



Chiefs in Vanuatu Today

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ON MARCH 2, 1994, Jean-Marie L  y   was elected Vanuatu's third state president. Two months later, when he delivered his first official speech to Parliament, he had stretched his name to Jean-Marie L  y   Lenelgau—attaching a chiefly title, Lenelgau, to the previously frenchified L  y  . The president's decision to be addressed by a traditional chiefly title speaks to the continuing importance of the chief (or *jif* in Bislama) in Vanuatu. Since that country's independence from Britain and France in 1980, *jifs* have flourished. The state has at least partly encouraged the acquisition by *jifs* of increased legislative, judicial, and law-enforcement functions at both local and national levels. The capacities and reach of the recently independent state have also emerged and solidified within the same political process. If the state has to some extent defined what a *jif* can be, along with the proper compass of his powers and duties, men who call themselves *jifs* have influenced the expanse and effectiveness of state programs.¹

Overlapping claims by national politicians and by *jifs* to each other's titles signal this jointly constitutive arrangement between state and *jif*. *Jifs* enumerate themselves along with politicians and ministers of religion among Vanuatu's national leadership; Jean-Marie L  y   Lenelgau and other political leaders, in turn, set about collecting chiefly titles and pose themselves as hybrid *jifs*/presidents, *jifs*/members of Parliament, or *jifs*/ministers of state.

There is considerable flexibility and creative potential within Vanuatu's local leadership systems—a flexibility that has underwritten the recent evolution of relations between chiefs and state. These local systems vary among Vanuatu's islands and cultural groups. In general, however, almost any ambitious and capable man, in some contexts, with a straight face, is able to call himself *jif*. *Jif* is an equivocal and commodious title. It sub-

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sumes a miscellany of characters who stake their leadership claims in both tradition (*kastom*) and modernity. These leadership claims trace inward, seeking roots in locally recognized systems of inequality, and outward, highlighting a chiefly ability to mediate with state organs and programs. The elastic expanse of the title serves ambitious individuals who scheme to claim it. It also serves the state, which, by recognizing and admitting *jifs* into government councils, puts to work able and ambitious local leaders within national political structures. But this accommodation between the *jif* and the state is not just the absorption and employment of enduring traditional leaders by modern institutions. The "traditional" *jif*, at least in his present form, has become known in Vanuatu within confines set by the colonialist and independent state.² He has grown up in the cracks and crannies that separate village from capital city, the country's numerous local polities from its overarching institutional state.

Kastom Jifs

Today's *kastom jifs*, although undoubtedly *kastom*, are not simply customary. The emergence and construction of the popular identity *jif*, from a plethora of local leadership positions, were shaped by the events and interests of postcontact, colonial society. Common use of the Bislama term *jif* itself may be relatively recent. Some New Hebrides condominium officials of the 1950s, for example, in their reports instead designated local leaders as "assessors" or "bigmen" (British District Agent 1950).

Vanuatu's indigenous leadership types varied considerably. Generally, the possession of a title legitimated a man's claims to authority, but there were several routes by which titles could be acquired. In the north of the country, men advanced through "grade societies," acquiring a new title at each stage in part by paying off titleholders above them in sacrificed pigs, mats, and food (Speiser [1923] 1991: 303; Deacon 1934: 47; Guiart 1958: 166-67; Allen 1981; Patterson 1981; Blackwood 1981; Vienne 1984: 308). In the center of the archipelago, patrilineages possessed chiefly titles that were inheritable (Espirat et al. 1973: 371-72; Facey 1981, 1988: 100; Philibert 1982: 194; Haberkorn 1989: 47). On Tanna, in the south, every male personal name was a landed title. In addition to these personal titles, local communities controlled one or more pairs of generic titles endowed with various ritual perquisites—*ierumanu*, "ruler" (i.e., sacred chief), and *ianinteta*, "spokesman of the canoe" (talking chief) (Guiart 1956: 88-89; Bonnemaïson 1987: 121; Lindstrom 1990: 55-56). In the far south, on Anatom, something closer to a Polynesian chiefly system may have existed, perhaps reflecting an intensified economic infrastructure of irrigated taro fields (Spriggs 1981: 57-60).

Notably, this archipelago since the 1860s has experienced virulent epidemics, massive population decline, considerable labor migration overseas, and increased and better munitioned local conflict. "Traditional" political systems, as first ethnologically described in the 1910s and 1920s, must be read in a historical context of two generations of massive social conflict and disruption (see, for example, M. Rodman 1983). By the early years of this century, missionary and colonial institutional hierarchies had spread to overlay most of the archipelago; reorganizing whatever precontact systems once existed. The missions imported a sacerdotal hierarchy of Elder, Deacon, Pastor, *Mama* (Anglican priest), and also, in many places, promoted the claims of elect Christian leaders to be "paramount chiefs" of entire regions or islands (see Rubinstein 1981:143; Tonkinson 1981:245; Philibert 1982:195). The colonial government also identified its own proxy chiefs, inventing the title "Assessor," which it bestowed upon English- or French-speaking men in each region. Assessors advised European district agents, particularly within island court hearings (see W. L. Rodman 1982).

