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Demand-sharing and fences: Aspects of the new Port Vila household

Partage à la demande et clôtures : Quelques aspects des nouvelles maisonnées de Port-Vila

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This paper was first prepared for the ESFO conference in Brussels in 2015. I would like to thank the participants at that workshop for their feedback, and I thank organizers Lamont Lindstrom and Christine Jourdan for their detailed comments on the paper. I also thank Laurent Dousset for reading a version of it and the anonymous reviewer for very valuable comments.

- 1 The suburbs in Port Vila, Vanuatu, have become interesting experiments into new forms of Melanesian sociality. Their design is constantly adapting to the challenges that come up in the situation that ni-Vanuatu face in their transferral from village life to urban life. Here people live in highly populated neighbourhoods, not only in co-habitation with people who they would at home classify as taboo relatives, such as in-laws or sisters and brothers, but also people of other places, speaking other languages and upholding other ways of life (patrilineal/matrilineal, other marriage rules, other forms of sorcery/witchcraft, etc.). As pointed out in the introduction to this volume, Vanuatu indigenous people's experience with an urban way of life is relatively recent, and for most people the major breaking point was Independence in 1980. Before that people from the outer islands and rural villages could visit Port Vila and they could work temporarily at the surrounding plantations or in government jobs like the police, hospital or post office, but once they no longer had any business with the colonial or administrative authorities in town they were deported back to their home village (see also Rousseau, this volume). Even though it is now over three decades since Port Vila became the administrative centre of the independent nation, and people have managed to make it their own city to some degree,¹ the adaptation to urban life and what that entails is still very much a potent social and political issue today. People all the time speak of the costs and benefits of a transfer from rural agriculture to seeking

employment in construction or the service industry, and from living in an environment of an expansive system of kinship and a circulating flow of agricultural produce to an economy of scarce consumer goods and money.

- 2 In this article I will take part in that discussion about what it means to live in a Melanesian town, by addressing one specific aspect of this problematic transferral of rural values to the urban situation. I will discuss the pressure that the urban household is under and look at some strategies that people use to meet with that pressure. This largely concerns making the household a closed and self-contained social unit, but I will especially focus on something that is more specific. People often set up what we can call a household store, a store that services their immediate kin and neighbours. I propose that this is meant to regulate the difficult dilemma of at the one hand upholding some idea of sharing between family members and friends, but at the same time avoiding the exhaustion of households through unpredictable taking of food and commodities. When people in Port Vila address this perilous form of depletion they use the term *stikim nek* in Bislama (lit. draw blood from neck), which indicates the life consuming danger that people feel in the face of aggressive “demand-sharing”. The metaphor addresses the problem of the extended family, as well as visitors from the rural areas, and their tendency to drain the supplies of the household without contributing anything.
- 3 I will look at this problem from the point of view of a discussion of demand-sharing in anthropology (from Peterson, 1993), and try to figure out how this widespread ideology is adapted to the seemingly very different social realm of the market place of buying and selling. In Aboriginal Australia, where Peterson thematised demand-sharing, it was based on obligations stemming from roles and positions in pre-existing kinship relationships. It was a system of rights and obligations to share, but which in practice was carried out through taking or demanding and not through ‘generosity’ as such. One needs to be careful in importing such a concept from another context, but I think it is fair to say that demand-sharing is also a good term for a general ethos of sharing in Melanesia. The issue in this paper is to address how the institution of demand-sharing changes under the urban circumstances of scarcity – when the households can no longer sustain all the demanding and taking that kinship, friendship and neighborliness should ideally allow. It seems to me that the experiments into urban life in Port Vila very much rests on its success of keeping the ‘sharing’ but getting rid of the ‘demanding’ and the household store is a good arena for making this change.

Household stores and the fencing in of settlements

- 4 This is based on fieldwork in Port Vila, on and off from 2000 until 2014. Before this Annelin Eriksen and I did fieldwork in a rural setting on North Ambrym (see Rio, 2007a; Eriksen, 2008). Our move to Port Vila also meant that we continued to do fieldwork through our networks with Ambrym people who were now living in town. This has taken us to different corners of the town; mostly in the suburbs like Pango, Ohlen, Freswota, Ifira, Man Ples, Tagabe and Bladinier, and we have always spent most of our days there – sitting and chatting inside their yards, sometimes moving into kava-bars in the afternoon and sometimes going to church with our Ambrym friends and their affinal relatives from other islands. This has been fieldwork into the lower classes of Port Vila; mostly to do with unskilled workers who drive buses or taxis, work in

construction or service hotels, but also the unemployed drifters who go and come to Port Vila, and the steady stream of Ambrym villagers who come to the town to sell their wood carvings for the various handicraft markets or to traders from New Caledonia. This also means we have mostly seen households that find themselves in a situation of constant scarcity and uncertainty.

