrington (1891: 323) refers to mats called *maraha* in his discussion of 'Mat-money' in northern islands including Pentecost. The most valuable mats were red mats which were 'called' *bwana*'. Speiser (1923:239), in his description of the dyeing of mats red on Pentecost and other northern islands, (which accords with our observations and those of Mescam and Walters), writes: 'The colour is red but, during the dyeing operation, all shades from a bright crimson to a dull blue violet may emerge. A short dyeing process, of course, produces lighter shades than a long one, and this fact is utilized to produce mats of two colours. This is to be found mainly in Aoba<sup>iii</sup> and Pentecost.' Walter (1996) describes mats with purple designs exchanged on Pentecost, Ambae, Maewo and Tomman, and mats that are dyed a uniform red in northern and central Malekula. In our study mats were described by the Apma speaking inhabitants of south west Pentecost as either white or red. Each red mat is valued according to the design and the density of the edge fringe requiring women many days to shred the fibres before the mat is dyed.

There are three types of mats in use in south west Pentecost. These are:

- a) White mats.

These include *butsbwan* (white sleeping mats which are about two metres in length and are not included in exchanges of mats) and the white mats that will be dyed with red designs for exchange as *tsip* and *sese* mats.

- b) Red mats which are divided into *tsip* mats and *sese* mats.

*Tsip* mats have a white design on a red background (described by Mescam 1989; Walter 1996) and are similar in production to small mats dyed on Ambae described by Bolton, (2003). The word *tsip* refers the traditional small mat worn as around the waist as a covering in dances on special occasions. *Tsips* are about one and a half metres in length and about 32 centimetres in width. In South West Pentecost the designs on *tsips* are made by women who bind strips of the *beqa* plant in the shape of the pattern to the mat before dyeing (Mescam, 1989: 43). *Sese* mats have a red design on a white background. *Seses* are three metres in length.<sup>iv</sup> *Sese* refers to a large blanket type mat that can cover the individual. The design is carved on the outer layers of the banana trunk to produce a stencil which will be placed over the rolled mat before being dyed.

#### *Dintsinan or the process of making mats red*

‘In the past everything on Pentecost was white. There was no red colour at all. Only one village had the red colour but it was very deep in the ground. So other villagers went to dig for it but they were hungry, it rained, and the sun got them. They became tired but they could not find the red colour. Only Pentecost went to dig and dig. They were hungry; they were burned by the sun; and there was a hurricane. But they tried. They won the colour. When they returned to Pentecost they had the red colour.’ (Zaccheus Tabi, August 2010).

Although the carving of the designs for the *seses* and the physical dyeing of the mats process is men’s work, in general the weaving and organising the dyeing of mats is women’s business. In Lolwari 22 July 1990 the authors observed the dyeing of the red mats, *seses*, on one of day of the week long process. The design stencils were cut by the male carver (who owned the designs) and his apprentice. The women sat under a temporary cover in two double rows facing each other midway from the carver’s shelter and the vats of water set up over the fires for dyeing the mats. Between each of the two pairs of rows of the women was a long bamboo cylinder of about 3 metres in length and 20 centimetres in width. The women filled a slit in the bamboo with red dye powder, tied sections of the fringe for manageability and then wrapped a white mat around the cylinder, folding the ends into the cylinder and then adding more dye. The dye is made from the roots of the *laba* vine. The outer layers of the larger roots are scraped and the very tiny roots are crushed to extract the dye. The scrapings are dried in the sun and stored in bags. About three to four handfuls of dye are needed for each vat of mats. The dye is added to the water until it turns red and the mats are boiled in the dye for 30 minutes.

One of the assisting men carried the stencils to the women and they lay the two stencils along the mat. They then lifted the top two stencils of each pair of stencils, rotated the cylinder slightly, and lay the next pair of stencils so that the stencils encompassed the cylinders. They repeated this procedure with another white mat, stencils and dye. A long rope of coconut fibre was wound round the cylinder at spaces of 10 centimetres and secured. The next stage was undertaken by the men who, in pairs, lifted the poles with the mats and laid them in the vats of boiling dye. These vats were made of corrugated iron folded into a boat shape, the ends nailed to a post with a clay cube enclosing the post to prevent leakage of the dye. Two poles with mats could be dyed at one time. After the fire died down (about 30 minutes later) two men lifted each of the poles with the mats out of the water and suspended them on upright poles with cross poles designed for cooling the mats. When cooled the ropes and stencils were discarded, the mats shaken and taken to a level area fronting the chapel and spread out on the grass to dry. We observed more than 28 *seses* drying by noon on the day of our visit. At a later date, the mats would be taken down the mountainside to be soaked in seawater to maintain the supple nature of the mats. Mats, like pigs, are real wealth but whereas pigs are may be observed by the public, mats and in particular *seses* are hidden until they need to be exchanged or displayed. They would then be stored in a basket above a fire so that the smoke would deter insects and mildew. Codrington, writing at the end of the 19th century in reference to ‘mat money’ in the northern islands including Pentecost, comments: ‘A rich man will keep fifty mats and more in his house, hung up and decaying, a proof of ancient wealth.’ (1891: 324)

The authors did not observe the dyeing of the *tsip* or small mats but the process used in south west Pentecost is described by Mescam (1989:43):

To make patterns on a small mat it has first of all to be attached to a bamboo with sprigs of the pandanus tree. The stalk of the *beqa* plant is then used, having first been cut lengthwise into strips. Screens made in this way are slipped under the ties cut to the desired length, [sic] that hold the mat. New strips are added as they go along. The figures are usually lozenge-shaped for the rigidity of the material precludes the tracing of curved patterns. After fastening a rope around the roll keeping the stencils in place, the mat is ready to be plunged into the vat for dyeing. The final pattern will eventually appear as a white negative on a red background, as opposed to patterns on *sese*, which will be red on a white ground.