In some cases, missions and government no doubt located existing titled local leaders and promoted these to Elder or Assessor. The process clearly worked in reverse as well. Ambitious cultural mediators, nominated by Europeans to be an Assessor or Elder, parlayed this externally derived authority to advance claims to local chiefly titles (W. L. Rodman 1982:73). Some men discharged all three positions simultaneously: Elder, Assessor, and titled *jif*. For the 100 years before Vanuatu's independence, a reciprocal relationship obtained between local leaders, who came to call themselves *jifs*, and government/mission structures of authority. This authority extended its influence into the countryside by nominating Elders and Assessors who thereby came to possess at least *de jure* chiefly status. And local leaders or would-be title holders could amplify whatever authority they possessed in their home village and region by accepting and cultivating these new government titles.

The independent state of Vanuatu today has upheld this bargain with local leaders, although the popular term *jif* has now entirely supplanted the colonialist term Assessor and has also multiplied hierarchically and geographically. Vanuatu currently possesses village *jifs*, area *jifs*, island *jifs*, town *jifs*, and paramount *jifs*, among others. In independent Vanuatu, the official capacities of *jifs*—on paper, at least—are more powerful than those of yesterday's Assessor or Elder in the colonial New Hebrides. This, in large part, descends from the political dynamics and rhetoric of Vanuatu's independence movement of the 1970s. The Vanua'aku party, which led the colony into independence and ruled throughout the 1980s, although founded by young government officials, teachers, and Christian pastors, embraced and defended local *kastom* as useful, splendid, and

honorable (Tonkinson 1982; Lindstrom 1982b). A political rhetoric that acclaimed the dignity and contemporary relevance of *kastom* unavoidably also raised the profile of *kastom* leaders. If *kastom* is politically conspicuous, legitimizing an independent Vanuatu, then so, too, must be traditional forms of leadership and inequality.

The National Council of Chiefs

A nationalist rhetoric of *kastom* has enfranchised the voice of *jifs* within the national political arena—but which *jifs*? Given the variety of traditional leadership positions, the widespread political significance of achievement over ascription, and the glut of claims to this Bislama title, Vanuatu has a lot of *jifs* to choose among. The creation of a National Council of Chiefs in 1977 provided one answer to Vanuatu's *jif* oversupply problem. An institutionalized chamber of chiefs permits the state to set parameters of chiefly identity and to police the number of authorized chiefly voices within state councils.

The National Council of Chiefs emerged from late colonial strategies to influence postindependence state structures.³ Like the political identity *jif* itself, the National Council was rooted in both colonial and indigenous practices. The creation of a chiefs' council expressed local attempts to reproduce at the national level the sorts of joint conclaves and assemblies of elders and leaders that people regularly convene within their villages and regions. And the French, in particular, hoped that a chiefly council might serve as a conservative force within soon-to-be-independent Vanuatu. Continuing Anglo-French conflict throughout the 1970s was a fundamental motor, pushing the country's move toward independence (see Plant 1977; MacClancy 1980; Beasant 1984; Van Trease 1987). The French realized, belatedly, that most of the young, educated civil servants and professionals who were demanding independence were British-trained, largely hostile to French interests, and supporters of the National (Vanua'aku) party. In response, the French rapidly expanded their school system throughout the 1970s (Paitel 1985), and firmed up what political support they could among Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, "half-caste," and francophone communities. They also attempted to exploit divisions between educated young urban leaders calling for immediate independence and older, rural, *kastom* leaders back on home islands who would be more willing to live with the political status quo.

The colonial New Hebrides Advisory Council proposed that the country's first Representative Assembly—which would succeed the council—should include four "custom *jifs*," "to be elected by an Electoral College

of Chiefs divided into four sections, each chief coming from one of the four administrative districts" (MacClancy 1980:126; see also Zorgbibe 1981:47). The four chiefs were to be selected in stages by fellow chiefs, rather than elected by popular suffrage: village chiefs within each island area would send representatives to an islandwide meeting that would select representatives to a districtwide meeting of chiefs that would vote for a single regional chiefly representative. Throughout this process, the exact character of this "Electoral College of Chiefs" and the specific qualifications of village, island, and district chiefs remained blurred and undefined; nor could they be easily codified from above, given Vanuatu's flexibility and variation in local leadership practices (MacClancy 1980:126). The self-identified pools of *jifs* involved in this process ultimately included anyone at the village level who was both willing publicly to assume the status label and able to confront anyone who might dispute his claims.

After some months of dispute about chiefly and other members of the Assembly, both sides agreed to a special sitting in June 1976, specifically to discuss the issue of chiefly membership (Plant 1977:85; MacClancy 1980:128). This meeting recommended the creation of a National Council of Chiefs "to act as an advisory body on matters of custom to the Assembly" (MacClancy 1980:128). The Representative Assembly charged the chiefs' council with advising

on all matters concerning New Hebridean custom. The Assembly must seek the views of the Council before taking any decision on these matters: the codification of custom; the judicial system, and legislation specifically affecting New Hebrideans; legislation concerning fishing and hunting; the organization of the registration of births, marriages and deaths; the determination of qualifications of Chiefs for election to the Assembly; land matters; any matter affecting the constitutional status of the New Hebrides. (Plant 1977:97)

The Representative Assembly met once again in November 1976—a year after it was elected. It was gridlocked, however; the National party (later renamed the Vanua'aku party) controlled twenty-one seats, as did its opponents. By mid-1977, the two colonial powers had decided to hold new elections the following November for a replacement Assembly. The Vanua'aku party boycotted these elections, and the Assembly remained ineffectual until all parties joined a Government of National Unity in 1978. The Vanua'aku party participated in, and won, a third round of elections in November 1978.

