

Keeping Options Open: Copra and Fish in Rural Vanuatu

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Coconuts are so much a part of South Pacific life that palms and islands just seem to go together. Throughout the Pacific, island after island offers swaying palms and sandy beaches, scenes that are remarkably uniform from place to place and that have changed little over the past fifty years. Across the Pacific, the ways in which islanders have responded to a cash economy are also similar. Yet the introduction of cash-earning activities followed historical courses that were different in each region, each colony, and even each island.

This chapter examines, first, what happened with the introduction of dried coconut (copra) as the major cash crop in Vanuatu (the former New Hebrides). Why did islanders (ni-Vanuatu) transform subsistence gardens into small plantations? How did they keep open their options for earning cash from other sources, and for social security through traditional activities? I then move stepwise from the hamlet to the global level. I discuss the implications of rural islanders' copra production for the monocrop export economy that emerged in Vanuatu and describe the vulnerability of that economy to world market forces. Islanders' responses to a copra crisis in the early 1980s illustrate both their flexibility and their reluctance to become too dependent on a single cash crop in times of uncertainty. Finally, the chapter evaluates a recent attempt to diversify the economy through the development of village fisheries in terms of the following question: Could fishing today have an impact on the rural islander's mode of production comparable to that of copra half a century ago? The development program's impact on women is of particular interest.

Lockwood, V; Harding, T.G. and Wallace, B. J. ^(eds) 1993
Contemporary Pacific Societies: Studies in
Development and Change. Prentice Hall, New Jersey. 171

RURAL ISLANDERS AND COPRA PRODUCTION

Through the sandalwood trade in the first half of the nineteenth century and the labor trade in the second half, the people of Vanuatu became familiar with a wide range of new goods and practices. Commercial quantities of sandalwood were found between 1825 and the 1840s in the southern part of the archipelago, attracting traders who were soon followed by missionaries (Brookes 1969). Despite the traders' reputed ruthlessness, the islanders were not easily intimidated. They were very selective about what they would accept in trade (Shineberg 1967). Nor did they take kindly to the first missionaries. The London Missionary Society representative John Williams, his assistant, and three Samoan teachers were martyred as soon as they landed on Erromanga in 1839. Nevertheless, increased missionary activity on the part of Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics brought Christianity to most of the islands by the end of the nineteenth century.

Along with the missionaries and traders came new goods. Islanders at first sought such items as fishhooks and calico; later they also wanted tobacco, knives, other metal tools, muskets, and ammunition. New tools and such items as cooking pots and cloth changed the way of life in the islands, reducing the amount of time spent on daily tasks and increasing mortality in armed conflict. Islanders continued to cultivate swidden gardens and, by and large, to provide for their own subsistence; but they began to sell their labor as well as their resources, such as sandalwood, specifically to obtain these new goods.

Those with access to the white men's goods had a new source of power. Part of that power consisted of increased knowledge of the world beyond the village. Anglican missionaries brought young men from Vanuatu to New Zealand, and later to Norfolk Island, to attend college. In 1847, sixty-five Vanuatu men were recruited to work in Australia, the first of thousands to participate in what became known as the Labor Trade. Most went to Queensland, where the sugar industry needed a steady supply of cheap, docile labor. The abuses of recruiting ships, also known as "blackbirders," are well known and the inadequacy of attempts to regulate the trade helped to end recruiting by the turn of the century.¹ In some instances, islanders were kidnapped and abused, but other men—and in smaller numbers women—signed on willingly.

The reasons for going to Queensland often had to do with a desire for adventure and for the goods that were offered in payment for one's labor. As in the days of the sandalwood trade, islanders' participation in the labor trade (at least insofar as that participation was voluntary) was linked to consumption goals. Laborers wanted the trunk filled with cloth and, at times during the trade, a musket that was their due at the end of a contract. Leaders extracted goods from the less powerful, returned laborers, and again as with sandalwood, islanders quickly established the best terms of trade that they could. There were clear preferences concerning destinations as well as trade goods.

Plantations within Vanuatu, compared to those in Australia or even Fiji, were never popular destinations with islanders. Until the 1880s, foreigners cultivated relatively little land in the archipelago. During the American Civil War, planters grew cotton for British markets. After 1880, coconuts became the main crop, supplemented by cocoa and coffee in some areas. During this period, French interests acquired large landholdings in the islands. Conflict between the British and French led to the establishment of the Condominium of the New Hebrides, formalized by the Protocol of 1914. This was an unusual and

inefficient form of colonialism whereby France and Britain jointly administered the islands. Paired institutions proliferated under the Condominium, including two currencies, two health care systems, and two police forces.