- 5 The situation for the urban ni-Vanuatu households is that their salaried income is often not really enough to sustain a life in the town. An informal survey carried out by the Vanuatu National Workers Union in 2010 estimated that the cost of living for a family of four in Port Vila per month is a minimum of 60 000 vatu (500 €). The minimum wage in Vanuatu, dating to the Minimum Wages Act of 2014, is 170 vatu per hour (1,4 €). The minimum wage pays a net salary of 26 000 vatu per month (200 €), and this more or less corresponds to the average salary among our Ambrym friends. This also very directly means that every month they are short of meeting with the monthly expenses of paying rent, school fees, transport, clothes and food as well as ceremonial contributions to weddings, funerals or circumcision ceremonies, even if both parents work. In addition all the temporary visitors from the islands represent a cost since they tend to contribute less than they consume. Strategies to cover the considerable deficit in household income is to try to sell woodcarvings, to engage in micro-credit circles, to gamble on slot machines, to borrow from family or to ask kin in the rural areas to send food on the cargo ships. In daily life the deficit and scarcity also implies a keen attention to details of spending, and coins of 100 vatu (around 1 €) is in general the measure around which they orient their consumption of store goods. A pack of sugar, some tea bags, small plastic bags of rice, tinned meat or fish, a bread, a few bananas and some island cabbage, some chicken wings, a trip on a bus, a couple of cigarettes, or a cup of kava, or a fill-up for the mobile phone – these are all items within reach of the 100 vatu coins in people's pockets.
- 6 But the problem for most urban dwellers is that this limited horizon for spending is in conflict with an ideology of sharing. In contrast to subsistence agriculture, which normally produces food in excess of the population, so that there is always a lot of food around that needs to be shared and eaten because it turns bad, the urban situation is the opposite. There are always limited amounts of money and store goods, and since they do not turn bad or rot, they do not need to be shared either. With the interesting construction of the household store people argue that they have found a way to remedy this, since the store has the purpose of being available and of mutual benefit for everyone in the household. In contrast with other stores, the household store offers the store goods for sharing, but only through payment so that the pool of goods can be maintained. They are not meant for creating profit and any indication that the store is creating wealth for the owner would be seen as immoral from the point of view of the customers.
- 7 The households that we frequent in the Port Vila settlements are mostly built on unregulated plantation land, like in the Blacksands, Tagabe and Ohlen areas that used to be colonial plantations. Some of this plantation land has now also been divided into regulated land plots, like the ones in Freswota and Bladiniere, where people have actually bought land with an infrastructure of water supply and electricity. In terms of living and structure of buildings this doesn't make much of a difference. For, often, the ones who actually build dwellings are not the ones who own the plot of land, but they take the opportunity of building on someone else's plot, friends or relatives. Even in the

regulated areas people therefore have a short horizon for their investment into the housing they build. Houses are often built with temporary materials, with concrete floors, but lightweight walls and roofs made out of corrugated iron, tarpaulins, bamboo, sago palm thatch, cardboard or chipboard.

- 8 These neighbourhoods are village-like in the sense they have paths going organically through them from house to house and so that only people who are friends or relatives will know their way between houses. The interiors of houses are like dark labyrinths of rooms and pathways leading here and there, but only with one entry, and with few sources of light. The households have barbed wire around them or fences around the yards made of corrugated iron. These are put up to secure them from outsiders looking in, and the houses are securely closed off against the outside.

Figure 1. – Neighbourhood in the regulated areas of Freswota, 2014

(© Knut Rio)

- 9 The households are in this way protected from the feeling of danger that the urban situation represents, and in this sense the households are now more and more like hamlets that close in on themselves. There is a sense of imminent danger and predation outside these yards, and people put padlocks on their doors, they bolt their windows and there is a widespread use of bars, especially in the little stores and kava-bars.

Figure 1. – A richly equipped household store servicing the extended immediate neighbours near Radio Ohlen, 2010

(© Knut Rio)

- 10 It is perhaps surprising that this development of enclosing and security should take place in Vanuatu. Keep in mind that in comparison with Port Moresby or Honiara, Port Vila is a peaceful place with very little theft. Rape of women is widespread, and the prison in Port Vila in 2010 housed 60% for rape, 20% for other violence and only 3-4% for theft.² This does not mean that ni-Vanuatu don't know what robbery or breaking-and-entering means, and they fear the situation in Port Moresby. But why is it, then, that Port Vila people adopt the aesthetics of dangerous places like Port Moresby and hide behind locks and bars?
- 11 The fear for women's sexuality and security is part of the rationale for the fencing in of the household. It is certainly a factor that there is a new moral panic about the sexuality of women, and women of the households are under close supervision; about how they dress, if they cover themselves up properly, do not wear make-up, and if they return home before dark (see also Servy, 2017). But the moral panic and new Christian concerns about female purity is only part of the picture. Rape of women does not normally take place inside the household, but in public places like outside the discos, outside kava-bars, or in the streets when women are walking home at night. Part of the problem that urban women face is exactly that they are *not* perceived to be in need of protection – they should instead protect themselves through clothing and proper behaviour. I suggest that the fencing in of the household relates to other social processes than a fear of violence, or rape or theft. It reveals a larger tendency of enforcing an inside-outside duality onto social life. The household store is central to this development, since it crystallizes a process of transformation that revolves around certain rural idioms like the hamlet, the lineage and sharing between insiders.

