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Indigenous essentialism? Simplifying customary land ownership in New Georgia, Solomon Islands

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Recent ‘anti-essentialist’ views in anthropology hold that socio-cultural phenomena have been studied with an exaggerated emphasis on patterns and order and cultural uniformity, thereby obscuring diversity, flux and variability (Vayda 1990). Such views have influenced a number of contemporary anthropological studies which duly emphasize dynamic cultural creativity on the local level (e.g. Borofsky 1987; Barth 1987). Indeed, some commentators see variation itself, and not order or degrees of normative consensus, as the main object of study (Rosaldo 1988).

Another important recent field of inquiry focuses on the active reconstitution or ‘construction’ of ‘tradition’ in the Pacific, particularly in colonial and post-colonial discourse and rhetoric. It has been commonly argued that the ‘politics of tradition’ in many Pacific Island societies (and elsewhere) tend to involve a certain level of reification or ‘objectification’. From this it may be inferred that an ‘essentialization’ of...
sorts of local cultures as 'congruent wholes' (Vayda 1990) forms part of the discourses not just of anthropologists, but also of indigenous political activists whose arguments about economic development, land ownership, national unity and similar oppositional or otherwise contentious issues are steeped in 'tradition'. However, in line with Wagner's approach to the 'invention of culture' (Wagner 1981), and following heated debates between anthropologists and activists (Trask 1991; Keesing 1991; Linnekin 1991), it has been necessary to point out that neither these nor other examples of 'created' cultural identities and reifications need be seen as 'something contrived and insincere' (Thomas 1992a: 213; and see Jolly 1992).

With these points of debate in mind, this article now turns to recent events in the New Georgia Group of the western Solomon Islands. I shall examine encounters and explore certain mutual entanglements between what appear to be 'essentialist' indigenous approaches to Melanesian culture, on one hand, and the discourses of neo-colonial agents as well as 'anti-essentialist' ethnographic analysis, on the other.

In encounters and negotiations with representatives of a transnational mining company during 1989 and 1990, customary leaders of the Marovo area of New Georgia actively moved to formulate highly simplified and uniform models of descent-based ownership of the land on which the company planned to prospect for gold and other minerals. The homogeneous, unilinear picture of 'representational kinship' (Bourdieu 1977: 24-25) used by the local spokesmen in these negotiations contrasted starkly with the highly pluriform principles of bilateral kinship reckoning and cumulative filiation used to define rights to land and sea in local-level dealings that do not involve foreign parties (Hviding in press). Customary leaders were well aware of this discrepancy. When questioned by an anthropologist they explained their own 'essentialist' exaggerations through simplification with reference to an historically informed notion that Europeans in general are incapable of comprehending the complex variability and fluidity of Marovo custom (or, in the Melanesian sense, lean towards equating cultural invention with inauthenticity (see also Jolly 1992).

And, as aptly noted by Handler and Linnekin (1984: 288) in their discussion of the definition of tradition in the present: 'Genuine and spurious - terms that have been used to distinguish objective reality from hocus-pocus - are inappropriate when applied to social phenomena, which never exist apart from our interpretation of them'.

I have carried out fieldwork in the Marovo area for a total of 27 months: in 1986-87, 1989, and 1991-92. I am grateful to the Marovo Area Council, the Western Provincial Government, and the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education for granting permission to carry out this work, and to the Norwegian Research Council (NAVF), the University of Bergen, and the Institute for Comparative Cultural Research for funding it. Detailed material on Marovo is found in Hviding (1988, 1990, in press).
kastom - rendered kastomu in Marovo). This article discusses these issues with reference to multiple processes of reification and their implications for anthropological analyses of 'tradition', and to long-term discourses involving anthropological models, local-level epistemology, and the oppositional or 'counterhegemonic' cast of resistance to colonial and neo-colonial domination, as examined elsewhere in the Solomons (Keesing 1992).

Marovo Lagoon: kastom challenged

The people of the Marovo Lagoon area in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands (see Figure 1) constitute a population of around 9,500 and represent five distinct though related languages. In addition, two historically distinct lifestyles and spatio-ecological orientations, those of coastal 'saltwater' people and inland 'bush' people, respectively, are reflected in oral histories and present-day territorial holdings. However, the entire population now lives exclusively in small to medium-sized settlements on the coast (see Figure 2). Marovo people derive their sustenance from an environment of extraordinary ecological complexity, consisting of 700 km² of coral reef and lagoon backed by mangrove-fringed volcanic islands covered with lush tropical rainforest.

The rights of individual persons to fish, to cultivate gardens or otherwise to harvest the resources available from the lands and seas of Marovo depend on their claims to, and maintenance of, recognized consanguineal and affinal ties with corporate groups that control well-defined territories of land, reef and sea. Marovo's bilateral system of kin reckoning makes for less well defined boundaries in the realm of social relations. Nevertheless, firmly based corporate kin groups, termed butu butu, do exist as largely localized units. Such groups are historically associated with and control homonymous territories of defined spatial extent, termed puava. The puava is a local variety of Pacific concepts which integrate land and sea estates, well known throughout Oceania. Whereas some butu butu of Marovo control both land and sea, others that have a 'bush' identity control land exclusively, and still other butu butu with a 'coastal' identity control mainly reefs and sea. The principles of customary law that regulate access to territories and exploitation of resources have shown considerable capacity for handling wide-ranging

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5 This population figure is based on an estimate made in 1993 on the basis of official material from the 1986 national census.
6 Examples of this estate concept are the Fijian vanua (Ravuvu 1983), the Hawaiian ahupua'a (Meller and Horwitz 1987), and the Yap tabinau (Lingenfelter 1975).
social, economic, and demographic change. Thus, customary rights in and over land and sea territories and resources maintain strong political potentials, which in contemporary Marovo are reinforced primarily in contact with representatives of economic and political systems of the wider world. In recent years, most of Marovo's butubutu have entered into a variety of discussions, negotiations and conflicts with non-local parties, mainly transnational capitalist enterprises concerning large-scale extraction of fish, timber and minerals.