The requirement that both resident commissioners had to agree on everything that was done ensured that very little was accomplished and that everything took a great deal of time. The missions had limited funds and manpower to provide social services, but, until the 1950s, they ran the only systems of health care and education in the islands. Thus, it was in everyone's interest that the islanders continue to provide for their own social security, even if they were urged to abandon those aspects of customary behavior deemed to be at odds with their new Christian lives. In many places, the islanders kept alive their customary systems of land tenure, reciprocity, ceremonial exchange, kinship and traditional medicine, and so could attend to their own well-being. This they did, even developing their own legal systems in some islands (see Chapter 4, "The Law of the State and the State of the Law in Vanuatu," by William Rodman, in this volume), and maintaining a deep-rooted sense of their fundamental autonomy that shrugged off the rivalries of the British and French, or *tufala gavman*, as a white men's problem.

During the first half of the twentieth century, ni-Vanuatu became more deeply involved in the market economy. They began to produce their own copra and form small trading companies. Experience gained working on white men's plantations, along with encouragement from missionaries and traders, led ni-Vanuatu to start their own small coconut plantations on customary landholdings in the outer islands where large plantations had not been established. Missionaries encouraged coconut production as part of their efforts to introduce a work ethic and to provide islanders with a source of cash with which to purchase cloth and other Western goods. Traders encouraged rural coconut production to transform islanders into both suppliers of copra and consumers of trade store goods. They also provided the market linkages essential to local copra production.

People planted coconuts in lowland gardens, so that once the food crop had been harvested, the palms could continue to grow in the abandoned garden. As more people followed this practice, moving from garden to garden year by year and sometimes clearing larger tracts of land expressly for plantations, some areas of Vanuatu were given over entirely to coconuts. A canopy of coconut palms rising from hundreds of smallholder plots came to cover entire coastal plains.

Islanders sold their coconut meat to traders who lived locally or who dealt from ships. At first, raw coconut meat was sold, but ni-Vanuatu soon learned to dry the coconut flesh, turning it into copra and earning a higher price for their product. The technology was simple. Minimum requirements were an ax to split the coconuts and a curved metal blade to scoop out the meat. The coconut could then be dried in the sun or smoke-dried on a "bed" made of local timber and a wire-mesh screen. Copra production fit easily into the rhythm of rural life as a part-time activity to pursue when one wanted cash.

By 1930, rural smallholders produced about one-sixth of all copra exported from the country (in 1982, they produced three-quarters of all copra exports). As their own plantations grew and islanders were able to gain the Western goods they wanted through labor on their own plantations, they were less and less willing to work on white men's plantations, except when the copra price was low; but, of course, when the copra price

was low, white planters were reluctant to hire more labor. In times of prosperity, ni-Vanuatu began to employ other islanders as plantation labor.² Some started their own trading enterprises with copra profits and did well because they could live more cheaply than white traders and could therefore undercut their prices

Chiefs often took the lead in adopting cash cropping in Vanuatu, as elsewhere in Melanesia (Finney 1973). In Longana (E. Ambae), the part of Vanuatu with which I am most familiar, chiefs were feared and respected as warriors and probable sorcerers before pacification in the 1930s (M. Rodman 1983).³ The aura of this power over life and death seems to have remained throughout their lifetimes, despite the end of warfare. They used the communal labor of their many wives and the followers who had lived under their protection to clear large tracts of bush for coconut plantations. Much of this land was brought into coconut production on the basis of what other Longanans recognized, even in the 1940s, to be flimsy land claims, but few were willing to protest their leaders' actions. In this way, a handful of men came to control far more plantation land than others. These were the men described as "masters of tradition" (Rodman 1987b). They were able to use their mastery of the graded society (based on pig exchanges) and their traditional knowledge of kinship, land tenure, and other customary domains to dominate the new sphere of cash-cropping coconuts. Often, their heirs have been able to keep these large holdings intact. In 1979, 5 percent of the landholders controlled 31 percent of the land planted in coconuts. Their annual incomes from copra averaged \$9,500 (Australian), while overall the average copra income per landholder was only A\$2,300.

Income differences are one sign of increasing social differentiation in Longana. Wealthier landholders employ fellow islanders as wage laborers. But differentiation has not proceeded very far for several reasons. First, tradition has masked new forms of inequality, making wealthy landholders appear to be nothing more than exemplars of a customary model of success. Second, redistribution of wealth in the form of pigs and mats exchanged ceremonially, and both money and business opportunities provided for kinsmen, have helped to level income inequalities. Third, there have been few ways for the rich to get richer in Longana. Development projects and investment opportunities were rare before independence and are only beginning now to reach the rural areas (M. Rodman 1987b).

