Yu Blong Wea?
An Anthropological Study of Vanuatu Land Struggle

Master’s Thesis in Anthropology
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Preface

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been written without the support and inspiration of the many people who have helped me in the process.

First of all I wish to thank all my informants from Mele Maat and Mele who let me into their lives and shared their time and knowledge with me. Especially I want to give thanks to Thomson, Leah, and their children for inviting me into their home and treating me like a member of the family. I am very grateful for your kindness, your unlimited hospitality, and your friendship. Na mesuk!

Besides from my informants I owe a special thanks to Diane Bretherton\(^1\) and her colleagues at the University of Queensland who aided the conceptualisation of the fieldwork and the research questions during the stages of planning. Once in Vanuatu, Howard Van Trease\(^2\) became a significant source of inspiration. Your many questions were of inestimable value to my realisation process, and I thank you for taking the time to throw me off balance. I also wish to send my regards to Anna Naupa\(^3\) and her mother Anne\(^4\). I remain indebted to you for your kindness, inspiration, and not least, a lovely dinner.

I owe a special thanks to my supervisor Cecilie Rubow whose unwavering support has made this thesis possible. All the way from the initial stages of planning, through the fieldwork itself, and during the ensuing process of analysis and writing, Cecilie provided invaluable inspiration and suggestions, and I could not have made it through without her. Thank you for your patience and guidance.

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\(^1\) Diane Bretherton holds the title of Honorary Professor at the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS).

\(^2\) Howard Van Trease is a notable historian with excessive knowledge of Vanuatu politics. He was so kind to meet me twice and discuss my project and thoughts. On writings by Van Trease, see for example *Melanesian Politics: Stael Blong Vanuatu* (1995) or *The Politics of Land in Vanuatu: From Colony to Independence* (1987).

\(^3\) Anna Naupa is a ni-Vanuatu development practitioner specialising in land policy, gender equality and democratic governance. Anna holds a Masters in Geography from the University of Hawai‘i.

\(^4\) Anne Naupa is currently the Chief Librarian at the National Library in Port Vila, Vanuatu.
Finally I wish to thank Reinholdt W. Jorck og Hustrus Fond for the financial support which made it possible for me to carry out the fieldwork.

Instructions for Reading

When I use indigenous terms in this thesis they are in Bislama - the unifying language in Vanuatu.

Quotes by informants have been translated from Bislama into English in a way which is sensitive to the way people spoke. In order to do so, sometimes I have compromised on the English grammar and syntactic structure.

*Italics* will be used when introducing indigenous terms (thereafter the terms will appear in regular font style), and as my emphasis of specific words.

‘Single quotation marks’ will be used for concepts and terms being discussed.

“Double quotation marks” will be used when citing academic texts or when quoting informants within excerpts from my field notes.

Indented line will be used for excerpts from field notes and quotes by informants.

[Brackets] within quotes mark my own comments.

I have chosen to refer to my informants by their real names instead of using pseudonyms. Since people already knew each other’s position in the conflicts, I do not find pseudonyms able to disguise the identity of people. Furthermore, all informants specified by name in the thesis were interested in getting their word out, and, as such, I find that I would do wrong by them in not letting them speak for themselves.

A final note on informants: The first time an informant is mentioned in the text he or she will be introduced. Appendix 1 provides an overview of the people appearing in the thesis, and it is meant to help the reader keep track of who is who.
Acronyms

DL: The Department of Lands.
VKS: The Vanuatu Cultural Centre (Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta).

Word list

Alienator: a term which describes the Europeans who occupied land prior to independence.

Blak man (black man): a term which describes ni-Vanuatu in general, as well as all that is considered traditional: a way of living, a building style, and so forth.

Freehold title: a term used to describe land areas which have been recognised as kastom land, meaning that they belong to a kastom owner who holds eternal rights. Such a right is therefore much different from that obtained by long-term leases.

Kastom: a concept with symbolic significance and multiple meanings. Most often it was used to describe tradition, culture, and proper way of conduct.

Kastom: when I use italics, kastom refers to a traditional gift.

Kastom owner/rightful people: these terms were often used by my informants to point to the same. Both referred to a specific kind of status, that is, the people who belonged to the land, and who were therefore the rightful owners.

Kastom system: a term used to refer to the unofficial system of governance represented by chiefs on various levels.

Lease: people who are not the original kastom owners of a plot of land can be allowed to lease it from the owner. The price is decided through negotiations between the owner and the leaseholder. A lease grants the leaseholder use rights to the land for a maximum of 75 years after which the owner is entitled to claim it back as long as he compensates the leaseholder for any improvements made.

Man kam: a term referring to people who do not belong originally to the place where they now live.

Man Maat/Maat Tribe: a term describing people who belong to Maat village on Ambrym. Among my informants it was used to signify different things, but in general it referred to the Mele Maat people.

Man Mele: a person from Mele (Mele Maat's neighbouring village).

Nakamal: this term refers to two different things. It both describes a traditional meeting house and a gathering of family clans. In this thesis I am only concerned with the latter. Furthermore, I only use the phrase in the singular, since this was how it was used by my
informants. A plural ‘s’ will therefore never be added. In Mele Maat three different nakamal existed (Sanoe, Peas and Namunei), although status of the latter was disputed.