A strongly oppositional and confrontational deployment of customary political procedures and cultural rules with the purpose of maintaining local autonomy (throughout Melanesia normally referred to as kastom) has been thoroughly documented by Keesing (e.g. 1992) for the inland Kwaio of Malaita, Solomon Islands. As will be argued throughout this paper, the Kwaio and Marovo situations show many striking similarities, despite some fundamental differences. Whereas pre-Christian religion remains a key ideological and organizational focus of Kwaio mobilization, local control over land and sea and over the pace of resource development constitutes the focal issue and generative dynamics in Marovo people's contemporary articulation of kastom. Among Marovo people, young and old, it is widely recognized that Marovo Lagoon and its adjacent land areas constitute what is probably the richest untapped
Despite encouragement and support from the national government, a number of transnational logging and mining companies have failed in their attempts to gain access to these untapped riches of the Marovo Lagoon area.

Figure 2: The Marovo Lagoon area, western province

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7 In 1984, Marovo Area Council members and attendants initiated the Marovo Lagoon Resource Management Project at chiefly meetings, an effort that gained governmental and international support and in the period 1986-89 involved visits by a number of foreign scientists who were asked to document the natural resource base of Marovo and the traditional usages of sea and land. My own initial period of fieldwork formed part of this. This project arose out of concern over environmental decay, and had the explicit local aim of providing background for future planning of 'sustainable development' (see Baines and Hviding 1992).
Marovo. In addition, access by industrial tuna fishing operations to the huge and important baitfish stocks of the Marovo Lagoon remains precarious at best (Hviding 1988; Hviding and Baines 1994).

Marovo people have thus succeeded in limiting the operations of a remarkable range of outside parties, ranging from tourists to transnational companies. Detailed studies of these events and of the processes underpinning the 'indigenous political power' of Marovo are of considerable comparative interest in that they represent a so-called 'traditional' system of 'customary law' which has so far been capable of meeting many of the challenges posed by a large and diverse range of developmental pressures of non-local origin. However, although intensive resource extraction by transnational companies has to a large degree been kept at bay in Marovo, there is a steady growth of village-based commercial enterprises based on sea and land resources. Thus, a continuous reformulation of customary principles of tenure over land, reefs and sea unfolds, involving various adaptations to changing economic, ecological and social-demographic circumstances.

The central position of territorial resource-related control in the maintenance of political autonomy and cultural identity, coupled with diverse middleman activities by local leaders, generates a vibrant process in Marovo of rhetorical discourse and political mobilization. This singular process is based on ideas about people's relationship to the environments of land and sea, about customary law and about kastom in its widest sense, as well as on contemporary attitudes to appropriate levels of economic development and organizational transformation. In some ways, these patterns are not unlike those of early colonial times, when the strong polities of coastal New Georgia (Jackson 1978), based on trading, warfare and headhunting, aspired to maintain control over trade dealings with Europeans in a context of expanding intercultural encounters and manifestations of local political power (Hviding in press: ch. 3).

Confronting world systems: the case of mineral prospecting

Let us now look briefly at a recent case of confrontation between foreign mineral prospectors and the leaders of the customary land and sea-holding groups of Marovo. Since the 1980s, a number of foreign initiatives to begin prospecting and mining for gold and other minerals in the

8 The national government is, moreover, caught in a striking 'double bind' (Bateson 1972), of being obliged, on the one hand, to support revenue-earning resource development by foreign capital, and on the other hand, to support local kastom with its implications for autonomous local-level control of the resources to be developed (see also footnote 17).
mountains of the large islands that face the lagoon and feed it through large rivers have provoked reactions from sea-holding butubutu. They fear river transportation of sediments into their lagoon and onto the fishing grounds on which both coastal and bush groups depend for their food and much of their cash income. These arguments are augmented by villagers who have visited Bougainville in Papua New Guinea and have seen marine sedimentation and pollution resulting from the mining operation of Bougainville Copper Limited, which was discontinued in 1989 as a result of guerilla warfare fueled by the disillusionment of customary landowners. Some Marovo spokesmen say that foreign mining and prospecting companies should not only have the permission of the government (which encourages their activities) and the ‘landowners’ of the area in question, but should also have the permission of the coastal people or ‘reef owners’, since mining is also bound to have consequences for marine areas, which are held by people other than those who control the mining areas uphill. In the midst of this, it has become very difficult for foreign prospectors to obtain permission even from landholding groups, and Marovo has become known as a very ‘problematic’ area for such ventures.

In August 1989, representatives of the Solomon Islands branch of an Australian mining company approached several customary landholding groups of the northern-central Marovo Lagoon area and entered into negotiations. The company’s aim was to reach agreements on prospecting for gold and other mineral resources widely believed to be found in the rugged hills and valleys bordering the lagoon. Under this type of agreement, the company would pay representatives of landholders fixed ‘royalty’ sums in return for being allowed to carry out prospecting. ‘Compensation’ money would also be paid on a fixed basis for environmental damage caused, for example, by the movement of machinery beyond the actual prospecting sites.