While the weaving of white mats, like baskets, is on-going female production, the dyeing of the mats is a village enterprise where there is a division of labour relevant to the physical strength of the men and women, except in the case of the carver. The carver has the knowledge of the designs for the stencils. So before commencing to cut the *sese* stencil he eats a special leaf that will allow him the confidence and skill to cut the stencils. There are costs associated with the production of red mats. The women who make the designs on the *tsip* mats are paid two *tsips*; the carvers of the *sese* mats are each paid 2 *seses*; the cost of the copyright of the design, which is paid to the chief (once only for each design), is two *seses*. Sometimes several villagers will arrange to have their mats transported to the village which is dyeing the mats e.g. in Vansemakul (July 2010) one person wanted 35 mats dyed, another wanted 35, and others wanted smaller numbers such as ten, five and five so a carrier from Melsisi was paid in *tsip* mats to transport the mats.



**Figure 2.** Silas Buli and *laba* vine (Photo: C.Winch-Dummett 7 September 2010)





**Figure 3.** Red mats stored in basket hanging from ceiling transverse beam  
(Photo: C. Winch-Dummett 5 September 2010)

### **Monetary value of red mats in south west Pentecost**

Graeber claims that while money is generally divisible, portable and commensurable it has two further features. First, ‘Money consists of things that otherwise exist only to be seen.’ (2001:92). Items in which monetary value is imbued, including coins, are not usually useful in themselves. A *tsip* mat is a beautiful item but since it is no longer used as an item of clothing except as a loincloth in certain ceremonial activities or dances, then it exists only to be seen, or exchanged for another item. This leads to the second feature of objects used as money in Graeber’s argument. Objects as money apparently have a socially agreed fixed price (as we will see below) but in reality their value lies in their potential to provide or pay for more items that may not be revealed in the present, but which, in the future, will be displayed as a measure of a person’s wealth. So it is through the potential for action that mats, as money, takes on meaning. Graeber argues that wealth in general is the value of some form of personal adornment, and includes possessions of various types as well as insignia such as titles, ranks etc. Money too can be an adornment of the person in a quantitative sense such as money which may be a ‘... mark of the owner’s distinctiveness by being identified with the holder’s generic, hidden capacity for action.’ (2001:94)

### *The relevant monetary value of mats in vatu, the legal tender for Vanuatu<sup>y</sup>*

*Gelgelan* is the process of buying objects or services with red mats and this may include traditional exchanges or for secular payments when cash is not available e.g., a taxi fare,

transportation of material, or assistance with building a house. Usually *tsips* are used for smaller transactions. In all cases 5 *tsips* equal one *sese*. *Tsips* may be used in all cases instead of *seses* with the exception of funerals where *seses* are mandatory. Undyed white mats equal 1000 vatu to 2000 vatu for the best quality. An undyed white mat will buy a bundle of taro or yam. *Tsips* equal @1000 vatu. *Seses* range from 2000 vatu to 5000 vatu.

*Seses* have the capacity to make money. One *sese* may purchase a small part of a garden of yam or taro (up to 25 - 30 in a heap). *Seses* will also buy one full circled tusk removed from a pig for 20,000 vatu and two full tusks removed from the pig for 40,000 vatu whether or not the pig is included. Items such as bullock, taro, yam and fowls may also be exchanged for mats or cash.

#### *Red mats as fines*

There are two kinds of fines – domestic fines and community fines. Fines are often reckoned in *seses* worth 3,000 vatu. In the case of a domestic matter one red mat paid to the aggrieved party is sufficient. In the case of a community dispute one red mat must be paid to the chief and another red mat paid to the person who took the matter to the chief. The value of the mats in vatu is not mentioned. Should the person re-offend or ignore the chief's advice, the fine will be increased. In the village of Vanu the fine is paid to Chief Isaiah immediately following his decision.

The accepted value of mats in monetary terms as substitute for vatu offers remote communities with limited access to the cash economy the facility to make payments for goods, services, transport, fines, for the pigs required for exchanges at marriages, grade-taking, or for fees of various types. Mats, as money, have the potential to be exchanged for vatu. Mats, because of their potential for commercial action, operate as a medium and mediator of access the local, national and global economies.

#### **The designs for red mats.**

Graeber (2001: 83) noting the importance of Turner's work on the material media of circulation having 'qualities in and of themselves' argues that:

‘... human action, or even human thought, can only take place through some kind of material medium and therefore can’t be understood without taking the qualities of that medium into account.’

So far we have examined the monetary value of red mats. Before we examine the exchange of red mats in their ceremonial or ritual context, that is, the non-monetary value of mats - the value *of* themselves, it would be to appropriate to discuss the value *in* themselves, that is the information contained in the design of the mats which will inform their contribution to social transformation through the exchange process.

Mescam (1989) names 18 designs for red mats, which were confirmed by our informants who explained the meanings of the designs. The designs on the more valuable *seses* are concerned with action whereas the *tsip* designs allude to the importance of personal qualities. The three *sese* designs are *ulun katapkap* which ‘opens the secret and intelligence of the designs’ and is therefore the first design to be cut; *wakit kere* which is a reminder for one to be observant in order to gain understanding; and *kamatkel* which refers to *tabu*, i.e., the recognition that certain actions, people, places and things are prohibited.



**Figure 4.** *sese* mat with *kamatkel* design. (Photo: C. Winch-Dummett 31 August 2010)

The personal qualities or values stored in the *tsip* mat designs include the following: the protection of the vulnerable young (*kalin bu*, bamboo); a good character (*biri biri wala*, little cucumber); wisdom (*sum*, glistening pearls in a spider's web); purity (*kalin buatal*, bottle); integrity and strength (*kalin wa rap*, fruit of the reed); care of the body (*ilin bwaga*, red rail feather); strength of the exterior of the body (*marin bo*, pork ribs). Mental attitudes are denoted by four *tsip* designs. These are the recognition of sacred and therefore *tabu* objects and places (*kail tu mwel*, cycad design also known as the *namele* leaf and prominent on the national emblem); independence (*kalin tsvin mana* denoting the designer of this *tsip* who survived as an orphan); and aspiration (*karauro*<sup>vi</sup> or *karawuro* which is the name of the armband worn as a man rises through the ranks of the graded society *lel leuten*). The importance of commitment to any task undertaken is reflected in *sum* which commemorates an old custom of a man placing a belt of shells around the neck of a girl that he wished to be his daughter-in-law, therefore implying 'highly prized'. These values concealed and revealed in the designs on the red mats are indicative of the ethos of the society. Geertz (1973: 127) explains ethos:

'A people's ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world view is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order.'