- 12 No doubt the household store is a concept that people have brought in from the rural areas. The idea of the village store was first introduced in association with the plantations during the colonial era, as the plantations became sources of commodities, wine, tobacco and sugar. Since then the idea of the village store has remained intact and every village around the country has at least a couple of stores. In the situation I know from north Ambrym the stores were servicing different parts of the village, according to lineage divisions and idioms of belonging. The store is also a way to interact with other lineage divisions and alliances. The concept of a store is as such also a social idiom inhering with social values. The store is always meant to help relatives and friends get the necessities of life, and it is a form of welfare institution. It is supposed to be a beneficent social space, where people can interact on equal terms, and get products that are free of relational obligations and issues of sorcery or envy. If you get a tin of corn beef for your Sunday *laplap* you can rest assured that this tin will not carry any germs or poison from a sorcerer. These village stores get the merchandise from the Chinese wholesale stores in Port Vila or Santo and these values of a social cleanliness apply to that whole network of trade, and the status of the Chinese merchants as complete outsiders and therefore free of relational dangers.
- 13 What we see now is that this idea of the village store is also maintained in the urban settlements. Each cluster of households in town also builds their own stores inside their yard. This means that there are stores at very different social levels in Port Vila. Firstly, in the centre there are shopping centres and supermarkets like *Au Bon Marché*. Secondly, there are the Chinese stores in Chinatown and outside of the city centre. They sell mostly tinned food, tea, sugar, kerosene, packs of rice but also cooking utensils and gardening tools, calico and clothes, fishing and diving equipment and toys for kids. The inventory of these shops constitutes the most important material culture also in rural village life, for gardening, food and ceremonial gifts. Thirdly there are stores out in the settlements, exactly the same stock as in the Chinese shops but with prices increased by a few cents, and many of them run by ni-Vanuatu and not Chinese businessmen. Finally many households have their own store, the same stock again but limited to the most used products like bread, sugar, rice, tea-bags and instant coffee, chewing gum, cigarettes, and tin-meat and the price increased again by a few cents. In people's accounts these stores are set up in order to help people in the settlement, just like in the rural villages, so that they don't have to go too far in the morning to get bread or sugar. In this sense the household store is a particular social space with an atmosphere of sharing within a limited group of people, but sharing through the particular form of exchanging commodities with money. The stores are normally placed inside or just next to the kitchen; the place where relatives would normally come to take food from the household. This commodity form of the sharing has the advantage of avoiding such *stikim nek* claims on one's stock. The household store is a form of resistance against aggressive demand-sharing.
- 14 Comparatively, Rodolfo Maggio comments from Honiara that the household store is very common in the urban settlements. He sees this initially as an income generating activity: "this is the easiest way to make a profit with relatively little labour. So easy, that stores have been mushrooming all over the place during the last decade", and along a stretch of 700 meters he counts 25 such household stores (Maggio, 2014: 97). But he also notes that this profit is very small and that there are also other factors involved in the importance of the phenomenon. In my experience a real substantial

profit would be counter-intuitive to the purpose of the household store. It is supposed to be non-profit, since it would not be right for a close relative or neighbour to make money from their relationship.

- 15 People in Port Vila always calculate very closely how much they should pay for a certain item. They mostly know exactly what things cost, and they don't hesitate to cross the town in order to get a certain product for 50 cents cheaper. This also means that the ideal for the household store is to sell at exactly the same price as the currently known price. This applies to tins of fish or meat, prepacked bags of rice, coffee or bottles of juice cordial. But the trick for creating a profit is to split up boxes and sell things as one and one piece; of tea bags, cigarettes, and rice in smaller bags, etc. If a box of 100 Lipton tea bags costs 500 vatu, one can sell single tea bags for ten vatu, and this implies 500 vatu (5 €) profit for the box. A box of 200 cigarettes might cost 5000 vatu, and by selling cigarettes individually for 50 vatu a piece it implies a profit of 5000 vatu (50 €). But they only sell small amounts of these things and it takes months to finish off these boxes. On an average day in one store I followed in 2014 they could sell 5 tea bags with 5 cents € profit per tea bag, 5 cigarettes with 25 cents profit per cigarette, 1 juice cordial with 50 cents profit per bottle, 1 bag of sugar with 50 cents profit per bag, 4 rice in bags of 100g with 10 cents profit per bag, 1 tinned tuna with 50 cents profit. Sometimes they would sell a jar of instant coffee at 50 cents profit and they could sell some fruits at 10 cents profit per fruit. This amounted to around 3 € profit per day as an average over the month I followed it; and a monthly income of 90 € (9000 vatu). But my point here is mainly that it is not this economic profit that drives the store. Considering that the sale from the store is limited to close relatives and neighbours, and that most of what leaves the store goes into the consumption of the immediate family, for the woman running it, for her husband, their children and for their visiting relatives, we need to realize that the store is best perceived as form of regulation of the consumption of the kin group. The store is a very clever way to control the immediate consumption of the extended family.
- 16 Whereas household stores are arenas of kin group consumption and not profit, the Chinese stores are the opposite. They are arenas for huge profits but no close social relations. Ni-Vanuatu have very little to do with the Asian population in Port Vila, except as their employees. The products sold in the household store are bought from the Chinese stores and this provides for a transformation from the realm of non-relatives to the realm of relatives. Even though this means that the Chinese are left with all of the profit – and these merchants do make quite a lot of money from the poor urban population – it also means that Ni-Vanuatu can protect their close relations from the realm of business.
- 17 In recent years these household stores have become tied up to the idea of 'prosperity' in a specific way. This does not concern profit, but how the store is a particular realm of cleanliness, order and accounting that do not pertain to the household relations of sharing generally. They point into an imagined future where the household has managed to overcome the gap that exists between them and the market of goods. Maggio also explicitly comments that stores are not intended to generate money, but rather to prevent economic appropriation by someone else. One of the informants told him: "It's just a way to keep the money inside the house" (Maggio, 2016: 9). And Maggio argues convincingly that ultimately, especially for Pentecostal converts in Honiara, these economic adaptations of the household to the market sphere is a way of breaking

with “a tyranny of need” (Maggio, 2014: 259) that the given definitions of their informal economy, their poverty and their precarious situation of scarcity offers them. Maggio concludes that “in conditions of poverty there is a tension between the value of sharing and the need to make ends meet, and Kwara’ae people make efforts to solve such a tension with the use of money and food.” (Maggio, 2014: 24). What he calls the “domestic moral economy” (Maggio, 2014: 90) becomes very interesting since the alternative distribution of goods in sharing relations is, through the household store, brought closer to what we would normally consider to be market relations. But we have to assume that they merely take on the form of the market relations because this presents them with some kind of advantage. The idea of “keeping the money within the house” first and foremost represents a way of thinking about close relations and the urban neighborhood and not so much thinking about money as such – since the money goes into the pockets of the Chinese merchant anyway. The household stores are ways of dealing with the urban dilemmas, as they create a space for meeting people between houses, and they supply relatives and friends with daily necessities, but inside a space that is protected from taking and preying. The fact that many stores have signs saying *no kaon!* (no credit!) also testifies to this dilemma of being on friendly terms but not too friendly, so to speak.