From the initial stages of the negotiations, the mining company employed a chief negotiator as well as a special ‘liaison officer’. The former, doubling as the director of the company’s Solomon Islands branch, was an Australian who had much experience with similar tasks in Papua New Guinea, and who considered himself a specialist on ‘Melanesian affairs’. In addition, he had recently married a woman from the Marovo area. The liaison officer was himself a Marovo man with much experience as a middleman between local groups and foreign business and resource development enterprises. Placing much faith in their own expertise on local conditions, these two negotiators launched hectic travel activity by air and speedboat (and even chartered helicopters) to and around the Marovo Lagoon area, involving a large number of scheduled meetings with ‘landowners’.
As soon as an initial approach had been made by the company, the landholding groups in question formed their own assemblage of experts. This 'Select Committee' consisted of empowered spokesmen, some with substantial experience with such forms of negotiation, and others with recognized expertise in matters of customary land tenure. Several members were fiercely opposed to any kind of prospecting or mining anywhere in Marovo. The stated aims of this committee included the raising of awareness and interest on the local level in matters relating to mining and prospecting on customary land, the explicit drawing-up of clearly defined conditions for negotiating such activities, and the conveyance of these defined conditions to relevant government ministries for them to incorporate into any licences issued to foreign companies.

As noted, this was not the first time Marovo landholders were involved in such negotiations. Some trial prospecting had been carried out, for example, during the mid-1980s in an area partly overlapping the area discussed in 1989. It was, however, discontinued after a series of compensation claims from landholders who argued that soil, valuable trees and sacred forest sites had been destroyed by the prospecting. The claims, still unresolved, continued to influence the 1989 negotiations, although these involved another mining company and, in part, other landholding groups. Discussion between landholding and sea-holding groups, as well as among the landholders themselves, on who had the right to decide over which areas, also caused immediate delays in the negotiations which the company had hoped from the outset would be finished by the end of 1989. When the company's chief negotiator presented a detailed plan for the monitoring of environmental impacts of prospecting and mining, he was met with distrust by some members of the Select Committee who, through urban contacts, had made their own investigations leading them to suspect that this 'new' company was different from the 'old' one in name only. In September 1989, negotiations came to a temporary halt when a majority of the members of the Select Committee made the following statement to the company director: 'We are not willing to discuss prospecting with you until you have settled with us compensation for damages made by the former company'.

Subsequently, discussions were resumed, although the desired compensation was not forthcoming. By October, however, after several more meetings, it was announced by the landholders' Select Committee that even the issues of ownership over the land concerned turned out to be too complicated to agree upon. It was stated that, although the Committee was indeed working on resolving this, these efforts were likely to continue for an indefinite period of time, and a leading representative made the following authoritative comment after a Committee meeting:
Edvard Hviding

We simply cannot decide in a hurry on who are the true spokespersons of this land. One thing we must agree upon first is whether the land goes through the side of men or the side of women here. We must name spokespersons of this land by deciding which of these sides is the stronger one. When the people are asked by the company to present in a straight and simple way which are the landholding groups, they find that this is not really straight at all, so that is why they have decided to make clear their own ways of butibutu and of genealogies and of land boundaries, before they are willing to negotiate directly with the company. That is why they have appointed us to this Select Committee, to have us do this on behalf of them. But straightening out kastom, genealogies and all that takes plenty of time. This is going to be slow, and there is no way of speeding it up, certainly not by the company holding all kinds of meetings with all kinds of people who claim to be the only true owners of this land.

At this stage, the company director and the liaison officer (who was, it must be remembered, a Marovo man himself) became concerned that the Select Committee was now making things so difficult that continued negotiations were jeopardized. In a conversation with me the Australian exclaimed, ‘All this talk about kastom obscures everything; I don’t think it is really kastom that is problematic, but rather that the landowners themselves are being difficult!’ The liaison officer endorsed this view, saying that as far as he was concerned, Marovo kastom regarding land was not really that difficult to clarify. But in any event, they both argued, despite the promise of gold deposits in the hills under negotiation, the Solomon Islands operations of the company did not command the financial resources necessary to allow erratic negotiations to drag on indefinitely without sound promise of eventual success. The company director also indicated that he was under pressure from the main office in Australia, which demanded efficiency.

Not unpredictably, the negotiations ended in the first half of 1990 with the complete withdrawal of the mining company from Marovo. This also came to signal the eventual demise of the Solomon Islands operations (in 1991, the former director who had led the Marovo negotiations moved with his family to Australia and took up a teaching job). The withdrawal was accompanied by continued and frustrated complaints from the company’s team about the unpredictable and difficult nature of Marovo negotiators, and by strongly voiced statements from Marovo spokesmen demanding that any future negotiations of this kind must adhere closely to what one well-educated Marovo leader described as ‘the proper bureaucratic procedure of kastom’, entailing, among other things, that
proper spokesmen for the land in question be defined. In addition, Marovo spokesmen expressed the viewpoint that procedural rules regarding *kastom* as well as customary principles of land ownership needed to be considerably simplified in order for white men to understand them. We shall have a closer look at this attitude, which may indeed be seen as a highly perceptive approach through which diverse and variable socio-cultural fields appear to be subject to explicit patterning, ordering and codification by indigenous people themselves.

