Chapter 1

Introduction

The field Ethnographer has seriously and soberly to cover the full extent of the phenomena in each aspect of tribal culture studied, making no difference between what is commonplace, or drab, or ordinary, and what strikes him as astonishing and out-of-the-way. At the same time, the whole area of tribal culture in all its aspects has to be gone over in research. The consistency, the law and order which obtain within each aspect make also for joining them into one coherent whole. An Ethnographer who sets out to study only religion, or only technology, or only social organisation cuts open an artificial field of inquiry, and he will be seriously handicapped in his work

Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, p.11

Between the Social and the Material

The question raised in this book is as old as the discipline of anthropology itself: how do the people in the study create social orders and meanings around themselves? After a few decades of useful deconstructions of such misapprehended concepts as 'society', 'culture' and 'individual', and the 'crisis of representation' following from the total abandonment of all such synthesising *a priori* concepts, we have not only to rebuild concepts but also to turn representation itself away from the fixed axis of us-and-them. The experiment carried out in this book is to begin at the other end of things – to humbly try to grasp what social notions are implied in the practices of the people under study. This means re-engaging the classical anthropological strategy of methodological holism outlined by Malinowski, and submitting our existing concepts to the pressures of the diverse and complex phenomena we encounter. We will reinvestigate whether a category resembling our previous ideas about 'society' can emerge from the totality of events, relationships and narratives accessible to us as researchers. If we can no longer hope to approach society as a 'coherent whole', then we can at least trace empirically how people themselves conceptualise their social life world – whether they practise society as a

reality – and look for the linkages they create within such practices. I think we will be able to demonstrate that the protagonists of this study, the people of the island of Ambrym in Vanuatu, are continually handling social totalities, both by making social relations 'complete' and 'finished' and by dissolving them and distributing them. As we will try to show, they are in all aspects of life simultaneously thinking about the here-and-now and anticipating the wider implications of their acts down chains of relationships, both historically and contemporarily.

But how do we approach the concepts of society and sociality? In the introduction to *Conceptualizing society* volume, Adam Kuper points out the contrast between Weberian or Malinowskian approaches, which take an actor-oriented and relational view of society, and the Durkheimian/ Maussian approaches of collective representations (see Kuper 1992). In the first of these approaches agency is held out and society tends to disappear, while in the latter society is held out and agency tends to disappear. This conflict can be seen between Barth and De Coppet in Kuper's volume. Barth argues that society is a fiction of the anthropological imagination and that the resource for anthropology should be people's *interactions* as they engage in variously distributed relationships of economic, religious or political concern. There is no social boundedness about the patterns that come out of such trajectories, he claims (see Barth 1992). De Coppet, on the other hand, sees society as a useful concept for describing what is shared in a community of people, the *self-evident* that is the basis of practice and of intercommunal understandings. It is a system of communications that also leads people to perceive the nature of their society in a certain way. Against Barth he argues

> … modern ideology, by making the individual the ultimate value, has rendered society itself less and less imaginable … the conclusion of this slow progression is that society is now considered as a simple collection of individuals, 'a pile of sand'. (1992: 59–60)

From De Coppet's point of view, Barth's Weberian approach is a sort of false consciousness, the result of the ideological forces of society at this point in history, that make us all dream of individual actors and interaction at a point when the ideological apparatuses themselves have been erased from recognition.

Both these perspectives place each other in the world of illusions, and both depend on the binary construction of dream versus reality. And it is right here that I want to situate the controversy over the category of society – in the relationship between the imaginary and the real, the mental and the material. I would claim that there is in a sense always a 'dream-machine' present when people engage in relationships with each other. This is sociality itself, and it is a precondition for meaningful interaction. This is the intersubjective realm of imagined relations,

always in the process of *becoming* real. What is it that makes me stay together with my wife, day after day? Why do not our children find themselves other parents? Why do I go to work every day? Why do I want to stay on in my father's hamlet? It cannot be that we actually *choose* to do so over and over again, because it benefits us or because other people compel us to do so, or because these actions even concern us *as choices*. Most of these choices are rendered unnecessary, because of the imaginary objectivity of these acts as naturalised acts. All these choices that turn out to be non-choises imply the realm of imagined totalities outside of our immediate selves, outside of our control. We stand before God, we make ourselves responsible citizens with responsibilities towards the State, we uphold images of the continuity of family and land.

With reference to De Coppet's comment, we could say that we in the Western context – whether in social science or in our broader social ontology, i.e. in how we conceive relations to be working – we find it hard to attribute concreteness to sociality itself. The issue in this book is to implicitly confront this view with an attitude towards the social that is very different. The *wehenru* spirit mentioned in the foreword could actually work as a comparative figure to our concept of society – in that both the *wehenru* and our 'society' feature simultaneously a dimension exterior to relations between people and a direct influence on the character of their relationships. Comparison is, however, always asymmetric, as has been pointed out in Iteanu's review of Louis Dumont's contribution to anthropology (see Iteanu 2007). And even though these Ambrym concepts and our 'society' are also in many ways incomparable – one personified and the other abstract, one concrete and the other imagined, one believed to be real the other believed to be fiction – in their respective contexts – we will try to retrieve a concept of society on Ambrym that in practice makes itself mainfest in many ways as a more realistic concept than our own. A blunt – but I believe important – observation will be that these Melanesians demonstrate a *better* understanding of social forces than Western social science[1] often does. Hence, against the attitude of cultural relativism, the claim is not only that the Ambrym islanders operate with a different concept of society, but that they also have a more realistic understanding of how sociality works universally.

Creating Agency

Keeping these questions regarding society in mind, we will now begin to approach the scene of North Ambrym ethnography. In order to directly introduce what the key issues are I will start off with an example from my first fieldwork, in 1996. In my work with recording the assemblage of practices related to the standing drums I had followed the production

of a monumental ceremonial drum (Rio 1997). The work with this drum was a communal initiative that would be part of an exchange between The University of Bergen and Ranon village on Ambrym Island; and the money for the drum would be spent on building a community house for the village.[2] The carver, the renowned Bongkon from a neighbouring village, was engaged in transforming the breadfruit log into a drum. This work involved no creative effort on his part, and the drum took shape as an exact copy of the renowned Ambrym drum design: a slit that reaches up half the drum's body underneath the face and pig's tusk necklace that makes the figure into a manly effigy with an impression of power and beauty. This drum was, however, in some ways special, since all measures were taken to make it an especially efficient and attractive drum. As was usual with all these drums that are now exported to the tourist market, it was painted in brilliant red ochre and smeared with a mixture of turmeric and coconut oil that made its 'skin' shiny and oily yellow. When Bongkon had finished his work, a day was appointed for the initiation of the drum. I saw myself as an important agent in the trajectory of the drum since I was supposed to document the customary practices in manufacturing drums for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre plus pay for it. Nevertheless, this initiation was held in my absence, and afterwards I had to obtain details from people who had been present.

The drum had been taken out of the seclusion that had surrounded it as long as it was in the process of being manufactured. It had been kept behind a high fence, which had protected it from the sight of women and children, and when it was now transported out to the village its face was masked. A hole had been dug centrally in the village and, after pigs had been killed on behalf of the community and live pigs had been paid to the carver along with a sum of money, the drum was stood up in the hole. It was now time to remove the mask on the drum's face, and as the coconut mat fell from the face, an outburst of surprise and astonishment was heard among the participants. The drum was beautiful! This was judged by its size, its shiny colours and posture,[3] and it evoked memories of past glorious moments of equally powerful achievements in this community. A man from another village stepped forward and paid a small sum of money in order to initiate the sound of the drum, and as he beat it, its 'voice' streamed out in a perfect, deep tone; a tone that could be heard for miles away. The carver himself watched all this and then he stepped forward. He had felt that this drum was so beautiful that it 'demanded' to be decorated (*iaia*). He did this by paying for a special red hibiscus flower that only certain high men have the right to use. He gave some money to the man who had beaten the drum as payment for this kind of flower, and hung it through the nose of the figure.

I believe this moment of celebration, of surprise and astonishment, had nothing to do with the tourist market or the demand for primitive art in the modern world. It had nothing to do with my own agency as the

buyer of the drum, and it had nothing to do with the money that would eventually replace the drum before it was shipped out of Ambrym to Bergen. All these things formed the background of the event, but in the foreground stood the drum itself as an especially potent mediator between the community and the specific history of that community. It touched people because it stood for the agency of the ancestors and thus imported an image of the past into the present. The carver therefore felt that he had to make a payment, in order to objectify that moment of mediation, to pay for the 'right' to make such a revelation visible. The red hibiscus hence became a mark of his own agency, but simultaneously it marked the agency of the drum as something that was now separated from the carver himself. It was an acknowledgement that the drum was no longer 'his own'; and that it had been transformed into an Other that now stood for itself.

To account for such happenings, I felt that I had first to cover some new territory in the ethnography of Vanuatu. A concept of mediation, and of 'agency that creates agency', appeared to be laden with potency and power in Ambrym social life, not only when making art. By using the concept of agency I mean not only the capacity and motion to act, but also the various kinds of outside 'influences' that affect these acts – in this indigenous model of mediation, action and influence. Agency will hence work as a synthetic concept that at different stages converges with 'exchange', 'power', 'mediation', 'influence', 'action' and 'intentionality'. We will see how people on Ambrym were actually playing constantly with 'turning around' social perspectives and standpoints, in a dialectic where giving others the motion to act was essential.