**Ni-Vanuatu:** the people of Vanuatu.

**Title:** a plot of land.

**Vatu:** Vanuatu's national currency.

**Waet man (white man):** a term which was used to describe anyone from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and so forth. Often it was connected to all which was foreign to the traditional way of living.
Map no. 1: Vanuatu in the world

Map no. 2: Vanuatu and Efate
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Chapter 1: An Introduction

The ocean stretches out behind us, calm and turquoise, as my new acquaintance and I walk away from the beach café and make our way towards the main road. I feel nervous and excited at the same time. Enneth, as the young woman is called, has agreed to take me along to meet her family in Mele Maat, the village where she lives, and where I hope to be allowed further access.

Telling me about her family and their way of living, Enneth guides me to turn left as we reach the paved road. The sun burns down and humidity makes sweat trickle down our foreheads. Alongside the road, trees and bushes stand tall and lush. Busses and cars pass us occasionally at high speed as they transport people to town in search of work or a possibility to sell their crops at the big market in Port Vila, the capital city. I feel exposed walking. There is no space for pedestrians and every time a vehicle zooms by it forces us to seek refuge in the verge on the side of the road. Also, many stare at us. They seem unaccustomed with the sight of a white and a black girl walking next to each other.

We walk on, passing gardens filled with plants the height of a person. On the other side of the road some houses are visible in between tall trees and bushes. After 20 minutes of walking, Enneth declares that we have arrived at Mele Maat. To our left I notice the deserted village cemetery, and further ahead a group of young men are playing football in an adjoining field. Across from the collection of gravestones and their colourful plastic flower décor a big open space spreads out covered in short grass and encircled by trees in various sizes and shapes. Occupying the part of the lawn closest to us is a big, white concrete building with a blue roof. Enneth tells me that this is the Presbyterian Church. Further down is another building, the community hall, which makes a somewhat poorer appearance with its grey concrete walls and corrugated iron roof. Behind it, many small houses are visible. Most of them look like they are built from imported materials, and corrugated iron dominates. Looking around it seems that metal has replaced wood to a large extent. Thatched houses are nowhere to be seen.

Leaving the paved road behind, we turn right and make our way down a muddy path which, I find out later, makes out one of several entrances to the village. A few chickens walk around the patches of grass alongside the path, and a pig makes a bit of noise inside a small paddock. Rain has come down in torrents the last few weeks and our feet sink into
the mud as we try to avoid the largest puddles. It is difficult. Some are as wide as the path, and we have to jump to get across. Still my sandals sink into the muddy ground. As I pull them out, they send cascades of mud up my legs.

I notice that on our left, the houses are placed very close to one another. Most look small and a bit shabby. On our right there are only trees and bushes, but as we walk on a big grassy lawn appears with a house made of concrete situated about 50 metres from where we are. The contrast is noticeable. Later, I discovered that the path on which we were walking constituted the dividing line between Mele and Mele Maat. With a population of more than 1851 people Mele village dwarfs its smaller neighbour in both numbers and size. Furthermore, while Mele occupies a large area to accommodate its inhabitants, Mele Maat’s approximately 1000 residents share a rather small area which has entailed a need to construct houses very close to one another, something which gives the village a somewhat poorer look.

Having left the grassy lawn behind Enneth directs me to turn left, and by doing so we arrive at an open compound. A house is situated on each side and in the back a few buildings appear. Up until now we have not met a single soul, but now an elderly man approaches us, smiling. Reaching out his strong, rough hand he introduces himself and while shaking it I tell him my name. Enneth explains that this is her grandfather. We say goodbye and walk down to the end of the compound where the house which Enneth shares with her mother and father, as well as two sisters and three brothers, is situated. As with most of the houses I have seen so far, the family home is constructed mainly from corrugated iron. As we enter the front door I notice the concrete floor, the small worn out couch and a little kitchen table with a tap and a sink. Slabs of wood make out some of the walls inside. One of these is covered with old posters displaying male and female fashion models from the 1980’s with big hair and colourful outfits. Enneth’s father gives me a big smile and welcomes me to their home, telling me that his name is Thomson. Enneth’s mother also approaches me, although a bit more shyly. She gives me her hand and says her

1 This number dates back to 1999 (Fingleton et al. 2008:24) and considering the general population growth in Vanuatu this is bound to be much higher today.
name is Leah. While Thomson is dressed in shorts and t-shirt, Leah is wearing a colourful island dress displaying a flower pattern. Also, Thomson’s bald head is a contrast to the black halo surrounding Leah’s.

Thanking them for their hospitality, I am directed to the couch while Thomson sits down on a white container next to me. Enneth draws forward a small, rickety office chair for herself, and Leah together with the youngest daughter, Moala, places herself on a traditional mat made of palm leaves which covers a large part of the concrete floor. Feeling a need to explain, I tell them about myself and the project I am here to carry out. When I mention that I have a particular interest in the Mele Maat people, because they originally came from another island to settle down here on Efate, Thomson immediately begins to tell me their story.

*This thesis is about stories and it is about truth. But most of all it is about conflict. Arriving in Vanuatu with four months of ethnographic fieldwork stretching out ahead of me, I wanted to explore the meanings of land and the way people, who move from their place of origin towards the urban areas, establish identity and a sense of belonging in a location to which they have no prior connection or rights. However, I was taken aback as I began to discover just how contested these issues had become.