In the meanwhile, the National Council of Chiefs that the Representative Assembly had created met for the first time on February 8, 1977, elected Willie Bongmatur its chairman, and passed, 19 votes to 3, a motion calling for "internal self-government" by the end of the year (Plant 1977:115; MacClancy 1980:130). Bongmatur, from Ambrym Island,

had been previously elected to the Assembly. He served as president of the National Council of Chiefs until he retired in 1993. In addition to Bongmatur, the original council included the three other chiefly members of the Representative Assembly and five additional chiefs from each of the colonial districts, chosen in November 1976 by the four loosely organized "electoral colleges of chiefs." Of these, fourteen *jifs* were associated with the Vanua'aku party, and ten with "moderate" parties that supported French interests (Plant 1977:95-96).

Following the establishment of a Government of National Unity, the colonial powers convened a committee of national leaders that met over several months in 1979 to tackle writing a national constitution. Bongmatur, as chairman of the National Council, was a member of this committee, along with three other official *jifs*. Bongmatur's concerns to codify chiefly authority within the constitution were seconded by party leaders from both sides (Zorgbibe 1981:62). The Vanua'aku party knew that it commanded the political support of a majority of council members; the "moderates" still believed that a Chiefs' council could protect minority rights along with island custom. Bongmatur recalled: "Since the National Council of Chiefs already existed, it would have been difficult to disestablish it. This facilitated its codification in the constitution. We were lucky that the National Unity government was led by a party that believed strongly in the *kastom* and culture of the country, and that chiefs should represent their own areas. This is how the Council of Chiefs made it into the constitution" (my translation, Bongmatur interview).

Actually, an initial French proposal presented to the Constitutional Committee by Charles Zorgbibe (appointed constitutional counselor to the New Hebrides in 1978) contemplated an even more powerful capacity for chiefs. In this draft, twenty chiefs would compose a Senate, an upper house of government (Zorgbibe 1981:82-83). This Senate—along with any official capacity for chiefs at all—vanished altogether in a second constitutional draft, presumably because of suspicions that chiefs in an upper house would undercut state (and party) powers to govern. Chiefs returned, however, in a third draft ultimately accepted by consensus. This institutionalized a national chiefly advisory body on custom that Parliament might choose to consult, rather than an influential upper house: "The National Council of Chiefs has a general competence to discuss all matters relating to custom and tradition and may make recommendations for the preservation and promotion of New Hebridean culture and languages. The Council may be consulted on any question, particularly any question relating to tradition and custom, in connection with any bill before Parliament" (Vanuatu Constitution, Chapter 5, Article 28[1-2]). Only on questions of land tenure does the constitution *require* Parliament

to consult with the Council of Chiefs (Chapter 12, Article 74). The constitution also directs Parliament to "provide for the role of chiefs" in village or island courts (Chapter 8, Article 50). National Council chiefs, to be selected by their "peers," would meet at least once a year. The constitution finally directs Parliament "to provide for the organization of . . . the role of chiefs at the village, island and district level" (Chapter 5, Article 29).

Parliament thus in the end secured for itself powers to "provide for" and "organize" chiefs. Nonetheless, the National Council of Chiefs, which arose within the political struggles leading to Vanuatu's independence, survived this period of rapid institutional development and change leading up to the birth of an independent state.

Malvatumauri Operations

At its maiden meeting in February 1977, the National Council of Chiefs changed its name to the Malvatumauri (or, in alternative Bislama spellings, the Malfatumaori or Malfatumauri). This *kastom*ization of nomenclature followed, by two weeks, the National party's parallel metamorphosis into the Vanua'aku party. Bongmatur explained:

After I was elected chairman, we talked about the name. Since the Council stood for *kastom*, we felt it better to rechristen it with a *kastom* name. This is why we renamed it the Malvatumauri. *Mal* means *jif*. *Vatu* means stone, or island, since all land rests upon stone. *Mauri* is something that grows and expands in the light. When we agreed on the name, we placed a stone and *namele* [cycad] fronds in front of the government building where Parliament met. Then we killed a pig [on top of the stone] to christen the new name [Malvatumauri]. (My translation, Bongmatur interview)