That we can speak about an 'aesthetics' of relationships in the region of Melanesia – larger social motifs that people fill their acts and events into – seems to be widely recognised among writers in Melanesian anthropology (see Strathern 1988; also Munn 1986, Wagner 1986, Sørum 1991). This also manifested itself in my rereading of Deacon's classic paper on the Ambrym marriage system as the completion of women 'going around and coming back' (Deacon 1927; see Rio 2005) and Guiart's detailed description of the graded society and a layout of the various stages of growth of the pig's spiralling tusk (Guiart 1951, see also Taylor 2005). After staying a while on Ambrym I realised that even many decades after these initial attempts at understanding Ambrym sociality, the spiral form repeated itself also in other domains of social life. It appeared to be a conceptual image that was crucial in the Ambrym people's way of comprehending different processes. It was clear that Deacon had been right in claiming that the system of marriage followed a spiral pattern, wherein father and son provide each other reciprocally with spouses by 'sending out' sisters who 'come back' as wives in the next generation. When taking part in yam gardening I also found that the same spiral shape was the pattern on which the growth of yamvines was

laid out. In addition the shape of the historic men's graded society had also worked conceptually as a spiral, inside which men worked their way upwards by fulfilling one and one cycle that was objectified by wooden effigies for every turn of the rising spiral. Furthermore, the graveyard of the highest man in the hierarchy was itself shaped as a spiral, with a stone fence circular in shape, the opening of the spiral forming the entrance to the graveyard. We could add that the whole domain of 'project' activities – of 'business', travel, lending and fundraising – was also founded on this metaphor of 'passing around and returning in an elevated form'. I understand spiral forms to build on a theme of production, of growth that implies and demands movement and multiple input of agency. The growth of a pig makes manifest the circles that it has drawn up in the Ambrym terrains while being exchanged between owners. The growth of a child makes manifest the care and nurturing that it receives from various relatives in different places, just as the growth of a yam is seen to depend on the way the owner takes care to lead the vines around in a circular pattern.

As I see it, these spiral shapes were really artefacts of a specific logic of agency – of a creativity performed on the relationships themselves. Even though the more material of these spiral forms now belonged to the realm of almost abandoned practices of *kastom*, the idea of things 'going round and coming back' seemed still to be regulating social life. I believe that this logic of a social aesthetic – that is simultaneously about how to produce growth in products and how to dispose of products – can also inform us about common anthropological problems. Not only does the agency of creating spirals represent us with the idea of thirdness as essential to production and growth, but this also introduces us to common anthropological problems. The spiral is concretely working as an alternation between process and structure, between singularisation and totalisation, between what is abstract and what is concrete, it is a theory of reciprocity and it is the foundation of Ambrym hierarchy. My aim here is to assess this issue of the social form itself in a more thorough fashion; hence putting the artefacts, the material side of the spiral cycles, into focus, and thus describe the social patterns and engagements from the perspective of these ossifications and metonyms.[4] By looking at intentionality[5] and agency I wish to draw attention to the becoming and the generation of these social dynamics without, however, turning to a naïve subject-oriented view of things.

We will approach this theory of agency in various domains of Ambrym social life: in kinship and marriage, in agricultural production and in the domain of ceremonies. The substantive content of this enquiry is hence the same as it ever was in Melanesian ethnography, comparable to most monographs from the region. If there is anything innovative in this work, it will be to challenge our current ideas about the constitution of relations and on what premises actors act. This calls for a comparative

consideration of the phenomenological status of relations and of what we call 'society'. There is surely something intriguing about the region of Melanesia, and what perhaps makes this part of the world so special – at least in the anthropological apparatus – is that people themselves work with explicit conceptions of making social formations into objective structures and into products. In the past decades of the critical turn in anthropology – particularly in the critical treatment of the concept of society (see Kuper 1992; Ingold 1996) in Melanesian anthropology striking against structuralism and 'persistence anthropology' (see Carrier and Carrier 1989; Carrier 1992; Thomas 1991) something has been washed out of anthropology, notably the possibility of recognising that in some places, with some people, social structure is itself a value, a concern and itself a practice. A certain view has become hegemonic: notably that social structure is abstract and that social process is the concrete issue that we can work with. A left-over from such a view is the possibility that people themselves often work towards social structures as concrete manifestations of their more abstract and unarticulated social life. A marriage system in the representation of a diagram is an obvious example of this: of concrete social formations that people let themselves be governed by and that they invest themselves in governing. Playing around with social form itself is not only explicitly the tendency of Melanesian kinship systems (see Langham 1981; Hviding 1996; Roaldkvam and Hoem 2003), but, as I will empirically demonstrate, it is also the overall foundation of power and production.

The Regional Context

The material presented in this book is the result of fieldwork among people in North Ambrym.[6] I believe, however, that the issues taken up here can also be recognised in other parts of the world, and I will imply that the model of agency and mediation that I am describing has resonance in all social environments. I have, however, chosen to talk about Ambrym in this work, in rather 'endogamous' terms, not to underplay the fact that the population of the island is a result of continuous migrations and immigrations to and from other islands, but to firmly maintain that my own perspective is from within Ambrym. It is by getting into the dynamics of this microscopic social setting that I want to contribute to the wider field of comparative sociology. By taking this position I also admit to having surrendered to a local 'essentialism' that is widespread in the region and of which 'kastom' is a central part. In every island and every language district[7] of Vanuatu people postulate that they are essentially different from other groups. The crucial thing in this production of difference is the maintenance of *kastom*: the locally contained stock of sociocultural reproductive means. I have indeed been seduced by this way of framing the world; a world in which it is always

'we' who are the essential actors and who have the right and 'authentic' customs.[8] In Vanuatu people are eager to see other *kastom* being performed, but mostly in order to spot their deficiencies, or their inner secrets. People might want to capture other people's *kastom* – their magic, their language or their sorcery – if they find this useful, but only in order to transform it into tools of their own *kastom*, as a utilitarian means in games and struggles between competing men or groups.

This does not mean that we pretend that this community in North Ambrym is in any way stuck with a 'traditional way of life', even though that is the slogan we get from the tourism industry of Vanuatu. On the contrary, I would say that people here are fantastically modern – even though they are cut off from the most obvious signs of modernity such as electricty, mobile telephones, roads and automobiles. Judging modernity as a tendency towards greater mobility, expansion of networks and generally a move of attention towards the global arena, these people may be said to be more modern than most people in the contemporary world. A major fieldwork frustration of mine was that the people I wanted to see were always immensely busy. They were constantly involved in 'projects'of some kind. Not only were they working their gardens, raising pigs and arranging for ceremonial prestations in order for marriages, circumcision ceremonies and mortuary ceremonies to take place around Vanuatu, but depending on age and gender they would frequently be taking part in meetings for the youth organisation, the sports association, the women's organisation, the development committee, the board of the primary and secondary schools. Morning and afternoon people would gather in church for gospel meetings – for children, youth and women. There were arrangements for fundraisings, 'mate to meet', 'bazaars' and 'markets', to raise money for various purposes. In between they would be receiving tourists off sailing yachts or cruiseships, or filling up huge containers of woodcarvings to be shipped off to Australia, USA or France. Some were travelling to Vanuatu's capital of Port Vila or Santo Town: to sell artefacts to stores of 'primitive art', escort bags of kava that would be on order from the kava bars, or just carry out important errands in relation to a political meeting or a church gathering. People in these islands are hence not only content with witnessing modernity, they are actively embracing it and living it.

But in order to really answer the question of 'what is going on' in Ambrym I believe we will have go beyond the mere appearance of these acts that people involve themselves in and look at what characterises their relationships – not least their own evaluation of the relationships they engage in. It is in this domain that I believe we can discover what is spesifically distinctive about this Vanuatu community in the context of anthropological comparison – as a comparison along lines of an alternative modernity.

Vanuatu in Melanesia

Melanesian ethnography has been short of material from Vanuatu (or the New Hebrides) compared to what has come out of Papua New Guinea. Apart from Deacon's and Layard's early monumental works from the island of Malekula and Speiser's work in several islands (Deacon 1934a; Layard 1942; Speiser 1996), we really have very few anthropological monographs from this archipelago (see, however, Allen 1981; Rodman 1987; Lindstrom 1990; Jolly 1995; Bolton 2003). Tanna cargo cult, Malekula graded societies and Ambrym marriage systems have therefore remained idiosyncratic to this chain of islands. Together with New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands, this part of Melanesia has in this sense been underrepresented in the comparative image of the ethnographic region. The predominant literature of the region has been oriented around the area of the *kula* trade of the Massim region as well as New Guinea Highland communities. In the resulting discussions Big Men, Great Men and Chiefs, peniscults, *moka* festivals and other instances of New Guinea culture have for a period become the comparative measures for the whole of Melanesia. Vanuatu societies have on rare occasions been drawn into this comparative exercise when demonstrating similarities with the New Guinea phenomena.[9]

This view of the Melanesian unified region is in some ways undermined by the linguistic bar between Austronesian languages, covering what Spriggs calls 'Island Melanesia' (see Spriggs 1997) – i.e. the Bismarck Archipelago, the Massim, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji – and the Papuan languages of the New Guinea mainland. However, no systematic effort has been made to clarify how the Vanuatu islands relate to the rest of Island Melanesia or New Guinea in terms of ethnography.[10] If we consider the value of tusked pigs, elaborate arts personifying spirits and ancestors, the elaboration of gender symbolism involved in yams and taro cultivation, the great weight put on ceremonies of death as well as on boys' circumcision ceremonies and the overall importance of more or less secret graded societies as important characteristics of the central Vanuatu islands, we might find close affinities not only with the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago and the Massim of Papua New Guinea, but also with the Southern Highlands and Sepik. The lines of correspondence entirely depend on which criteria we use for comparison, and I believe that matters of cultural development, exchange and innovation are far too complex to determine on the basis of language difference. As the reader will become aware, I have, however mostly seen my material in light of contextual ethnographic literature from Austronesian language settings (e.g. Young 1971; Wagner 1986; Munn 1986; Damon and Wagner 1989; Battaglia 1990; Carrier and Carrier 1991; Foster 1995; Hviding 1996),however, I have also expanded into Papuan language settings when it has been of benefit to more general theoretical arguments.

Life on Ambrym

Ambrym is centrally placed in Vanuatu (see Figure 1.1.), surrounded by the islands of Epi, Malekula, Ambae and Pentecost, which are all within a day's reach in a boat with outboard motor. There are around nine thousand people living on the island (National Population Census, 2001), and around half of them live in the northern part. In this north-central part of the Vanuatu archipelago Ambrym is the only active volcano, and during night time the Marom and Benbow craters radiate a deep red light that can be seen from all surrounding islands. Dip Point in West Ambrym was, early in the colonial era, invested with an infrastructure of roads, a hospital building and churches, and was by some meant to be the future capital of the New Hebrides. These plans were, however, violently disrupted in 1913 by a volcanic outbreak that destroyed the whole settlement (see Frater 1922). Since then several other outbreaks have caused displacement of people, especially in SouthEast Ambrym, where a whole community was evacuated and moved to Efate Island around 1950 (see Tonkinson 1985). Whole lineages from West Ambrym have been displaced to Malekula and North Ambrym, living in what seem to more or less permanent exiles and creating eternal relationships between distant settlements.