If we synthesize and conceptualise the qualities of the designs they reveal the core values of the society. These, then, may be defined as self-respect, self-discipline, independence, attentiveness, ambition, commitment, wise judgement, and the maintenance of social reproduction through nurturing the development of the younger generations and through participation in the traditional *kastom* activities. As we will see these are values by which young men are identified for consideration for chieftaincy.



**Figure 5.** Zaccheus Tabi holding a *tsip* mat with the design *kalvin tsivin mana* (Photo: C. Winch-Dummett 31 August 2010)

### **The exchange of mats and pigs in the cycle of ceremonial transactions**

Red mats and pigs are represent real wealth in south west Pentecost. Both red mats and pigs are exchanged in formal ceremonies where their value, like that of heirlooms, ‘ is derived from acts of production, use, or appropriation that have involved the object in the past’ (Graeber, 200: 105). Both mats and pigs may be used for secular payments but it is during ceremonial occasions they denote real wealth. Pigs are nurtured for up to seven years to facilitate the required curvature of the tusks to be worn by males ascending the ranks of the graded society or *lel leuten*. The cultivation of pigs is public and wealth in this respect is public knowledge. Red mats, on the other hand, are stored in seclusion and a man’s accumulation of mats and their potential to increase his power and material possessions may only be conjectured. Like the display of the *wampum* or bead money of the Iriquois, the presentation of the mats at ceremonial occasions is ‘ ...

an act of revelation, of bringing the invisible, intangible contents of mind or soul into visible, physical reality.’ (Graeber, 2001: 133)

The giving and receiving of red mats and pigs accompanies all of the social interactions of the life cycle of the south west Pentecost society. Robbins (2004: 189) comments:

‘...[Melanesians] have ideas ... about how social action creates “sociality,” a flow of relationships that constitutes the ever-changing context of social life. ... they imagine that everything we would want to study at the structural level is constantly made and remade through practice. The point of these makings and remakings is not their effects on the “structure” in place just prior to them but rather their ability to further the flow of sociality.’

Graeber (2001: 88) offers a perspicacious comment on the creation of social transformation:

‘...people are not, for the most part, self-consciously trying to reproduce their own societies but simply pursuing value that makes it so easy for them to end up transforming those same societies as a result ... In any real situation, there are likely to be any number of ... imaginary totalities at play, organized around different conceptions of value ...’

The presentation of red mats is known as *maslun*. *Maslun* is performed for almost every activity in *kastom* e.g., marriage; acquiring titles in *lel leuten*; or for assistance in non-ceremonial exchanges e.g., building a house. *Maslun* is performed on the initial occasion of such activities and is offered to a father’s sister or brother and also to the mother’s sister’s husband who is of the same marriage moiety as the father of the person offering *maslun*. Only one or two red mats are offered, or the equivalent in cash (@29,000 vatu), may be offered in non-ceremonial occasions.

The cycle of ceremonial exchanges of mats in south west Pentecost commences with the giving of white mats to the newly wed couple. From the birth of a child red mats will be exchanged. The boy who enters *lel leuten* will not be associated with colour but when he reaches the third grade *warisangal* he will begin to ‘look red’. During his ascension through the grades he will acquire more red insignia until he reaches the 8<sup>th</sup> level. He will not acquire any further red insignia in the final two grades at which time he will be a senior chief and of advanced years. It would seem that the colour red that accompanies the stages of development in a man’s life are symbolic of his potential to achieve status, prestige, power and and the wealth that accompanies these achievements. Red therefore

implies influence and authority. Similarly, a man who has achieved the final two grades of *lel leuten* does not receive further red insignia. By the time a man reached this level he would be of senior years, would have established his social network through his consanguinal and affinal kinship ties and would be in the position of patron to aspiring candidates. The final grade, *mariak*, is white and the candidate who has achieved this status covers himself in white ash. It would seem that the candidate is, like the parents of an unborn child, devoid of potential.

### *Marriage*

Although south west Pentecost is historically a matrilineal society, today residence is patrivirilocal with women moving to the villages of their husbands on marriage, thereby dispersing the matrilineages amongst villages. Codrington writing, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1891: 67) noted,

‘In the New Hebrides the ancient succession of the sister’s son to his uncle’s property appears to be strongly maintained in Araga,<sup>vii</sup> Pentecost Island where the nephew succeeds to the house, the garden and the pigs of his uncle, and the son takes nothing except what his father has given him in his lifetime;’

By early 20<sup>th</sup> century Speiser (1923: 299) noted that inheritance was patrilineal in south Pentecost:

‘However, in southern Pentecost the sons are said to inherit everything and the nephews get nothing unless the man has no sons. In this case, however, it cannot be said for certain that this arrangement is not due to European influence, for I received this information from an area which is very much under the sway of the mission.’

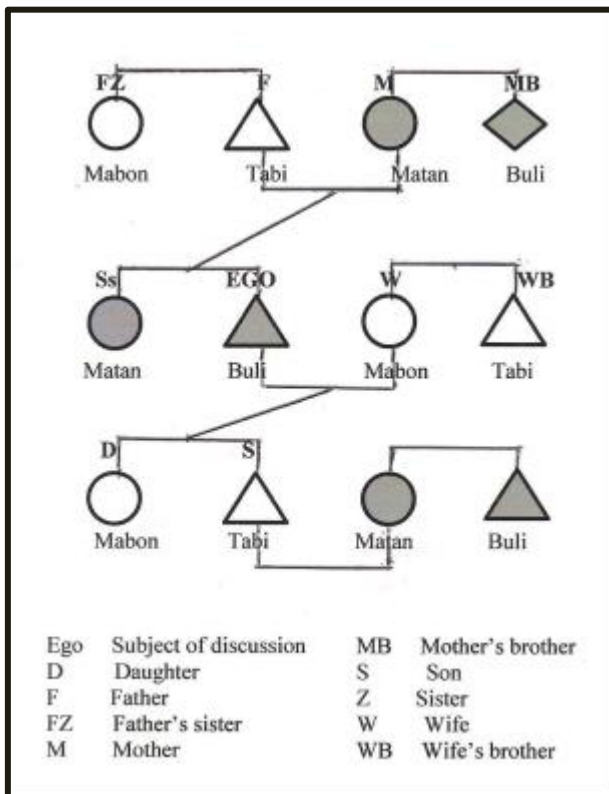
There is a myth concerning the symbolism of the red colour of the mats that links the mats used in exchange to the ancient matrilineal descent system. One day a menstruating woman was making a white mat when suddenly drops of her blood fell upon the mats. The people liked the red colour and sought a way of making red mats from that time. According to Walter (1996: 108):

‘A dyed mat is first and foremost the menstrual blood of women, the feminine principle of the universe, the symbol of the lineages which give women in marriage. It is in symbolic opposition to the curved pig’s teeth which represents men’s reproductive substance, the masculine principle of the world and the lineages which give men.’