**A tale of simplified complexity**

Referring to the existence of recognized customary principles, or *kastom*, and defining the transmission of power over landholdings as based on *tututi* ('chains of knots'; genealogies) and *sinoto* ('attachments'; filiative links to focal genealogies), the senior men on the Select Committee insisted that a uniform representation of these principles was required in order to provide an easily understandable 'official version' of the basis of customary land tenure. Most important was the need to agree upon a single predominant principle of unilineal reckoning, since this, it was held, would facilitate a unified approach for all the landholding groups in dealings with the mining company.

Prior to my return visit to Marovo in 1989, I had carried out a substantial ethnographic analysis of Marovo society, based on eighteen months of fieldwork in 1986-87. This work was influenced by contemporary anthropological views emphasizing the fallacies of received wisdom about 'kinship' and 'descent', and about the orderly coherence of 'local cultures' (e.g. Schneider 1984; Keesing 1987; Rosaldo 1988). Central to that analysis is the identification of a strikingly pluriform repertoire in Marovo of principles for defining the basis and form of descent groups, processes of cumulative filiation, and kindred composition. This repertoire, although largely dominated by cognatic descent reckoning and bilateral kindreds, also includes principles of patrilineal, matrilineal and double unilineal descent, and may be alternatively spoken of as being based on 'cumulative filiation' (Scheffler 1985). In practice, this contributes to the formation, in a basically bilateral system, of a variety of more or less distinct and rather 'unilineal' groups and categories such as localized, corporate patrilineages and non-localized, totemic matriclans. Regional variations in social organization occur throughout the Marovo area, and this is widely recognized. Most notably, the groups with a largely inland-based history and identity and with predominantly terrestrial territorial holdings, the 'bush people' (*tinoni pa goana*), maintain a greater emphasis on matrilineal ties, whereas the groups that
have a sea-related history and largely marine holdings, the ‘saltwater’ or ‘coastal’ people (tinoni pa sera), emphasize patrilineal succession in leadership matters.

During my next period of fieldwork, starting in September 1989, the representation of Marovo cultural categories and social organization contained in the analysis sketched above was discussed with a number of locally recognized experts on Marovo *kastom*. The variability, diversity and flexibility of principles argued for in the analysis were largely agreed upon by these experts to be a valid description of patterns found throughout Marovo. The differing respective biases, particularly in terms of matrilaterality and patrilaterality, of ‘bush’ and ‘coastal’ butubutu, were widely agreed upon to be a most fundamental distinction in Marovo society, representing important differences in *kastom* between the two types of groups (which are, moreover, also marked by linguistic differences).9

However, while discussing kinship analysis with me during September 1989, several of these very same *kastom* experts were also actively involved in the attempts by the Select Committee to create a uniform version of descent groups and land ownership for presentation to the mining company. I attended a number of informal gatherings of Select Committee members and customary leaders as an observer, and I was rather surprised to find them eagerly trying to agree on one single principle of *kastom* to be presented as the ‘Marovo way’ of reckoning descent, forming corporate groups and transferring leadership over butubutu and ‘guardianship’ (chinakei) over the puava of land and sea. During a betel-nut break, I expressed my observations, upon which the *kastom* experts attempted to reassure me by pointing out that they were in fact only trying to create a uniform order in a variable and diverse system with the explicit aim of maximizing local benefits in the negotiations with the mining company.

This process of ‘essentialist’ codification did not always proceed smoothly. The attempt to transform at least two distinct biases in filiation and descent into one single *kastom* procedure of genealogical reckoning created considerable conflict among the experts, particularly in

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9 Five languages, all belonging to the northwestern and central Solomons Austronesian Family (Ross 1986), are spoken in the Marovo area. These vernaculars are Marovo, Bareke, Vangunu, Hoava and Kusaghe. The first is dominant and is the traditional language of the coastal people, whereas the other four are spoken by the different bush groups of central and northern Marovo.
discussions representing both ‘bush’ and ‘coastal’ people. Not unexpectedly, the explicit aim of defining one uniform representation of unilineal descent turned out to be virtually impossible to achieve. Accordingly, the Select Committee declared that negotiations between the mining company and customary landholders be suspended until the latter had agreed on the fundamental principles of kastom relevant to the case. ‘What is proper kastom takes a long, long time to straighten out’, one old expert on tututi (genealogies) noted with a chuckle, adding that in his view it would no doubt cost the mining company prohibitive sums of money to just wait and do nothing while Marovo debates about kastom continued.

When the company finally withdrew from the whole enterprise, it was to the great satisfaction of most of the elders and other local experts on the Select Committee who had still not agreed upon a definition of land kastom ‘simple enough to be understood by an Australian’, as they expressed it. That the company had, in fact, employed a liaison officer of Marovo origin was downplayed by the Select Committee, whose spokesmen insisted on negotiating directly with the Australian director, defining him as by necessity incapable of comprehending kastom in any terms but the simplest codifications. This insistence on having Marovo ‘chiefs’ (e.g. the leading members of the Select Committee) speak directly with ‘chiefs’ from ‘overseas’ (e.g. the director, and not the subordinate liaison officer) has a long history in Marovo. Oral traditions and old European accounts indicate that the ‘chief-to-chief’ approach also characterized early colonial encounters between the ‘saltwater’ groups of the lagoon and the multitude of ‘ship men’, whether traders or men of the British navy.

