

CLASSIFYING THE MATERIAL

Food, Textiles and Status in North Vanuatu

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Abstract

The analytical category 'material culture', and in particular the ways in which different kinds of material culture are classified museologically, need critical examination in the light of specific ethnographic data. In this article, the categories 'food' and 'textiles' are considered in the context of status-alteration systems in east Ambae, Vanuatu. An analysis of the women's status-alteration system *huhuru*, reveals a categorical association between certain textiles and ritual food, which undercuts the distinction between these two object types as essentially different.

Key Words ◆ food ◆ material culture ◆ status ◆ textiles ◆ theory ◆ Vanuatu

The subject of my doctoral fieldwork was dictated by the Board of the Cultural Centre in the small Melanesian nation of Vanuatu. I had expressed an interest in working in Vanuatu, on a topic concerning women and material culture; they selected the place and the focus of my research. Specifically, they asked me to work on the north Vanuatu island of Ambae, and to study women's production and use of plaited pandanus textiles. My project was, in part, directed to training the Cultural Centre's women's culture project co-ordinator, Jean Tarisesei. Jean is herself from Ambae, and it was in her hamlet cluster, Lovonda, that I lived. This was in the east Ambae district known as Longana. Jean and I spent over a year in 1991–2 working on the Ambae project, documenting textiles in Longana, and walking around the island talking to women in all the other districts, both about their knowledge of textiles, and (respecting Cultural Centre priorities) about the importance of making sure that knowledge was practised, and was passed on to the next generation.¹

A couple of times during that year, women asked me if we were not also going to study food and cooking. At the time, I replied that we were focusing on textiles. Later, when I wrote my thesis, I thought about the question again, and understood it as addressing the way indigenous knowledge and practice, *kastom*, is framed in contemporary Vanuatu. I concluded that the question was about whether or not cooking can be thought of as *kastom*. Having spent at least a month in Vanuatu every year but one since then, and having spent a lot of time talking to Ambae women, both on Ambae and in the capital Port Vila, I think now that I missed an important point. The question highlighted an equivalence, a connection between textiles and food, which I failed to see. I think I failed to see it because of the categories I brought with me to my fieldwork. I was constrained by my ideas about the nature of material culture.

This article is thus an attempt to think about the category, material culture, in the context of ethnographic data from Ambae. Specifically it is about museological concepts of 'material culture' as a tool of ethnographic analysis. To address this topic is very much to set up a straw man: it is evident from the outset that material culture, like all analytical categories, is ultimately indefensible. However, it seems to me that there is merit in thinking about how this category works, how it is used, and how it applies to specific ethnographic circumstances.

The fact that objects have been treated as something of a special case within anthropology is a consequence of both their physicality and their portability. It was objects that could survive the rigours of international transportation to become part of museum ethnography collections which were constituted as the category 'material culture'. Objects whose size defied transportation, such as houses, and objects whose fragility defeated it, such as food, were usually not included. A category of theoretical analysis was thus created on the basis of largely practical discriminations about what could and could not be collected and displayed. The boundaries of the category were subsequently reinforced as anthropology for many decades moved away from the study of objects. The development of fieldwork methodologies at the beginning of the last century demonstrated the limits to what could be learned from objects alone, and brought about what Marilyn Strathern has described as a 'division of labour' which created on one hand museologists and on the other anthropologists uninterested in objects (1990: 38). This division focused debate on questions about whether or not objects were a productive focus of research, rather than on the relevance of the category itself.

The recent resurgence of interest in material culture has tended to assert the relevance of research on objects, rather than investigating the potentials and limitations of the category itself. In contexts such as the *Journal of Material Culture*, detached from a museum environment, a far

broader definition of material culture is now implicitly developing – one which includes architecture, landscape and, for example, food, as well as the kinds of objects which normally sit on museum storeroom shelves. However, there seems to be some value in considering the status and analytical power of the category itself, and in particular in considering some assumptions which the category seems to bring with it. Specifically, I am concerned with the classification of the different kinds of material culture.

In order to start thinking about these questions I focus here on status-alteration rituals in north Vanuatu. These rituals dominated social life in much of north Vanuatu for at least the last century and a half, and are still significant today in many areas, including Ambae. I concentrate on the Ambae women's status-alteration system called *huhuru*, and discuss for comparative purposes the Ambae men's status-alteration system, known as *huqe*.² *Huhuru* focuses on textiles; it also, as I have gradually come to realize, focuses on food.

SOME BACKGROUND

Vanuatu is an archipelago of about 80 widely dispersed islands which lie roughly north–south over 850 km, in the western Pacific, a little to the east of northern Australia. Most of the islands in the archipelago are small, and many are surrounded by open sea. They are almost all 'high islands', volcanic in origin, mountainous and rugged in landscape. Between them, the 190,000 people of Vanuatu speak 113 languages, all but three of which are Austronesian (Tryon, 1996: 171). They also have a lingua franca, Bislama, a neo-Melanesian pidgin. In 1980, Vanuatu achieved independence from Britain and France, which had administered the archipelago jointly, and argumentatively, since 1906. It was formerly known as the New Hebrides. Today, the indigenous citizens of Vanuatu are known as ni-Vanuatu.