During the main part of the fieldworks I have stayed in the village of Ranon. This is an entry point into this northern part of Ambrym, being the first good harbour after Craig Cove in West Ambrym, and serving as a first landing place for tourists who venture to this rather backward location in modern Vanuatu. To arrive here you can get on a cargoship from Port Vila in the south, or from Santo town in the north, and spend two or three days on board. You can also go by Vanair on a flight from Port Vila to Craig Cove, and then catch a small boat that will carry you to the northern part. From Ranon village you can see across both to Malekula, in native tongue called *Fentee* ('under the sea'), and to Ambae on clear days. Expeditions by sailing canoe used to go across to the Small Islands off northern Malekula to engage in barter with the people there, but the new routes of communication now tend to lead people instead to the centres of Port Vila or Luganville.

North Ambrym is quite densely populated, with villages and hamlets (i.e. extended households of the same agnatic group), closely scattered from the seashore and high up in the hills (see Figure 1.2). Whereas many of the villages in the hills have kept their agnatically based, exogamous, virilocal hamlet structure, the coastal villages are today composite villages with many different hamlets internalised in larger structures set up around churches. The village of Ranon, inside the district of Lihor, is hence directly the result of a century of being the plantation office as well as being the location of the Presbyterian Church in the district. This was the centre of the copra plantation, marked out by stores, warehouses and sleeping barracks for the work-crews, up until
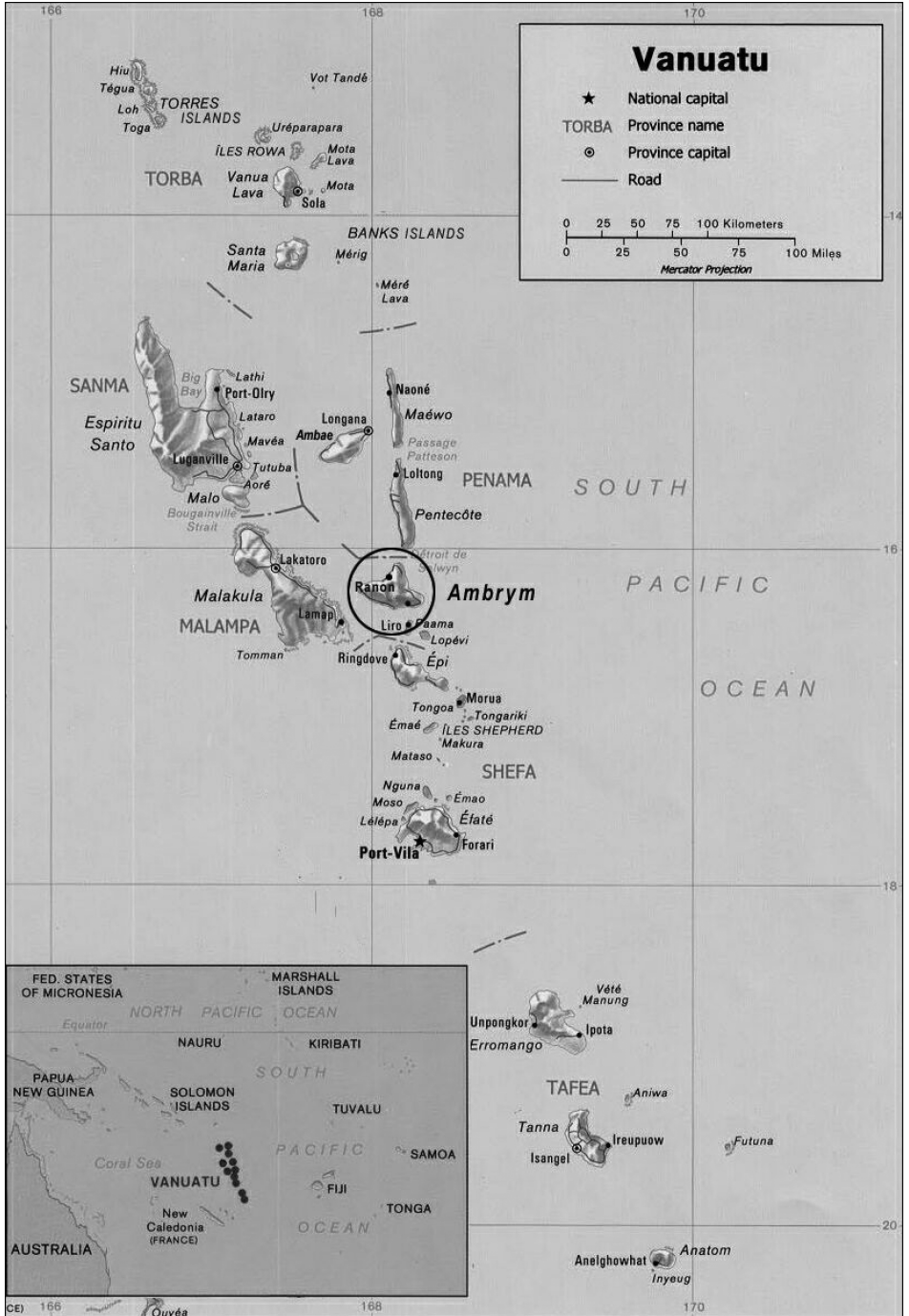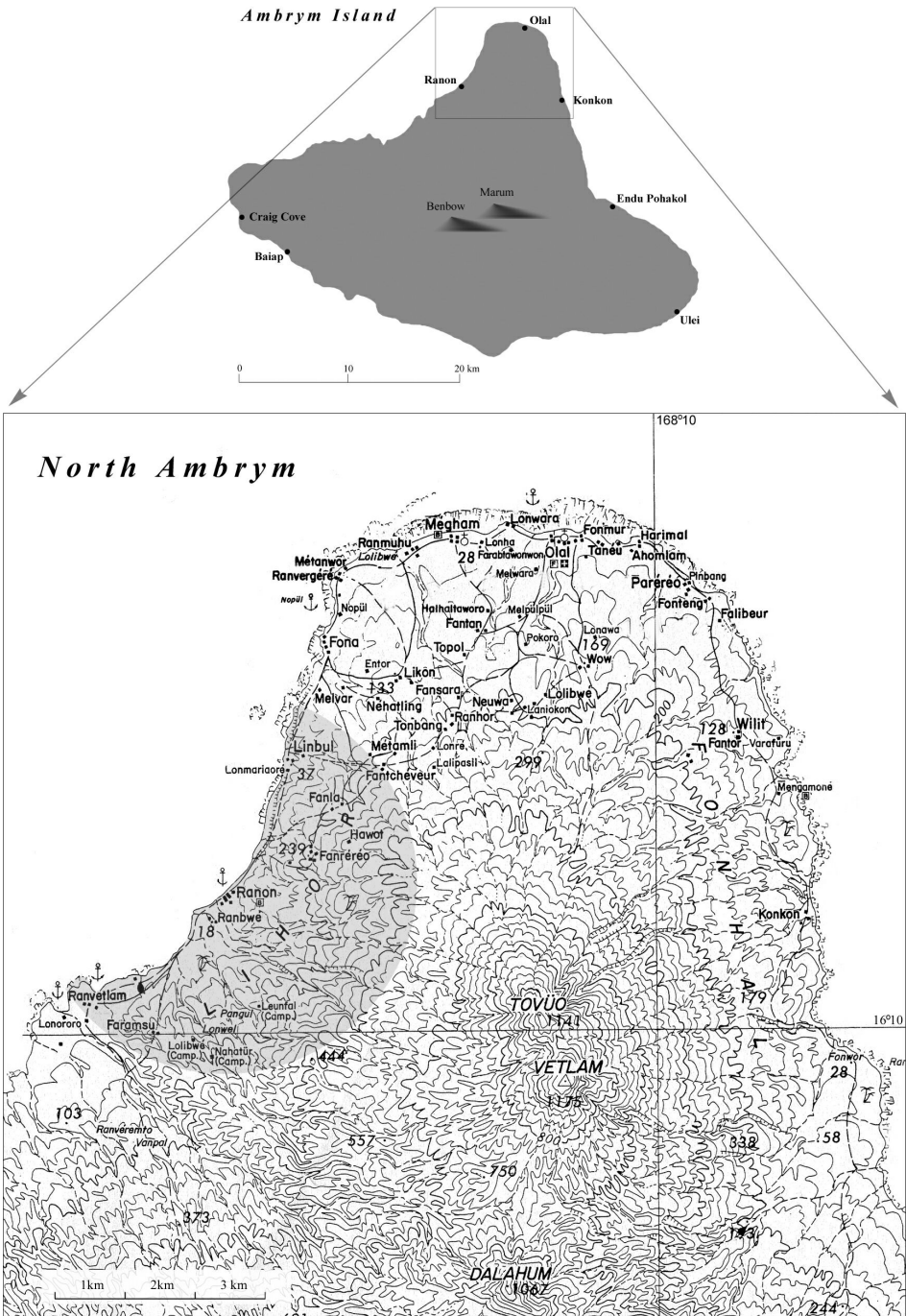
Figure 1.1 Map of Vanuatu

Figure 1.2 Map of Ambrym

1980. At this point the manager of the business was run out of Ranon and Ambrym altogether, due to a political situation of uproar against colonial influence.

The various hamlets in Ranon have been set up as people settled here to work on the plantation. Of the approximately two hundred inhabitants in this village, only two hamlets are considered to be 'of the place', whereas three hamlets consist of people from West Ambrym, three from the now deserted village of Hawor, and one from the northeast village of Konkon. Between these hamlets there have been extensive intermarriages over the years, and all hamlets are now mutually intertwined in relationships that go through women.