Roots of ‘essentialism’: colonial, indigenous and anthropological

The ‘essentialist’ approach taken by the kastom experts in their representations of Marovo kinship and land ownership, and also the implications of this approach for the politics of access to customary land, may be interpreted in a number of different ways. The fundamental question is, of course, what interests people themselves may have in being ‘essentialists’ by exaggerating social order and cultural uniformity in this

10 This was particularly striking in this instance, since the area discussed is located far inland and has not been inhabited since around the middle of the nineteenth century. The descendants of ‘those who lived up there’ today constitute a noncorporative group dispersed through a variety of coastal and bush butubutu, while simultaneously maintaining notions of an ancient link with that named tract of mountain valleys with remnants of old settlements.
particular sense. I wish to argue that, apart from tactical motivations for entering into endless discussion, the essentialization of tradition may be interpreted as a means of dealing with the outside world by attempting to present a uniform picture of one's own world, or as a means of addressing fundamental variabilities, or indeed perceived inconsistencies, in the Marovo world itself.

Furthermore, it may be argued that ethnographically informed elements of British colonial approaches to local landholdings have had a formative historical influence on Marovo 'essentialism', and this may represent more Solomons-wide patterns. As usual in contemporary discourse about resource development on customary land, the mining company did encourage the groups of landholders involved to present their customary terms in what the company's chief negotiator referred to as 'a clear and concise way'. In Marovo terms, this admonition echoed well-known messages from the colonial past. To clarify this, let us for a moment turn our attention to the structural-functionalist anthropology that had an implicit yet definite influence on the dealings of many British colonial officers with customary land tenure systems. This 'school' of social analysis strongly emphasized the unilineal character of kinship in the tribal world,\textsuperscript{11} while largely ignoring the role of, and underplaying the widespread occurrence of, less definite bilateral or 'cognatic' systems. As Keesing has observed, 'tribal societies without unilineal descent systems were long relegated to a kind of negative leftovers bag of "bilateral" or "cognatic" societies. Radcliffe-Brown's rather contemptuous dismissal of such systems as a kind of "Teutonic aberration" was a major contributing factor' (Keesing 1975: 91).

In his analysis of social structure on Choiseul, also in the western Solomons, Scheffler (1965: 35-38) discusses the inability of British colonial agents to comprehend the 'ambilateral' systems of 'descent' and land inheritance they encountered in New Georgia.\textsuperscript{12} Many Marovo elders

\textsuperscript{11} On a related note, see Malinowski's observation (1932: 158-159) from the Trobriands, that native (non-Trobriand) mission teachers had a hard and largely futile job trying to convince the Trobriand Islanders that there is such a thing as physiological paternity (a necessity for support of the Christian dogma of 'God the Father and [...] the filial love of Man to his Maker' [1932: 159]). As we know, the Trobrianders do not recognize physiological paternity. Consequently, they voiced 'fierce opposition [to any] attack [on] this part of native belief' (1932: 158), whether by ethnographer or missionaries.

\textsuperscript{12} See Allan (1957) for a late example of colonial approaches to land tenure and Solomon Islands 'lineages', and Strathern (1992a: 84, 1992b: 93-98), for general information on the consternation shown by anthropologists at having to handle the lack of closures in 'cognatic kinship', a reaction fuelled not least by Melanesian ethnography. Tiffany (1983) has examined colonial judicial processes in the Solomons whereby customary land tenure has been reified and simplified according to lineage-based models derived from African
recall having answered questions from various colonial officers on specific matters regarding land tenure and its relation to 'lines' of descent. One of the officers remembered by name is 'Mr. Allan', who, in the 1950s undertook a survey of customary land tenure throughout the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (Allan 1957). Although his report contains little information specifically about Marovo, the bilateral character of kinship in New Georgia is described - but downplayed as a recent corruption of an 'original' matrilineal state of affairs (Scheffler 1965: 35-38). However, it is my conviction that the mixture of male and female links characteristic of virtually all genealogies recited in Marovo, some of which cover sixteen generations, disproves any contention that bilateralism is of recent origin. It is, nevertheless, likely that the dealings of a succession of district officers and other agents, a number of whom had degrees from Oxford and Cambridge (which for some may well have comprised some social anthropology), may have generated the widespread impression in Marovo that Europeans are only capable of comprehending customary land tenure in terms of simple models of unilineal descent.

On the basis of these experiences in colonial history, the Marovo elders and experts who were engaged in the 1989 negotiations may have chosen to present to the mining company a unilineal model, however incompatible with perceived 'reality', assuming that such a model of 'clear and concise' principles of descent underpinning landholding would be the only one readily understandable by Australian company officials. By the same token, Biblical influences, very strong in twentieth century Marovo, may also have promoted more unilineal, genealogical views of traeb or laen, the most commonly used Pidgin glosses of butubutu. In any event, the overall impression emerges that Marovo kastom experts may find it useful to present their own culture(s) in essentialist terms simply because they perceive Europeans to be essentialists.

At the same time, however, indigenous categories themselves may in this specific case have demanded a simplification of pan-Marovo kastom into a notion of unilineal descent. The land area in question consists of inland mountainous tracts, uninhabited since the early twentieth century, but still considered a place of partial origin of several localized groups in contemporary Marovo. Today, some of these groups are regarded as predominantly 'coastal', others as having a mixed character, and still others as predominantly 'bush' people. Against this background, the essentializing efforts may be regarded as a way of limiting the number of ethnography and colonial service.