Ambae lies to the north of the archipelago. Resembling an overturned canoe in shape, it is about 40 km long, dominated by a dormant but very dangerous volcano, Manaro. Ambaeans live on the lower slopes and ridges of the volcano, and on the shoreline, inhabiting locally defined districts, which radiate from the volcano like unequal wedges of a pie. Inhabitants of each district are distinguished from those of others by minor linguistic and cultural variations. These differences are greatest in the two western districts, where people speak the Nduindui language. North-East Ambaean is spoken in all the other districts, in a number of distinct but mutually comprehensible dialects. This article focuses on east Ambae, and specifically on the east Ambaean district of Longana.

East Ambaeans are linked by a common kinship system based on dispersed exogamous matrimoieties. Moiety affiliation is the single most

important social classification: although there are also matriclans, these have no salience in ordinary life, and quite a few people cannot name their own. Rather what is important are the immediate links of locally resident family groups: those people connected by descent through mother, daughter, granddaughter – a group known as *garo*, meaning rope or line – and the collection of people living in a hamlet. Residence is patrilineal, a hamlet most usually consists of a man, his sons and their families, living together on land to which the group holds use rights. In the past, hamlets were scattered widely through the bush, today, they tend to cluster in the vicinity of a church building, each located on land to which the group has rights. Hamlets are private space: people do not visit each other's hamlets unless connected by close kin ties, or for special occasions. These include ceremonies (such as status-alteration rituals, marriages and burials) and meetings and/or training courses of one kind or another.

Prior to the colonial era, there was a considerable amount of trade and exchange throughout the archipelago, and in most areas people were familiar with the ideas and practices not just of those who lived adjacent to them, but of a wide sweep of surrounding islands. This was an exchange not just in valued resources (pigs, shell money, paint), but also in rituals, songs, dances and so forth. Early accounts of the archipelago record, in effect, a freeze frame of this dispersion of rituals, and people today still remember where certain rituals, or parts of rituals, came from, and through whom they arrived (Huffman, 1996: 191). A feature of northern Vanuatu, which is quite clearly a function of this trade, is the widespread phenomenon of status-alteration rituals. These rituals, commonly described as 'graded societies', have been a major focus of anthropological research in the archipelago, studied by John Layard (1942) and Bernard Deacon (1934) in the earlier part of last century, and by people such as Bernard Vienne (1984) and Margaret Jolly (1994) in more recent years. In many parts of north Vanuatu there is not, or was not, one such system in each place, but several. Codrington, writing in 1891, reports that in the Torres Islands in the extreme north of the archipelago, there were at least one hundred *tamate* or ghost societies, and that every man belonged to four or five (1981[1891]: 75), while Rivers reported at least 60 such societies³ in the Banks Islands in 1914 (Rivers, 1914). In most areas there was and is one primary male status-alteration system, alongside of which these other associations existed.

Status-alteration systems vary greatly not only in their forms, but also in their focus. Men's status-alteration systems most usually revolve around pigs, although there were and are systems which at least at some point involve other animals such as fowls. In some cases the rituals emphasize the exchange of these animals, in others the rituals elaborate killing them. In the past some secret men's systems were even based on

the killing of people (Kirk Huffman pers. comm. 1999). The achievement of status can express greater social, economic, spiritual or political power and authority. In some areas, the grade-taker's participation leads to his increasing acquisition of spiritual power, which makes it more and more dangerous for others to associate with him. In east Ambae, however, the men's status-alteration system, *huqe*, is as much concerned with pig exchange as with pig sacrifice, and the high-ranking men the system produces are more political and economic leaders than spiritually potent ritual directors. Thus in the past men who achieved high grades in *huqe* would generally become political leaders around whom other lesser men would gather; even today high-ranking men, such as Chief Rubat of east Ambae, command considerable respect and deference from other members of their communities.

Status-alteration systems are commonly described in the anthropological literature as a male preoccupation. Except for occasional mentions in various accounts, the overwhelming impression provided by the literature is that they were men's business (Deacon, 1934: 479 f; Jolly, 1994: 184 ff.). However, throughout the whole of north Vanuatu, there were and are women's status-alteration systems. While these were less dramatic and hence less visible, they were and are important in most places. As with men's systems, women's status-alterations systems often turn upon pig-killing, but this is not always the case. In some instances, as with the east Ambae women's *huhuru*, a system will focus on textile production. Women's systems also have varying consequences for participants. Annie Walter, for example, makes the neatly expressed contrast that whereas the north Pentecost women's status-alteration system (*kau*) makes aristocrats, *lengwasa*, practised in Central Maewo, makes women (pers. comm. 1997). In north Pentecost, only some women climb the grades, but in Maewo, all women must participate, and all reach the same level. In the Ambae *huhuru*, all married women must take part, but some women achieve greater status than others. At least some women's status-alteration systems are less rigidly hierarchical than many men's systems, and is partly for this reason that I prefer to use 'status-alteration system' rather than 'graded society' to describe the diversity of these rituals.