The Domestic Mode of Production

Today, a domestic form of production rather than a communal or village mode predominates in much of Vanuatu. In Longana, the household is the basic unit of both copra and subsistence production. Now that plural marriage is no longer practiced, a husband and wife are the nucleus of the household, with dependent children and/or parents included for some periods of the domestic cycle. A healthy adult male could produce a metric ton of copra (1,000 kilograms) in about nine days. A husband and wife working together with some help from children or older people could expect to make a ton of copra in three or four days.

While the labor time involved in producing a ton of copra is predictable, the price is not, even with the price stabilization provided in recent years by the Vanuatu Commodities Marketing Board. For example, in July 1987, a ton of copra sold for A\$320. One year earlier, it was worth half that amount. Consequently, rural islanders work to achieve particular targets or goals. Instead of making copra to make money, small producers make

copra to buy things. Notably, the producers in my sample (sixty-eight people) remembered how much they had produced in terms of the specific reason they had made the copra, such as to buy a sewing machine, pay school fees, or finance a wedding.

Most islanders remain intermittent copra producers, following a well-documented "targeting pattern" of making copra to achieve specific consumption goals (Brookfield with Hart 1971:262; Bollard 1978:326; M. Rodman 1987b). The only Longanans who make copra regularly are a few entrepreneurs who have inherited larger plantations (often established by chiefs in the 1930s and 1940s). Most people cut copra when they need money, and otherwise tend their pigs, their gardens, and their family obligations. When they make copra, they make enough to achieve a particular consumption goal.

In summary, by the 1930s, islanders had learned to produce their own copra and to trade in the Western economy to which they had been introduced first by sandalwood traders, then missionaries, planters, labor recruiters, and finally by the colonial Condominium. The people of Vanuatu took active roles as participants in these new marketplaces. They insisted on particular goods, particular destinations as laborers, and other terms of trade. The most powerful took particular advantage of the goods, and especially the guns, that Westerners brought. These men also took advantage of local traditions to bring large areas of land under coconut production, land to which other less-powerful people also had claims that they feared to press. Except for those among the heirs of these large landholders who have become entrepreneurs and regularly harvest their coconuts, most islanders are intermittent copra producers. Coconuts have become an important part of the domestic economy, alternating with, but not replacing, subsistence gardening and pig husbandry. Coconuts provide a ready source of cash that supplements the social security islanders obtain through customary exchanges and kinship networks. Coconuts, then, offer one option among other more traditional ones for islanders to ensure their self-reliance.

VANUATU COPRA IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Vanuatu's domestic export earnings from copra have ranged from 46 percent of total exports for the decade 1967-1977 to 76 percent in 1981. Clearly, copra exports dominate the country's economy, a dependence that has made the government vulnerable in bargaining with copra buyers overseas. Revenue earned from copra fluctuates due to climatic conditions, such as cyclones and drought, but erratic movements in the world price of copra account for most of the variation in domestic export income. Vanuatu's other major exports include cocoa and coffee, commodities whose price variations often coincide with those of copra. Moreover, the quantity of copra exported by the country is insignificant on the world market. In contrast to Vanuatu's 1981 copra exports of about forty thousand tons, the Philippines produces over two million tons of copra annually, or 85 percent of the world's coconut product exports. The economy of Vanuatu is at the mercy of a market it can scarcely influence, much less control.

The average rural Vanuatu family has 3 hectares under coconuts with annual yields of only 600 to 700 kilograms of copra per hectare.⁴ Until the introduction of a marketing board in 1982, there was no government control over production and little regulation of trading. What has been described elsewhere as the "chain of copra" (see M. Rodman

1987b) passed most of the marketing costs back to the rural producer. The "beach price" he or she received for a bag of copra was relatively unresponsive to international price increases and more responsive to a falling market. Islanders responded to instability by withdrawing from copra production when the prices were very low. They could do this because coconut palms are hardy and require minimal attention (Brookfield 1971:148). Small producers also tended to work toward cash targets, so that they might actually sell less copra at higher prices.

Historically, France purchased as much as 90 percent of Vanuatu's copra exports because copra from the ex-colony enjoyed duty-free entry. But France and northern European copra buyers discounted the price paid for Vanuatu copra because of the poor quality of the product. The economist J.S.G. Wilson recognized the precariousness of the archipelago's copra market position in his 1966 survey:

If there were no import duty and New Hebrides copra was offered at the same price as foreign copra, the importers in Marseilles would tend to prefer foreign copra, because on the whole it is of rather better quality. It has only been because of its relative price advantage that New Hebrides copra has been able to hold its own for so long....(Wilson 1966:101)

In the late 1970s, demand for copra began to decline markedly. A general destabilization of the soft edible-oils market followed the commodities boom of 1972-1974 (FAO 1982:12). The subsequent fluctuation in world prices for soybeans, which dominate the edible-oils market, together with a slowdown in the growth rate of demand for tropical oils, limited the marketability of low-quality coconut oils. Then, in 1980, vegetable-oil prices plummeted due to higher output, the world recession, and the U.S. embargo on food sales to the Soviet Union associated with the war in Afghanistan. The Soviet grain embargo glutted the soybean market and affected coconut oil prices for the entire year (Sacerdoti 1982:45).