A former colony, Vanuatu has experienced extensive land alienation and control during the 20th century. Growing resistance to colonial rule and exploitation finally brought about independence and a declaration that all land must be returned to the original kastom owners – a term referring to those holding ownership of land areas prior to the intrusion of waet man (white man). While set forth with the amiable purpose to restore rights over land in the hands of ni-Vanuatu (the people of Vanuatu), this declaration resulted in widespread unrest as arguments flared up between people all over the archipelago about who was really the true kastom owner of specific pieces of land. Today, more than 30 years after Vanuatu gained its independence, ferocious disputes over land still shake the nation, and arguments remain about who can rightfully claim to be the rightful people, that is, those who belong to a certain place and consequently hold rights over land.

2 Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu, Article 73
Taking as its starting point the empirical setting of Mele Maat, a village situated 10 km outside the capital city on the island Efate, this thesis focuses on two specific land struggles which had already been ongoing for years, one playing out between Mele Maat and their neighbouring village Mele, and another unfolding among people within Mele Maat itself. Differences put aside for now both were concerned with land and with claiming one’s own rights or disclaiming the rights of others, and both were characterised by an abundance of stories about past events - and their meaning and significance – many of which collided strongly with one another.

Retrospectively, during my first meeting with the people who ended up becoming my host family and closest friends and informants (described above) I was introduced for the first time to this practice of narrating the past, though at the time I did not recognise its importance. Having just sat down on the plastic container next to me, Thomson began on a detailed story in which the trajectories of the Mele Maat people unfolded. He told me about how they had been forced to evacuate their home island as a consequence of the destructive residue shot out from the fiery belly of Mt. Benbow more than 60 years ago; how the colonial government brought them all to the island Epi where they stayed until a storm hit, causing a devastating mud slide which killed so many people that the sea turned red; how they finally managed to settle down on Efate while working for the French plantation owner, André Houdié, who let them buy four plots of his land on which they could establish their village and cultivate gardens. This became Mele Maat, named after its proximity to Mele as well as the village from which they came, Maat.

As with so many other stories of what had happened and what it meant, this story was told to me repeatedly and by many different people during my stay in the village. However, while the contents of this specific story, relating the dramatic journey which shaped the Mele Maat people and their fundamental claim to the land on which they now lived, was to a large extent agreed on by all, the opposite turned out to be true regarding almost every other story concerned with belonging and rights to land. Living among my informants these diverse interpretations of what was true became a source of puzzlement, but as time progressed I began to realise that the content of the stories could not be understood by way of binary oppositions such as true and false. Rather, truth turned out to be multiple, and this multiplicity had specific manifestations which shaped the struggles over land.
As such, while remaining humble towards the complexity involved in the issue with which I am concerned, in this thesis I will: explore the production and perseverance of conflict as it unfolded in the village of Mele Maat. More specifically I will investigate the multiplicity of truth and its implications for the ongoing land struggles.

The overall concern which traverses this endeavour is to understand the relationship between the multiple truths and the ongoing struggles over land. By focusing on multiplicity I will show how my informants through their narratives established diverging social worlds which were often fundamentally different from one another. Each provided the narrators with categorical schemata for interpreting past and present events and developments, and each shaped how people understood their need to struggle and how they chose to do it. My main argument is that the multiplicity of truth was both part of what spurred the conflicts onwards and what upheld a certain kind of social stability within the context of conflict.

Acknowledging that the multiplicity of truth was not alone in affecting the production and perseverance of struggle, I have chosen to expand the analysis to include other factors as well. This means that I investigate selected elements which each and in their combination had impact on the conflicts with which I am concerned, and while some of these seemed to be connected to the production of truths, others worked quite independently from it. Approaching the subject of study like this has been a way to deal with the profound complexity I discovered in the field.

Upon having, in this introduction, unfolded some of the themes that serve as focal point for the thesis and its analytical endeavour, the remaining chapter will fall in four parts. First, I will position the present study within the regional literature on land struggles in order to show how it contributes to the existing body of knowledge. Secondly, I will outline the theoretical framework applied in the thesis to shed light on the questions posed. Having done so, thirdly the overall empirical setting will be introduced with a specific focus on land in a historical, political and symbolic perspective, and finally I will lay bare an overview of the remaining parts of the thesis.
1.1 Positioning the Study: A Focus on Struggle

Vanuatu has, like so many of its Pacific neighbours, experienced colonial domination and land alienation, and it is not alone in being confronted with persistent disputes over land (Jowitt 2004; Wilson 2010; Storey 2006; Corrin 2012; Norm & Fingleton 2012). While the specific problems and challenges of such conflicts vary greatly in the region, land struggles must be recognised as a general issue which confronts local people as well as policy makers with demands of conflict resolution and management.

This development has not gone unnoticed, and in Vanuatu many have pointed to the problems at hand. The Second National Development Plan (1987-91) lamented that disputes over the ownership of custom land, rather than land availability, are the largest single obstacle to the development of the rural areas of Vanuatu (Rodman 1995:105). Referring to Vanuatu on a general level Russell Nari emphasises that the increase in conflicts has been seen by many as a major obstacle to the development process, and he states that: “It is for this reason that both the public and the private sector are investing a lot of time, efforts and resources to formulate appropriate strategies and policies to rectify the situation” (Nari 2000:1).