Life in Ranon village has its own pace. At sunrise people get up to drink tea and chat over a lump of bread, boiled bananas or leftovers from yesterday's dinner. The two village stores are open and the men tend to meet outside the co-op store, to smoke and tell jokes. Mostly people work in their gardens, which are located an hour's walk up the steep hills above the village. Adults take off in the morning and come back in the afternoon. Husbands and wives go together, while babies, young girls, adolescent boys and old people stay at home. In the gardens, which lie high up in the hills and are comfortably cool and windy, people meet; and there is time for a good deal of joking and smoking here too. In the evening people return with baskets of cabbage, coconuts, bananas, taro, yam, sweet potato, manioc, tomatoes or whatever there is to be harvested. Gathering and hunting, too, contribute a good deal to the diet. People gather different ferns to make relish, and there are fruits and nuts of all kinds, some endemic to these islands. In the breadfruit season, from December to January, people do not have to eat much else than this rich fruit.[11] Women go looking for seashell and small crabs along the beach, and men hunt for flying foxes, wild pigeons, wild roosters, megapod eggs and wild pigs in the forest. Fishing is much neglected in these parts, and older people complain about how lazy the young people are. There are, however, no reefs outside Ranon, and Ambrym's population is mainly directed towards inland agriculture and not towards maritime resources. The foodcrops are planted and fruits grow so that when one kind is finished another is ready to be harvested. This is a reassuring circularity for people who are sure that they will never starve. In the area immediately around the Ranon settlement there is a forest of coconut palms, a remnant of the plantation established here by a French family, the Rossis, around 1860. After Independence in 1980 the plantation was distributed out to those holding customary ownership to the ground. Today every household in Ranon has the right to some part of it, and most families work copra regularly to make money for schoolfees, sugar, kerosene, torch batteries, rice and tinned food. In Ranon there are three stores: one co-operative store set up by the English under their government, and two private ones. They all have the same things in stock and people do not differentiate between them.

In the evening people return from their daily work. Again they gather outside the store to buy rice, tobacco or a tin for dinner. Some men go to drink kava outside the house of a friend, while the women prepare the food. Some go to feed the pigs that are fenced just outside the village hamlets. At dinner the household comes together to eat and listen to the radio, and afterwards most people go off to sleep while only the youngsters break the silence by singing or cheering. Church meetings take up much of the people's attention in Ranon. The Presbyterian church is a large building in the middle of the village and there is some kind of meeting there every day. In the evening, after dinner, people meet to rehearse prayers and songs. In the daytime groups hold meetings; the youth group, the women's group, the Presbyterian group, all are involved in national discourses of modern Vanuatu.

Wood-carving has recently become an important part of village life too. It comes out of a general tendency to upgrade customary activity, which also includes reviving traditional dance and performance. Since tourism has become big business in Port Vila, and the French cruiseship Club Med II has started paying regular visits to North Ambrym, wood-carving has overrun all other customary practices and is now made on an almost industrial basis. At the time of my fieldwork in the years between 1995 and 2000, tourist souvenirs made higher profits than did copra and kava cash cropping. Selling just a small item could bring in more money than a year of copra work. In Ranon a store selling wood-carvings was set up for tourists, and everywhere you went you met people carving small or big standing drums, or other customary items (see also Rio 1997).

Ambrym in the History of Anthropology

As will become apparent in Chapter 2, Ambrym became known to the academic public very early in the history of social anthropology. Thanks to W.H.R. Rivers, Ambrym became one of the central places for the start of the discipline of kinship studies and thereby anthropology as distinct science (see Langham 1981), and the island has since then figured regularly in academic writing. It has since the start been a slippery place to deal with, and the long debate has fed on the tendency of the Ambrym system to slip away from the various theories of it. Some thought it was basically a patrilineal system (see Deacon 1927; Lane and Lane 1958; Josselin De Jong 1966); others believed it had developed out of a matrilineal system (Rivers 1915; Löffler 1960); yet others believed it was at the core bilateral (Seligman 1927, Patterson 1976).

In the era of Schneider's paradigmshift in kinship studies, the fascination with Ambrym as a 'twisted' case has faded away. In various recent studies of kinship in Melanesia, the Eurocentric desire for lineage and genealogy has been abandoned to the advantage of local idioms of

relatedness. Anthropologists now find that these local principles of relatedness often cross-cut strict unilineal patterns, and are organised in quite different ways. After Schneider's treatment of the seemingly unilineal categories of *genung*, *tabinau* and *wolagen* among the Yap as essentially non-genealogical terms (see Schneider 1984), Melanesian anthropologists have similarly involved themselves with the ontological status of local concepts of relatedness. Carrier and Carrier (1991) found that on Ponam, PNG, the concept of relationships called *ken si* – literally meaning 'the muscle of the clam shell' and metaphorically standing for 'cognatic stock' – cross-cut previous ideas about *kamal* (men's houses) as patrilineages and *kowun* as totemic matrilineal groups. They write

> *Ken si* were not corporate groups, nor were they permanently active. They coalesced as groups only in order to assist their individual members with ceremonial exchange or other projects. Thus, although every individual was a member of a great number of stocks, it was rare for more than a few of those to be active as groups demanding participation at one time. (Carrier and Carrier 1991: 47)

Likewise Hviding (1996) has demonstrated that the *butubutu* – bilateral, land-owning corporate groups of New Georgia, Solomon Islands – were intertwined with the corresponding meanings of the *puava*, the territory on which residence defined the *butubutu*. Hviding writes

> The general idea is that all those who are able to claim descent from the same ancestors, through combinations of male and female links, belong to the same *butubutu*. Such people are *tamatalana* ('in consanguinal relation') of common descent (*meka tututi*, lit. 'One chain of linkages'). One definition of *butubutu*, then, may be 'cognatic descent group', Thus every Marovo individual is a member of several different *butubutu* and has varying degrees of claims to the recourses controlled by each of them. It follows that each *butubutu* consists of an assemblage of people all of whom share ancestors but have different types of actual affiliation with the group. (Hviding 1996: 143)

This turn to dissolving allegedly essentialised concepts of linearity into fluid and momentary constellations of groupness very early on led Mary Patterson to re-interpret the Ambrym kinship material (see 1976, 2001). She departed from earlier theories of linearity and instead focused on the concept of *bulufatao* (which literally means 'doorway', the focal point for 'people of the place') with its emphasis on the relationship between father and son in the household. Through alternating generations their relationship is completely reciprocal; as the 'father' becomes the 'son' when the son marries. A man hence calls both his father and his son by the same term; he marries his father's 'mother', and so he has exactly the same kinship relations to his father and his son. In the same way that

Carrier and Carrier's discovery came through the metaphor of the two sides that are unified in the muscle of the clamshell, Patterson found the concept of *tali viung*, which literally referred to 'two sides of a bunch of coconuts'. The metaphor refers to the relationship between father and son, as two mutually interdependent parts of the same plant, thus forming the axis which affinal and genealogical relations of the ego are oriented around. Patterson sees this relationship as the core of Ambrym kinship, without, however, implying that this is a patrilineal system. Instead, she sees it as a 'cognatic descent category' on the basis that it is

> founder-focused, but tracks its descendants in other such groups by remembering the origin sites to which sisters and daughters have gone in marriage, since it is on the basis of such prior ceding of women that rhetorical claims can be made to return to their 'place'. (2001: 45)

Since Patterson's observations, coming out of the first long-term fieldwork in North Ambrym, much of the puzzle of Ambrym kinship has been dissolved. It now appears as a 'normal' Melanesian kinship system, with a conceptual emphasis on place (*were*), paths (*hal*) and sides (*tahiwere*).

After Patterson's fieldwork in the late 1960s there has been no major anthropological effort undertaken in North Ambrym. The government that was formed in Vanuatu after Independence in 1980 felt that foreign researchers represented a threat to the formation of indigenous liberation and awareness, and did not want them to be a part of this fragile process. This prohibition was lifted eventually in 1994, and my own application to do research was approved by the Cultural Centre by the end of that year. At this point in the development of the discipline of anthropology the whole history of Ambrym kinship seemed awkward and detached from ethnographic fact, and I had not intended to go into it. As we will see in the next chapter, I have found reasons to do it anyway. I believe that the problem anthropologists have had with understanding it can in fact tell us a great deal about the structure of Vanuatu social life.

Towards a Model of Divided Agency

I will now briefly introduce some of the concepts that are central to this work as a whole. To start off from the right vantage-point I will first tell a story from Ambrym. It is a story that is accompanied by a sand drawing design called *namroingfeang*, meaning, 'I am looking for fire'. I was told this story by Bangror in the small hamlet of Bogor of North Ambrym, in July 2000. Bangror's father's father, also his name Bangror, had paid for the right to put the design of *Nam roing feang* on his personal *atingting* standing drum. The design is simply a spiral form, and on the

standing drum it was now used at the eyes of the drum face. The ceremonial payment was a great spectacle – a ceremony called *jaoje* – with a great number of pigs being killed for his mother's closest agnates. For this ceremony a ladder of about 10 metres and with thirty rungs was mounted up on the four metres tall *atinting* standing in his ceremonial ground (*harl*). The ladder was decorated with *lipliparpar* flowers (a species in the ginger family with red flowers) and croton and cordyline leaves that old Bangror had paid for in a previous *sarabwerang* – a ritual of shooting one's mother's kin (see Patterson 1981). Bangror killed pigs as he mounted the ladder, one pig for every rung in the ladder – for each rung calling out the name of the recipient of the pig.[12] After that ceremony Bangror and his followers have had the right to put the *namroingfeang* image on the eyes of their drums. It is a well-known sand drawing with a special story connected to it. In one sense it is about joking relations, but also about certain aspects of agency and reciprocity. The story goes like this:

> A man – his name was Kenken[13] – sat in his house with a father of his. His father asked him to go to his *tubiung wehen*[14] to get fire. He went on his way, while singing *Namroing feang, Namroing feang, Namroing feang* – I am looking for fire etc.
>
> (*While telling the story the narrator now puts his finger down in the sand and starts circling inwards in a spiral motion in an anti-clockwise movement, illustrating the movement of the man walking until he reaches the centre of the spiral, his* tubiung wehen*'s place*).
>
> When he arrives in his *tubiung wehen*'s place and asks for fire, the old woman swears at him. She says: *Or lo for forwirne feang kene tubium*? – You ought not copulate with the fire cunt of your *tubium*? The man goes back to his place, while he is singing *naua fefe, naua fefe, naua fefe* etc.– I will go to tell, I will go to tell etc.
>
> (*The narrator now starts to circle back outwards in the same circle, clockwise, to indicate that the man is going back home.*)
>
> He comes back to his house, and he tells about what happened when he asked the old woman for fire. The older man says to him: *marom rua woho bwe* – You and I will go and ask again. So they went back to the woman's place and there the father killed the old woman.
>
> (*The narrator again circles inwards in the spiral, ending the story when his finger is pointing at the centre of the spiral.*)

To the people of Ambrym, this story takes up a well-known motif of social interaction. People often turn to their mother's kin in order to borrow things. And as the son here goes to get fire, this is interpreted by the woman as a request for a sexual favour. This also reflects the fact that

men in real life turn to their father's mother's natal place to get a bride, as pointed out by Deacon in his classic paper. The people in the mother's place are also joking relatives, in control of a joking capacity to tell people off, to offend one's sexual capacities and to deny any demand for borrowing with a smile. This is of course deadly serious, and the mother's kin are in reality in control of both life and death through this joking. It is important to note that the centre of the spiral here is not the place of the actor in the story, but a place were he must go to in order to get his reproductive means. It is hence *in another place* that he has his centre, and both his origins and his future means to reproduce lie there. The killing reflects a desire in people to get rid of this outside control of their own life and reproduction, and the story pretends (and makes fun of the idea) that Kenken and his father could be self-sustained and themselves take up the centre of their own life. That would, of course, be a great relief.