Given Vanuatu's traditional dependence on copra sales to France, the closing of a single, antiquated, and unprofitable copra crushing mill in Marseilles was enough to precipitate a national crisis in the islands. In February 1981, the mill that purchased most of Vanuatu's copra exports ceased operations. The bulk of Vanuatu's copra then was sent to Unilever mills in Germany that previously had processed only about 3 percent of the country's copra. But Unilever pronounced the copra quality unacceptable; the June shipment, for example, contained "pieces of plastic, timber, and string as well as burnt and wet copra" (*TamTam* 1981:1). Vanuatu was given six months to improve the quality of its copra or lose its one remaining market for the export commodity on which the country's economy depended. As Prime Minister Lini put it, "If copra producers do not succeed in improving the quality of their copra by then, Vanuatu's prospects of future copra exports are almost nil" (*TamTam* 1982:1).

Initially, the Prime Minister's exhortations had little effect. Producers in the islands were fearful that they could not make acceptable copra, so rather than wasting their efforts producing an unsalable product people simply stopped making copra. This response was identical to rural smallholders' responses to very low prices in the past when an inadequate return on the investment of labor led to a cessation of cash crop production in favor of subsistence production, despite an almost total absence of alternative sources of cash.

The copra quality crisis of 1981-1982 took Vanuatu by surprise. Planners knew that world demand for copra had declined by about 10 percent annually for the preceding decade (FAO 1983:165), but postindependence attempts to diversify the export economy had only begun, and structures for improving both the quality of copra and the vertical integration of the copra market were only in the planning stages in 1981. Reduced to dealing with a solitary and skeptical buyer, Vanuatu had no choice but to show a determination to improve the quality of its product. This meant finding a way to motivate rural producers both to resume making copra and to make it better.

A media campaign with a great deal of radio time was the core of the government's plan. The work of agricultural staff supplemented the media campaign in areas producing the worst copra. The goal was to achieve an immediate improvement in copra quality simply by eliminating practices that produce an unacceptable product (such as too hot a fire or too short a drying period). "Kopra Man" t-shirts and comic books helped to convince smallholders that they could produce good-quality copra without making major changes in the production process.

The process of educating rural copra growers was tricky. They often responded to uncertainty by withdrawing from the market, and the uncertainty during this crisis was great. Patient, repetitive explanation in a context of respect for rural people was important. The *Kopra Man* comic book encapsulated a Vanuatu style of knowledge transmission in an effective literary form. *Kopra Man's* appearance was youthful, but his moustache suggested a stylish maturity. His facial expression was nonthreatening, his eyes and mouth had a friendly expression, and the set of his brows was neutral. *Kopra Man* was willing to answer the comic-book farmers' questions. He did not deliver an unsolicited lecture on agricultural techniques. The problem of copra quality, as presented in the comic, lay not with the producer but with the use of confusing technical terms concerning copra quality. The assumption was that once the terms were clearly understood, the islanders would be able to recognize—and therefore control—the quality of the product.

The information phase of the copra-improvement scheme was successful in raising the standard of Vanuatu smoke-dried copra and in overcoming the initial withdrawal of smallholders from copra production. By April 1982, agricultural officers noted an improvement in copra quality due simply to slower and more complete drying over smaller fires, better storage, rejection of sprouted coconuts, an improvement in general cleanliness, and cessation of the practice of ramming sacks of dried copra to increase the bag-weight.

Although rural farmers were willing and able to improve production techniques in a crisis situation, price incentive would be crucial to the long-term improvement of copra quality. A problem facing planners in Vanuatu is that the country must export a higher-quality product just to maintain its market. The few transnational corporations who buy copra, such as Unilever, can afford to be increasingly selective as the demand for coconut oil drops steadily relative to other edible oils, and supplies remain fairly constant.

As essential as the production of good copra is to the Vanuatu economy, the difference between world prices for high- and low-grade copra is too small to make conversion to hot-air drying economical for Vanuatu producers. Deep subsidies would be necessary to raise the standard of production. Even then, there is no guarantee of a secure position vis-à-vis the transnationals. In sum, the copra crisis of 1981-1982 is simply a dramatic illustration of a chronic condition, highlighting the economic vulnerability that

dependence on copra as a predominant export has produced. The crisis contributed to the national government's determination to diversify the economy. Deep-water, artisanal fishing is one such attempt at diversification that began at the time of the copra quality crisis.