Since 1980, the Malvatumauri has reorganized its membership several times. Until 1994, each of eleven island regions sent two chiefs to the council, with the exception of the smaller districts Epi and Paama, which sent one, and Tafea, the large southern province, which sent four. Regional (or island) councils of chiefs, as electoral colleges, select representatives to the Malvatumauri every four years. These councils may also subsume several area councils of chiefs, which, in turn, include village councils of chiefs.⁴ Additional area councils continue to be established as components of regional councils. (For example, a Southwest Tanna Area Council was established in February 1993: *Vanuatu Weekly* 429 [Feb. 20]: 3.) In the elections of March 3, 1993, the eleven regional councils, serving as electoral colleges for the Malvatumauri, comprised the following numbers of state-approved chiefly electors (*Vanuatu Weekly* 430 [Feb. 27, 1993]: 1): Banks/Torres, 14 chiefs; Santo/Malo, 18 chiefs; Am-

bae/Maewo, 16 chiefs; Malekula, 10 chiefs; Pentecost, 9 chiefs; Ambrym, 6 chiefs; Paama, 4 chiefs; Epi, 8 chiefs; Shepherds, 16 chiefs; Efate, 18 chiefs; Tafea, 7 chiefs. In 1994, the government reduced the number of regions to six, although the number of chiefly representatives has remained the same. The regional councils are variously active. Membership is assorted and shifting, depending on an island's political unity and whether or not one or another political faction is boycotting a council, questioning the chiefly claims of its members (as has been the case in Tafea).

The government funds Malvatumauri operations, including travel grants to bring the twenty-two *jifs* to Port Vila for two meetings each year. The Malvatumauri's budget includes salaries for its president, a secretary, and one typist. In 1992, the Malvatumauri raised 10 million *vatu* (around US\$90,000) to construct a large "national *nakamal* [men's meeting-house]" near Vanuatu's new Parliament House (*Vanuatu Weekly* 316 [Dec. 1, 1990]: 2). The chiefs christened the structure *Farea Saralana* (a North Efate language name that *Vanuatu Weekly* translated as "miting haus blong evri pipol"). This house, constructed partly of traditional materials, serves as a meeting hall for the assembled chiefs' biannual conferences and for other public events during the rest of the year.

The president of the Malvatumauri also serves as the chairman of the Cultural Center Oversight Committee; of Vanuatu Handikrafs (a traditional-arts sales cooperative); of the government's Social Concerns Committee; and of a committee to choose Sir Paul Reeves Scholarships (established by a former governor-general of New Zealand); and is a member of the Judiciary Service Commission. Former President Bongmatur at one time also chaired the Arts Festival committee that organized Vanuatu's participation in the South Pacific Arts Festivals.

Paramount *Jifs*

Beginning with structures left in play by the departed colonial authorities and the new state constitution, Malvatumauri *jifs* have engaged in a strategic process of elaborating and defining chiefly identity and prerogatives. National *jifs* claim a double authority founded in village tradition and state constitution and, tactically, may emphasize one or the other in different contexts. Mediating officially between village and state, *jifs* have attempted to expand their influence in both arenas. State politicians have been understandably supportive of increased chiefly powers in the village, but less sympathetic to magnified chiefly authority within the nation as a whole. But *jifs*, to date, have been more concerned to solidify their authority at home.

Given Vanuatu's boisterous local politics, it is no surprise that state-approved Malvatumauri *jifs* have faced challenges from other pretenders to traditional leadership. In the mid-1980s, francophone *jifs*, mostly from the small islands off northeast Malekula, established the United Council of Chiefs. This alternative chiefly conclave condemned the legitimacy of both the government of the day and the Malvatumauri (which the United Council of Chiefs president criticized as a bunch of upstarts who lacked true chiefly credentials or ancestry). As Brunton (1989) and many others have noted, local authority and political structures in Vanuatu are always under threat of challenge and erosion. State recognition of official island and paramount chiefs provides Malvatumauri *jifs* a significant external boost for their authority at home.

Malvatumauri *jifs* quickly took advantage of their official status to begin codifying *kastom* law. This codification of *kastom* appears necessary to many people to resolve irregularities within local customary practice and to lend force to chiefly decisions and decrees. In 1983, the Executive Committee of the Malvatumauri (consisting of eleven of the twenty-two chiefs) published a book of *kastom polisi*, organized into forty articles, and authorized by the "Paramount Chiefs—Malvatumauri" (Malvatumauri 1983; for an English translation, see Lindstrom and White 1994). Nearly all this policy aims at village-level delict and disorder, and much of it seems designed particularly to keep women and youth under closer control and to make chiefly supervision of village activities more muscular. For example, Article 1 gives *jifs* control over land-tenure disputes and decisions; Article 2 accords *jifs* the right to adjudicate village murders and arrange appropriate *kastom* compensation; Articles 4 and 5 allow *jifs* to control people's movement from village to village and from island to island; Article 6 gives *jifs* the right to command the free labor of villagers for public-works projects; Article 8 regulates marriages; Article 14 attempts to control unwed pregnancies (*pikinini blong rod*); Article 15 demands general village order; Article 17 attempts to forestall villagers from defecting to new religious denominations; Article 18 gives *jifs* authority over *kastom* law; Articles 22 and 23 regulate circumcisions and childbirth; Article 24 condemns adultery; Article 29 demands that children respect *jifs* and elders; Article 31 gives *jifs* control of village meetings; and Articles 33 and 34 give *jifs* the right to regulate spirit mediums and healers and the prices they may charge. Amendments to the Malvatumauri's original 1983 policy had been written, although not as yet published, as of 1992 (Bongmatur, interview). The regional councils of chiefs, too, have been charged with codifying island *kastom* policy. By 1992, Tanna (Tafea) had prepared and printed its code, and Ambrym and Malekula were in the process of writing policy.