The preoccupation with achieved status in north Vanuatu is linked to a concept that is important throughout the archipelago: the concept of respect, the showing of honour and deference to others. Ni-Vanuatu often identify the 'way of respect' as a defining characteristic of their joint, national *kastom*. The idea that one should show deference and honour to chiefs and leaders first, but ultimately to all others, is both advocated, and practised by most ni-Vanuatu. There are terms for respect in most Vanuatu languages. In a quick survey which I made in 1998 of 22 languages from across the archipelago, all had between one and three

words which could be translated as respect. North-East Ambaean has two such words: *lado mara* which translates directly as 'to respect', and *tabetabe*, 'to look up to' or 'to love'. Commonly, the achievement of rank is metaphorically equated with height and this metaphor of height is widely significant. The association between status and height is expressed in many of these language terms. Like *tabetabe*, many of the words for respect can be translated as 'to lift up', and the Bislama *left-emap* is widely used as an alternate expression to *rispek*.

Status-alteration systems are part of a wider concern with the maintenance and control of difference in the archipelago. In contemporary Vanuatu, this is an ongoing preoccupation. People work hard to create differences between themselves, but at the same time expend considerable energy making sure that these differences are not too great. This is often expressed as a concern about not 'going too high', about gaining too great a status, or gaining it too quickly, out of step with contemporaries. People are anxious not to incite jealousy, not only because of the interpersonal unpleasantness, but because sorcery, backed up by a sound botanical knowledge of poisons, is a real and feared threat in most parts of the country. So an interest and pleasure in the creation of status differences is balanced by a concern that those differences should not become too wide. Status-alteration systems provide a way to create and formalize differences between people, and to embody them in certain characteristic forms. The fear of jealousy at least partly explains why some of the expressions and symbols of that status are comparatively subtle.

STATUS-ALTERATION SYSTEMS IN EAST AMBAE

On Ambae, then, the two principal status-alteration systems are *huqe* and *hururu*. *Huqe* is the men's status-alteration system, based on pig exchange and pig-killing, which involves a sequence of ten specified grades or steps. Right up until the 1980s *huqe* was a significant focus of male endeavour. Michael Allen, describing *huqe* in 1969, emphasizes the effort involved in participation. He says that grades were achieved by 'men who had the necessary means and skill to perform the complicated rituals at which [the grades] were assumed and in addition, the many lengthy and arduous tasks that had first to be accomplished' (1969: 89). Only some men achieved the highest grades of the system, and to do so was a lifelong endeavour. Unmarried girls take the preliminary junior grades of *huqe*, each girl takes her last *huqe* grade the day before she is married. On the morning after her marriage, she is introduced to *hururu*, the women's status-alteration system. This system is based not on pigs but on the production, display and exchange of pandanus textiles. Like *huqe* it involves a tremendous amount of preparation and hard work for the grade-taker, notably in the making of a large number of textiles.

There is some disparity between the degree to which *huqe* and *huhuru* are being practised today. Many men, having taken the junior grades in *huqe* during their childhood, do not enter into the adult *huqe* system, preferring to seek status and achievement through avenues such as wage labour, local government or the church, which are seen as being less arduous and less expensive. *Huqe* has been becoming decreasingly important since about 1980.⁴ However, women continue to make *huhuru*. This disparity seems to be a consequence of the interconnection between *huhuru* and marriage. Whereas *huqe* as a system stands largely independent of other exchanges and rituals, *huhuru* is linked to the exchanges at marriage. The exchanges which take place at the end of a *huhuru* ceremony, constitute a woman's partial repayment of the debts to her husband's family incurred at marriage. At marriage the groom's family's gifts outweigh those presented by the bride's family. By taking a series of *huhuru* grades, a woman is fulfilling her obligation to balance this debt.

In the Longana district *huhuru* does not involve clearly demarcated grades in the way that *huqe* does. Nevertheless, a woman's achievements in *huhuru* bring her respect and deference. This respect is of a kind not unlike that accorded in western society to those who acquire academic qualifications: no attention is drawn to a woman's achievements within *huhuru*, but where it is known it is respected. Women who do not perform *huhuru* can be criticized, and a woman who has not made *huhuru* for her husband will be ashamed. Older women who have made *huhuru* several times are said to be like chiefs among women. A man sometimes stands a little in awe of his wife's achievements in *huhuru*. Thus the exchanges made at the end of *huhuru* are only a partial motivation only for taking a *huhuru* grade.