DIVERSIFYING THE COPRA ECONOMY: VILLAGE FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT

The ocean is an obvious resource for Vanuatu to develop in efforts to diversify the monocrop coconut economy. The land area of the archipelago is small (less than 14,000 square kilometers) compared to territorial waters that span 680,000 square kilometers of sea (Ridings 1983). In 1976, offshore resources began to assume new importance when the South Pacific forum introduced 200-mile nautical zones.⁵ The United Nations sanctioned 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zones in 1982 (Bergin 1983:20-21; *Asia Yearbook* 1984:112). Vanuatu Islanders are not known for their maritime orientation, perhaps because many lived in the interiors of the larger islands prior to pacification. Nevertheless, a recent survey found that ni-Vanuatu depend considerably on the sea for food. About half of the rural households in Vanuatu regularly take some of their food from the sea. The total annual catch of finfish and shellfish was estimated to be 2,403 tons in 1985 (David 1985:6). More than three-quarters of this total was for subsistence. Two-thirds of these fish and shellfish were found within the reef, where a large variety of seafood is relatively easy to catch. Outside the reef the variety of fish is much less and there are few shellfish.⁶

My research in Port Olry (Santo Island) indicated that households eat fresh fish at about three evening meals a week. Ample supplies of fish were part of the diet, and this had been the case long before the introduction of fisheries development schemes. On the Longana (Ambae) coast, the consumption of fresh fish from within the reef is low by comparison with Port Olry. Sea crabs or reef fish are sometimes featured at a feast, and a few households eat fresh fish often, but in contrast to Port Olry, fresh fish is not common in the Longana diet.

In 1982, Port Olry became host to one of the first projects in the Village Fisheries Development Program (VFDP). I conducted an evaluation of this project in 1985 for the Canadian volunteer organization CUSO,⁷ and later wrote a book about this project and others in the group (M. Rodman 1986, 1989). The expressed intent of the VFDP as a whole was (1) to meet demands for fish in both urban and rural areas and to substitute progressively for imported tinned fish; (2) to generate employment and income in the rural areas; and (3) to provide an important source of protein (Vanuatu 1984:117). The Port Olry project grew into one of the program's largest. By 1985, it consisted of fifteen privately owned fishing boats and a fish-buying association with a cold room. A much smaller VFDP project began in 1983 in Longana. It involved a single, 8-meter, catamaran fishing boat. Both projects had the assistance of volunteers from CUSO, a Canadian nongovernment organization, for the first two years. By 1985, nearly one hundred VFDP projects were scattered throughout Vanuatu. Most were similar to the Longana project in that they were very small. And most involved only men.

Women's options regarding fisheries development are limited, in any case, by the rarity with which women traditionally fish from canoes in many parts of Vanuatu. Most often, women fish and glean within the reefs, and fishing from boats in deep water is men's work, where it is done at all. But, as elsewhere, Vanuatu women are involved in fish

marketing. In this area they, like the men, seek to keep their options open and pursue strategies of self-reliance through diversification of productive activities. And, of course, they have been affected as consumers of fish.

In fact, a woman was the prime mover behind the establishment of a fishing association in Port Olry. Women were both the biggest beneficiaries and the biggest losers in this fishing project, as this story of the strong woman behind the fishing association reveals. In 1985, Celia Sarsom was forty-four years old, and she was probably the most influential person in the village, although she held no office. Celia's style was to be tough, direct, and outspoken. But in public, she conformed to local expectations of feminine behavior. She dressed like the other women in bright-colored Mother Hubbard dresses. She sat with the other women on the fringes of social gatherings.

Celia's father had been the village chief when she first considered the idea of starting a new fishing association. It seemed a risky undertaking, partly because her father's reputation had foundered on an earlier community venture. Subsequently, the leader of a rival faction in the village had attempted to establish a fishing association, but participants felt that the organizer was absconding with their money and the enterprise failed. Still, the possibility of building up a viable fishing business intrigued Celia.

In 1980, she and her husband began buying fish to sell at the town market. Soon there were times when she had more fish than she could chill. The fish-marketing business was bigger than she had expected.

In February 1982, Celia was approached at the market by a white man, a Canadian CUSO volunteer whose job was to organize village fisheries development in the north of Vanuatu. Gradually, the Canadian and Celia began to make plans to start a fish-marketing association in the village. The Canadian was careful to be sure that Celia felt the local people really wanted such an association. And he was careful to point out what the association might cost her personally. He told Celia that a new fishing association would drive her out of business. She would no longer be able to sell fresh or frozen fish at the market because, first, the association would handle all the fish from the village and, second, a fish market with proper cold storage in town would mean that for health reasons, market women would no longer be allowed to sell fresh fish.