- 18 I suggest that there has been a development from the village store, as a welfare institution for the expanded kinship group in a situation of plenty, and to the urban neighbourhood store that provides a means for regulating demands about sharing in a situation of scarcity. I therefore believe that the fencing in of the household and the construction of the household store as a form of self-containment go hand in hand.
- 19 It is perhaps puzzling that Melanesians should want their closest relatives to buy food among themselves, and it is intriguing that they should be so paranoid about security. These questions concern what kind of social formation is taking shape in these urban settings. My approach follows from Polanyi’s dictum that all economic forms are instituted on particular social forms. Hence, what we tend to call the market, along with money and trade, belong inside particular historical processes that are instituted in particular social and historical circumstances (Polanyi, 1957). It also follows that buying and selling is not in itself a unitary phenomenon that we can understand without understanding the social structures where it is going on. The social relations pertaining to the Chinese merchants in Port Vila, recalling the well-known figure of the ‘foreigner trader’ (see Polanyi, 1957: 260), are very different from the social relations of the household store. It is my impression, also supported by Maggio in Honiara, that the market relations of the household is very much set up in a resistance and perhaps as an attempted break with, on the one hand, the impersonal relations to these foreigner traders and on the other hand a break with aggressive forms of demand-sharing as too invasive social relations.

Demand sharing is generosity and not exchange

- 20 The concept of demand-sharing, also framed as ‘tolerated theft’ (Peterson, 1993: 861), has emerged in recent years as a way of changing our view of hunter-gatherer societies (see Peterson, 1993; Woodburn, 1998; Riches, 2000; Jimenez and Willerslev, 2007; Widlok, 2013). Demand-sharing refers to the mutual rights of people who are in a prescribed kinship relation, to take and make use of each other’s goods and

possessions. Criticizing a 'noble-savage' perspective on the value of communitarianism and generosity, these authors instead focus on the 'taking' that sharing involves. It has become clear that the demand to be given food is not really a moral claim to be generous; it is rather a social technique or acquired skill with no moral issues attached at all. Taking, and the social skills of trickery and deception, mostly involves no ethical discussions or moral consequences or sanctions (Peterson, 1993: 868).

- 21 It is not a long stretch to apply these lessons from hunter-gatherer situations to the value on sharing in Vanuatu. In the Ambrym village economy people grow vegetables and fruits and rear pigs. People within a lineage or a hamlet work together and also share the products of their efforts. This takes place within the bounded hamlet group organized around patrilineal descent. Outside of that realm; in the ceremonial economy of marriage, death or circumcision the bounded hamlet groups extend into exchanges with other such groups. This is initially to do with a process of 'giving life'. What is defined as the group of 'mother's kin' (*wuruen*) contributes 'life' in the form of matrilineal blood, gifts of live pigs or vegetables or mats for sleeping or clothes for wearing. It follows that the persons who are on the receiving end of this this stream of gifts of life has to cancel out of such a hierarchical structure by returning the 'gift of life' with killing of pigs and giving of money. Through these ceremonies they replace the perspective of the gift with the perspective of exchange, and in the vocabulary the gift is replaced by a 'payment' (see Rio, 2007b). It is hence not only in the urban sphere that things are paid for. In my view people in these rural areas have for a long time used 'payment' (*pem* in Bislama) as an idiom for creating autonomy for the person. The ceremonial payment for masks and secret knowledge in the *rom* society, payments for rights to specific carving designs such as the two or three faced *atingting* drums, the payment for specific symbolic items like the mirror or the comb in girls *yengfah* initiation ceremonies, the payment for plots of land for building a house, or even the insistence on paying for bottled milk for a baby that one is adopting, these are all institutionalized payments that allow the person to move away from social encompassment and to gain autonomous agency and a capacity for equal exchanges with others. This way of thinking at least goes back a century, when W.H.R. Rivers commented on similar payment for rights, and specifically he pointed out that when boys were circumcised they had to 'pay' their mother's brothers for the right to see and own their own penis. Rivers, who observed the ceremony of male initiation on West Ambrym in 1914, commented that:

"There is an objection in Ambrym to the glans penis being seen, but... this is not due to the fear of magic or fear of any other kind, but it is because they have paid for the exposure of the glans in the *pakvi* ceremony. They object to anyone who has not so paid seeing what they have paid for" (Rivers quoted in Layard, 1942: 478).