Other Malvatumauri initiatives look out toward the state rather than

back at the unruly village. Article 20.1 of Malvatumauri policy demands: "The work of chiefs in Vanuatu must be maintained and must develop significantly in the future" (my translation). One notable effort in this area was Bongmatur's invention of a National Conference of Chiefs. Whereas the Malvatumauri's codification of *kastom* policy has attempted to empower *jifs* at home by cuing their state-sponsored official paramountcy, initiatives such as the National Conference of Chiefs aspire to raise the volume of chiefly voices within national councils.

Unlike the Malvatumauri and its limited twenty-two chiefly slots, Bongmatur's National Conference of Chiefs is open, comprehensive, and meets every two years. Using the rule of thumb of one *jif* per village, Bongmatur estimated that Vanuatu boasts at least 2,200 *jifs*, all of whom he has invited into the conference (although these *jifs*, unlike Malvatumauri members, receive no government travel funds or other subsidies if they join). The Conference of Chiefs, in part, supplements and shields the reputation of the Malvatumauri, whose limited membership is open to attack as unrepresentative of the country's abundant company of *jifs*.

At the National Conference of Chiefs convened in September 1992 at Lolovenue, Ambae, the collected *jifs* passed seventeen resolutions. Many of these addressed issues on the national agenda (*Vanuatu Weekly* 410 [Oct. 10, 1992]: 4). Resolution 2, for example, demanded chiefly input into a scheme to construct a touristic "cultural and exhibition village" at Eratap, Efate; Resolution 5 attacked government plans to allow freehold land titles outside the towns; Resolution 7 condemned bank plans to foreclose on land used as loan collateral; Resolutions 8 and 9 recommended that *jifs* denounce any state police or court officer who appears corrupt or shows favoritism; and Resolution 15 directed that the Conference of Chiefs acquire an office in Port Vila.

The National Conference of Chiefs, more than the Malvatumauri, which by statute and budget comes under closer government scrutiny, is an independent body of self-nominated *jifs* who convene to influence national policy. Its self-appointed duties include criticizing state politicians and officials. Ad hoc *jifs* of this sort, and their lists of resolutions, potentially threaten the interests of state politicians and bureaucrats.

State *Jifs*

Miles has addressed "the search for appropriate models" (1993: 31) for chiefly participation in the state administrations of Niger, Nigeria, and Vanuatu. The problem is for developing states to make useful work for chiefs. This must be the right sort of work—something that takes advan-

tage of chiefs' traditional status and local authority but that will not disturb the sometimes unsteady authority of central governments. Miles locates five appropriate "modern functions" for traditional rulers within state apparatus: (1) to broker incoming projects and deals for local economic development; (2) to boost the authority of state leaders by ennobling them on regular occasions with sundry traditional titles; (3) to police the hinterlands, overseeing "low-level" conflict resolution; (4) to serve as ombudsmen between their communities and the state bureaucracies; and (5) to rouse community solidarity and provide local social and administrative services in situations where central governments are ineffectual or even disintegrating. Chiefs, in sum, are to serve the state as its middlemen and brokers (see Rodman and Counts 1982). They extend the reach of the state into the remoter corners of the nation at the same time as they improve citizens' access to state bureaus and programs.

Many of Vanuatu's political leaders have embraced similar functionalist programs for chiefly employment, and they also recognize the dangers of an overly independent chieftaincy (see Jupp 1982). Although politicians themselves want to be *jifs*, they clearly would prefer *jifs* not to be politicians. Prime Minister Maxime Carlot (now Carlot Korman after accepting a chiefly title from Erakor village), echoing Vanuatu's first prime minister, Walter Lini (himself a courtesy-titled chief several times over), warned *jifs* to maintain *kastom's* purity by keeping their noses out of crass politics: "*Jifs* must not mix the proper fashions of chiefly work with those of the white man. Mister Korman said that if a *jif* wanted to keep his job as a *kastom jif*, he must not act like an administrator or an official (*wan man we istap ranem wan Ofis*)" (my translation, *Vanuatu Weekly* 380 [March 14, 1992]: 7). Vincent Boulekone, onetime opposition leader but later allied with the former Vanua'aku party government, also spoke of the perplexing problem of conceding *jifs* just the right measure of power: "We are living in confusion because what is the kind of power the government can have with traditional authority? We don't really want to give full power to the chiefs because we would have some problems. But chiefly authority can be adapted with democracy" (Keith-Reid 1991:22; see Mangnall 1990:20).