He remembers Celia's response well because it surprised him. "That's great!" she said, "I don't need that work. I have more fish than I can handle, and I have more than enough other business." She seemed quite happy to put herself out of a job, but in a way she was only putting the other women who sold fish at the market out of work, for she immediately invested her own money and time in organizing the fishing association.

Just as the Canadian volunteer saw potential in village fishermen, Celia quickly recognized the potential benefit to her family in organizing the fishing association as a village fisheries development project. First, she knew she would have the government and the expertise of Canadian fishermen on her side. Second, as a woman, she could deal more directly with a white Canadian male than with Melanesian men in her village. Third, she could put the Canadian and the Vanuatu fisheries department between herself and the rival faction in the village, and hopefully avoid drawing a connection in local peoples' minds between this venture and the previous fishing association fiascos. Fourth, she was able to mediate the local impact of both CUSO and the Fisheries Department and serve

as the mouthpiece for local opinion on which the outsiders depended. Finally, she encouraged the career of a close male relative who became manager of the association when the CUSO volunteer returned to Canada at the end of his contract.

Clearly, one woman benefited greatly from the fishing project—Celia. Just as clearly, the other market women suffered. But, less obviously, another category of women who had the least to begin with has quietly benefited. These are the 14 percent of the households in the village (population six hundred) headed by single women. Unless there is a boy in the household big enough to catch fish for the family, these women could only depend on the generosity of others who might share their catch of deep water fish. Single women who are household heads have little money, and they recognize that fresh fish offers good food value for a reasonable price (about A\$1 per kilogram). So the fishing association became a convenient, regular source of fresh fish that especially helped these women. Although the market women who could no longer sell fresh fish suffered in the short run from the project, their options were not ultimately curtailed. They simply began to prepare cooked fish which they could still sell legally at the market.

The expectation behind this small-scale fisheries development program was that participants would at least go fishing regularly, if not full-time, and that they would sell their catch either locally, as in the Longana case, or to two urban fish markets, as in the case of the Port Olry fishing association. The program sought at least to extend the depth and breadth of islanders' participation in the cash economy. It sought to develop domestic markets for fish, with the possibility of building an export market, as part of a long-range plan to achieve national self-reliance.

The Fisheries Department of the Vanuatu government intended for the VFDP to prepare the way for a second generation of commercial fishermen. These islanders would fish full-time in 10-meter, diesel-powered boats, for which larger loans obviously would be necessary. Greater indebtedness would require the captain to fish regularly and productively. Such fishermen would have little time for gardening or making copra. Instead, they would become participants in a capitalist mode of production.

For many reasons, this has yet to happen. So long as islanders retain relatively easy access to gardens and coconuts, they are not compelled to sell their labor on a full-time basis, as either crew members or captains. The Vanuatu state so far has made little effort to impose constraints that would force people to enter a capitalist mode. It is clear that the state lacks the resources to provide the social services that would be necessary if capitalism supplanted the domestic mode of production, and social reproduction in rural areas. The collection of a head tax has a long history of rural opposition, as have attempts to alienate or even register titles to land. Customary land tenure is enshrined in the constitution, and the idea of someone having no access to land remains anathema. For all of these reasons, the government has not used, nor could it use, a big stick to transform the mode of production in Vanuatu.

In addition, there are particular reasons why fishing has had little impact in this regard. Fisheries development so far has failed to achieve a transformation of the mode of production in Vanuatu partly because of problems with the program. First, the prototype of the larger fishing boats sank during maiden trials in 1985. Second, the extent of the resource remains uncertain, and ongoing research indicates that 100 small projects may be the maximum that can be sustained, partly because of the slow maturation rate of

deep-water species. Third, problems associated with intermittent production, widely scattered projects, the expense of reliance on air freight, and the perishability of the product continue to inhibit the development of a marketing infrastructure. But, more fundamentally, the VFDP projects have yet to become viable businesses that can stand on their own without subsidies of various kinds. They remain imitations of real businesses, and they would not be financially viable even on paper were it not for government grants and loans, subsidized fuel, and "cargo"—that is, capital goods such as motors, freezers, and cold rooms provided as foreign aid to Vanuatu, especially by Japan. "Cargo" is often more available than staff and therefore becomes the "solution" to problems. A new motor may be easier to obtain than a mechanic, for example.