- 22 As a continuation of this way of thinking, in what is now on Ambrym called *taoboan* or 'pig-killing', men will throughout life kill pigs as payments to their cross-lineage relatives, ideally to 'both sides' i.e. mother's kin groups and wife's kin groups, so that they towards the end of their life can ideally have the right to themselves – not only their penis – but the right to see their entire person as autonomous from the surrounding hamlets other than their own.
- 23 The general outcome of this way of thinking grounded in the Ambrym lifeworld, and no doubt similarly in other islands of the archipelago, is a general stress on 'payment' within issues to do with rights, autonomy and individual standing. The status achieved

through payment cannot be shared and cannot be taken either. But we need to keep in mind that this autonomy is vis-a-vis the other lineages that helped produce oneself and one's own lineage. Throughout life one is constantly looking to achieve an equal and autonomous position with regard to the other lineage people, people who are not 'like oneself', and this effort to become equal and autonomous is kept in motion since the other lineages also throughout life keep maintaining their giving of life and claiming that they have a share in your life and lineage. This concerns the ongoing process of relations between lineages on Ambrym.

- 24 Within the lineage (*buluim*), by contrast, and within the brotherhood of peers (*bulbulan*) one is always at one with the lineage itself. There is on Ambrym no stress on becoming individuated or autonomous from the lineage, since the lineage is basically *who one is* as a person. Sharing within the hamlet and lineage when it comes to matters of general sustenance, commodities, or garden produce therefore comes completely naturally and needs no overarching moral regulations. Like in the hunter-gatherer societies mentioned above this sharing has the form of taking, and those who have sharing rights can go and help oneself to anything within the hamlet without worrying about moral claims or sanctions. In daily life this means that people who share lineage also share food, and it is not uncommon that people show up to take food or cigarettes or clothes from other houses than their own. It is not so much a question of giving away things, it is more following the demand-sharing form of taking, and people sometimes have clever ways to avoid things being taken. On Ambrym the peril of envy then enters into the internal relations of the lineage as a poison. If people are holding things back from circulation within the hamlet, their relatives can start to build grudges against them and this will result in illness and possibly death of the selfish person. It is believed he or she will be victim to *abiou*, what we would call sorcery or witchcraft or magic (see Rio, 2002 and 2017). People blamed for this will be members of the lineage or brotherhood, and we note how this is a danger inhering in the internal relations of the hamlet and mostly not between villages. It is when the internal demand-sharing is running into obstacles that this aspect of *abiou* reveals itself, as a lineage predicament. This is problematic since it cannot be resolved through ceremonial exchange, like disagreements between lineages can, and these issues of sorcery remain an upsetting factor internal to the hamlet society.
- 25 All these things concerning payment, rights, autonomy, taking, sorcery and internal versus external relations in the rural situation must be kept in mind when we move the focus to the design of the urban settlements in Port Vila. After all the people who populate Port Vila also still have a specific grounding in the rural islands of the country. The most important point here is that taking and demand-sharing in Vanuatu is not a generalized model of exchange – it only works within the limited parameters of the kin who define themselves in togetherness. It has been pointed out in much ethnographic work from Vanuatu that membership and access to lineages or hamlets or kin groups can be very flexible and people can move back and forth between hamlets quite freely. I have previously argued (Rio, 2007a) that we should think through hamlets and not lineages when we try to understand structures of belonging on Ambrym, and people adapt kinship terms to where one is staying. Arguably, it is co-habitation that is associated with taking and demand-sharing. Demand-sharing is instituted on the idea of the lineage and hamlet as sharing a communal substance where everyone has equal rights to helping oneself to any resource and fruits of garden work within the kinship and marriage system. *Pem* (payment) is instead instituted on

inter-hamlet relations, wherein the value on autonomy and rights are all the time achieved through exchanges with other outside parties. It is therefore interesting when demand-sharing and payment fall together inside the Port Vila household.

- 26 But let us first get this into a perspective of the larger discussions about ‘reciprocity’. My outline above of a dual model of transactions, payments and distribution can also be supported by contributions from Alfred Gell in PNG (Gell, 1992) and Joanna Overing in the Amazon (Overing, 1992). They also set up this contrast between sharing and exchange. They both uphold that sharing in these societies is not about giving at all, and not about expecting or anticipating a return. The three obligations theorized by Marcel Mauss (to give, to receive and to return) wither away in a view on demand-sharing, just as the individual person withers away, as sharing is merely about the handling of the pool of mutual life-substances; like food, blood, semen, clothing, etc. In Gell’s view it was misleading to frame the flow of these substances under the general notion of reciprocity, as e.g. in Sahlins’ model of ‘generalized reciprocity’ that confused gift-exchange with sharing (Sahlins, 1972). Gell argues that the concept that Mauss treated generally as gift was actually modelled on a certain ritual form of giving (especially the *kula* and the *potlatch*) which involved the ceremonial encounter with certain significant others, other lineages or tribes. Gell was convinced that in old Melanesia these competitive gifts represented peripheral phenomena – entirely bound up to a form of ritual engagement with the people on the *periphery* of one’s social horizon. He opposed Mauss and Sahlins, by saying that ritual gift-exchange is not what constitutes close social relations, but sharing is. If there is an axis between close relations and more distant relations, ritual gift-exchange belongs in distant relations together with market transactions, and demand-sharing belongs in close and intra-lineage relations. Gell’s material on the Umeda suggested that they resembled hunter-gatherers in the sense that they tended to deal in sharing *instead of*, or at least in opposition, to reciprocity. This principle was most strongly suggested by James Woodburn’s paper title: “Sharing is not a form of reciprocity” (Woodburn, 1998). The *potlatch*, the *moka* and the *kula* are not prototypical situations; they are peripheral instances of commodity barter turned into ritual competition under certain historical circumstances. Gell’s argument here bears resemblances with Polanyi’s comments about the “foreigner traders” as an aspect of many ancient societies wherein some people for part of the year would go away for trading expeditions (Polanyi, 1957: 260). Overing’s article about Amazonian trade-partnerships exactly underlines this same point (Overing, 1992). The barter exchange relationships between men across cultural boundaries would deal in objects of use-value, but their use-value would depend on the power and potency invested into the objects by their makers. Like Mauss’ gift, these bartered and exchanged objects would carry the spirit of their maker, and would continue to be potent and dangerous and useful exactly because of these long-distance relationships. It would be a mistake to think of these trade-items or the trade itself as impersonal or alienated, and as noted by Polanyi, “There can be, under these conditions, no such thing as trading *in general*” (Polanyi, 1957: 260). Trade would always be trade in very specifically important and meaningful objects, and therefore carried great symbolic importance in terms of reproduction and regeneration. Demand-sharing is instead dealing in objects that are of value for reproduction and regeneration, but objects that are said to be ‘nothing’ because they are in abundance. In Gell’s framework the reproduction of Umeda society does not depend on exchange, only “moral obligation” (Gell, 1992: 152), i.e. to basically fulfil your role as mother, brother, wife or