Much has been written about the ongoing land struggles. Such studies vary in approach and purpose, but most tend to work on a more general level - either regional or national - and to focus on governance structures and legislation (Brown & Nolan 2008; Nari 2001; Regenvanu 2008; Forsyth 2004, 2009; Rousseau 2004; Jowitt 2004; Simo & Van Trease 2011; Loode et al. 2009). Some of these have explored the possibilities and limitations of the state legal system and the traditional structures of governance, and thereby sought to provide guidelines regarding how to overcome the continuous struggles in a way which remains sensitive to the cultural diversity characterising the country (Brown & Nolan 2008; Forsyth 2004, 2009; Rousseau 2004; Jowitt 2004). Others have looked more specifically on certain aspects of the legislation and reform (Simo & Van Trease 2011; Regenvanu 2008; Nari 2001). Many of the above mentioned studies have also focused on

5 Russell Nari is DG of Lands and formerly Deputy Director of the Vanuatu Environment Unit.
the issue of land itself and discussed issues such as contrasting Western and indigenous conceptions of land and ownership, and how these have influenced the production of conflict (see for example Nari 2001).

Together these studies have provided an invaluable insight into the Vanuatu land struggles and proposed many suggestions for conflict resolution. However, in their efforts to discuss some more general aspects of conflict and conflict management, the context specific, that is, the details and the variations seem to be sacrificed to some extent.

While this study is similarly concerned with the issue of conflict resolution, its purpose is of a more holistic kind with emphasis on lived experience. As such, it provides a window through which to consider the ongoing land struggles in a different light. It seeks to ethnographically explore the land struggles from the viewpoint of people engaging in such conflicts. In this manner the study differs somewhat from those mentioned above. This focus makes possible an exploration of the ways people experienced the ongoing conflicts, how they understood their need to struggle, and the ways they chose to do it.

1.2 When things are not simple: Outlining the Theoretical Framework

During the fieldwork I soon discovered that whatever was going on it was not a simple matter: issues of conflict were everywhere; a range of different people were involved in the struggles; the struggles themselves unfolded on many levels, from arguments to regular court cases; opinions collided strongly with one another; and past, present and future scenarios were being attached with multiple meanings - just to mention a few aspects, which made the conflicts over land so complex.

If the overall aim of the thesis is to explore some of the complexity characterising the land struggles, the question is how. To answer this, we need to look at the concept itself. What does it mean that something is complex? John Law and Annemarie Mol attempt to establish a definition, "[I]f things relate but don’t add up, then they are complex; if events occur but not within the processes of linear time, then they are complex; and if phenomena share a space but cannot be mapped in terms of a single set of three-dimensional coordinates, then they too are complex" (Law & Mol 2006 [2002]:20). However, they point out that while this is not exactly wrong, still it is too simple because it
works with binaries, "In a complex world there are no simple binaries. Things add up and they don’t. They flow in linear time and they don’t. And they exist within a single space and escape from it. That which is complex cannot be pinned down. To pin it down is to lose it' (ibid: 20-21).

Law and Mol’s proposal should be read as a critique to what they consider a general understanding within social science. Accordingly, Law writes that the framing assumption within academia is that "the world is properly to be understood as a set of fairly specific, determinate, and more or less identifiable processes" (Law 2004:5), and that through our methods we can discover the most important of those (ibid:6). But, he asks, is this indeed what social science is meant to do (ibid)? Law finds his inspiration in philosophical romanticism and the works of influential post-structuralists who share an understanding of the world as fundamentally elusive and rich - a condition which presents limits to what we can know by way of our theories and methods (Law 2004:8-9). Building on this understanding of the social and how to study it, Law writes that the need is for heterogeneity and variation instead of looking for definite processes (Law 2004:6).

While other theoretical perspectives will be included to shed light on the empirical data, Law and Mol’s understanding of the complex will provide the overall framework for this thesis. Complexity will, as such, be a recurrent theme which continuously guides the developing analysis. I have chosen this approach in an effort to remain as true as possible to my empirical data and the fact that not everything added up. The chapters of the thesis should be read as such. Each deal with specific elements which affected and/or were affected by the conflicts, and these will be analysed in their own right.

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7 This does not mean that nothing in the world can be made clear and definite, Law points out, but rather that when things are complex they usually get distorted when we try to make sense of them (Law 2004:2).

8 The philosophical romanticism, represented by thinkers such as Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, holds that the world is so rich that our theories about it will always fail to catch more than a part of it; that there is therefore a range of possible theories about a range of possible processes; that those theories and processes are probably irreducible to one another; and, finally, that we cannot step outside the world to obtain an overall ‘view from nowhere’ which pastes all the theory and processes together (Law 2004:8). According to Law, post-structuralists like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida share many of the same intuitions, “Instead of assuming that there is a specific external reality upon which we can ground our efforts to know the world, such writers mobilise metaphors such as ‘flux’ to index the sense that whatever there is in the world cannot be properly or finally caught in the webs of inquiry found in science and social science. And they talk of ‘discourse’, ‘deferral’ or ‘episteme’ to point to the methodological efforts to make and know limited moments in the fluxes that make up reality” (ibid:8-9).
In the thesis I have chosen to deal with two aspects which each and in their combination made the land struggles complex. As I mentioned above, the multiplicity of truth constitutes one such. The other aspect which I have chosen to explore was in some ways connected to this, but not in a simple way. In the following I will position the study within the theoretical fields of which these focal points are part. First I will discuss the issue of *historicity* and secondly I will be concerned with the non-linear folding of *time*.