13 Details on the educational background of officers serving in Marovo until 1930 are given by Jackson (1978: 400).
lineages and spokespersons empowered to exercise control over the inland area. This technique of defining bilateral kindreds in a more narrow, unilineal way has often been used in Marovo to create more compact corporate groups as well as to centralize economic benefits derived from particular land and sea holdings. One important contemporary example concerns the sloughing off of entire subsegments of bilateral kindred when the 'rightful owners' of the lagoon's tuna baitfish resources, the exploitation of which entails royalty payments from the tuna fishing industry, had to be defined.

'Making sides': achieving relational states

The various possible interpretations of Marovo 'essentialism' outlined above, relating to dealings with a different outside world or to internal inconsistencies in the local world, are further illuminated by the Marovo concept of varikale, which can be glossed as 'making sides'. A brief semantic clarification of this concept is required. In Marovo language, vari- is the reciprocal causative prefix, and kale, glossed as 'side' (but always presupposing the existence of a similar, parallel 'side'), is a complex category that implies pairing, symmetrical opposition, and complementarity (for a detailed semantic and cultural analysis of the kale concept, see Hviding in press: chs. 4 and 6).

In the context of kinship, varikale may refer to a principle of privileging matrifiliation or patrifiliation, and on a cumulative level it may refer to the resultant reckoning of rather distinct matrilineal or patrilineal genealogies. This implies giving privilege, as a matter of principle, to one 'side' of filiation, and cumulatively to the making of one of two possible paired 'sides' of descent reckoning. Different types of 'side-making' in kinship matters prevail in different spheres of Marovo social life and between different types of groups, notably those of 'bush' and 'coastal' people. While the latter groups emphasize patrilateral ties, the former have a matrilateral bias. On a general level, it is said that political strength and the substance of butubutu 'leadership' (binangara) follow the male line, generated not least by a tendency towards male primogeniture. In a complementary fashion, the more elusive concept of vuluvulu, a blood-based 'rootedness', is said to emerge from unbroken chains of female links. The process of varikale, applied to the dominant 'side-

14 See Scheffler (1985) for a detailed summary of discussions in Melanesian anthropology of 'rules of filiation' and 'rules of descent', and of the relationship of 'cumulative filiation' to 'descent'.

816 Edvard Hviding

lineages and spokespersons empowered to exercise control over the inland area. This technique of defining bilateral kindreds in a more narrow, unilineal way has often been used in Marovo to create more compact corporate groups as well as to centralize economic benefits derived from particular land and sea holdings. One important contemporary example concerns the sloughing off of entire subsegments of bilateral kindred when the 'rightful owners' of the lagoon's tuna baitfish resources, the exploitation of which entails royalty payments from the tuna fishing industry, had to be defined.

'Making sides': achieving relational states

The various possible interpretations of Marovo 'essentialism' outlined above, relating to dealings with a different outside world or to internal inconsistencies in the local world, are further illuminated by the Marovo concept of varikale, which can be glossed as 'making sides'. A brief semantic clarification of this concept is required. In Marovo language, vari- is the reciprocal causative prefix, and kale, glossed as 'side' (but always presupposing the existence of a similar, parallel 'side'), is a complex category that implies pairing, symmetrical opposition, and complementarity (for a detailed semantic and cultural analysis of the kale concept, see Hviding in press: chs. 4 and 6).

In the context of kinship, varikale may refer to a principle of privileging matrifiliation or patrifiliation, and on a cumulative level it may refer to the resultant reckoning of rather distinct matrilineal or patrilineal genealogies. This implies giving privilege, as a matter of principle, to one 'side' of filiation, and cumulatively to the making of one of two possible paired 'sides' of descent reckoning. Different types of 'side-making' in kinship matters prevail in different spheres of Marovo social life and between different types of groups, notably those of 'bush' and 'coastal' people. While the latter groups emphasize patrilateral ties, the former have a matrilateral bias. On a general level, it is said that political strength and the substance of butubutu 'leadership' (binangara) follow the male line, generated not least by a tendency towards male primogeniture. In a complementary fashion, the more elusive concept of vuluvulu, a blood-based 'rootedness', is said to emerge from unbroken chains of female links. The process of varikale, applied to the dominant 'side-

14 See Scheffler (1985) for a detailed summary of discussions in Melanesian anthropology of 'rules of filiation' and 'rules of descent', and of the relationship of 'cumulative filiation' to 'descent'.

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Indigenous Essentialism?

making' principle of 'bush' and 'coastal' groups, respectively, thus serves to define flexible, bilateral kinship more sharply for specific purposes.

The pairing of complementary opposites inherent in *varikale* (which also denotes even numbers such as two, four, six, ...) is also strongly expressed in the use of the concept in reference to political activities, particularly those involving the establishment of reciprocal relations through encounters and subsequent negotiation with other groups. Striving to achieve a state of complementarity, and thereby some level of equality, has been the focus of a long sequence of encounters between Marovo people and outside parties, as evidenced by oral history concerning early contact with traders and, later, with colonialists, as well as from recent encounters and confrontations with logging companies and others. Through insisting upon a symmetrical form of dialogue, in which 'chiefs' negotiate with 'chiefs', and in which negotiations consist of reciprocal procedures of give-and-take, Marovo spokesmen tend to utilize their *varikale* notions far beyond the local socio-political context. Often, they also insist that external parties, including Europeans, follow the same approach.