The third party here figures concretely in the constitution of relationships, demonstrating a perspective where social distance becomes a question of immediate centrality. Agency has become a fashionable word in today's anthropology, as being central to the post-structuralist reappearance of the subject and of practice (see e.g. Moore 1999). But even though agency now appears to be the 'right' concept for our time, it is important that it does not become filled with the kind of universalistic and unreflected assumptions that earlier caused problems to concepts of the person and the self (see Battaglia 1995). I will not use agency as a self-evident relation between actors and their acts and intentionalities, but wish to question how Ambrym people recognise *effective* agency and how they understand its causality. What kinds of social configurations are then implied by action, and what relationships are in the foreground and in the background of these actions? Battaglia has described what she calls 'invisible foregrounding' among urban Trobrianders in Port Moresby. When they see photos of people in newspapers they try to figure out who the person behind the person in the photo is – i.e. who the true subject of the photograph is. Similarly they imply that there is always an agent 'walking behind' a valuable object that circulates (see Battaglia 1994: 631). This type of 'invisible foregrounding' can also be likened to how Ambrym Islanders conceive of agency, in the sense that there is always a double perspective on agency. There is the agency of the immediate performer and the agency of influence coming from elsewhere. A specific model of agency, where persons interact in relationships that have a third person, a 'mediator' at the centre, is pressing itself forward in the Ambrym setting, and I believe it is this that has led writers on Ambrym kinship to claim that it was governed by a combination of dyadic and triadic principles.

Featuring Thirdness

This version of agency then needs to be set in contrast to a current way of understanding reciprocity. Acts are often seen to belong to the performers of acts, and are interpreted and appreciated by the recipient of the act as belonging to the actor. The ideas of the 'rational actor' or 'economic man' are based on this logic that individuals themselves 'possess' their own acts. This has also been the premise of much theorising around gift giving.

In trying to create a comparative meeting place between different concepts of society I will suggest that the concept of thirdness can be placed at the centre of the analysis.[15] It will be made clear how a sense of thirdness is already at work in our Western assumptions about society and that this is comparable, if not similar, to the way the Vanuatu islanders imply thirdness in their practices of society. I mean by thirdness a sense of imagined objectivity in social interaction and the perspective of totality that arises from imagining this objectivity. Thirdness is the viewpoint from where society is enabled to take a look at itself. It however varies how thirdness is attributed with concreteness.

As thirdness is revealed inside the values and ontology of social relations of the Vanuatu islanders, we will also realise its relevance for the Western understandings. Of course, the issue of thirdness has been around in philosophy for a long time, and both Kant and Hegel structured their ontologies in triads. Also Peirce made his whole pragmatic semiotics revolve around the triad, and insisted very strongly that thirdness was crucial to an understanding of the human world (Peirce 1955, chap. 6). In his system of firstness, secondness and thirdness:

> Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else.

> Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third.

> Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other (Peirce 1958: para. 328)

The importance of thirdness hence lay in the crucial role of the mental and the imaginary in the constitution of human lifeworlds, and in his 'semeiotics', his theory of the triad of signs hinged on the crucial role of the 'community of interpretation'. He attributed to thirdness capacities of the social such as order and legislation and also added that 'sympathy, flesh and blood, that by which I feel my neighbour's feelings is third.' (1955: 80). Here we begin to see a concept of social forces that resembles the anthropological notion of 'structure', but a concept of structure that would belong to a phenomenological approach to society. Thirdness here

is a category not primarily of social interaction or the material world, but first and foremost of the mind. Whereas we can conceive of knowing as the experience of firstness and secondness, knowledge is the experience of thirdness (see also Kohn 2005) and, as Peirce points out, 'If you take any ordinary triadic relation, you will always find a mental element in it. Brute action is secondness, any *mentality* involves thirdness' (Peirce 1958: para. 331; italics added). With regard to social relations such as included in reciprocity, his claim was that a gift could never be recognised as such were it not for a code of behaviour and law mentally manifesting itself in the idea that giving and taking a gift is one and the same social phenomenon (ibid.), and as such – in a 'universal algebra of relations' – dyadic relations always presuppose the thirdness of mentality, law and order. This kind of approach then theorises the importance of thirdness in all kinds of relationships in the human world, just as much as 'social structure' in anthropology has been presupposed universally to form the background in the analysis of social phenomena (see Strathern 1992; 1995). We see how thirdness is taking shape as abstract, belonging to the realm of mentality and rules for behaviour, forming the background for social realites in the foreground. Secondness belongs to observable reality, thirdness figures as invisible mentality. Thirdness, as 'society' or as 'structure', has in a similar fashion remained abstract and in anthropology, at least in the development of British anthropology after Radcliffe-Brown, more time was spent on theorising secondness – as the appearance of relationships in kinship and in economy – than on theorising the constitution of society as a present condition in a systematic and practical social dialectic.

As Peirce's emphasis on thirdness first and foremost adresses legislation and law, the state is especially relevant in Western attitudes to thirdness in social formations. An important question has been if we who live in strong state traditions are at all able to think about human relations without either state or God playing a part in them, and if people in alternative forms of social organisation then think differently about relationships. In Clastres' now classical *Society against the State* he moves against a statist assumption that Amazonian chiefs would be the early development of the sovereign leader. He argues that in this type of society the chief can never be in command of society or in a sovereign position of exercising power, and therefore the chief can never assume state power either: 'The chief is there to serve society; it is society as such – the real locus of power – that exercises its power over him' (Clastres 1987: 207). What is interesting about Clastres' argument is that this conceptualisation of society – society as being itself a sovereign body – is found in an explicitly non-statist social formation. In order to avoid further misunderstandings Clastres adds that totalised society as 'the One' (in opposition to the rule of the Many, i.e. where the chief would exercise despotic power) among the Indians is indeed being recognised as

a possibility, but this figure is then placed inside the realm of Evil. Society as the One – 'as the universal essence of the state' – is explicitly what they do not want (1987: 217). Hence they can think about images of the state without exercising it, and can even resist it. But Clastres' account here also makes us wonder if the state as a form of thirdness was not already implied in the way he conceived of society among the Indians in the first place (see also Kapferer 1997: 277). It is, however, clear that theories of thirdness have first and foremost been part of an assemblage for thinking about society under state-forms, and it is in relation to the state that thirdness takes its most concrete form. Hence, the role of legislation and the Leviathan sovereign body in the evolutionary models by Hobbes, the role of universal morality in Kant's Copernican revolution, and the role of bureaucracy in novels by Kafka are only some of the most clearly drawn examples of a strong statist ontology of social relations continually present in Western traditions. This book will try to some degree to set up Vanuatu sociality in contrast to this, but, this being said, we will be careful about pressing the social patterns discovered here into a negatively determined comparative exercise.

Reciprocity at Stake

A central issue in these discussions will be the role of reciprocity for existence of society. A claim in sociology has been that reciprocity between two parties is the basic start of social life. Alvin Gouldner hence claimed that the 'norm of reciprocity' was a natural 'starting mechanism' for social systems: he said that it is a universal human tendency that reciprocity comes before society itself. This would work from the premise that in an original situation of two parties of strangers, a thing given by one of them would compel the other party to return an equivalent (Gouldner 1960). This would set off sociality. Inside such a logic we also see the contours of a view of society as having its origin in a certain period of human evolution – in a teleological course away from a primitive kind of human life without exchange and towards state-forms, free-trade and 'the invisible hand' as the natural conclusion to history.

In the paradigm of Radcliffe-Brown and in the development of British social anthropology, a similar conceptualisation of society as based on reciprocity cemented itself – society now becoming an observable network of relations 'on the ground', fitting into the observable scheme of social pragmatism, and leaving aside aspects of religion and morality as secondary phenomena. The result of this turn in Britain has been a whole range of studies that were directed at describing marriage, kinship and ceremony as merely being about reciprocity and balance between groups and the processual maintainance of stability in dyadic forms. In

the region of Melanesia, anthropological studies from the British camp have mostly occupied themselves with exchange of women and of valuables *as reciprocity*. Of course, the work of Malinowski on the issue of kula exchange in the Massim region very early set a standard for perceiving exchange to be the basis for Melanesian society. However, when Malinowski, towards the end of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, searches for the greater meaning of the kula he reaches the conclusion that kula is not primarily about economy, but as much about aesthetics, magic, healing and the almost sacred character of kula valuables and a concern for societal growth. Unfortunately, the message Malinowski still gave to the comparative science of anthropology – having establishes that it was a 'novel type of ethnological fact' (1922: 510) – was that this manifested the essentiality of *exchange* not only for the economy but for theories of the religious and the cosmological in Melanesia.[16] Even though there can be strong intuitive arguments for putting forward such an idea, I believe this impression has been considerably altered through later fieldwork in the region, where the idea of production and reproduction has been more dominant (see Weiner 1980; Leach and Leach 1983; Munn 1986). Frederick Damon in particular has confronted this Malinowskian legacy, by making it clear how 'one is forced, I believe, to deal with the kula not in terms of exchange theory but rather with a production theory of society' (1983: 317). Within this statement lies an important change of perspective, which I will try to further underline throughout the chapters, and explicitly deal with in the final chapter of this book.