### 1.2.1 Multiple Worlds

"[A]ctors do not discover orders of the world that existed before they made them"  

In dealing with the issue of truth and its many representations of the past, I write into a field well explored within anthropological theory: that of historicity and historical consciousness. Lévi-Strauss has argued for the impossibility of a single "objective", "totalised history". Hereby he decouples truth and history by saying that “historical facts are no more given than any other” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:257). This observation has opened up for an understanding of history as relative and context specific, rather than a given fact which exists in the world independently from human practice. Simultaneously, however, it poses some problems. That truth, in a historical sense, “is a matter of context” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:254) suggests that history is nothing more than a matter of competing versions. In response to this Liisa Malkki argues against the notion that all versions of history should be accorded equal validity, and that a retreat into thoroughgoing relativism is politically or morally defensible. If all versions were equally true, says Malkki, it would be possible to insist that Holocaust never happened in Europe, that Hiroshima was a dream and so forth. This leads her to conclude that there are *wrong* versions of historical events (Malkki 1995:240).

Somewhere in between the two extremes of one and many historical truth(s) many scholars have taken it upon themselves to challenge the notion of “objective history” as the reconstruction of a universal and unsituated historical truth, and shown how knowledge is situated, contextual, multiple⁹, and always in the process of becoming¹⁰. Consciousness is not a *thing* existing absolutely, independent from social action and invention or of the

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contingencies of the lived (Malkki 1995:240). In the forthcoming analysis of the multiplicity of truth, I adopt a similar approach and hereby acknowledge the relationship between social action and historicity. I find my inspiration mainly in Nelson Goodman's concept of 'worldmaking' and align myself with the relativism it entails. As we shall see, the social worlds which my informants established were able to exist quite independently from one another and consequently truth remained multiple.

1.2.2 The Folding of Time

"Time flies, but it flies like a swallow, up, down, off quickly and then coming slowly back again" (Law & Mol 2006:13).

The other level of complexity with which I am concerned in this thesis has to do with time, and by choosing this focus I write into an already existing field within anthropological theory on time and practice. Time, as Mol and Law so poetically express it in the quote above, is not only linear in the sense of passing minutes and hours each following each other like pearls on a string. Similarly, Morten Nielsen argues that different temporalities are not necessarily distinct from one another, or separated through a linear chronology (Nielsen 2011:397-99). This understanding of time provides the outset for my analysis. By way of this view on temporal flows, I will investigate how time, while progressing from one moment to the next, also folded in non-linear ways, and discuss its implications for the ongoing conflicts. From this it will be clear that past, present and future were neither distinct temporalities separated from one another, nor were they connected in any simple linear way. Rather, each of them folded into one another, and this folding of time had specific ramifications for the ongoing struggles over land.

In the analysis of the production of truth (described above) I am also concerned with how past traditions and events were turned into present-day resources through the narrative practice. However, as I will show through the developing analysis, a focus on people's orientation towards the future is able to provide additional answers to the questions I wish to explore.

In order to understand how my informants oriented themselves towards the future, and to analyse the impacts this orientation had on the ongoing struggles, I will draw on a range of studies written on future assumptions and anticipatory action. Nancy Munn (1995),
Marilyn Strathern (2005) and Morten Nielsen (2011) will be my primary inspiration in the analysis which seeks to investigate how concerns about the future folded back on the present context of conflict and incited certain actions which kept the conflicts in motion. However, the conceptions of the future did not only take the shape of concerns. By including Vincent Crapanzano’s theory on hope (2003) in the analysis I will show how the act of hoping and the potential for success was both part of what spurred people to struggle and what maintained a relative peace among the struggling parties.

Before moving on I wish to point out that while some of the theoretical perspectives included in the analysis to come are products of different fields within anthropological theory, I find each of them able to add (partial) answers to the questions I pose, and in their combination they point to the complexity inherent in the diverging struggles over land. My approach to theory is inspired by the turn in anthropology which has been named ‘the pragmatic’11. I consider theories to be necessary tools in generating anthropological knowledge, but they are not whole truths12 and should for this reason be used in a reflexive manner. For this reason I see no contradiction in combining perspectives from various theoretical fields. On the contrary it is a way to deal with complexity theoretically.

1.3 Vanuatu: A Note on Geography, Demography, and a History of Land Struggle

Vanuatu is a Y-shaped archipelago situated in the south west Pacific Ocean. The country counts a population of 234,023 people13 who presently inhabit about 65 of 83 islands14. Consisting of an abundance of islands with pristine white beaches, jungle, volcanoes, black ash, sun, rain and plenty of fertile soil, Vanuatu is predestined to be a paradise on earth. However, the place is marked by factors which to some degree counter this potential. With a specific focus on land, in the following I will provide an overview of the historical and political developments which have influenced the current struggles.

11 Kirsten Hastrup describes in the following way, “A pragmatic anthropology acknowledges that theories are not final answers to human riddles, but […] temporary instruments through which we can handle social complexities” (Hastrup 2005:144).
12 See for example Hastrup’s description of the grand narratives characterising the anthropological discipline up until the 1980’s (Hastrup 2005:133-37).
1.3.1 A History of Land

As I mentioned in chapter 1.1 Vanuatu shares a trajectory of European colonisation and exploitation with a range of nearby countries. The first Europeans to visit the archipelago were Spanish, French and English explorers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Forsyth 2009:1), but the first land boom occurred in the 1860s, when Europeans first established cotton plantations on Efate and Epi and then diversified to copra (dried coconut) and cattle (Cox et al. 2007:8). Development led the French and British governments to establish a joint naval commission to provide security for their nationals and commercial interests. This eventually lead to the establishment of what was termed the Condominium in 1906 under which the British and the French jointly, and more or less equally, ruled what was then known as the New Hebrides (Forsyth 2009:1).