Despite concerns to elevate *jifs* above the polluting waters of politics, the interests of government and of the political parties occasionally do impress themselves upon the Malvatumauri. When Bongmatur retired in 1993, for example, he was replaced by *Jif* Noël Mariasua of Emau, whose francophone skills and political background were more in tune with the government of the day, led by Prime Minister Maxime Carlot Korman. The dilemma for politicians is that the state must recognize and empower *jifs* in order that *jifs* may legitimate and serve the state. The dilemma for

jifs is that they must at least appear to serve the state in order to promote their authority at home.

Vanuatu *jifs*, to date, have provided for the state two main services: a warrant of traditional legitimacy and, grossly, a mechanism of crowd control (most particularly a means by which to keep belligerent land disputants and wayward adolescents in line). These are the second and third political functions that Miles (1993) enumerates. Vanuatu's politicians since before independence have rhetorically deferred to *jifs*, who lend traditional legitimacy to state institutions, including the national constitution. Chiefly participation sanctifies government decisions and institutions, integrates local leaders within the national order, and accords with the general rhetorical importance of preserving and honoring Vanuatu *kastom*. Bongmatur recalled:

When we had written the country's constitution, no one knew where to sign it since this was the sacred document of the country: The foundational law and life of the country. Now following *kastom*, they asked me, "Jif, do you agree we could sign the constitution on top of the stone on which you killed the pig?" I agreed and we signed the constitution on that stone. (My translation, Bongmatur interview)

In addition to lending *kastom*'s blessing to state endeavors such as lending its stone to constitutional signatories, the Malvatumauri performs minor bureaucratic housekeeping chores for government. At the state's request, the paramount chiefs have devised a "*kastom* marriage" certificate. Civil servants not married in church or by a judge can obtain one of these certificates at the Malvatumauri office in order to register their spouses and children for government benefits (Bongmatur interview).

The double role of chiefs as servants of the state yet guarantors of its legitimacy, and the difficult balance of powers between *jif* and state, have motivated ongoing debate within Vanuatu political circles. If chiefly powers are *too* constrained and of little consequence within the national arena, a *jif*'s capacity to legitimize state projects (and one prop of his authority over his village subjects) collapses. Yet, the constitution grants chiefs only meager powers to advise and be consulted. Bongmatur noted that Parliament only once since independence has actually followed Article 74 and consulted with the Malvatumauri about land law. Parliament notably neglected this duty before it passed a new land lease bill in 1992. Although the new national *nakamal* sits close to the new Parliament House, its location clearly does not symbolize, spatially, an equal partnership between chiefs and politicians. The *nakamal* is tucked away down a lane. Chiefs are close enough to be called on stage when required, but not constantly in Parliament's direct line of sight. The legitimizing auras of *jifs* are ambiguous—at least insofar as the identity *jif* is partly an artifact of the colonial and postcolonial state and, furthermore, is frequently locally con-

tested. That sacred stone had been in place for less than three years, and its patina of hoary pig blood was shallow at best.

To celebrate and boost the state-affirmed powers of *jifs*, the government has proclaimed March 5 to be an annual "Custom Chiefs Day" national holiday. More substantially, in the late 1980s, leaders of the Vanua'aku party government began to talk up chiefs, and suggested that their official capacities should be expanded and strengthened. This was to occur by means of constitutional revisions, guided by a constitutional review committee. The Constitutional Review Committee traveled around the archipelago conducting hearings on the functions of custom chiefs and how their contributions to the nation could be enhanced, regularized, and codified. This review and its ambition of further empowering chiefs were clearly linked to an erosion of the government's influence that was in part due to factional infighting then under way within the Vanua'aku party. Once again, party leaders, seeking popular support, courted *jifs* and honored *kastom* by way of proposing a new constitutional deal that would devolve additional powers to local leaders.

This national debate about stronger chiefs began when Presbyterian pastor Fred Timakata (once the vice-chairman of the original Council of Chiefs) was elected Vanuatu's second president, replacing the ousted and temporarily jailed Ati George Sokomanu.⁵ The new president proclaimed in his inaugural address that he planned "to revitalise the influence of the customary leaders . . . the real Melanesian Way does not involve party politics in decision-making" (Moale 1989:24; see also *Vanuatu Weekly* 380 [Mar. 14, 1992]: 7). *Vanuatu Weekly* took to describing Timakata as "Bigfala Jif blong evri nara Jif blong Vanuatu" (289 [May 25, 1990]: 5). This journalistic transformation of state president into paramount *jif* continued to blur, at least rhetorically, the lines between *kastom* and politics.

Similarly, the Constitutional Review Committee's hearings sought ways further to empower *jifs* by bringing *kastom* into political practice: "Custom should be invited in from the cold to provide the basis for democracy. One change is likely to be entrenching traditional chiefly powers in law" (Mangnall 1990:19). Grace Molisa, Prime Minister Lini's personal secretary at the time, explained:

Even before notions of Western democracy, Vanuatu always had individuals exercising authority over communities. "Government through elections requires so much training and certain learnt skills. . . . Our chiefs already have this in their upbringing and in their being." It would mean changes to the judiciary, giving more powers to village and island courts, while chiefs in Luganville and Port Vila would take charge of their own people living in town. (Ibid.)