cousin. Services, favours, food and objects are handed over according to prescribed role-definitions – in what he sees as “non-reciprocal” relationships like between parents and children or husband and wife.

- 27 Although not yet explicitly treated as such in Melanesia, the large literature on modern forms of taking or demand-sharing – like the *wantok* system in PNG, the system of remittances, what is called *nilim* (from ‘needle’) in Solomons pidgin,³ or *stikim nek* in Vanuatu pidgin document the widespread and current systems of demand sharing being instituted across Melanesia. Compared to *moka* or *kula* or *malangan* they are institutions that are not about individuation, autonomy and renown of the person or group, but instead how the person is always subject to blood-letting and depletion by others. But these words are recent and predominantly urban words, reflecting urban experiences over the last decades, first and foremost expressing what form demand-sharing takes in a situation when rural plenty is exchanged for urban scarcity. If we keep in mind Polanyi’s point that all sorts of actions are ‘instituted’ in social structures, what happens when a society instituted on demand sharing becomes directed towards shopping in the market place? I think this can be a test case for the institution itself.
- 28 It is of great interest in that respect to compare the situation that Gell describes from “Old Melanesia”, to what Joanna Overing describes from contemporary Amazonia. Like Gell, she is also critical of the flawed overestimation of exchange and underestimation of sharing in the literature. But she is even more useful in this case since she explicitly writes about how the Piaroa village situation and institutionalized sharing transfers to the market place of commodities. Similarly to Gell she describes a central dichotomy in Piaroa life, between the acquisition and transformation of resources through work – and “exchange” (*palou*) as the acquisition of goods created by persons from a foreign place, in a political domain of foreigner relations between equal, competitive individual trading partners. The objects were powerful objects as they were ritually treated by their maker in order to become efficient, and we could compare them to the *kula* shells as powerful and potent objects that also contained the spirit of their makers. When the Piaroa go to the store in the market town to buy other things they do not use this term of “exchange”. Overing underlines that products of the forests and the shops are operated differently from the exchange of dangerous and potent foreigner objects. Dangerous relations with outsiders are contrasted with safe interior relations within the community. For they instead classified shopping as hunting – and emphasizing the aspect of “taking” and shopping as a form of predation. The Piarao framed it as “Going wandering to see what could be found” – just as people in Port Vila say *mi wokbaot nomo* when they tell you what they have been doing during their day in town. In Piaroa society the market place offers itself as a place to be foraged or gathered. The prestigious trade and gift-exchange is considered to be completely peripheral to this domain, since that is about the relationship between individual men of different regions, exchanging their personalized products. For the Piaroa to walk around in the town and to walk around in the forest was very similar, in being a form of non-focused gathering of what caught the eye. The commodities were not marked as somebody’s product or in any way as inherently spiritual or powerful objects. The shops were safe and known places of internal relations, for close kin to wander around together and pick the products they liked.
- 29 But let us get back to urban Melanesia. Transferred to the situation in Port Vila there are perhaps some clues to how we should think about the sphere of stores and market.

We could say – and sometimes people in Port Vila make this comparison themselves – that when you live in the urban settlements you frequent the Chinese shops like going to your garden. When people make this analogy between Port Vila shops and gardens they forget that gardens can be quite problematic, with disputes of landownership, thefts, destruction by animals, bad climatic conditions, hard labour and lack of cooperation, but their point is simply that when you are in the village and you want something to eat, you can go to the gardens and pick what you want for the day, vegetables or nuts or fruits. It is perceived as a free and benevolent domain of interaction. The store is also prototypically a place for equal, indifferent and unproblematic relations. People relate to shopkeepers by calling them by respectful kinship titles (aunt or uncle) and they in a sense pretend that their capital town is also an extension of their hamlet, projected onto a national framework. This realm of shopping is certainly closer to an atmosphere of being among kin than ceremonial exchange or sacrifice among more distant relatives. Nor is it a realm where you can achieve personal autonomy or personalized rights, and the rural concept of *pem* does not work in the urban sphere. When you buy something it will not get you the right to the item *per se*. You do not get the right to the emblem of Coca-Cola if you buy one bottle; you merely get a chance to drink it. Everything in the store is laid out openly before you, anyone can get anything they like and the commodities in the Chinese shops are considered *samting nating*, easily consumed or broken as they are. But, of course, everyone also knows that this is not a space for taking, and people are well aware of the concept of “theft” in the urban domain, as a crime that will lead to punishment. You can only take something as long as you pay for it. But as pointed out above, the quantities are small and for a little coin you can get a little thing. The store is simply a place for getting cheap and easy stuff.