Marriage is constrained by descent through a system of four named moieties ordered around two matrilineages (see Table 1). The two female moieties are Matan and Mabon and the two male moieties are Tabi and Buli. Membership of the male moieties changes with each generations so that a man will be of the same moiety as his father's father and his son's son but he will be of a different moiety from his father and his son who together will share the same moiety. For example if Ego is of the Buli moiety then his father's father and his son's son will belong to the Buli moiety; however his father and his son will each belong to the Tabi moiety. Most men carry the name of the moiety with their own first name.

**Table 1.** Marriage moieties of South West Pentecost



A woman, on the other hand, belongs to the same moiety as all of her immediate female antecedents and descendants. Women also carry the name of their moiety with their other names. The rule then is that a Buli will always marry into the Mabon moiety and a Tabi will always marry into the Matan moiety. The female moiety into which a man will marry will not be the moiety of his sister. This form of marriage system accords



with Layard's (1942) description of bi-lateral cross-cousin marriage. Table 1 also demonstrates the connection between Ego and mother's brother who is of the same moiety as Ego. In the main a man will be nurtured by his father and inherit land from him but he also has some claim on land through his mother's moiety although today this claim is rarely enacted.

The importance of these marriage rules lies not only in their recognition of the correct persons to marry in biological terms, but the maintenance of the traditional exchanges which are the warp and weft of south west Pentecost societies. At marriage there may be several types of prestations of gifts, but those that are obligatory are pigs and mats. The number and type of pigs and mats is strictly recorded because they are part of a series of transactions between individuals and groups that will take place over the long term. Future ceremonies such as the birth of a child, the entry into the ranks of the graded society, and mortuary rites will all require the giving and receiving of pigs, mats, and perhaps money, to pay for these occasions and as fulfilment of the obligations to give and receive. Individuals who choose to opt out of this system will find themselves struggling for support for example to build a house; set up a business, because they will not be obligated to return the favour.

Betrothal or engagement for marriage is known as *kalingoro nanhavin*. On this occasion the boy's father gives red mats to the girl's parents. At marriage red mats and pigs are given to members of the bride's family by the bridegroom's relatives and members of his village. White mats are presented to the couple by the new husband's paternal aunts. During the following year these mats will be dyed with a distinctive red pattern. On the birth of a male child the parents will return the dyed mats to the infant's father's family, the father's sisters and brothers who will contribute to the child's later ascension through the graded society. Codrington (1891: 231) comments concur with this description:

'At Araga, on Pentecost, a first-born son remains ten days in the house in which he was born, during which time the father's kinsmen take food to the mother. On the tenth day they bring nothing, but the father gives them food and mats, which counts as money, in as great quantity as he can afford. They, the kin of the father and therefore not of the infant, on that day perform a certain ceremony called *huhuni*: they lay upon the infant's head mats and the strings with which pigs are tied, and the father tells them that he accepts this as a sign that hereafter they will feed and help his son.'

Zaccheus, as the boy's father at his marriage to a girl from Bwil, gave four pigs @ 20,000 vatu each to the girl's father and mother, and 25 small pigs @3000 vatu each to the girl's father's sisters and brothers. At a marriage ceremony at Vanmasakarowt in 1990, eight red mats were received by the by the women of the bride's family on behalf of her father; and nine pigs of varying sizes were distributed to the bride's father, bride's brothers, the bride's mother, the bride's father's sisters, and to other members of the bride's family; with money to the bride's father's eldest brother's daughter. In the case of marriage, described above, the circulation of both red mats and pigs go from the bridegroom's father's relatives to the relatives of the bride. After the birth of the child the white mats, now red, circulate back to the bridegroom's family.



**Figure 6.** Chief assessing red mats displayed at marriage at Vensenmakul 1990  
(Photo: C. Winch-Dummett)

### *Circumcision*

At circumcision *maslun* is made to the boy's father's sisters and brothers. Originally circumcision took place in the *nakamal* and bamboo was used for the procedure. The boy remained in the *nakamal* for three weeks and during that time only his father's

brother could take care of him e.g. providing food; washing the boy in the sea. After three weeks the boy's parents would make a ceremonial laplap (cooked food) and give *seses* to the uncle who took care of the boy. Today, boys go to hospital for the procedure. They remain in hospital for one week. They then return to the *nakamal* for three weeks. Red mats continue to return to the family of the young child's father's family. Codrington (1891: 234) writes, '...[circumcision] has come up from Ambrym to the lower end of Pentecost, as a prevailing custom and not very lately ....It is not a mark of initiation and has no religious or superstitious character; it is a social distinction.' This is the case for modern south west Pentecost although it is not clear whether Codrington was referring to the *kastom* of the far south of Pentecost or to the southern area of Pentecost generally.

#### *The public graded society (lel leuten)*

Graeber (2001: 93) refers to Mauss' argument that in societies lacking an ideology of individualism (such as is the case in south west Pentecost),

'... the person, or public self of its members is often built up out of a collection of symbolic name and titles, ritual paraphernalia, or other sorts of insignia and badges of office.'

Graeber (2001: 120) also comments that the Iriquoians of northeast North America (also a matrilineal society):

'... saw their societies not as a collection of living individuals but as a collection of eternal names, which over the course of time passed from one individual holder to another.'