The state newspaper, *Vanuatu Weekly*, publicizing the work of the Review Committee, offered a series of testimonies lamenting the lack of

chiefly authority to settle definitively local land disputes and otherwise organize village life: "The *jifs* said that although they currently have a role to play in villages and island courts, they still face problems since the constitution does not give them enough power to straighten out all problems. . . . The *jifs* also recommended to the [Constitutional Review Committee] that only *jifs* should consider land disputes, not the magistrate or Supreme Courts as is the current practice" (my translation, *Vanuatu Weekly* 324 [Feb. 2, 1991]: 2, 6; see also 323 [Jan. 26, 1991]: 2, 4; 325 [Feb. 9, 1991]: 3; Keith-Reid 1991:22).

Continuing political feuding within the Vanua'aku party stalled the constitutional review process and led ultimately to the collapse of the Lini government. The rump Vanua'aku party, headed by Prime Minister Donald Kalpokas, lost in parliamentary elections held in November 1991. The francophone Union of Moderate Parties, led by new Prime Minister Maxime Carlot, formed a coalition government with the National Union party, established by Walter Lini after his expulsion from the Vanua'aku party leadership. The new government abandoned the constitutional review process and its plans for revising the constitutional functions of *jifs*.

Nonetheless, the Lini government had several practical motivations for advancing *jifs* beyond their symbolic capacity of epitomizing *kastom* legitimacy; and these are motivations that any government might share. An official chiefly hierarchy now exists that extends out from the Malvatumauri in Vila, down through the six regional/island councils, into various area councils, to terminate in many village councils of chiefs. This is a useful institutional device that links center to periphery. Any further codification designed to empower, regularize, or "organize" *jifs* will increase state control over the definition of chiefly identity and the scope of legally recognized, official chiefly functions. By bringing *jifs* more firmly into state bureaucracy—making civil servants out of them—the state obviates some of the possibility of an independent Malvatumauri voice.

Official *jifs* are functionaries within island courts and maintain a dispute-settlement apparatus that shadows the state judiciary system; and both *jifs* and state politicians argue the utility of regularizing and strengthening chiefly powers to police and judge (cf. Westermarck 1991). Even police leaders recently suggested that chiefs establish unofficial village police forces:

Chiefs from the islands are being encouraged by Police to set up their own village police to help maintain law and order. . . . With the proposed system, the village chief council appoints the force which then reports to the chiefs of the village. The trouble makers then appear before the village court and are fined or sentenced to clean the village cemetery. Only serious crimes are handed over to the Central Police, Inspector Kalala said. (*Vanuatu Weekly* 497 [June 11, 1994]: 5)

Multiplying land disputes and pressures to clarify ownership in order to facilitate national and foreign investment and to assure collateral for development loans, increasing youth crime in town, and challenges to village stability from incoming Christian evangelical groups all were among the motivations behind the aborted constitutional review and its promise to reinforce chiefly powers. *Jifs* unhappy with their lack of powers to force people to come to village courts and to enforce court judgments, people who have unhappy experiences with land cases tried in state courts, and officers of these courts who are themselves uncomfortable with having to take such decisions, all called for giving *jifs* greater responsibility in land disputes (*Vanuatu Weekly* 325 [Feb. 9, 1991]: 3; Mangnall 1990:20).

People are first supposed to bring land problems and other disputes to a village, area, or island court staffed by volunteer local *jifs*. Practically, this is the only option anyway for many people who are distanced by geography or knowledge from the sittings of state magistrate courts. Village courts adjudicate disputes and *jifs*, sitting as judges, may impose communal service (e.g., clean the village cemetery) or "fines" of produce or money that disputants exchange between themselves, although the *jifs* do not always have effective means to enforce their decisions. These village courts, evolved from traditional dispute-settlement practices, however, mostly hear cases in which adversaries are ready to settle anyway, and thus they actually do resolve many local disputes, at least temporarily.

All levels of the official chiefly hierarchy are now involved in dispute settlement, up through the Malvatumauri. Bongmatur attempted to establish procedures for chiefly intervention into disputes, although these procedures appear to be variably applied. He explained:

When there is trouble that people don't know how to resolve, the *jifs* first work on this. We even have appointed *jif* representatives in the two towns, Vila and Santo, to work in these places. When trouble occurs, they all handle this first. When they are unable to resolve it, they bring the problem to my office for me to deal with. Even island councils of chiefs that are unable to resolve a problem sometimes ask for my intervention, especially in issues of land. (My translation, Bongmatur interview)

Jifs hear the case and assign "fines" of pigs, kava, mats (in the case of Northern Vanuatu disputants), and money. The Malvatumauri also has decreed that each side in a case must pay 2,000 *vatu* for chiefly judicial services. If disputants refuse a judgment or to pay a levied fine, Bongmatur noted that *jifs* can, at that point, summon the police and state courts to take charge:

When a person fails to pay his fine, I put him into the hands of the police, if the issue is criminal, and he goes to state court. When he goes to that court he will

discover that he is sentenced to three or six months prison, sometimes a year if the trouble is serious and he is a real criminal. When he is in prison he will think back to the *jifs*: "Oh, if I had only exchanged the pig or mat that the *jif* demanded I would still be home caring for my children, with my family. Or perhaps I would have a job. Now I work [in prison] for nothing." So this [threat] makes people learn a lesson, when they experience the difference between the two systems of justice in the country: the work of *jifs* versus that of the national court system. (My translation, Bongmatur interview)

Bongmatur contrasted an inequitable and uncustomary Western system of justice that establishes winners and losers with traditional settlement practices, wherein *jifs* soothe strained relationships through ritual acts of exchange.