Through the 20th century land alienation increased until by 1972 over a third of the country’s land had been alienated for agricultural purposes, comprising most of the arable land on the coastal plains and river valleys (Cox et al. 2007:9). This extensive alienation of land was a significant factor in bringing about independence since the discontent felt by ni-Vanuatu turned into political opposition during the 1960’s and 70’s (Van Trease 1995:6). Despite French resistance independence was achieved on 30 July 1980, largely without bloodshed (Forsyth 2009:2).

In the introduction to the thesis I disclosed that at independence all land which had been appropriated by foreigners was returned to the indigenous kastom owners and their descendants. Simultaneously, rules of land ownership were changed to accommodate the new situation. This entailed that all registered land titles granted during the colonial period were cancelled (Simo & Van Trease 2011:1). In the process of restoring land to the original owners some European planters were driven from their land, but the majority succeeded in obtaining long-term leases and remained (Cox et al. 2007:9). This process was enabled by the passing of the Land Reform Act in 1980 and the Land Leases Act from 1983 which provided kastom owners with the option to negotiate leases for up to 75 years with the previous owners of their land, normally for a single, up-front payment.

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15 Van Trease points out that this opposition started already in the 19th century, well before the establishment of the Condominium, but that it grew to become the catalyst for the nationalist movement which brought about independence (Van Trease 1995:12-13). As such, before independence, two groupings of political parties emerged: the English-speaking pro-independence movement that became the Vanua’aku Pati and a number of French-speaking parties opposed to immediate independence.
(Regenvanu 2008:65; Fingleton et al. 2008:27; Cox et al. 2007:9). When such leases expire the kastom owner is entitled to claim back the land as long as he compensates the leaseholder for improvements made during this period. However, since many kastom owners fail to meet these demands, permanent alienation of land has become possible once again (Cox et al. 2007:9-10).

Furthermore, while the Constitution declared that all land was to be returned to the original owners, this process has turned out much more complicated than anticipated. Uncertainty over title, disputes about identity of the true kastom owner, and lack of information continued to cause delays in registration (Rodman 1995:82). As Joel Simo and Howard Van Trease express it, “Though the framers of the Constitution did provide for a procedure to deal with land disputes, they did not anticipate that the problem would grow to become one of the most disruptive issues in Vanuatu society today” (Simo & Van Trease 2011:1).

1.3.2 The Politics of Land

Governance in Vanuatu is carried out by an ensemble of actors and agencies from the realms of the state, of civil society, and of customary societal structures (Boege & Forsyth 2007:2). At independence the colonial government was abolished and in its place a new two-stringed system of governance was installed. Inspired from the British, Vanuatu adopted a democratic model with a 52-member Parliament elected to four-year terms by universal adult suffrage.

While this system has become the official governmental structure it is facing certain problems. Firstly, political instability is endemic in Vanuatu; motions of no confidence regularly lead to the overthrow of governments and there is continual reshuffling of the political parties (Forsyth 2009:9). Secondly, among the general population great distrust exists towards the state which still, in many areas is considered to be an alien and foreign construction, and towards the politicians who are known to be corrupted and following self-interest (ibid:10). Finally, the state has limited resources and outreach which makes it inaccessible in many areas (Brown & Nolan 2008:3).

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16 Today most of coastal Efate is now alienated and this is radically transforming the social and geographical environment. Land development has spread out from Port Vila around the coastline, with residential subdivisions taking over beach frontage (Cox et al. 2007:10).

17 For example, during my four months of fieldwork the government changed three times because of the so-called motions of no confidence.
The state provides a national court system which works on four different levels (Forsyth 2009:139). The highest is the Court of Appeal which is followed by the Supreme Court. Then come the Magistrates' Courts and The Island Courts which are at the bottom of the court hierarchy. At independence, the Island Courts were charged with the resolution of land disputes with appeals going directly to the Supreme Court. This system, however, led to an enormous backlog of cases as 100 per cent of cases were appealed (ibid:7). In an effort to overcome these problems, the Customary Land Tribunal Act was passed in December 2001, introducing a system of Customary Land Tribunals throughout the country to enable all cases involving land disputes to be dealt with at a local level - village, area and island - rather than through the state courts (Simo & Van Trease 2011:1). However, these have continuously failed to solve the existing problems (Forsyth 2009:7-8).

Many refer to the state system of governance as the official one and it is often contrasted with the traditional way of kastom (custom) (Forsyth 2004:431)\(^\text{18}\). In chapter 4 I will discuss the meaning and significance of kastom in further detail. Here it suffices to say that kastom in Vanuatu refers both to tradition, in the sense of culture and practice, and to a system of governance based on traditional values and conceptions of appropriate behaviour (Forsyth 2009:95).

*The kastom system*, as Miranda Forsyth has termed the traditional structure of governance (Forsyth 2009:95) occupies a prominent role in the Constitution. As such, Article 95(3) affirms that “customary law shall continue to have effect as part of the law of the Republic of Vanuatu”\(^\text{19}\) while Article 74 states that “rules of custom shall form the basis of ownership and use of land”\(^\text{20}\). However, the position of kastom in the Constitution is ambiguous, and what it means to follow the rule of kastom remains quite unclear (Forsyth 2004:431). This, Forsyth argues, suggests that the drafters of the Constitution were torn between a desire to incorporate kastom, and a desire to modify those parts of it which were perhaps not seen as being in conformity with the standards of a modern nation state (ibid).