Mauss also focused his discussion on the bond created between two parties and the issue of reciprocity involved – when proposing the 'obligations to give', 'obligations to receive' and 'obligations to return' as a universal morality of gift exchange. The closest he could come to understanding what the nature of the 'obligation' itself really was, was through exploring the Maori concept of *Hau* (Mauss 1990; Lévi-Strauss 1987).[17] The morally asserted obligations following this 'spirit of the gift' could easily be comprehended as a social dimension akin to what was developed by Peirce as abstract thirdness. This point was crucial to the critique that Sahlins later raised against him (Sahlins 1972). Sahlins took up the fact that in all the examples Mauss uses from the Maori about the *hau*, 'the spirit of the gift', there were always three parties. Mauss had called this an 'obscuring feature' that had not been necessary to the informant Ranaipiri's accounts (Mauss 1990: 11), and it was this that Sahlins reacted to. Having retranslated the Maori concept of the *hau* to be a principle of growth, of yield and interest, Sahlins reinterpreted the importance of the *hau* in economic terms:

> But if the point is neither spiritual nor reciprocity as such, if it is rather that one man's gift should not be another man's capital, and therefore the fruits of a gift (the *hau*) ought to be passed back to the original holder, then the

> introduction of a third party is necessary. It is necessary precisely to show a turnover, the gift has had issue; the recipient has used it to advantage. (Sahlins 1972: 161)

Godelier later responded to this critique, taking up the defence of Mauss. Following the same economic argument, he insists on proving that only two parties are necessary for an exchange to take place. If A gives something in his possession to B and he passes it on to C, and if C then returns this by giving another possession of his back to B who then passes this back to A to return his debt to him, then this is still only reciprocity between two parties: A and C, with B only working as a middleman (see Godelier 1999: 54; see also Casajus 1984). I would suggest that both Sahlins and Godelier have missed an important point, by essentialising Ranaipiri's story to be strictly of an economic character and not expressing itself on the ontology of Maori exchange and relationships.[18] As Sahlins pointed out, the introduction of a third party seems to be essential for Ranaipiri, to show a 'turnover' of the giving. But to understand this 'turnover' we might have to deviate from Sahlins's perspective of the economic 'interest' of the *hau*, and instead go into a discussion about how agency and reciprocity works. What if the talk about the *hau* was not strictly about possessions and yield, but really a way of talking about how relational agency was constructed and recognised among the Maori? We could understand his insistence on bringing in the third party as a habitual reflection of the totalising capacity of Maori exchanges, where the agency of the third party maybe reflected the necessity for attributing concreteness to the social context of the exchange. Then the perspective of the 'Maori Juridical expert' Ranaipiri (Mauss 1990: 11) could also be compared to certain theories in Western philosophy.

A proponent of a Western ontology of social relations has been Alfred Schutz (see Schutz 1970), and we can perhaps recognise Mauss's, Godelier's and Sahlins's perspectives in his philosophy. In his theory of social relationships he makes a distinction between what he calls 'we-relationships' and 'they-relationships'. In 'we-relationships' people have the same reference point towards the world, and a special instance of this he calls 'face-to-face situations' wherein two parties become aware of each other, sharing a 'community of time', grasping each others thoughts 'as they come into being', presupposing 'an actual simultaneity with each other of two separate streams of consciousnesses', in a 'spatial immediacy of the other'. Such a 'thou–orientation' is in a sense the foundation of reciprocity, if both parties are thou-oriented towards each other (1970: 184–85). In contrast to this 'thou-orientation' stands the 'they-relationship'. When the Other is a 'mere contemporary' and we have not direct contact with him, we are closed off from his 'stream of consciousness'. Schutz says that the object of this relationship is instead 'my own experience of social reality in general, of human beings and

their conscious processes as such, in abstraction from any individual setting in which they may occur' (1970: 225). In the 'synthesis of recognition' that takes place when one constructs the 'they-relationship' what is constructed is an anonymous and abstract 'ideal type'. This 'ideal type' is an important part of people's knowledge of the world and forms the contextual background to the 'We-relationships'. As examples of such 'anonymous' relations he mentions postal employees, police, or agents in monetary exchanges.

> My social relationship to them consists in the fact that I interact with them, or perhaps merely that, in planning my actions, I keep them in mind. But they, on their part, *never turn up as real people*, merely as anonymous entities defined exhaustively by their functions. Only as bearers of these functions do they have any relevance for my social behaviour. (1970: 226, emphasis added)

We then see that this theory of social relations is very specifically about Western social relationships and how they are conceptualised. Of course, in social systems such as among the Maori or on Ambrym, the concept of anonymous 'ideal types' of contemporaries is not so feasible. In these small-scale societies there are of course ideas of 'Others', and people in other villages and other islands clearly represent 'they-relations' in opposition to the 'we-relations' of an agnatic stock or a network of trade-partners, but here the 'they' are always also 'real people' who are seen to really interfere in the 'we-relationships'. As I will come back to in later chapters, Ambrym people's ideas about marriage, growth, death and sorcery are indeed founded on a principle of the appearance of 'They' as 'real persons'. It is then not even a matter of a 'they-relationship' turning into a 'thou-relationship', but a concrete break with such a division. My point is that the division will have to be set up in a different way for Ambrym social life. In these former theories of exchange there has been a tendency for accepting as real only relations between donor and recipient. One has therefore been led to neglect the concreteness that the social sometimes takes, as the concrete influence of 'They'. I would believe that the concept of the *hau* among the Maori was also alien to such theories. In Ranaipiri's account it is natural to bring the third party into the issue of reciprocity, to demonstrate the real character of the 'they'. In his view reciprocity is not fundamentally based on two parties 'face-to-face', but is revealed through the third one in a concrete and direct fashion.[19] As a case in point John Leroy has described how the massive pig-killing ceremonies of the Kewa of the Southern Highlands of PNG produce social wholes by installing an outside perspective on ceremonies (Leroy 1979). Leroy finds that the ceremony operates with a triadic structure where not only the donor and recipient of pigs interact, but where a 'generalized other' is set up as a totalising agent:

> To announce that exchange is triadic is simply another way of saying that it occurs in the presence of others, and that these can condense into a single anonymous third person, who is anyone and everyone in the culture. He does not even have to be physically present for his influence to be felt; imagination and memory may represent him ... Through his unifying glance, donor and recipient understand their act to be a part of wider public reality. (Leroy 1979: 185)

This makes itself relevant in the practical situations of the pig-killing ceremony among the Kewa since behind every gift of a pig or a pearl shell always lies a concern for who else it could have been given to alternatively, who stands behind the recipient to receive it next and who the gift was borrowed from. These considerations, which we intuitively consider as peripheral concerns to the relation between donor and recipient, are according to Leroy so immediately essential that they together form the veritable presence of thirdness as a real agent in this system. A similar tendency has been noted by Frederick Damon to be the case with the system of kula exchange in the Massim (see Damon 1983: 320).

I therefore believe Schutz's analysis must be regarded as specifically valid only for a Western social ontology. The problem with exporting it to other places is the emphasis on the division between concrete relations and abstract relations, which pertain specifically to certain aspects of Western capitalist society. My argument here relates to Harrison's critique of Sahlins's typology of reciprocity (see Harrison 1993: 15–16). Sahlins's view that 'generalized reciprocity' belongs to close relationships between close kin, and that 'balanced' and 'negative reciprocity' take place in more distant relationships, seems to be founded on this same Eurocentric idea of social distance. Basing his observations on New Guinea sociality, Harrison turns the argument around and claims that it is the act of giving itself that makes relations close and the act of stealing or haggling that puts a distance into a relationship. Social distancing can actually be an artefact or an achievement that in turn is seen to have beneficial effects. Accordingly, the definition of an outsider as an enemy is not based on a universal tendency of man to define outsiders and strangers as enemies. On the contrary, in New Guinea enmity on the one hand and generosity on the other are not a difference in distance but in momentary evaluation of equally close relationships. Similarly I would insist that we cannot assume *a priori* how Ambrym people conceptualise social distance. We will see how the most distant of relatives suddenly take up the centre of attention, just as the story of the spiral showed how people often find themselves to be distanced from the centre of their own command.

Unlike Schutz, Jean-Paul Sartre does not treat reciprocity as a face-to-face situation, but, more like Ranaipiri and Leroy's *Kewa* pig-killers, see it as a dialectical oscillation between dyadic and triadic social formations.

In his theory of reciprocity outlined in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre 1991) he begins his investigation of reciprocity by describing himself standing in a window, observing two workers outside. The two workers cannot see each other, and their mutual relationship as workers is only constituted through him as a third party. As a result of his totalisation they come to stand for a unification of their mutual reciprocity as 'workers' of the same class. But this reciprocity only exists as his totalisation and insofar as they have not yet been engaged with one-another. Once they meet face to face; their mutual reciprocity as in the eyes of the third party is closed off and they engage in a seemingly dyadic relation, in what Schutz called a 'reciprocal thou-orientation'. But Sartre's point is that even though they themselves close it off through their interaction, the triadic constitution of their relationship continues to hold, and it is only under the assumption of this absented mediation of the third party that they can come to interact in exchange (Sartre 1991: 100–109). If we could see past the apparent Hobbesian bias in this theory and instead look at it as a model where social encompassment becomes immediately relevant to relations, we can in Battaglia's terms see how the third party is 'invisibly foregrounded' in dual relations. By doing this Sartre makes Marx' concept of 'exchange-value' relevant as a system based on an objective measure of value.

> what has emerged clearly here is that duality ... is released by a sort of communicative trinity which presupposes plurality: it is only the third party in fact who can, through his mediation, show the equivalence of the goods exchanged and consequently of the successive acts. For this exterior third party, the use-value of the goods exchanged is clearly transformed into exchange-value (Sartre 1991: 108).

I believe this idea also opens up the controversy over the gift to new aspects. A complete view of reciprocity cannot only be about the reciprocal engagement of the two parties and their 'stream of consciousness', or the 'spirit of the gift' as a released property of the donor, but must also take into account how that relation is constituted on a certain kind of agency performed on the outside of the relation itself. We need to merge a structural perspective with a realistic view of social ontology.