THE IMPACT OF COPRA AND COMMERCIAL FISHING COMPARED

Even without basic changes to the mode of production, might the VFDP at least have had an impact equivalent to that of the introduction of copra? Theoretically, the program's objectives could be met simply by extending participation in capitalist markets without other changes in the traditional economy. This was the way in which copra had earlier been incorporated. That is, if islanders could be motivated to fish on a frequent and regular basis, the program's goals could be met without fundamental changes to the domestic mode of production in the islands. People would still tend their gardens, raise their pigs, look after ceremonial and other social obligations, and make copra. They would simply add fishing to these options as they added copra a half-century or more in the past. But this would help to diversify the country's economy only if people who fished generated at least as much cash as their forgone copra incomes had generated, or if they took up fishing as a net addition to commercial activity, perhaps filling some of what had been "leisure time" in this way.

Commercial fishing has indeed been incorporated into the local economy, following the pattern established with cash-cropping coconuts—that is, a pattern of intermittent, targeted production for the market without participating in a capitalist mode of production. Like copra production, commercial fishing is intermittent, not only because there are alternate ways to earn money, but also because it competes with noncommercial demands on peoples' time. Villagers reserve time for subsistence gardening, leisure, social obligations, and recreation. The 1984 agricultural census found that Santo men spend 16 percent of their working time in their gardens and 31 percent in leisure activities. In fact, diversity seems to be valued for its own sake. In research I conducted on work, ni-Vanuatu ranked desk jobs among the most difficult because these jobs were seen to be the most monotonous. But diversity also is important to rural people because the state provides no pension, unemployment insurance, or the like for its citizens. Social security remains a matter of custom, informally looked after in the villages. Only by maintaining access to their means of production and reproduction—in other words, by maintaining a variety of potential sources of income, food, and social support—can rural islanders ensure continued self-reliance. Ironically, this strategy of individual self-reliance inhibits the achievement of national self-reliance and constrains capitalist development (M. Rodman 1987a).

Another similarity between fishing and copra—and another reason for intermittent participation in both activities—is the possibility of opting out. Islanders withdraw from fishing for the market in response to social and economic conditions in much the same way as they cease copra production when a low price or poor terms of trade reduce producer motivation. Elsewhere I have described some of the ways in which islanders, who have no control over the prices they receive for their copra, nevertheless control other terms of trade (Rodman 1987b). For example, on one occasion when Longana was completely out of gasoline, islanders refused to sell their copra until a ship brought them fuel in exchange. Most producers maintain an “exit option” (Hyden 1980), so that they can withdraw from one kind of commercial activity into another, or into gardening, when social or economic conditions make production for the market unattractive.

Islanders can use this exit option to gain bargaining power in commercial fishing in much the same way as they do in the context of copra production. For example, the fifteen fishing boats of Port Olry village have a reputation for “going on strike.” If they are unhappy with the manager, as was all too often the case in this project, which was beset with local political problems, or if the return to labor seems inadequate, Port Olry fishermen don’t stop fishing for food, but they do stop fishing for money. There, fishing boats have supplemented but not replaced outrigger canoes, of which twenty-nine were in use in October 1985. Most subsistence fishing continues to be done from canoes on a daily basis because these vessels are convenient and cost virtually nothing to operate. The availability of both fishing boats and canoes have provided village fishermen with new options to fish commercially or to feed the family. It is, however, a relatively minor option.

Despite similarities in the ways islanders have made commercial fishing part of their way of life, it remains an insignificant source of cash compared to copra. A range of activities compete with fishing for the time a producer devotes to earning an income. In Port Olry, alternate activities include copra and cocoa production, ten stores, sixteen truck-taxi businesses, market gardening, collecting and selling lobsters and coconut crabs, sales of pigs, and sales of cattle to the Luganville abattoir. The people of Port Olry (population approximately six hundred) earned an estimate total income of more than A\$500,000 in 1985, of which fish sales constituted about A\$18,000, a distant third as a source of income after copra (A\$331,000) and cattle (A\$34,500). All but three Port Olry fishermen earned more money from copra than they did from fish in 1985. At that time, one could earn A\$150 per week from copra. In comparison, those who sold fish averaged a mere \$5.68 per working week from these sales. Of the 79 men who sold fish to the association in my sample of 1,044 cases, only four earned incomes of more than A\$1000 per year from fish.

Why has the impact of fisheries development not been as great as that of copra a half-century earlier? The answers to this question also suggest what it would take for real diversification of the copra economy to occur, even without basic changes to the mode of production. One reason for the minimal impact of fisheries development is simple. Intermittent copra production has become so deeply a part of life in the islands that, so long as there is a market, no other commodity is likely to displace it as the main source of cash in rural areas. Islanders learned how to make copra on expatriate plantations before they planted their own commercial stands. There have been no such learning opportunities with deep-water handlining, except for the projects assisted by expatriate volunteers.