\(^{18}\)It should be noted that although these two systems of governance differ in many ways, they also overlap and share some conceptions of conflict management. To consider them direct opposites would therefore be a mistake. See Benedicta Rousseau (2008) for a more detailed argument.

\(^{19}\)Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu, Article 95

\(^{20}\)Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu, Article 74
The kastom system exists in every village and town in Vanuatu, and is indisputably the way in which the majority of conflicts in every rural and urban community are managed, and even cases managed by the state system often have some level of involvement with the kastom system (Forsyth 2009:97). Several levels of authority exist within this system. Firstly, each village has its own chief who mostly deals with matters concerning the village. Several area councils bring together chiefs from larger areas such as an island or a region to make decisions of a more general character. On top of the structure is the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs which represents chiefs at a national level21 (ibid).

All these different levels of councils as well as individual chiefs are responsible for managing conflicts that members of their community are involved in, and focus is generally on restoring peace and harmony rather than finding a winner and a loser (Forsyth 2009:95; Brown & Nolan 2008:14). The matters handled vary according to various factors such as the chiefs’ own assessment of their jurisdictional capabilities and power, community support for the kastom system, the wishes of the conflicting parties, and the accessibility of the state system (Forsyth 2009:98).

1.3.3 From Mother to Commodity?

While having outlined the historical and political background of the continuous land struggles I wish to add a final note on the importance ni-Vanuatu ascribe to land. In most literature on this subject, land is highlighted as the mother of the people and argued to be essential to their identity construction (Bonnemaison 1984:1, Nari 2000:1; Forsyth 2009:3, Brown 2008:192). Traditionally, land and sea were highly valued as much for what they symbolised as for what they produced. They were the source of identity as well as the basis from which all subsistence requirements were met (Nari 2000:1). Sethy Regenvanu (the first Minister of Land following independence) articulates it like this, “Land to ni-Vanuatu is what a mother is to a baby. It is with land he identifies his identity and it is with land he maintains his spiritual strength. Ni-Vanuatu do allow others the use of their land, but they always retain the right of ownership” (‘Land Rights’, Vanuatu Weekly, July 1982:10). In this quote Regenvanu emphasises a central issue. In earlier days,

21 Brown and Nolan describe the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs as a “hybrid”, national organisation which loosely links customary authorities across the country. It enables a “customary voice” to speak at the national level on issues of importance to custom and by extension of importance to much of the rural population, which includes approximately 80 percent of ni-Vanuatu (Brown & Nolan 2008:i).
land always remained with the original owners. While other people could be granted permission to use it for a period, it never changed hands, but was passed on from one generation to the next (Crocombe 1972:220).

While land remains of symbolic significance to ni-Vanuatu other factors have begun to affect how people understand and make use of their land. Forsyth notes that, "Today [...] land additionally provides the possibility for exploitation in order to participate in the cash economy. With the growing population, it is becoming a limited resource subjected to competing pressures" (Forsyth 2009:7). This increased focus on land as commodity have inticed land owners to lease out land to white man or fellow ni-Vanuatu as a way to earn an income. However, profits have generally shown to be a quick fix which does not presuppose development (Cox et al. 2007:10).

Another change which has affected ni-Vanuatu conceptions of land has been brought along by increasing urban drift. While approximately 80 per cent of the population lives as subsistence farmers in rural areas many now choose to move away from their place of origin to get closer to one of the two urban centres - the national capital Port Vila (population: 44,039) situated on Efate, or Luganville (population of 13,156) on Espiritu Santo22. Circular migration has always been an aspect of life in Vanuatu (Bedford 1973; Haberkorn 1992:808), but contrary to this movement where people usually return to their place of origin, the current urban drift is characterised by long term or permanent settlement in the urban or peri-urban areas23 (Michell 2003:360; Cox et al. 2007:15-19). As a result the urban population growth is currently 3.5 per cent compared with the national growth of 2.3 per cent, and the rural of only 1.924.

These two developments in combination have produced increasing problems with land scarcity, especially around the urban centres. I see this as part of the reason why struggles are flaring up in these areas. However, as will be discussed throughout this thesis the conflicts over land were far more complex than this explanation suggests.

23 Many blaim the lacking possibilities to earn money in rural areas as well as the isolation - caused by the distances between islands and the sporadic and expensive nature of transport - for this development while others point to the alluring position urbanity has obtained in the minds of especially young people (Forsyth 2009:4-5). Today, there are still very few opportunities to participate in the cash economy in rural areas (Mitchell 2003:362, 366; Storey 2005:1, 3).
1.4 Outline of Thesis

Before turning to the analysis I will in chapter 2 provide a description of the fieldwork, the informants, and the methods which all shaped the collected data. Also, I will discuss the problems I encountered in my efforts to obtain data from people who sharply opposed one another in the conflicts. This entailed several ethical challenges which could only partly be overcome. Three analytical chapters will then follow the methodology chapter. These are structured according to the different levels of complexity with which I am concerned, but since these folded into the conflicts in different ways, aspects of both multiplicity and time cut across the chapters to come.

In chapter 3 I zoom in on Mele Maat in order to provide a further backdrop for the ensuing discussions. While the first part will describe the home of my host family, the second is concerned with how my informants balanced their lives in between traditional and Western ways. In the last part of the chapter I move on to discuss how different levels of uncertainty characterised my informant’s relationship to the place on which they now lived. Through this I will explore the way categories were established and negotiated while people struggled to establish legitimacy and rights. As we shall see, these struggles were characterised by an abundance of stories each of which asserted the storyteller as someone who belonged.