The Marovo *kastom* experts, who in the present example insisted on codifying kinship and landholding based on a single unilineal principle, followed the indigenous concept of *varikale* in that they were 'making reciprocal (descent) sides' in order to obtain a higher-level 'making of reciprocal (political) sides'. The emphasis on local control over the pace of negotiations and over the definition of the 'procedure' to be followed, was, in turn, to prevent one-sided domination by the mining company. The mining company officials felt constrained by their obligation to treat customary landholding groups with respect, which prevented a one-sided acceleration of negotiations, and certainly any initiation of actual mineral prospecting. Curtailing the latter was explicitly the main aim of many Marovo spokesmen.

On a brief comparative note, it may be remarked that the *akatawa* concept of the Polynesian atoll of Pukapuka (see Borofsky 1987) seems to be semantically similar to the Marovo concept of *varikale*. This is indicated both by the etymology of the concept and by its connotations of paired relationships. Borofsky (1987: 7-8) glosses *akatawa* as, among other things, 'becoming sides'. In his analysis of transformations of traditional knowledge and of the 'making of history', Borofsky describes how Pukapukans had in recent years codified a social unit called *akatawa*, which had not been previously described, nor, apparently, encountered by ethnographers working on the atoll. It is indicated that before 1976, the
akatawa was little known, or in any case, of little traditional significance. However, the question I wish to pose here is whether the Pukapukan akatawa, as described by Borofsky, should in fact be seen as representative of a social ‘object’ - in this case a moiety-like division of the population and resources of the atoll - or whether the concept should be seen more as a descriptive term for a state to be attained. The preceding analysis of the Marovo varikale concept leads me to suspect that Borofsky tends towards reifying the akatawa concept by interpreting it as an actual form of social organization - a certain type of collection of actual individuals. An alternative would be to view the akatawa concept, like Marovo varikale, as a cultural mechanism designed to achieve a great range of temporary relational states in social life. The cultural framework of ‘becoming sides’, then, would seem to be a generative procedure through which Pukapukans, like the Marovo people, may create numerous and potentially highly different social arrangements in different potential and temporal contexts. Thus, what was ‘little known’ before 1976 may not have been the generative mechanism of akatawa or ‘becoming sides’ as such, but rather its specific organizational implications from 1976 onwards.

A number of recent studies of Oceania point to the importance of pairing and complementary oppositions as underlying modes of representation and means of social categorization, whether as ‘making twos’ or as ‘making sides’ (e.g. Lancy and Strathern 1981; Parmentier 1987). The analysis contained in this article demonstrates that, in addition to identifying such basic structural principles, it is important to focus on the actual processes through which the making of complementary oppositions creates diverse, temporary and specifically adapted social solutions and definitions, in the context of fluid and flexible socio-cultural systems. Turning again to Vayda’s views on the ‘anti-essentialist’ approach in modern anthropology (Vayda 1990), such a processual focus is one way of avoiding continued exaggeration of patterns and order, and of emphasizing variations and variability in socio-cultural phenomena.

The fundamental character of Marovo varikale as a relational state to be achieved and transformed, a fluid dynamic process rather than a static structure, is important for the present discussion. To repeat, kale means ‘side’ in the sense of half a pair, reciprocally related to the other half of the pair (i.e., ‘one side and the other’, or prototypically left/right, male/female). And vari- is the Marovo reciprocal causative prefix, denoting a fundamentally relational aspect of the state achieved (e.g.,

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15 See also Vayda (1990) for a discussion of Borofsky’s analysis of the Pukapukan akatawa in the context of ‘anti-essentialist’ views.
'standing in a symmetrical relationship [to each other]'). This points towards the temporary and negotiated nature of varikale. It also indicates that insistence by Marovo spokesmen on having this procedure determine negotiations with the outside world may be, rather than a means of forcing kastom into a uniform and simplified model, a means of exploiting the inherent creativity of a pluriform system of kin reckoning through 'side-making'. This cultural creativity, in turn, promotes an endless array of possible 'uniform definitions' for any number of contexts, external and internal. Reaching an actual pan-Marovo agreement on any component of this repertoire of contextual definitions of kastom is not only difficult, but is quite unlikely.

Thus, when Marovo spokesmen appear to be opposing the anti-essentialist stance of modern anthropology by insisting on a non-fluid, uniform social order, they are in fact employing a generative, flexible approach to the contextual definition and formation of social and political groups, through the process of varikale. When they seem to be striving to obtain internal agreement on a pan-Marovo principle of descent reckoning with regard to landholdings, Marovo negotiators may alternatively be seen as consciously pursuing what they know well to be impossible. On the other hand, they are also aware that the cautious and respectful approach which government procedures require mining companies to take in dealings with landholding groups has the recognition of customary principles as one of its major components. In their opposition to proposed mineral resource development, then, the Select Committee of landholders' representatives are in fact exploiting the very mystique of non-codified kastom by defining it as something which is too complicated for Australians and other outsiders to comprehend, and which has to be simplified especially for the latter audience so that they may acknowledge its immutable significance. By doing so, the place of both negotiating parties is defined on the basis of the premise that the rights to land and sea embodied in customary tenure are not to be challenged, nor overridden by national law.