- 30 It is my impression that when Port Vila was made into a national capital in 1980 after independence and people started moving into it they saw Independence as their appropriation of their own plantations, where they could both enjoy its many stores and the labour market. After all, when people on the various islands think about Port Vila they have in mind big plantations; because that is what Port Vila used to be before independence. The vision of the independence movement was that Vanuatu citizens could now all live together in the plantations, and free themselves of all the different types of inequalities – colonial as well as customary – and thus also extend the sharing morality from the lineage to the larger town. Some of this imagery remains in people’s uses of Port Vila today. If you ask people what the benefits of town life is they will talk about store products – they can drink soda and ice cream and eat chicken wings – and that they can get work, but they also refer to a special feeling of freedom: freedom to roam around in the town and enjoy the town’s products.
- 31 But the downside to town life for many is that element that they say did not exist in their home island – scarcity. In town you pay for everything, they say again and again, and money is always short. What they are implicitly saying is that they are paying and paying but they never get any rights or status back from it. Independence did not work exactly as they would hope, and their fencing-in of their houses is a most visible statement of this failure to become a real urban brotherhood or extended hamlet society.
- 32 In a sense the town becomes a test case or limit for the demand sharing ideology of the hamlet. And we should also note that even though Port Vila neighbourhoods and

households are structured on the rural idea of the hamlet as a space of mutuality and sharing, they do not have instituted exchange relations with other neighbourhoods like they do in the rural areas. The only manifestation of the inside-outside parameters from rural life is that urban households close-in on themselves, but since this does not mean that exchanges are planned with the outside world, it remains an impotent form of enclosure. If there is a death or a marriage or a circumcision, or a conflict, the ceremonial aspects of this will most often be in relation to rural communities where they belong or other urban communities where they share origin. There is very rarely ceremonial exchange between neighbourhood groups. The urbanites have in a sense brought to town only half of the structure of village life – the internal sharing but not the external exchange. To some degree this is remedied by chiefs who are appointed for each neighbourhood, and they can to some degree negotiate exchanges between neighbourhoods when conflicts break out or girls are impregnated, but they often find this problematic – since island-belonging will always overtake and interfere with neighbourhood-belonging. An important aspect of this half-way import of a rural structure is that there is always a demand for sharing within the group, but there are few ways to negotiate personal autonomy or status. Demand-sharing and taking in a sense overruns all aspects of personal status, and there is no aspect of the person that cannot be taken away – thereby the powerful metaphor of *stikim nek*. The person has little protection from blood-letting and the fencing-in only magnifies the problem.

The urban household as demand-sharing unit

- 33 I have above tried to outline how demand-sharing functions within a limited social group when there is an abundance of resources available. The hamlet functions as a social formation where everyone has mutual access and rights to take and consume each other's food. With the urban neighbourhood, the household or "yard" as they are often called, there is an implicit extension of this social formation. If you live in a household you can also enjoy all products of consumption that is found in it. This is a principle and a moral order. And I related the paranoid protection of the household to this principle. Given that many households experience more and more scarcity they also more and more limit both the openness of the household and the dimensions of it.
- 34 With the idea of blood-letting and the *stikim nek* metaphor they articulate the potency of the inside peril of the demand-sharing unit. Across Vanuatu this is articulated through the presence of an envious sorcerer inside the group, who would look at all goods and commodities and crave them as a response to selfishness on someone else's part. The blood-sucking danger of the urban household, like the cannibalist sorcerer, is draining the household from the inside and out. People will notice that they are always short of money and food, and it is because someone internal to the household is preying on its resources. Hence people try to limit who is allowed into the household and the institution of the household store is set up exactly to avoid this internal figure of preying to deplete its resources. Even though the household is not directly or visibly under much threat from rapists or thieves, the urban household is under a lot of imaginary pressure and attention, especially the attention of potentially dangerous predatory forces, after human substances, flesh and sexuality – and their design of fences and warning signs reflect this phantasmagoric vision, more than realities of crime, violence or theft. A very potent issue in this phantasmagoria of the fenced-in

household is envy (termed *jelas* in Bislama). Inside the general ethos of sharing and equality *jelas* is now amounting to a form of terror, since envy will also set off evil forces that can be a peril to health and property. The neighbour who observes your property, your wife, your children, your new outboard motor or television, he will set off a *demon* (again Bislama) that potentially can possess you, eat you and destroy you. This is by far the most prevalent explanation for illness and bad fortune now in Port Vila – *jelas* and *demon* (see Eriksen and Rio, 2017). This should perhaps be understood as an equalizing phenomenon, relating to the moral imperative of sharing and thus of emptying or pouring everything in one's property over to others inside the kinship community. The intentionality of sharing is very much a moral demand on *others*, so *jelas* is an expression of a demand on others to share their property. Demand sharing is therefore easily transformed into a demon, so to speak, and it is a major theme of Pentecostal churches to limit demand-sharing. It is with respect to these concerns with envy and aggressive demand-sharing that the household is taking its form in Port Vila. In this respect the household store is interesting.

- 35 We can again look comparatively to Rodolfo Maggio and his material from Honiara. In the neighborhood where he was living the household store took up a particular space like a sanctuary from these issues of greed, preying and demand sharing:

“Instead of paying retailed products in the corner shops, nowadays a growing number of people in Gilbert Camp buy a stock of processed foods from wholesale distributors and sell them to their relatives, within their own household, and even to themselves. For example, Mark, the head of a Pentecostal household, buys a stock of tinned tuna and stores them in his house. Every time his wife Jodie wants a tin, she does not just take it from the shelf, but pays for it. Mark requests her to do so for every meal she cooks, with no exception. When she has no money, he writes down her debt on a ‘Family Kaon Buk’; literally, the family debt records. It should be noted that Mark is as much diligent in recording his wife's debts as he is with his own debts... So, the point is not that Mark is gaining a profit by selling to his wife at market rates. As Jodie confirmed, they agreed that she buys from him and that he buys from himself” (Maggio, 2016: 8).