The importance of titles acquired through advancement in the men's graded society of south west Pentecost conforms with this model of social transformation whereby even though the individuals may not survive, the social roles that they had held will survive, and so society will continue to recreate itself.

The public graded society known in south west Pentecost known as *lel leuten* is a series of ranked named grades through which a man will seek to ascend throughout his lifetime in order to achieve prestige, authority, power and wealth. The islands where the public graded society is practised and the local names for these societies are described by Layard (1942:690) as: *hukwa* (Torres Islands); *sukwe* (Banks Islands and Maewo);

*hukwe* (N.E. Ambrym); *hungwe* (W. Ambrym); *sumbe* (Malo); *mol* and *meme* (S.W. Santo); *faefi* (S. Ambae); *loli* (North Pentecost); *warsangul*<sup>viii</sup> (S. Pentecost); *maki* and *mangki* (N. and S. Ambrym) and *megi* (Epi). where matrilineal descent was the norm. According to Deacon (1970:707): ‘... there is considerable uniformity in the rites and regalia belonging to the graded society in all the islands of the North and North-Central New Hebrides.’

The practice of the graded society in south west Pentecost has been variably affected by the different missionizing denominations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, the French speaking Marist missionaries c1898, from Melsisi to just north of Ranwadi, or the English speaking Church of Christ, c1901, that is, the villages south of Ranwadi. The French missionaries of the period from 1898 to c1940, in particular Père Gonnet, (Pambu, Reel 52), describe the villages of the area south and east of Melsisi as being in constant warfare. Chiefs, supported by allied villages, led devastating murderous and destructive raids on other villages either in revenge or to assert power. The Marist missionaries did not become involved in these wars until after the death of Père Gonnet in 1935, nor did they attempt to interfere with *kastom* practices other than their prohibition on murder and polygamy.

It is not clear from the correspondence and records of the Marist missionaries whether the graded society operated in these villages at that time, although Père Gonnet (Reel 52: 21) refers to the continual squabbles over women and pigs. However, according to Bowes (1990:57), in the Church of Christ villages from Ranwadi to Hotwata in the south, (these villages would traditionally have networks of alliances with villages in the Marist villages), and where local church leaders and Christians had worked in Queensland on the sugar plantations up until 1901, ‘[T]he traditional pig-killing ceremony (*hungwe*) was abolished ...’ It may be assumed, then, that in the *hungwe*, i.e. graded society, existed before the arrival of the Marist missionaries and probably continued during their time. In the Church of Christ villages, just as in the case of the Marist Catholic missions, some villages accepted Christianity while others maintained *kastom*. As Bowes (1990:57) explains: ‘Two contrasting lifestyles developed. One was identified with custom, *nakamal*, and the chief. The other was identified with the Bible, the chapel-cum-school and the church “teacher”. ... Tribal wars and cannibalism continued in some measure during the first two decades [of the 20<sup>th</sup> century].’

This dichotomy of attitudes to the graded society remains to this day. In those villages centred on Melsisi *lel leuten* has continued uninterrupted, but in the Church of Christ villages *lel leuten* has only recently been revived since Independence (1980) when *kastom* and Christianity have emerged as the defining symbols and expressions of Vanuatu nationhood. Although some *kastom* chiefs continued to ascend *lel leuten* in the Church of Christ villages after the introduction of Christianity, other senior men and elders acquired authority through their training in western institutions as pastors and teachers or became successful business men. A third opportunity for a man to acquire influence was for his village to select him as a type of magistrate or chief who could settle local disputes. Such chiefs would be sought from the family of a successful chief of this type although it was not a strictly hereditary title as may be found in some islands in the south of Vanuatu. In the late 20th Century an easing of animosity between the Christian denominations and an appreciation of *kastom* as a symbol of national unity have strengthened the graded society as a means for all men of ambition to attempt to achieve a chieftaincy, and thereby a possibility of local, regional, or even national influence, the latter through participation in the Malvatumauri, the National Council of Chiefs (see Bolton 1998; Lindstrom 1982; 1997).

Entrance to *lel leuten* in South West Pentecost takes place at a time when a chief or the father of a boy believes him to be mature, with a sense of kindness, tolerance, and an absence of cruelty, anger or desire of revenge. If the boy's father is a chief then the process will be easy because he will have accumulated the pigs and mats required to pay for the services of the officiating chief, dancers, slit-gong players and other important people. Otherwise the father will need the support of his relatives and those who may be obligated in some way due to his assistance with pigs or mats on previous occasions such as marriages, *let leuten*, or in commercial transactions.

Every rank of *lel leuten* has a specific cost that must be reckoned in red mats and pigs, or the equivalent in vatu (especially in the case of men with city jobs and without the resources to raise pigs). In the early stages of *lel leuten* the boy's father will provide the mats, pigs, yam and money required, but he may be assisted by relatives such as and sisters and brothers who may dance for the boy candidate. The father's brothers will get one *sese* and father's sisters will each get one *tsip*. At higher levels there will be more

donors who contribute to the number of pigs and mats required for that grade. They may be relatives or they may be other donors attracted by the wealth, prestige and authority of the candidate. They too will have the privilege of dancing at the *lel leuten* and these offerings will be recorded for a reciprocal donation when they, or their male relatives, enter into higher grades of *lel leuten*.

There are certain people who play the gong rhythms. There is also a special gong rhythm for those of certain grades and another for those who do not have status. When the donors present the mats, or the pig which they tie to a stake or tree, they dance in a line towards the candidate holding a specific leaf that represents the item presented. Each type of pig with its specific tusk curvature, or the equivalent number and type of mats is represented by a particular leaf. Following the presentation of the pigs and mats the candidate begins a dance. Ten *namele* leaves (cycads) are placed on the ground in a line each parallel to the other. These ten *namele* represent ten social values or rules.<sup>ix</sup> The candidate weaves through the *namele* leaves thereby recognising the rules. This action signifies that the candidate is now considered a man of honour. The candidate's father's brothers and sisters may now commence dancing.