In a similar argument Wagner has pointed out how 'influence' is a 'total phenomenon' among the Daribi of the southern Highlands of New Guinea (see Wagner 1967). In his account social forces is revealing themselves very concretely in people's lives. The relationships with ancestors, affines, mother's agnates as well as sorcerers here at moments amount to a veritable curse that people have to continually ward off in the relationships that they engage in:

'Influence' is really a wide and diffuse category, including all the
threatening forces in the world against which a man must defend and
define himself to keep the freedom and mobility of his soul. (1967: 62)

As will become apparent, I regard this theory to be more in line with
how people on Ambrym conceive of reciprocity. But here I also want to
extend on this notion of influence, and look at this as a dialectical process
of *shifting perspectives* in the process of production and in the constitution
of people's lives. Instead of just describing this as 'reciprocity' I will try
to focus on mediation as a model for production and power. I engage in
this discussion, not because it is so special to the Ambrym setting that
people recognise external influences to their lives, but specifically to see
how these influences work, how they make themselves manifest, in
what situations they hold power and in what ways people engage with
these forms of power and influence.

In this way thirdness will throughout this book represent an analytical
vantage point from which we can observe how social totalities – in
images of kinship, in production of objects and persons, in displays of
produce and in ceremonial arrangements – are assumed, created and
made beneficial to social process. It will turn out that the people of the
island of Ambrym explicitly recognise the power of constitution of the
social world by always giving credit to manifest third parties for 'seeing'
the real constitution of things. The concept of society opted for here is
then not merely a question of a series of relationships, but a potential for
creating larger imagineries than what can possibly be contained in
singular relationships laid out side by side. As pointed out by Marilyn
Strathern, our anthropological concept of 'relation' is already a
holographic construct, and its investigation is potentially capable of
rendering concrete the complex transfer of meaning between things
related as parts and the relations between them as wholes (see Strathern
1995). In most Melanesian ethnographies and vocabularies we hear that
relationships are not thought of as 'relations between', but instead
configured along a dynamic of 'containment' and 'release' in what
appears to be a hierarchical way of conceptualising relations (see
especially Wagner 1986).[20] But the relation as a solitary analytical
apparatus for discussing sociality quickly limits itself to a narrow vision
of the social. And when it is argued that 'relations are intrinsic not
extrinsic to the living person' (Strathern 1992: 83) followers of Strathern
especially run the danger of reducing Melanesian sociality to a purely
personal level – despite the intention of doing the opposite by denying
the ontological existence of the individual in Melanesian contexts – and
this can lead us into a transactionalist abyss where we fail to see sociality
beyond the transactions of persons. As a development of these ideas
concerning the relation, which come specifically out of New Guinea
social ontologies, we shall here seek out the possibility for using
thirdness as a complement to the relation – for describing the

hierarchical capacity of relations that contain other relations, and maybe for seeking out a specifically Vanuatuan social ontology in comparison to the New Guinea forms. It should then also be made clear that thirdness is here not meant as a middle term *between* people, but as a constitutive force both in the constitution of persons and relations. This framework enables us also to discuss what exists socially on the outside of relations. I believe this is important not only because it allows for an anthropological view of sociality not immediately visible on the level of persons, but also because this dynamic of outside and inside figures prominently in Ambrymese ideas about their social reality. There is the recognition of social forces outside of Ambrym, such as foreign Church agencies, agencies of the state, colonial landowners, that directly have effects on Ambrymese relationships (see Rio 2002); there is a tendency also to install outside agency in sorcery (see Rio 2002a); and there is a constant nomination of outsiders, witnesses and strangers for influencing essential relations of production. It is this last characteristic that will be explored throughout this book.

Thirdness and Hierarchy

As a background to these ideas about Ambrym power we should keep in mind the regionally specific imagined axis between 'great men', 'big men' and 'chiefs', the virtual stereotypes of various ways of organising society in Melanesia (see Sahlins 1963, Godelier 1986, Godelier and Strathern 1991). It has been a characteristic of the more great-man-like varieties that their leaders do not base their power on wealth or violent oppression, but rather on being the masters of ritual knowledge and magic. An important side of the power of the Baruya great man was, in Godelier's view, to organise ceremonies that mobilised people and the production of their community. Through monitoring kinship and exchange they took it upon themselves to give these processes communal meaning and communication with ancestors. They were the only ones who knew how these processes worked and the only ones who could make them work. The great man was therefore also typically the protector of his tribe, a great warrior and the prime target of the enemies. Much of the discussion around Godelier's typology (see Godelier 1986) has been ordered around differing ways of making exchange, kinship and marriage. He claimed that great-man systems worked on the principles of equivalence, of exchange of woman for woman, pigs for pigs etc., while in big-man systems an escalation of competition led to greater exchangeability of persons with things and things with persons. In a later book, edited by Strathern and Godelier (1991), there is, however, a general claim that these forms are only variants of the same theme and that they are transformations of each other. Lemonnier (1991) makes the important point that 'substitution' is a key principle in

Melanesia, both where there are big men and where there aren't. That a woman given in marriage can only be exchanged for another woman and not wealth and that a death can only be compensated with another death are only variants of a cultural theme, wherein the focus is on the unity of appearance and quantity. His claim is that most New Guinea people recognise that the pool of 'life forces', momentously taking the form of blood and semen, but also being revealed through salt, seashells, pigs, etc, is constant. Therefore the loss of one thing needs the compensation of another similar thing. There is here no essential difference between big men and great men since both characters deal with extracts of this finite pool of potent objects.

Mimica, in his account of the Iqwaye, a neighbouring people of Godelier's Baruya, touches on the same hook-up with one-ness and sameness (see Mimica 1988). In their counting system all the fingers of the hand amount to One (i.e. one hand), all the twenty fingers and toes of a man amount to One (i.e. one man). If you count large numbers, for instance the totality of a community, the number will also approach One since all sets of numbers eventually reach the composite number of One. Infinity, or the cosmos, is also One since the cosmos was originally made out of the body of the One creator. In this kind of fractal logic, all entities are simultaneously composed of other parts, as they are simultaneously wholes. In such a cosmology the question of distance can only be temporary, since all things in the world can potentially be put together. The act of counting itself is then an act of totalising, which brings all the things in the world into a cosmic totality, reminiscent of the creator. The ability of the man counting, making unity encompass plurality, is also a power of perspective, of being able to draw together things to reconstitute the unified deity.

It is this characteristic in many New Guinea societies that Wagner builds upon when talking about the 'fractal person' (Wagner 1991), the person who is always one and the same as his constituent relationships. Wagner is critical of approaches that take away this aspect of New Guinea personhood by dissolving subjects into matters of scale, as for instance when the big man has been seen to be the 'scale-shifter' from individual to group-level integration. We here see a view explicitly turning against Hobbes's Leviathan's shadow. Wagner concludes that, 'The task of the great man, then, would not be one of upscaling the individuals to aggregate groupings but of keeping a scale that is person and aggregate at once, solidifying a totality into happening' (Wagner 1991: 172). Wagner has also pointed out how the prominent men of Barok, New Ireland, have powers that consist of making knowledge manifest in concrete forms, in artistic images, in performances or ritual. This power then implies both synthesising and totalising collective formations, in order to make manifest certain patterns of the flow of social life (see Wagner 1986,1987; see also Strathern 1992).

Even though Vanuatu is far removed from New Guinea – removed not only by oceans, but also by history and language difference – we can still trace similarities to these typologies. My point here is that an important aspect of the power of the great men of Ambrym is based on their capability of taking up a totalising position, a position that makes them able to put together their community as a whole while still also being part of the community. This can be interpreted as an egalitarian model, since people do not use hierarchical distinctions to create difference, but instead to create differing perspectives on things. There is still a hierarchical dimension to this: in Dumont's definition of hierarchy as a conceptual way of ordering the world inside a totalising motion, submitting all parts of the social world to coming in touch through the relation to the whole (see Dumont 1980).

The concept of 'power' (*helan*) in North Ambrym is transformable into many different expressions. The word can describe men who are simply well built and strong, and the root of the word, *hel*, is a verb that means 'to fight'. However, a key ability of great men is to 'see things differently'. The expression *vanten ngele meje foforo* (lit. this man opens his eyes and turns around) expresses the power of such men to be able to grasp every side of a matter and see things from different perspectives simultaneously. This can imply knowledge in itself: knowledge of history, of how to make gardens grow well, of making pigs become plenty. But it also describes their ability of 'foreseeing the road' and discovering sorcery, and furthermore of being able to talk 'strongly' and persuasively about how things and issues relate to each other.[21] Skill in oratory, of course, clearly relates to this ability for seeing things from a different perspective and 'turning them around'. This is a crucial resource in claims in rights and land (see also Lindstrom 1984). All these things mentioned are evidence of power, and power can of course generate a wide variety of leaders and personalities – on the surface of things recognisable as big men or great men and sometimes taking even chiefly proportions. A central idiom in all of this is 'to be on top of things', or 'to stand up high' (*besese*) concretely manifested in climbing up ladders during status ceremonies, and I have therefore chosen to call Ambrym prominent men 'high men'. Like the concepts of 'great man' and 'big men' this is a relative term, in terms of how high one is. The term of address for a high man is *jafo*, and significantly this is used to address men of high rank as well as men in certain relationships of kinship. It is a term used for in-laws, as well as a term for addressing strangers and the 'white man'. It is hence a term of respect, setting up the other party as momentarily higher than oneself.

Ni-Vanuatu, like other Melanesians, have come to use the expression of 'chief' to characterise their leaders in Bislama.[22] This reflects the point raised by several authors (Deacon 1934a; Layard 1942; Allen 1984a) that there were in northern Vanuatu no clearly defined leader figures before

the introduction of 'assessors' and chiefly titles by the colonial government. I think my further material will also illustrate that the Ambrym high men of today, or even men appointed to be chiefs, do not explicitly consider themselves to be leaders *over someone*. That would immediately cause envy and argument and would lead to disruption. Much akin to the chiefs described by Clastres who can never assert political power or dominance (see Clastres 1987), these high men are humble men, who neither assemble wealth for themselves nor have any power of instructing other people what to do. They have respect, however, and they have influence and responsibilities in the community.