There are some significant differences between the way in which *huhuru* is practised in the different Ambae districts, and in some districts these rituals are much more secret than they are in Longana. While Longana women told me about *huhuru* as soon as I began speaking to them about textiles, women in other districts were much more circumspect. Although I did not have the opportunity to investigate *huhuru* elsewhere to the same extent, I am confident these differences are sufficiently great for me to be able to discuss the Longana *huhuru* without betraying the secrecy attached to other versions.

Studying the Ambae status-alteration systems from the vantage point of an interest in textiles, it is easy to see textiles as the key mark of status and differentiation between grades. Both *huqe* and *huhuru* utilize a special group of textiles called *singo*, of which there are two types. In the men's system, *huqe*, the achievement of a new grade is most visibly marked by the presentation of a *singo tuvegi*. *Singo tuvegi* are small textiles (about 1 m long and 40 cm wide). Men wear them hanging from a belt at the front. Women (having taken the junior grades prior to and

at their marriages) are able to wear *singo tuvegi* wrapped around their hips. There are several different named types of *singo tuvegi*, which are distinguished from each other by the design plaited into the body of the textile, and subsequently highlighted through the dyeing process. Each *singo tuvegi* type is attached to a grade or series of grades in *huqe*, and is part of a set of costume elements specific to that grade. In Bislama, people speak of this set of elements as *yunifom blo step* (the uniform of the grade).

The women's status-alteration system, *huhuru*, turns on another kind of *singo*, a *singo maraha*. This is not a textile to be worn by a woman, but rather, it is a necessary attachment to the most valuable of the textiles used in exchanges, which are known as *maraha*. The *singo maraha* is joined to one end of the *maraha* and is an essential completion of it. There are actually several different kinds of *maraha*, *singo maraha* are only joined to the most valuable of these.⁵ *Singo maraha* are also finely plaited, and are long and narrow – usually about 1.5 m long and 30 to 60 cm wide. Like the *singo tuvegi*, there are several different kinds of *singo maraha*, which are distinguished from each other by the designs plaited into and dyed onto them. A woman making *huhuru* gains her status from the identity of the *singo maraha* which is the focus of her ritual.

Singo are special textiles in a number of different ways. They can be made only by some women, who have paid for the right to learn how to make them, and to learn the special stencilling technique used in dyeing them. The right to plait *singo* is generally passed from a woman to her son's wife, and it is a well-guarded privilege. The right to use the stencil type applied to *singo* is also restricted, although among a larger group of specialists. This stencilling technique is sometimes also used on the women's clothing textile known as *sakule*.⁶ All Ambae textiles are dyed red. In the past, dyeing (a process then utilizing vegetable dye and a bark dye bath), was a difficult and anxious procedure, and it was hedged about with many taboos and restrictions. These days, dyeing has been made considerably easier by the introduction of chemical dyes sold in local trade stores, and by the use of galvanized iron to make dye baths. *Maraha* are dyed a wash of red by being dipped in the dye, but other textiles are all dyed using hand cut stencils. The many taboos and restrictions surrounding the dyeing process are increasingly disregarded, although less so in the dyeing of *singo*.

Singo are particularly distinctive because of their capacity to inflict various kinds of harm on those who handle them incorrectly, including their makers. All *singo* are subject to restrictions on their production, handling and use. A woman who is making, or has even merely touched a *singo* should wash her hands before she touches food or holds a child. To fail to do so would result in damage to the eyes, and in boils and sores, transmitted to herself and others through food, or directly to the child.

A *singo* is dangerous from the moment a woman begins to make it, and is in fact most dangerous during production. From the moment a woman joins the first two pandanus ribbons, at the beginning of making a *singo*, it becomes powerful, even though that step of joining the ribbons is identical for the production of all textiles. Admittedly, the pandanus threads are generally somewhat finer than usual, but this is not what makes the difference. It seems that it is the identity of the textile-to-be as a *singo* which is important. All the debris from the making of the *singo*, the bits and pieces of leftover pandanus and the rubbish from the stencilling process, must be carefully gathered together and buried at the foot of a fruit-bearing tree. The fruit of the tree can thereafter only be eaten by a person who has paid for the right to eat the restricted food associated with that *singo* type, something which is obtained during a *huhuru* ceremony. The power of *singo* is such that a person should not even step over a long *maraha* which has a *singo* attached to it, for fear of the harm it could inflict on them.