The candidate kills the pig of designated tusk curvature and the chief announces the new title of the candidate. Up to this point the ceremony takes place in the open. After the pig killing the candidate, now a chief, enters the *nakamal* (the men's house) where he remains from five to ten days. Food will be prepared for him on the sacred fireplace which is designated as *tabu* by two *namele* leaves lying close together directly in front of the fireplace. When the period of seclusion is over the new chief will go to the sea to bathe. On the seashore where he bathed he will plant a *namele* leaf which will remain there for one year as a sign that this area is *tabu* to everyone. After one year he will remove the *namele* leaf. By this action of planting and removing the *namele* leaf he demonstrates his power as a chief to make rules.

#### *Categorising pigs according to tusk curvature for lel leuten*

In order to fully appreciate the exchanges of pigs and mats in the grades of *lel leuten*, it is useful to examine the categorisation of the size and curvature of the tusks of pigs to be sacrificed at the pig-killing which is part of the ceremony. Pigs are graded and valued according to the size of the tusk. There are ten named levels of tusk development

towards a single full curvature of the tusk (i.e. from the lower jaw, through the outside of the cheek above the upper jaw and into the mouth of the pig). There are a further six named grades of tusk curvature towards a second level of tusk curvature which is rare. (i.e. through the outer cheek and into the mouth a second time). The number ten is fundamental for most calculations. For example, the monetary value of mats is reckoned in multiples of 10 and the 10 levels of tusk curvature correspond to the 10 grades of *lel leuten* i.e., the graded society. However, although this is the norm this cannot apply to the tusk curvature because the pig cannot live longer than 7 years by which time it is possible for only the 16<sup>th</sup> level of tusk curvature to be reached.

In the list below the name of the pig indicates the size of the tusk. The measurement of the length of the tusk accords to the width of the fingers at the base measured from one to four fingers.

First curvature:

1. *bolewanteshosok* Very small pig
2. *botwut* Small tusk just erupting
3. *botebebi* Tusk is about a half inch in length or width of one finger
4. *boliwontemamal* Tusk is about one inch or width of two fingers
5. *lipsal maabubotero* Tusk is curved and about to enter the cheek about three fingers.
6. *lipsal tewasten* Tusk has gone through the skin and entered the jawbone
7. *lipsal trebolelen* Tusk has entered the jaw to the length of the width of one finger.
8. *lipsal trebolelen* Tusk has entered the jaw to the length of the width of two fingers.
9. *lipsal teroblelen* Tusk has entered the jaw to the length of the width of four fingers.
10. *lipsal tetwak* After four fingers the tusk emerges from the mouth and the first curvature is complete. The second tusk curvature may commence and the second series of six levels commences.

Second curvature:

11. *lipsal lewantoshokok*
12. *lipsal towut*
13. *lipsal tememal*
14. *lipsal tebebi*
15. *lipsal maabu*
16. *lipsal tewestang*

*The 10 grades of lel leuten with the required number and type of pigs and mats required*  
Listed below are the names of the grades and a brief description of the title accompanying each grade. The candidate acquires a new title each time that he meets the requirements for acceptance into a higher grade.

1. *bahribo*. This means ‘stepping on the pig’ which means that a boy may now enter the *lel leuten*. (No title). The boy wears a red mat and gives the chief a small pig. This is known as *malsi*, giving something in return. He must present one *lipsal tewasten* and one *sese* (a total of one pig and one large mat)

2. *bilanban*. The boy has the right to wear the *karwurowuro* belt and *bilanban*, a special red mat. (No title). The first gong rhythm *birilak* is bought. He must present one *lipsal tewasten* and 6 *seses* (a total of one pig and one mat).

3. *warisangal*. This means ‘red hibiscus’ which means that the boy may now wear a red hibiscus and he is beginning to ‘look red’. (No title). He may wear *nangaria*, a croton with yellow, green and red leaves. The gong rhythm is *kabnmolan*. He must present one *lipsal trebolelen* and 7 *seses*; one *botwut* and 2 *seses*; and one *bolewanteshosock* and one *sese* ( a total of 3 pigs and 10 mats).

4. *gori*. This is the name of a gong rhythm associated with this grade. (No title). This is the name of the associated gong rhythm. The candidate wears *warisangal* (red hibiscus), *nangaria* (coloured leaves) and *karwurowuro* and *bilanban* the belt and mat. He must present one *lipsal trebolan* and 7 *seses*; and one *botwut* and 2 *seses* (a total of 2 pigs and 9 mats.)

5. *malmahang temit*. This means ‘breathing of the pig’ and is the name of the gong rhythm. The title is *liwus*. He must present one *lipsal trebolelen* and 9 *seses*; one *botebebi* and 4 *seses*; one *botwut* and 2 *seses* (a total of 3 pigs and 15 mats).

6. *kavwik*. This means ‘native apple’. The title *vi* is now used for the first time of three consecutive times before the most senior titles (e.g. note that the co-author is Chief



Vitamerin – *vi* the beginning of the title). At the levels of *vi* the candidate has the right to oath-taking which gives him the right to judge others and impose fines. Because this grade is in the central position of the hierarchy of grades the candidate can now give advice on his own behalf from *bahribo* to *mariak*. He must present one *lipsal tetwak*<sup>x</sup> and 10 *seses*; one *botebebi* and 4 *seses* (a total of 2 pigs and 14 mats).

7. *malmahang tememe*. This means ‘red belt’. The title *vi* is bestowed a second time. The red belt distinguishes this grade and indicates that the candidate may now judge people according to the 10 values of the grades.

8. *karwurowuro*. The title *vi* is bestowed a third time. The candidate is now recognised as an adult, a chief and can now make decisions on behalf of the higher chiefs. He must present 2 *lipsal tetwak* and 20 *seses* (a total of 2 pigs and 20 mats).

9. *hatnan karwurowuro*. This means a special type of hat. The hat is like ‘a crown’ and the people are subject to the decisions of the person wearing that hat. The title of *tamaraka* meaning ‘high chief’ is bestowed and he has the right to authorise ceremonies. He must present 2 *lipsal tetwak* and 20 *seses* and he must pay for the hat with one *lipsal tetwak* and 10 *seses* (a total of 3 pigs and 30 mats).