Oppositional discourse and the appropriation of colonial categories

By recalling early encounters between New Georgians and Europeans, in which the former retained considerable control over their interaction with the latter (Jackson 1978; Shineberg 1971: 303-314), the present-day spokesmen of Marovo achieve political power in dealings with neo-colonial agents by insisting that customary procedures are fundamental premises for interaction. I have argued that this is, among other things, accomplished by utilizing indigenous relational schemes of symmetrical
opposition. In its specific content, this ‘oppositional thought and
discourse’ is strikingly similar to that of the Kwaio (Keesing 1992) and
other colonized peoples, in that it freely incorporates and uses for its own
ends the categories and symbols of the outsiders. For the Marovo people,
this ties in with their extensive knowledge of foreign, overseas worlds of
meaning. This is made possible in part by the significant proportion of the
educated Marovo elite who retain their loyalties to matters of ‘home’.
Also, Marovo villagers have for generations been closely involved with
Christian and capitalist enterprise and have acquired much knowledge of
these once alien logics.

Present-day discourses in Marovo, oppositional, confrontational or
otherwise, borrow freely and innovatively, then, from world systems of
political economy and meaning. The case study presented in this article
indicates that categories and concepts held by Europeans (or ‘ship men’)
have been appropriated by Marovo people from domains as diverse as
anthropological kinship theory, colonial land legislation, western
bureaucratic procedure, and Christian doctrines. Appropriated European
categories have even included ship men’s own representations of Marovo
people, as indicated by early trade encounters in which headhunters of
New Georgia actively exploited the white man’s fear of them (Shineberg
1971: 304-305).

In their recent attempts to present simplified legalist models of
descent-based land ownership, and in their insistence on determining the
correct ‘procedural rules’ for negotiation, Marovo spokesmen have
exploited lessons learnt in colonial contexts. This echoes the ways in
which the Kwaio of Malaita have ‘produced mirror-images of the political
structures used to dominate them, have invoked conceptual entities that
were convenient fictions of colonial administration, have mimicked and
(often unwittingly) parodied the semiology of colonial rule and white
supremacy, and have demanded cultural autonomy by seeking to
represent their “custom” in imitation of colonial legalist statutes’ (Keesing
1992: 8). Principal among ‘convenient colonial fictions’ exploited by
Marovo elders and spokesmen during the mining negotiations was, of
course, the anthropologically-derived ideal of well-defined customary land
ownership based on unilineal descent. Accordingly, this apparent
‘indigenous essentialism’ may be seen rather as creative imitation, and
even parody, of this ideal.

Parallels between the Marovo and Kwaio situations, highly different as
they may seem in terms of specific issues at hand, may be pursued still
further. By claiming the pre-eminence of *kastom*, in part through invoking
syncrctic combinations of indigenous and non-indigenous categories, in
the present case most significantly through the well-ordered, official

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simplifications of 'representational kinship' (Bourdieu 1977: 24-25), the oppositional discourse of 'those who look after Marovo' demonstrates its potential for 'counterhegemony'. With theoretical reference to the works of Gramsci (1971) and Guha (1983) on hegemony and counterhegemony, similar appropriations of the logics of colonial discourse by the Kwaio have been analysed by Keesing as ultimately transforming such logics by 'their deployment in a counterhegemonic political struggle' (Keesing 1992: 238). Thus, the active incorporation of imported, mainly colonial categories does not necessarily reflect any universal hegemony of these categories on the local level in either psychological or political terms (Keesing 1992: 236). Indeed, it has been shown here that in the oppositional discourses of Marovo, 'imported' categories coexist and interact with indigenous notions such as the procedure of varikale, in itself an oppositional cultural scheme. Parallels between the different, yet similar, Marovo and Kwaio situations are all the more notable in the overall context of Solomon Islands' nation-level discourses. In these, Malaita (in particular the pagan Kwaio) and the western Solomons (in particular the people of Marovo and Roviana) are often spoken of as representing two extremes of a cultural-economic-political axis from 'kastom-oriented and backwards' to 'Christian and modern'.

In the long run, the 'politics of tradition' analysed in this article, building on indigenous oppositional logic and on the creative mirror-imagery of colonial concepts, has proved capable of sustaining Marovo autonomy in a wide range of fields of time and action. Through their subtle and not-so-subtle approaches to oppositional discourse and practice, the people who 'look after' Marovo and are seen as the 'guardians' of lagoon, land and people aim at empowering themselves to

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16 The Marovo case bears many parallels to Bourdieu's notion of 'representational kinship' as exemplified by the topic of unilineal descent groups among the Kabyles of Algeria: 'The genealogical diagram of kin relationships which the anthropologist constructs merely reproduces the official representation of social structure', and moreover, 'representational kinship is nothing than the group's self-representation and the almost theatrical presentation it gives of itself when acting in accordance with that self-image' (Bourdieu 1977: 34-35, emphases in original). The mutual entanglements in Marovo of various representations for 'official uses', in a brew of indigenous and colonial categories, indicates both the multifaceted basis of such self-representation, and its potential political uses in cross-cultural discourse.

17 It must be noted here that I have been told by a number of western Solomons leaders who actively oppose encroaching mining, logging and industrial fishing 'companies' that they find it relatively easy to identify with the struggle of the pagan Kwaio against 'government'. The active roles played by the colonial administration and post-independence governments in encouraging large-scale export-oriented resource development makes the distinction between 'government' and '[foreign capitalist] company' a diffuse one in the eyes of many Solomon Islanders.
Edvard Hviding

effectively decide who will reap present and future benefits from the bountiful environments of the Marovo Lagoon.

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Indigenous Essentialism?

823

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