"Town chiefs" provide valuable policing as well as judiciary functions within Vanuatu's urban settlements. The Malvatumauri acknowledges the chiefly status of older men from outer-island communities resident in Vila and Santo. These town *jifs* assume oversight responsibility for their fellow islanders, particularly younger migrants, who are often unemployed. Town *jifs* also represent community members who come into conflict with residents from other islands. Bongmatur estimated that there were more than thirty such *jifs* active in Port Vila in 1992. Town *jifs* have one effective punitive sanction that they sometimes have been able to apply. Assisted by compatriots in the Port Vila police force, they exile back to home islands especially obnoxious and troublesome cases, typically young men and women. This practice is illegal, although many people accept its legitimacy if not its application in particular cases. One town *jif*, for example, criticized on the radio a second urban *jif* from North Tanna who had ordered his men to kidnap, beat up, and ship back to Tanna a woman who had become pregnant (I presume by a boyfriend from beyond North Tanna) (*Vanuatu Weekly* 324 [Feb. 2, 1991]: 2). The oversight of urban youth by town *jifs* no doubt contributes to the civility and order of Port Vila, at least compared with some other Pacific towns (Port Moresby, for example).

Chiefly powers in town, however, are not always entirely appreciated. The police and the judiciary have criticized chiefs for overstepping their authority, and stepping onto that of the state, in their attempts to resolve disputes intramurally by means of fine, exile, unofficial imprisonment, and other such punishment. In addition, women's organizations have occasionally condemned chiefly decisions that appear to privilege the rights and interests of men over those of women—as perhaps in the case above, where a posse of irregular police set upon a young woman and exiled her against her will. The sides are shifting, and the boundaries of authority blurred. *Jifs* serve the state, but threaten it as well, as when state police

and judges see their authority usurped and sidetracked. *Jifs* serve the people, but also threaten them, or some of them, as when they evoke custom to maintain inequalities between men and women, the old and the young, and the urban and the rural.

JIF AND STATE share interests in shoring up chiefly political authority to regulate village affairs, keeping unemployed migrant youth, both male and female, under control, and resolving local disputes, particularly those occasioned by conflicting land claims. The *jif* here operates as a tamed, salaried civil servant who extends the reach and effectiveness of the state into rural and urban settlement areas. Because of vexatious land disputes and the disruptions of urban migration, and because of the legitimating, rhetorical significance of *kastom* within the national agenda, the state and *jifs* are now in bed with one another—one could even say firmly wedded. Official *jifs* perform valuable legitimating, policing, and judiciary functions. Despite its reproaches to *jifs* to stay clear of politics, the state maintains an opposite interest to sustain effective chiefly capacities that legitimate the national agenda and police and judge islanders and urban migrants. The challenge is to ensure that *kastom jifs* on the islands, town *jifs* in the settlements, and Malvatumauri paramount *jifs* hobnobbing in the national *nakamal* remain firmly committed state *jifs* as well.

But the *jif* presents potential dangers as well as services to the state. The balance within this relationship, despite the constitution's unequal distribution of powers and rights, is not entirely in the state's favor. Some future Malvatumauri paramount *jifs* might stand on their constitutional authority and denounce state leaders for failing to preserve and promote *kastom*. State politicians have been nervous about exactly how much independence and power to accord *jifs*, and how to ensure that chiefly action serves the state. *Jifs* and people share local interests that occasionally counter those of national politicians and state leaders. Insofar as state legitimacy and institutions require and enfranchise the role of *jifs*, state leaders are hard pressed to shut them up if they become unruly and difficult.

The Carlot Korman government, for example, has confronted *jifs* from Ifira Island who claim the lands upon which Port Vila has spread (*Vanuatu Weekly* 506 [Aug. 13, 1994]: 1). The state aims to condemn these lands and transfer clearer titles to the capital's inhabitants. Because the state has valorized a traditionalist rhetoric in which *jifs* control land, however, it has had to deal with Ifira chiefs. And these rejected out of hand the government's final compensation offer of 110,000,000 *vatu*. If state leaders move ahead with the threat to withdraw their offer, and to treat directly with individual Ifira families, they will find themselves in the unhappy po-

sition of diluting the "safer," official functions of *jifs* while intensifying their extramural hazards.

Jifs operate both inside and outside the state, and this double stance offers politically strategic possibilities. Both chiefs and state continue to work out the meanings of the increasingly popular and stylish title, the *kastom jif*. Aborted state plans to regulate and organize *jifs* by promising to increase their powers by means of a constitutional revision would have drawn *jifs* more firmly into state structures. And local leaders, on their side, continue to test their capacities and standing vis-à-vis the state. The Vanuatu *jif* today remains under active and ongoing construction.