10. *mariak*. This means ‘the end’ – the culmination of the hierarchy of grades of *lel leuten*. The title of *tanmanok* is bestowed. He must present one *lipsal tetwak* and 10 *seses* (a total of one pig and 10 mats). He must present 2 *lipsal tetwak* and 20 *seses* (a total of 2 pigs and 20 mats).

In addition to the pigs mentioned above for each of the above grades the candidate must also provide 10 extra pigs. These 10 extra pigs represent the social rules or values that the candidate must dance through as he winds his way through the 10 *namele* leaves during the *lel leuten* ceremony.<sup>xi</sup> Therefore the total of pigs required to enter each grade is composed of the number of pigs stipulated for entry into the grade plus 10 extra pigs. For example *mariak*, which is the highest grade, requires one *lipsal tetwak* and 10 *seses* for entry; the extra pigs and mats to pay for each of the 10 steps or values are: 2 *lipsal*

*tetwak* and 20 *seses*; 2 *lipsal trebolelen* and 18 *seses*, 2 *lipsal trebolelen* and 16 *seses*, 2 *lipsal trebolelen* and 14 *seses*, and 2 *lipsal trebolelen* and 12 *seses*.

In *karwurowuro*, an important grade with the title *vi* a third time and which endows the chief with the power to make decisions on the part of a higher chief, the 10 extra pigs may of lesser value than that for *mariak* but must include 3 or 4 *lipsals* plus 6 or 7 lesser pigs from *botwut* to *lipsal*.

The meaning attached to these two groups of pigs and mats lies in the authority given to the candidate as he aspires to the new grade. The pigs and mats required for entry into each new grade pay for the new identity and title acquired by the candidate through acceptance into that grade. The extra pigs and mats which the candidate pays to dance through the society's values and rules symbolised in the 10 *namele* leaves bestow the authority on the candidate to access 'tabu' and 'rule', i.e., the rights and responsibilities of the grade.

### *Funerals*

There is no difference in burial ceremonies for women or men. *Maslun* is made for the funeral. When a man or woman dies mourners go to the village to wail and bring a *sese* mat. Sometimes the mourners will come with 30 – 40 or even 100 *sese* mats. Some of the mats are used to wrap the body e.g., if there are 50 mats then 20 – 22 are used to wrap the deceased before burial. A large house is required to accommodate the deceased and the many mourners. By late in the afternoon, about 4 p.m. when all the mourners have arrived, the deceased is wrapped for the burial which takes place that same afternoon. The deceased person is placed lengthwise on the mats, and the body, but not the head, is covered with blankets, calico and mats. The mats are folded over the body from the ends but one end is folded in such a way that the head is not covered by these mats. Each mat is wrapped separately over the previous mat.

The close family of the deceased counts all the mats to determine how many to bury with the deceased and how many to keep. At Lolwari in August 2010 a deceased chief received 120 red mats. His body was wrapped in 50 mats tied with vines. Today any person may carry the deceased to the interment but in the past chiefs had to be carried by chiefs. After the five or 100 days elapse there is a feast, *kubungi*, and the remaining

mats are distributed on behalf of the deceased amongst all those who had remained for the five or 100 days. These remaining mats are known as *malengan*. On the day of the funeral a pig or pigs are killed by a family member and this event is recorded. For example, it may be the case that five pigs and two bullocks are killed. The people who donated the pigs or bullock will be given some of the remaining red mats.

## Conclusion

‘The *tongoa* or *hau* – which itself moreover possesses a kind of individuality - is attached to its chain of users until these give back from their own property, their *tongoa*, their goods, or from their labour or trading, by way of feasts, festivals and presents the equivalent or something of even greater value.’ (Mauss, 1923 : 12)

The inclusion of this quote is not to re-plough ground by examining the presentation of red mats in traditional Maussian terms but in fact to attempt to explain how the people of South West Pentecost have seamlessly adapted a traditional exchange process into a modern western economy while maintaining the integrity of the exchange process of each market place in economic terms. We now address Mauss’ comment by taking a new perspective on it, from the flip side so to speak, a process of analysis used by Graeber in examining writings of Mauss and Marx, although our perspective differs in terms of specific subject matter.

Most people of traditional or western economies, (familiar with Mauss or otherwise), would agree that gifts received include an obligation to reciprocate in the present or the future. Even if ostensibly the gift is a demonstration of generosity there is usually some underlying mutually understood social balance included between giver and receiver, e.g. an appreciation of service; a source of personal acknowledgement; or in the expectation (e.g. anniversaries) that the gift will be returned with some degree of equivalence at a future definite date (e.g. the giver’s own anniversary). However, we suggest this same expectation of equivalence can, if taken to the extreme, actually rupture social relations. For example, if we select a gift that we believe will be commensurate with the specific interests of the recipient, we have personalised the gift – not just with an equivalent of *hau* demanding that the gift be returned – essentially with how we recognise the special qualities of the recipient. If however, the recipient (less interested in the qualities of her future recipient) later gives that gift to another recipient (in the meantime storing it in a

drawer, box, basket etc.) and the gift returns to us as a gift, the social clumsiness of all the givers in the chain accrue as an insult intended or not to us.

On the other hand in the potlatch or similarly in *lel leuten* the destruction of wealth achieved through the labour of many others is made public. The audience knows exactly the monetary value of the pigs sacrificed, and the pigs and mats presented as payments, and therefore, the expected value and quality of future prestations. There should be no concealed personal or social resentments and hostilities that will accrue leading to the possibility of negative action. In *lel leuten*, through obligated giving and receiving, social relations are maintained in the present but, more importantly, the means for future social integration and viability, as Graeber would suggest, is assured through the transformation of production as new networks and alliances emerge in pursuit of future *lel leuten*. The value of the gift in this case, lies not just in the cost of the production of the item in either monetary terms or in the investment of labour and time which could have been used in other unrelated enterprises, but in the extent to which the transformation of those elements into communal action reinforces social reproduction.