The women's status-alteration ceremony, *huhuru*, involves the dyeing of a suite of at least eleven high-value exchange textiles of several prescribed types, the preparation of food specific to the ritual, and an exchange of textiles between the woman and her husband and his family. The focus of the occasion is the dyeing of the *singo maraha*. *Huhuru* actually means 'to make red'. In the Longana district the different *huhuru* ceremonies are distinguished solely by the identity of the *singo* which is dyed in it. It is on the production and celebration of that *singo maraha*, and specifically of its design, that the ceremony turns, even though the ceremony celebrates the woman's productivity in preparing the textiles she needs to mount it.

A woman who wants to take a grade in *huhuru* must produce the necessary textiles herself. She is usually assisted in this process by female kin from both moieties, by her daughters-in-law as well as by her own sisters and daughters. Generally speaking, other women will sit down to help for a day, and in this context the person helped must feed them. She must also commission a *singo*-maker both to produce the *singo* to be joined to the long *maraha* she has made, and (on the day) to dye the *singo* and prepare the food associated with it. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the woman presents the textiles she has produced for the ceremony to her husband (and hence his family), as a return for the textiles he and his family gave for her at her marriage. Indeed, women speak of making *huhuru* for their husbands, rather than of making it for themselves, although the status a woman achieves by making *huhuru* for her husband is something that belongs to her alone. In order to take a grade in the pig-killing rituals a man needs the textiles his wife gives him through *huhuru*, so that a man's grade-taking is dependent to some extent on that of his wife.

In 1992 I observed a *huhuru* ceremony performed by a Longana woman called Lena Jasper. Lena made *huhuru* for two *singo* at one time, thus taking two grades at once. To do this, she had to prepare at least 20 *maraha* of various specified types – a major endeavour. The ceremony took place under a partly walled roof, a large space cut off from the casual gaze. Women who were involved in supporting Lena were present, but not other people. Two *singo* specialists came on the day bringing the undyed *singo*. While they carefully worked on the cutting and placing of the stencils, the other women helped Lena to dye the other textiles she had prepared.⁷ The *singo* specialists dyed the *singo*. When the *singo* were removed from the dye bath the culminating moment for Lena took place. They became Lena's responsibility at this point, and with shy but evident pride, she removed the dyeing rope which held the stencil to the textile, and revealed the completed *singo*. If the ceremony had finished there Lena would not have achieved her new status, but to the observer (to me), that seemed to be the moment at which her new status took hold for her, and her achievement became palpable.

The *singo* specialists then prepared the restricted food. This is called 'the food of the *singo*'. The name, in language, actually refers to the kind of food that is prepared, known in Bislama as *laplap* and in North-East Ambae as *longo*. We have no parallel dish, so it is hard to describe. It is made by grating raw carbohydrate vegetable (such as taro), and cooking the resultant paste spread out as a slab and wrapped in leaves, in a hot stone oven. There are many different ways of modifying this paste with additions both before and after baking: for example, with coconut cream. The recipe in this instance is the most secret part of *huhuru* and I cannot reveal it. Such is the secrecy of this part of the proceedings that women not directly involved in preparing it disappeared while this took place.

When the food was prepared Lena, and those members of her family who were paying for the right to eat the *longo singo*, came holding textiles over their heads, to look at the food before it was cooked. The head is viewed as the most sacred part of the body. Holding textiles over one's head is seen as a protective gesture, and in this context emphasizes the potency of what is being seen. The *singo* specialists talked to them about each of the two *singo* designs, their history and their rank. Then the *longo singo* was baked in a hot stone oven. When it was done, it was laid out in an enclosed booth, the dyed *singo* was draped above it, and both were surrounded by decorative leaves of specified varieties. Then the people who had viewed the uncooked food returned, again holding textiles over their heads, to view this display. Again, the *singo* specialists spoke to them, and they gave them the textiles they had been holding over their heads as payment. Then the woman making *huhuru* and her husband ate a specific part of the food, prescribed by the ritual. The rest was divided

by those who, by viewing it when uncooked, and by paying, had earned the privilege of eating it. Then Lena took the textiles that had been dyed during the ritual, including the *singo*, and presented them to her husband, and, as is usual, his family made a return gift to her. Lena also made a series of payments to the *singo* specialists who had effected the ritual for her. At the conclusion of the day both the grade-taker and her husband presented ordinary cooked food to each other as a meal.

This is a very simplified account of *huhuru*. It is simplified both by my desire not to overwhelm with detail, and by the fact that some aspects of the ritual are secret and I cannot discuss them. However, what is probably evident to you, but what I did not grasp for some time, is how many and complex are the links between *singo* and food in *huhuru*. The first is that the malevolent power of *singo* is transmitted most particularly through food. A woman who handles a *singo* and does not wash her hands before she touches food will cause harm to herself and to others who eat the food. Food, it seems, is a particularly effective transmitter of the power of the *singo*. In the case of children however, food is not necessary to effect this transmission, the woman can harm the child just by touching him or her. The debris from both the plaiting and the dyeing process is equally potent: buried at the foot of a food-producing tree, it makes the fruit of that tree safe only for those who have the rights to that *singo*. Just as the *singo* itself is restricted, and can only be made by those who have the right to do so, so the food which is central to the ritual can only be seen and eaten by those who have paid for the right to do so. If others were to eat it, they would become sick. Whatever the source of the power of the *singo*, it is linked to and through the *longo singo*. Cooked food is also exchanged at a number of points for the labour of producing *singo* and other textiles, and against itself.