- 36 Even the slightest demand sharing effort of a husband, brother or a sister is instead turned into a question of purchase. If you want cigarettes, sugar, batteries, credits for the mobile phone; you can get it but you have to buy it.
- 37 It is fortunate that we have Overing's insights from Amazonia here (Overing, 1992). If not, we might just see this as an indication of complete alienation or possessive individualism. Like in her situation, I think, however, that we need to take into account that people here value the market place as a situation of equality, of closeness and community. The history of the general store in Vanuatu indicates that it can be associated with the plantation and garden and a space that is closer to the domain of demand sharing than to exchange, but freed from the evil aspects of *stikim nek* and sorcery. As long as it is the Chinese merchants who take all the profit and hold the capital, the money is also out of their reach as possibly creating problems of envy. The household store, with its note outside saying that credit is not allowed and is bad for business, is a service provider for the immediate neighbourhood, and the buying from that store becomes a way to uphold sharing among close kin, but through an institution that avoids and prohibits aggressive taking. The opening of the household store is seen as doing a favour to the people of the household. They no longer have to for long distances in order to buy mobile credits, bread or tea as they can instead get it from their trusted family or friends. This is not the end-point of demand sharing – it is

instead the institutionalisation of a new form of demand sharing that no longer emphasises taking but instead upholds sharing in its pure and monetary form.

Conclusion

- 38 The intensity of the fencing in and locking up the household also means that that the town of Port Vila is breaking up internally and becomes divided strongly through lines of co-habitation. I argue that their form of enclosure is a result of a social process formulated around a unitary principle of sharing, but without a possibility of ceremonial exchange and personal autonomy or status. The protection of the household from an expanded or universalised form of taking or demand sharing, meaning that everyone in the town would be taking everything from everyone else, is laying a dark shadow of paranoia over the town that should ideally have been the joyous achievement of the independence movement.
- 39 Here it is possible that Chris Gregory is on to something important in an article about household economy in India (Gregory, 2009: 152). With regard to Polanyi's instituted processes, he asks if it is possible that 'non-instituted processes' take over in processes of urbanisation. After all it might not be so easy to transfer customary rural institutions to the city. What people discover in Port Vila is that the suburbs are not instituted in a general 'Melanesian way of life' and that it is not possible either to uphold sharing or exchange as general parameters. In town all those who are not within the hamlet are ultimately strangers and potentially predatory on your earnings, substances and sexuality. These town people are not givers of life, and they cannot be approached in ceremonial exchange. Town life is instead instituted on the hamlet as a general principle and the urban household takes the instituted process of taking from the hamlet social form and transforms it into a non-instituted process of buying. The hope is that whereas taking becomes impossible to uphold in the town, buying will work out. Buying is an import from the world of Chinese traders and white people and for this reason, exactly because it is un-instituted in the Vanuatu social life, it can be an instituted vehicle for purifying the urban household of its demons. The fear is that this attention to the interiors of the household, to the neglect of relations between households and neighbourhoods, will instead increase animosities, hostilities and envy and make Port Vila an even harder place to live.

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NOTES

1. The city center of Port Vila and the adjacent coastline is to a large degree owned or leased by the ex-pat population, and a lot of the colonial patterns for employment, class, and housing are still maintained.
2. Survey of detainee offences, Department of correctional Services, 2010.
3. Cato Berg who did his fieldworks in Honiara in 1996 and 2001-2002 told me about this term.

ABSTRACTS

This article addresses certain aspects of town life in the capital of Vanuatu. In my most recent fieldwork in 2010 and 2014 I have been investigating household economy and aspects of social organization in the settlements that rapidly spring up around the town of Port Vila. I will present one particular feature of these settlements as a test case for revisiting the long debate about Melanesian reciprocity, demand sharing and gift. Notably, in many households people set up a little store, from which kin and friends in the neighborhood can buy their household supplies. Like the household itself, the store is typically fenced off and barred in – not directly from fear of theft, but as a defense against aggressive demand-sharing and envy. My point will be that people in Port Vila now tend to use the store economy as a way of protecting the value of sharing from the too intruding world of relatives and neighbors.

Cet article discute certains aspects de la vie urbaine dans la capitale du Vanuatu. Lors de mes dernières recherches de terrain (2010 et 2014), j'ai étudié l'économie des maisonnées et l'organisation sociale des quartiers informels existant autour de la ville de Port-Vila. Je présente ici un aspect particulier de ces quartiers et mets à l'épreuve le débat établi sur la réciprocité mélanésienne, soit le partage à la demande et le don. Dans le cas qui m'intéresse, les résidents de nombreuses maisonnées installent un petit magasin où les membres de la famille et les amis du voisinage peuvent acheter les articles ménagers dont ils ont besoin. Comme la maison elle-même, ce petit magasin est clôturé et fermé, non par peur du vol, mais comme moyen de protection contre le partage à la demande agressif et la convoitise. Je défends l'idée que les gens de Port-Vila ont recours à ces magasins pour protéger la valeur du partage de la famille et des voisins toujours plus envahissants

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Mots-clés: Port-Vila, partage à la demande, économie marchande, quartiers d'habitat informels urbains

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