I will be reflecting in particular on the totalising abilities of the high men of North Ambrym. I think this ability of both big men and great men, maybe all leaderfigures of Melanesia – to stand above, to look down on social process, and to turn perspectives around – has been underestimated as a regional characteristic. I will consider this ability and reflect about the power of meeting with the colonial apparatus and handing over information to anthropologists. I think there is something regionally specific about the act of drawing a kinship diagram in the sand to represent one's own society to the anthropologist, or for that matter any deliverance of information to colonial officers or missionaries. Any such deliverance in itself represents a complex process of objectification and externalisation, but when dealing with societies of the kinds Godelier has called great-man and big-man societies, we have maybe to reflect more on this process and the power of the handover itself. I believe that to account for the role of high men we have to give a prominent place to their ability to position themselves as representatives of social creation. I think that beside the *mana*-like activities that bestow power on high men, it is the importance of relative social positioning that Ambrym people value the most when accounting for power. What is at issue is the power of creating society.

The Chapters

The outline of this book will follow Malinowski's demands for ethnographic holism and through its course it will describe different aspects of Ambrym society that share a common motif of productive display. In Chapter 2 we will be introduced to the whole debate over Ambrym kinship and marriage, in order to ponder about Bernard Deacon's informant's ability to draw kinship as a sand drawing. In Chapter 3 we follow how totalisation becomes a key feature when trying to understanding the shifting perspectives on kinship that North Ambrym social life presents us with. In Chapter 4 we move more specifically into a theory of production and follow how marriage relations are constructed as being productive for the agnatically structured *buluim* and the growth of the male genealogy. A motif of

circulation and spiralling emerges as a central productive idiom. In Chapter 5 we move up the hill to the sphere of gardening and specifically the production of yams. We see here the formulation of a similar productive technology based on the spiral form that constitutes male products and persuasive metaphors for a specifically all-male ideology. This is again followed into the realm of the male ritual hierarchy and the production of men and other male products in an enchanted technology that can continually be harvested and divested of its products. In Chapter 6 we move from the realm of production into the realm of exchange, only to find out that exchange itself is significantly part of production also. In this chapter as well as in the next, special attention is given to the way ceremonies in North Ambrym are about creating agency and intentionality in persons by casting exchange also in the perspective of growth. Whereas Chapter 6 deals mostly with boys' initiation, Chapter 7 picks up on the same tendencies in ceremonies of death. In Chapter 8 we draw together the impressions from these two chapters, and further explore the language and conceptualisation of exchange. In this chapter we also get a glimpse of how the ceremonial orders relate to cashcropping and the logic of money. This brings us in the final chapter to consider the findings concerning the category of society in North Ambrym, and as a case in point to address how social life in North Ambrym presents itself with attitudes about the gift. Thirdness and gift emerge as related phenomena – both being explicitly upheld as constitutive of Ambrym sociality while periodically being denied – in what is seen as a play with perspectives.

The book will thus lead the reader around in a spiral movement, as if we were planting poles in the ground for each chapter, starting as we have now seen with the planting of seeds in the anthropological nursery of the first chapter, leading the argument on to kinship as the first pole, the relations with mother's kin as second pole, marriage as third pole, yam gardening as fourth pole, boys' initiation as fifth pole, mortuary ceremonies as sixth pole, the language of exchange as last pole and then coming back full circle in Chapter 9 – in time for harvest – to further explore the substance of the plant that has been tended throughout the book: an Ambrym concept of society.

Notes

1. The concept of society and its reduction in social science has been discussed in Ingold (1996) and more recently in Kapferer (2005).
2. This drum and a smaller one are now on exhibition in the University of Bergen.
3. There is one concept that covers all these capacities of being 'strong on the senses'; *mokor,* which describes strong colours, good smell (*bon mokor*) and that also relates to the concept of noise and drumming (*kor*).
4. As the pig's tusk is an ossification and a metonym of the social processes that cause the growth of the pig.

5. By intentionality I simply imply the way that consciousnesses are directed towards certain things and motions; and that 'every consciousness is a consciousness *of* …' (see Riceur 1967: 8). This 'directedness' of consciousness is not a concept of motivation or interest, but merely a way of talking about how people fix their consciousness on certain things in a motion of engaging with them.

6. The material that I present here is mostly collected around the district of Lihor on the northwest coast of Ambrym; and in my document search in libraries I have mostly been interested in this area. This district is of course culturally corresponding in many ways to the other areas of Ambrym, Vanuatu and Melanesia in ways that will become apparent. Populations in South and Southeast Ambrym do not often frequent the rest of the island, and both socially and linguistically have more in common with the island of Paama to the south. From the way people of the north talk about the people of the southeast there are significant differences regarding history, the role of the graded society, marriage practices and in what crops people can cultivate. Even though one can walk over to Southeast Ambrym from Ranon village, across the volcanic plateau, in one day, people very rarely do this. There are few bonds of kinship between the two regions and the two languages are so different that it is hard to communicate between them.

7. There are in all around 105 distinct vernacular languages in Vanuatu, giving it the highest language density in the world. All these languages belong to the Austronesian language family and to the same Oceanic subgroup. Therefore the languages of Vanuatu are still much more uniform than those of New Guinea or the Solomon Islands. The major break between the languages in Vanuatu is that between the south and north (see Crowley 1990; Lynch and Crowley 2001).

8. Judging by the recent response to my work from Mary Patterson (2006), there is an aspect in the anthropological practice of also adopting these features of kastom and to essentialise one's own field material as particularly authentic.

9. As in Michael Allen's contribution to Herdt's Ritualized homosexuality in Melanesia (Allen 1984), and Strathern's use of Rubinstein's material about intellectual property from Malo Island and Jolly's work on migrant labour and place in *The gender of the gift* (Strathern 1988; see also Jolly 1992).

10. A growing number of journal articles is now reaching to fill some of the gaps in important comparative issues, see, M. Patterson for Ambrym (2002), J. Taylor for Pentecost (2005), C. Mondragon for Torres Islands (2004), J. DeLannoy for Malekula (2005), A. Eriksen for Ambrym (2005), H. Geismar for the market of art (2005).

11. Each household has a special wooden platter for making breadfruit pudding, called *wowo*. It is made simply by beating cooked breadfruit and covering the big platter with the resulting pudding. The platter, called *sije*, is often shaped like a turtle standing on its four feet. It is one of the few possessions that follow the household through the generations. Metaphorically, *langlang sije*, literally meaning 'many platters', is an expression of generations; building up on top of each other.

12. This pig killing (*taoboan*) went on for so long that a renowned chief of Fanla village is reported to have commented 'Here you are going on with your endless pig-killing, and that is good for you, but the rest of us are ready to go to sleep'.

13. Already at this point in the story people start to laugh. *Kene-* itself a swearing word, translatable as 'cunt of-'. *Bon kenem* – the smell of your cunt – is pretty strong swearing and if not part of a joke it is an offence.

14. This woman has an ambivalent position with regard to the father and son here. *Tubiung wehen* (MBD, FMM) is the potential mother-in-law for a man, and his request to her for fire is also metaphorically a request for marrying her daughter.

15. We can see this form of assymetric comparison in Iteanu's paper (2007) – the type of comparison that Dumont makes between hierarchy in India and individualism in Europe. These are concepts that are not represented in indigenous thought or

reducible to their respective closed contexts, but that gain their importance *through* comparison.

16. The legacy of thinking through models of exchange has, however, been strong. One of the well-known examples of this is *The Rope of Moka* by Andrew Strathern (1971). Here Strathern looks at the exchange of shells and pigs as an integrating social process – 'both as an institution linking groups together in alliances and as a means whereby men try to maximise their social status' (1971: xii). This was only one among many studies from this region that focused on exchange and the political leadership coming out of the so-called Big Man role (see also Schwimmer 1973; Sillitoe 1979; Feil 1984). This literature seems to be based on taking the idea from Lévi-Strauss of marriage as alliance building, combined with the typology of restricted and generalised exchange from his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, but more or less without his explicit idea about society as an imaginary totality of signs; a system of communication rather than a sum of exchange-relations (Lévi-Strauss 1949). The premise in these types of studies is that you only need two parties to create society, and inversely that society emerges as a result of the interaction of dyads.

17. This issue has also recently come up in the discussions about Mauss (see Derrida 1992; James and Allen 1998). Gofman has recently pointed out that however useful Mauss's concept of 'total social fact' has been, it remained in his essay on the gift ambiguous and untheoretical (Gofman 1998).

18. Akin to Damon's perspective on the kula, Parry has suggested that the Maori *hau* represented the idea that reciprocity itself was productive, a self-evident fact among the Maori, and that gifts where the outcomes of such productive relationships (see Parry 1986: 390).

19. I here follow the argument of Sahlins (1972) and his reanalysis of Best's material from New Zealand.

20. It is therefore a possible misunderstanding of Strathern's 'relation' to use Gell's 'strathernograms', where the relation figures as a middle term between persons (Gell 1999: 36). Dumont's 'encompassment of the contrary' (see Dumont 1980) seems closer to the ethnographic reality of the relation here, and I will come back to this in the final chapter.

21. These aspects of power probably resemble other forms of power in Melanesia, at least they are reminiscent of the *mana* concept (see Keesing 1984).

22. From Murray's diary written in 1887 in Ambrym we see that the high men around Ranon already at that point spoke about themselves as 'chiefs' in Pidgin. I suspect this form arose under influence of traders and missionaries who very generally spoke about leaders of all kinds as chiefs (see also Lindstrom 1981; 1997; Allen 1984a). Even though the European concept of chief was adopted it was assimilated to stand for various types of leaders, and in all the villages and hamlets that Murray visited there were actually several chiefs (Murray 1887). Another missionary who visited Fanla village around 1900 even described their leaders as 'kings', maybe influenced by one of the men who called himself Pharao (Frater 1922). If we consider the situation that Murray described from 1887, we realise that leadership was spread out among a handful of men. Some men were highly graded in the graded society, some were accused of sorcery attacks, some knew magic, some installed themselves as peace negotiators, and some took it upon themselves to explain things to Murray. They stood out from their hamlets or villages and, in Murray's descriptions at least, represented special forms of agency.