Moreover, the pattern of intermittent production characteristic of the island economy works better with coconuts. So does the pattern of allowing kin and affines access to plantation land that a chief controls. A neglected palm tree will survive longer than a neglected fishing boat or outboard motor. Lending a boat holds much greater risks to the owner than lending access to a plantation. Copra itself is less perishable than fish. Finally, it has usually been easy for islanders to find a buyer for their copra, although the price they receive may be very low, but markets for fish are less fully developed. Fishermen unable to sell all or part of their catch may be discouraged from continuing. This in turn means an unreliable supply for those attempting to develop fish markets. To a much greater extent, the copra market preceded smallholder production.

CONCLUSION

Since the introduction of copra production, rural islanders have had one foot somewhat tentatively in the capitalist marketplace and the other squarely in a lifestyle based on values and relationships that are very different from those underlying a capitalist way of life. They have participated in the cash economy mainly through small-scale copra production, although a variety of other activities offer alternative ways to earn money, and islanders have done so instrumentally, to reach limited target incomes oriented to specific consumption goals. Copra production historically was incorporated into the islanders' way of life on their own terms, as well as the terms dictated by the international and domestic market. Copra has remained an adjunct to an economy based on subsistence gardening and elaborate exchanges of mats and pigs. It has deepened islanders' ties to the cash economy, but it has not made the major changes in the domestic mode of production that would signal a transition to capitalism. By and large, people retain access to plantations and the land they need for gardening, even where the accretion of smallholdings into large plantations has been a legacy of warrior leaders. They have been able to do so partly because of the selectiveness for which islanders became known in the days of the sandalwood and labor trades. By opting out of copra production or by withholding copra from the market, islanders can affect terms of trade that are otherwise beyond their control.

However effective islanders' attempts are to manipulate terms of trade in copra locally, the country as a whole has virtually no influence on the international copra market. The copra-quality crisis of 1982 dramatically illustrated this dependence, and encouraged national efforts to diversify the monocrop economy. The Village Fisheries Development Program was one such strategy for diversification.

The results of the VFDP have been disappointing at the national level, in that it appears not to have increased the overall productive activity of the islanders. Commercial fishing has been incorporated as an intermittent activity, but not as a net increase to the cash economy. Working to earn money is still tied to specific consumption goals. Islanders use fish, as they have used copra, as a way to reach particular consumption targets. Thus, fishing projects have diversified the economy only minimally. So far, they have simply strengthened the subsistence sector and extended the options facing islanders who want some access to cash.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting my research in 1978–1979 as doctoral student, in 1982 as a postdoctoral fellow, and in 1985–1986 as an independent scholar. McMaster University and the University of Waterloo also provided funding for portions of this research, which I acknowledge with appreciation. As always, I am grateful to the people of Vanuatu for sharing their way of life with myself and my family.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Corris (1970) and Scarr (1967).
2. MacClancy (1981:88). See also W. Rodman (Chapter 4) for a description of current practices of employing local labor among Ambae smallholder plantation owners and analysis of the implications of this practice for social differentiation.
3. See W. Rodman (Chapter 4) for a discussion of our reasons for using the term *chief* rather than *bigman* to refer to men of wealth, rank, and influence.
4. Republic of Vanuatu, *First National Development Plan, 1982–1986*. Port Vila: National Planning Office, p. 128.
5. The Law of the Sea Convention held in April 1982 by the 3rd United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea further sanctioned 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zones for the South Pacific States, although the U.S. refused to sign this treaty (Bergin 1983:20–21; *Asia Yearbook* 1984:112). The data on Vanuatu's sea area come from Penelope Ridings (1983).
6. Etelidae are the most common species caught on the deep reef slopes of the tropical Pacific, comprising 62 percent of the fish caught in a study conducted in Vanuatu by ORSTOM. These are the snappers and *poulet fish*, of which *Etelis carbunculus*, *Etelis coruscans*, *Pristipomoides multidentis*, and *Pristipomoides flavipinnis* are the major species. The ORSTOM study estimated that the mean sustainable yield for fish at depths of 100–400 meters in Vanuatu is about 1 kilogram per hectare per year. Consequently, the mean sustainable yield for Vanuatu as a whole is less than 750 tons annually (Brouard and Grandperrin 1985). Thus one of the most fundamental constraints on capitalist development in this fishery is biological.
7. Until 1980, CUSO was an acronym for Canadian University Services Overseas. Since then, the organization, which serves as the primary placement agency for Canadian volunteers working in overseas development, has been known simply as CUSO. It has moved away from its association with universities and emphasized recruitment of more mature volunteers with considerable practical experience.