So bearing in mind the question at the beginning of this paper we endeavour to explain how a small-scale society, in particular that of South West Pentecost, maintains this human commitment and viability while at the same time acquiring the necessities for surviving in both the small-scale interdependent society and the increasingly pervasive western economy. The demands of the national and international market economy of labour, wages, finances and so on are not a permanent viable option for most villagers even if they have some access to the cash economy through their own endeavours such as growing copra or kava. The capacity to maintain a local economy so that individuals or groups can ride out the vagaries of the market economy is embedded in social relations. Informed by Graeber, we will examine three ways in which the society of South West Pentecost has resolved this problem. Our discussion refers to the ways in which mats may be recognised as possessing value; the importance of display in the exchange of mats; and mats as generators of social reproduction.

#### *The monetary value of mats and the value of mats as repositories of key social values*

In our earlier discussion of mats used in a secular context we noted that a specific monetary value, i.e. the transferable measure in value in vatu, was assigned to *tsip* and

*sese* red mats. Yet the same mats are used in ceremonial occasions where there is no reference to monetary value, although of course, participants at ceremonies such as marriages or *lel leuten* would well know the *vatu* value of each mat (and in fact there are instances where monetary equivalents in the form of school fees are exchanged instead of mats or pigs by people who work in an urban area and cannot supply the relevant pigs or mats). The answer lies in the form of presentation of the mats in the relevant social contexts. In the non-ceremonial exchange of mats for goods or services the mat remains folded and is passed without any particular gesture to the recipient. However, in ceremonial exchange the mats are held by one corner only and spread out on the ground with a flourish to display their beautiful designs and fringes. The particular designs on the mats exhibited on these occasions when the mats made public reveal the core values of the society.

*The display and action of red mats in exchange.*

Graeber (2001: 225), in his discussion of types of gifts, comes close to a description of the role of the exchange of red mats in south west Pentecost where, as structures of human action

‘... timeless relations of open-ended, communistic reciprocity, whether they apply to groups like moieties or clans, or members of a family, or a network of individuals ... [are] concerned with maintaining the value of a timeless human commitment ...’

Graeber describes two types of products circulated in exchange societies: beautiful objects that are displayed and circulated but never destroyed such as the *mwali* (beautiful bracelets) and the *soulava* (necklaces) of the Trobriand Kula ring, and other items that are destroyed in the action of a major cultural event such as the coppers destroyed in the potlatches of the societies of the American Northwest. The beautiful goods remain hidden, just as red mats are kept in a basket in the recesses of a house, except for display and exchange at ceremonies. This concealing and revealing of mats, beautiful items, demonstrates timeless human commitment because new mats will constantly be created and mats will continue to circulate as the members of the society are transformed through networks established at marriages births and *lel leuten*. As we have seen, it is only at funerals that red mats are freed from circulation.

On the other hand the nurture of pigs is ongoing and public. The killing of pigs at *lel leuten* is the culmination of the cycle of pig production. It is the point where action, in the terms of the sacrifice, consumption and sharing of pigs and other foodstuffs, results in the transformation of the identity of the candidate and a reorganisation of the mode of production as new social alliances are formed. Only the jaw and tusks of the sacrificed boar remain from the sacrifice but these are a potent symbol of the candidate's social level vis-a-vis other males in Pentecost and beyond.

*Mats as generators of social reproduction.*

As Weiner (1976:221) claims:

‘The basic force that gives momentum to the processes of human interaction is control over the circulation of goods, over workpower, and over the final regeneration of persons through social and cosmic time.’

The value of red mats may be seen in their capacity to generate future transactions that reproduce the society in which they are exchanged. Just as the value of the *wampum* of the Kwakiutl is derived not from ‘... the importance of past actions, but like money, from its capacity to mediate future ones,’ (Graeber, 2001:132). Society is reproduced diachronically through the transformations of networks as the actors are regrouped according to the various ceremonial occasions, and synchronically as the younger generations move forward to take their places and commitment in the ceremonial occasions. Social reproduction viewed through the exchange of red mats, must be a collective enterprise, one that holds meaning to the participants. But for the core values concealed in the hidden mats and revealed in ceremonies to have meaning there must be an underlying desire for peace. If we substitute ‘mats’ for ‘wampum belts’ in the following quote (Graeber, 2001:145) we may understand the logic behind the exchange of red mats in a society which was driven by revenge and violence before the arrival of the Christian missionaries:

‘Without war, “peace” is meaningless. In a sense, then, the wampum belts [red mats] themselves – or, perhaps more accurately, the process of weaving them together – was itself a model of the process it was meant to mediate, one constantly reproduced in ritual: of converting the potential for destruction into harmony by integrating it into a larger social whole.’

The commitment to the accumulation and exchange of red mats in the south west Pentecost cycle of cultural ceremonial activities, with recognition of their monetary equivalent, has led to a collective recognition of the importance of the processes leading to chieftaincy and therefore the viability of chieftaincy as a means of engaging groups of people beyond the immediate village level into webs of obligations and entitlements that transcend individual disputes, and meet the needs of the local economy as it lurches through the challenges imposed on them by the vagaries of the global and national economy.

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## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The customary traditions .

<sup>ii</sup> In discussion with Zaccheus Tabi.

<sup>iii</sup> Aoba was renamed Ambae in 1980.

<sup>iv</sup> Our discussion of the production and designs of red mats in South West Pentecost is informed by our observations of the dyeing of red mats in Lolwari Village (1990); by Mescam's (1989) study the production of red mats undertaken in the villages of South West Pentecost; and our meetings with Chief Martin Virakor of Rep, Chief Joseph Virahop of Ronwok, Mikael Bule of Lolwari who is currently the carvers in Lolwari, Zaccheus Tabi of Vanu Tabi of Vanu, and Chief Isaiah, an elected chief of Vanu.

<sup>v</sup> In February 2012, US \$1.00= Vatu 89

<sup>vi</sup> Alternative spelling 'karawuro'.

<sup>vii</sup> Codrington (1891 : 92) uses the Araga inter-changeably with Pentecost and Whitsunday Island..

<sup>viii</sup> Today *warsangal* is the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of *lel leuten* in south west Pentecost .– the grade where the candidate 'becomes red'.

<sup>ix</sup> These values are not defined but refer to the power of the chief to judge and fine those who break the peace in the village. Informants described these rules as being similar to the Ten Commandments of the Christian churches.

<sup>x</sup> In *lipsal tetwak* the pig's tusk has completed a full circle and signifies that the wearer is a chief.