Huhuru effects a number of kinds of differentiation between people. Primarily *huhuru* differentiates women by altering their status, increasing the respect due to them. However, the grade-taker's husband and other family also gain a new differentiating right in the fact that they are now able to eat the food associated with that particular *singo* type. Much was made of the fact that I, by participating in Lena's *huhuru*, would now, if ever I visited Ambae on another such occasion, already have the right to eat the food associated with those two *singo* designs.

A person taking a grade in the men's status-alteration system, *huqe*, does not obtain status directly from the *singo*, rather, status is obtained from the pig or pigs which are killed or exchanged. However, the *singo tuvegi* he earns the right to wear is an expression of that achievement, and it is part of the visible embodiment of his new status. Today men often borrow *singo tuvegi* from each other, but in the past a man planning to take a *huqe* grade would commission the making of a *singo tuvegi* for himself. The rituals associated with this required the man to visit the

singo maker to observe the production process, and to listen to her talking to him about the *singo*. The commissioning process may also have involved the preparation of restricted food specific to the *singo*, just as restricted food is still prepared for the *singo maraha*, but the food for the *singo tuvegi* is now largely forgotten. By taking a *huqe* grade a man also obtains the right to eat food associated only with that grade in the *huqe* system.

TEXTILES

There is, quite clearly, a link between rank, textiles and food in *huhuru*. What I want to do now is to think a bit more about how this works. To do so, I will first backtrack, because the beginning of the rethinking I have begun to do is about textiles.

Throughout this article I have been speaking about textiles as if they are a unitary category. This is quite wrong. There are 25 named textile types in Longana. Each one is distinguished from the others on the basis of its plaited form and each named textile type has a distinctive set of uses. However, although they are made of the same material, by the same techniques of manufacture, share the same basic form, and are all dyed red, Ambaeans do not consider these objects to be the same. The differences between them are so great that these objects are actually several different kinds of thing. They fall into categories, which are, to an Ambaeans, as self-evidently distinct from each other as a tea-towel and a bed sheet would be to a European. There are four categories: *maraha*, *qana*, clothing textiles, and *singo*. *Maraha* are high value exchange items and are used to wrap the dead. *Qana* are used when new as exchange valuables of lesser importance, and when they are taken out of the exchange system are used as domestic furnishings – to sit upon and sleep under. Clothing textiles are not now much used, and I never learnt a name for them as a category. Finally, there are the *singo* – textiles that are used to symbolize and confer status or rank.

There is no term in either of the Ambae languages which refers to all the textiles women make from pandanus: no word meaning ‘textile’. It is possible to refer to all these objects by the term for pandanus, *veveo*, just as one might refer in English to cotton articles, but this does not make these objects into the same kind of thing. People do not, of course, fail to see the connections between them, but the differences are real. This came home to me when I realized that there is a textile that does not fall into any of the four categories. This is a *wasmahanga*, an undyed textile with complicated tails, tassels and lacework, which is worn by men, folded over a belt and hanging from it, usually at their back, to indicate achieved status in *huqe* at the higher grades. It might seem that a *wasmahanga* should be, for example, classified in the same class as *singo*

tuvegi. However, a *wasmahanga* is different because although women plait it, they do not use it. Although men use *qana*, *maraha*, clothing textiles and *singo*, all the objects in those categories are woven by, and used by, women. But *wasmahanga*, once made, goes by another road, and is used only by men. This kind of distinction does not apply to *singo tuvegi*, because women, in taking the junior grades in *huqe* before they are married, earn the right to wear *singo tuvegi*, which they do by wrapping them around their hips. And sometimes a very senior man will decide that his wife should take a further step in *huqe*, again granting her the right to a higher *singo*. However, my understanding is that no woman ever earns the right to wear *wasmahanga*.⁸

Textiles are often treated as a special case of material culture, and moreover, as a unitary category. The work of Annette Weiner has been invaluable in drawing attention to the importance of textiles, especially in the Pacific region. In her enthusiasm for the subject, she suggests that textiles (or as she phrases it, cloth) can be treated as a singular category. She defines cloth as including 'all objects made from threads and fibres, such as Australian Aboriginal hairstrings and Maori flax cloaks, leaves such as Trobriand banana leaf bundles, and bark, such as Polynesian barkcloth' (1992: 157). Through her emphasis on cloth, Weiner has highlighted the ethnographic salience of objects that have often been overlooked. However, the lesson that Ambae textiles make evident is that it is far from wise to group objects together merely on the basis of a similar material form. Cloth should not be treated as a singular category, precisely because ethnographic specificities reveal substantial differences between the objects that such a categorization groups together.

FOOD AND WHAT FOLLOWS

The link between achieved status and food is widespread in north Vanuatu ethnography. In some places, food is so critical to the expression of achieved status among men that the grades of their status-alteration system are sometimes described as eating grades or 'eating classes'.⁹ In these systems, men who share membership of a certain rank cook together on a fire, and no one who is of lesser status than they should eat from that fire, lest they be harmed by doing so. The spiritual potency achieved by men in some status-alteration systems is dangerous to others, and is in particular communicable through food. Eating as an expression of rank (and of its concomitant spiritual power) is so deeply felt that conversion to Christianity was formulated in some areas as 'going to eat with the women' (Curtis, 1999: 64). For men who relinquished their membership of a status-alteration system for Christian faith, the key expression of that transition was to give up the eating grades by which they had been defined, and do the unthinkable: eat with

people who were not in any way part of that system, the women. The cooking and eating of food is thus an important mark of distinction.

What *huhuru* does is draw attention to a number of structural equivalences for Ambaeans between textile production and cooking. The textile is 'cooked' over a fire, and is transformed, made complete, in the same way that *laplap*, and other foodstuffs, are baked in a fire and transformed into an edible form. In fact – I think I can say this much – in the part of the *huhuru* I cannot describe a more explicit connection is made between the textile and the food. As I hope I have made evident, food is almost as important to *huhuru* itself as the textiles it celebrates.

What food does in *huhuru* is to negotiate the power of the *singo*. A discussion about the source of this power is outside the ambit of this article, but, as I have suggested elsewhere, it does seem that this power is very much connected to the *singo* design (see Bolton, in press). It is the design that distinguishes the different *singo* from each other, and thus the different *huhuru* grades from each other. It is the design about which the *singo* specialist speaks to those who come to view the special food for the *singo*. There is however, no particular narrative or meaning attached to any of the designs. It is not that when the *singo* specialist speaks about the design that she reveals arcane knowledge, or recounts a significant myth; the significance of the design seems to be visual. It seems to me that the power of the *singo* is linked to the visual impact of the design itself. This power, the power of the *singo*, is transmitted to the food, and also to the grade-taker. This link is so strong that a knowledgeable woman from the Lolovoli district (which is adjacent to Longana), once suggested to me that the name *singo* refers specifically to designs for which there is a special or restricted food.

There are a series of connections here, between textiles, designs and food. All three mediate or embody power, which is transferred between them. By manipulating the relationships between these three things in *huhuru* women transform themselves, literally ingesting the power of the *singo*. Or to put it another way, the food, the *longo singo*, mediates and reinforces the power of the *singo* (which power perhaps lies most specifically in the design), translating that power into a new status for the woman. The food mediates the power, and perhaps both mediate the power of the design. What is significant to me is that for Ambaeans, these three things are not categorically different. In fact, it seems to me, as I think back on my fieldwork, that for women involved in *huhuru*, textiles and the restricted food had an equal value. When I first encountered *huhuru*, I was completely mystified, realizing neither that there were women's status-alteration systems throughout north Vanuatu, nor that those systems could be based on something other than killing pigs. Looking back at my early field notes on *huhuru*, I notice with interest that I titled them not *huhuru* but, using the Bislama term, *laplap singo*.

The way people first presented this material to me was as being about the food of the *singo*.

Retrospectively, I realize that for Ambaeans, restricted foods are not categorically different to *singo*. Both are continually remade for the occasions in which they are used, both are modified during those occasions, both embody and transmit the power which the ritual negotiates, which power is used to transform the women themselves. *Singo* are not in a significant sense more permanent, more important than the *laplap singo*. Hence women's surprise that I so consistently failed to attend to food and cooking.

SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Of course, anthropological theory has long acknowledged that objects are not the same everywhere. Exchange theory implicitly recognizes that the material and the non-material are often treated as continuous or equivalent as people trade and exchange them, and it is from exchange theory that some of the more radical formulations of objects have been derived. Nancy Munn's account, made with respect to Gawan canoes, of the transformation of one object into another over time derives from the analysis of exchange (1977). The recent developing interest in consumption arises in part from exchange theory, and consumption studies are no respecters of the material, utilizing an increasingly broad definition of goods, not treating the differences between material and non-material as significant.

Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* offers a different take on exchange theory. One of her key arguments is that both persons and things have the social form of persons, and that 'relations and persons become in effect homologous, the capabilities of persons revealing the social relations of which they are composed, and social relations revealing the persons they produce' (1988: 173). In this formulation, the specific character of objects is less important than the relationships in which they are transmitted. It is somewhat diminishing to the sophistication of Strathern's argument to make the point I am making here. However, from her perspective, objects do not fall into a defined category at all. They are both transformed and transformable, created by/out of persons, embodying, effecting and transforming relationships. In this analysis, objects are subject to, and obtain their significance from, and effect the form of, the relationships in which they exist.

Alfred Gell indirectly builds on Strathern's argument in his book *Art and Agency*, proposing that an object should be understood to have agency itself, to create effects. In an extended argument, he demonstrates how objects exercise agency, mediating and entering into social relations between and with persons. This is a 'kind of second class

agency' (1998: 17) dependent on the humans who make the objects, but Gell argues that it is agency nonetheless. Strathern, commenting in turn upon Gell's analysis, observes that 'Euro-Americans often think agency inappropriately personified when applied to inanimate entities, but that is because they link agency to will or intention'. In fact, she observes, 'in terms of the effects of entities upon one another . . . "things" and "persons" may be co-presences in a field of effectual actors' (1999: 17). For Gell, anything can have agency in this way, including not only such objects as a chipped stone found on a beach but, for example, a Hindu girl worshipped as the goddess Durga (1998: 150). Rather than treating the difference between object and non-object as unimportant, Gell thus stretches the definition of the object beyond the material.

Gell's argument also builds in part on ideas about the anthropology of art. The agency that Gell discusses is recognized to some extent in the western intellectual system through concepts such as aesthetics – which allows that an art object may have agency over a viewer's emotions. It is easy, when focusing on ideas of aesthetic power, to define objects broadly so as to include cattle, as Jeremy Coote does, for example (1992). However, Gell's theory offers an approach that avoids the great pitfall of aesthetics, which is the problem of identifying which things exercise aesthetic agency, which things are art. Thus what Strathern and Gell both do is introduce a way to analyse things on the basis of their agency, in terms of what things do, rather than what they are, or what is done to or with them.

My observation here is not that we should reintroduce the bounded category material culture, not at all. My point is rather that both in taking the category for granted, and equally in overleaping it, it is all too easy to import into analysis western assumptions about the classification of objects into types and categories. It is all too easy to fail to attend to the ethnographic specifics of how people classify things. If we pay attention to what things do, what agency they have, then we need all the more to understand the locally constituted limits to that agency (which may be greater or lesser than those we assume). We also need to understand the forms of the relationships in which things operate.

In other words, what my Ambae experience shows me is that it can be as important to attend to other ways of classifying things as it is to attend, for example, to other ways of classifying kinship relationships. The trap into which I fell was that of naturalizing material culture as a category, and further, of naturalizing my western system of classifying things such as food and textiles into separate categories. For Ambaeans, *singo maraha* is far more closely linked to *laplap singo* (restricted food), than it is to other textile categories, such as *qana* (the low value exchange textiles). *Singo maraha* are linked closely to *laplap singo* by the power of the designs which they mediate. By naturalizing my assumptions that

textiles are one kind of thing, and food is another, and, further, that textiles must be more important than food by virtue of their greater permanency, I introduced into my understanding of Ambaean ethnography painfully obvious errors that it has nevertheless taken me years to acknowledge and begin to correct.

Notes

1. Jean is now the women's culture project co-ordinator at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and is a close colleague. She has contributed much to my understanding of the material discussed here, although I have not as yet had the opportunity to discuss with her the particular argument I make in this article.
2. This article is part of an ongoing analysis of north Vanuatu status-alteration systems. In an earlier article, I considered the question of the malevolent power attributed to the textiles that are utilized in both systems (Bolton, in press).
3. Rivers is reporting on *tamate* societies here; there were also *kwat* societies in the Banks, as well as the more public graded system, the *sukwe* (cf Vienne 1996: 241).
4. In his doctoral thesis about the *huqe* in east Ambae, William Rodman reports an efflorescence in the *huqe* at the end of the 1960s, reporting that 'more men assumed new rank during 1969 and 1970 than in any equivalent period since the Second World War' (1973: 78). By the time I reached Ambae, in 1991, this enthusiasm appeared to have entirely died away.
5. The four Longana *maraha* to which *singo* are attached are called *ngava hangavulu tavalu*, *ngava hangavulu vinvinu*, *vatungule mwera*, and *vatungule vavine*.
6. This stencil type is known as *giglugi*. The other kind of stencil, *bwagavi*, is applied to all *qana*, which are low-value textiles.
7. The distinction between *singo* and the long *maraha* to which they are ultimately joined is evident in the fact that both the *singo* and the *maraha* are dyed separately, and in this case are only joined later, after the *huhuru* rituals are completed.
8. Although no one commented on this to me, another very significant difference between *wasmahanga* and *singo* is that *wasmahanga* is not dyed. *Singo* are always dyed red.
9. For example, for Malo island, see Rubinstein 1981: 138 ff.

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