In chapter 4 I look more closely at the narrative practice. First I will investigate how the narratives gained their force and legitimacy in diverging notions of the meaning and significance of past traditions and events. Through a discussion of the constructed and continuous aspects of kastom, I will argue that it was a symbol open for interpretation, and show how it was utilised by my informants to claim rights over land. In the last part of the chapter I am concerned with how the many stories told could be produced and maintained, as well as how this affected the ongoing struggles over land. I will argue that the many versions of what was true cannot be understood by way of notions such as true or false. Rather, truth should be considered multiple.

While having in chapter 4 provided an analysis of the ways the past was brought into the present-day struggles and with which results, in chapter 5 I bring these arguments into a broader discussion about temporal flows, and provide an analysis of how people’s orientation towards the future shaped the ways they understood their need to struggle
and how they chose to do it. Furthermore, I will explore the way the multiplicity of truths along with other factors made any settlement difficult to reach, and how conflict was upheld as a result. As I will argue, this situation brought with it a condition where everyone involved could maintain hope of future success, and through the analysis I will show that a certain form of stability was created within the context of conflict, as my informants placed their trust in others to fulfil their hopes.
Chapter 2: On Entering the Field & Methodology

The decision to focus my fieldwork on Mele Maat was a result of the convergence of the anthropologically interesting and the methodologically opportune. One major factor which shaped the development had to do with the difficulties I experienced in establishing any form of prior contact to anyone who could assist me on my arrival. After several attempts to get in touch with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre\(^ {25} \) in order to obtain a research permit, I had decided to leave for this Pacific island state without one such or any established contacts in my suitcase. Once there I managed to obtain a permit, but aside from that I was still on my own. My initial plan had been to focus the study on people who lived in the more temporary settlements in the outskirts of Port Vila. However, people I met strongly advised me against approaching these areas without a guide, telling me that it was too dangerous for a white girl on her own.

Acknowledging that I had to look for other options, I began to ask around about the village Mele Maat which, as far as I had learned, was more settled and easier to approach. Most importantly the history of its people as well as their rather unique position intrigued me. Having left their home island to settle down on Efate more than 60 years ago, what, I wondered, characterised their relationship to this land now. Driven by the possibility to explore the matter I began networking my way towards someone who could help me gain access. By way of luck I managed to get introduced to Enneth, the young woman introduced in the beginning of the thesis, who took me along to meet her family. At the end of this first encounter Thomson and his older brother, Maatson, who had come by to say hello, offered me to come live with them in the village. Greatful I accepted, and within a week I moved into the home of Thomson and Leah who during the months to come would provide me with language, knowledge, food and friendship along with my newfound sisters and brothers as well as their extended family.

2.1 The Field

An anthropological field does not exist in itself but is always defined by the anthropologist. This is the case with both empirical and analytical contextualisation (Olwig 2002:118).

\(^ {25} \) The Vanuatu Cultural Centre was founded in 1956. As a “hybrid” organisation it is currently contributing to stability in Vanuatu by playing an active, bridging role between customary interests and the emerging, non-Church based civil society, as well as working with government on critical issues such as land tenure, sustainability and juvenile justice (Brown & Nolan 2008:i, 7).
Each of these place a certain frame around the project which guides the choice of informants and location(s) as well as the anthropological attention, that is, what is focused upon (Gulløv & Højlund 2003:354; Hastrup 2003:413). As such, depending on one’s level of perspective there are several fields to be identified within the present study. Having already outlined the analytical perspectives shaping the forthcoming discussions and conclusions, I will now turn toward the empirical context of the study.

Though I ended up living in Mele Maat throughout the fieldwork, the field was not restricted to the village itself. George Marcus has coined the phrase multi-sited fieldwork to describe an approach which is inherently different from the classical single-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1995). Similarly, Akhil Gupta and James Furguson have proposed that a re-definition is required of the ethnographic fieldwork as we move towards a focus on social, cultural and political locations (what they term location-work) rather than merely on location (in a spatial sense). This points to the de-centralisation of the field as an element of a multi-stringed methodology, developed with the aim of achieving ‘situated knowledges’ (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:37-39). Based on this understanding my fieldwork can aptly be characterised as a multi-sited one.

Living with my host family it was naturally their side of the story which was related to me first. However, as time passed I could not help but wonder what those whom the family opposed so strongly had to say about it all, and finally I decided to follow my intuition and seek out these people as well, despite of my family’s objections. In this way, the field consisted of a range of people who took up diverging positions in the internal conflict in the village and who, while sharing the same area, most often lived in different spheres with no contact to one another. A note on numbers must also be included. Of about 1000
inhabitants I managed to talk to about 35 people. While some of these were only brief
encounters, I relied on approximately 15 key informants\textsuperscript{26} in the village.

As time passed and my confusion grew as a result of the many stories told, I decided to
seek out people from the neighbouring village Mele whom, I hoped (utterly naïve) could
provide me with the true story of what had happened. However, this only increased the
level of complexity as I discovered that not only within Mele Maat itself was truth a
disputed subject. Also between Mele and Mele Maat did diverging interpretations and
claims to rights collide. In this way my informants did not make up a coherent group of
people, but rather represented contrasting positions which were often sharply articulated
and lived out. Besides from the informants from Mele Maat and Mele\textsuperscript{27} I also interviewed
the former minister of Lands, Ralph Regavanu\textsuperscript{28}, President Chief of the Malvatumauri
National Council of Chiefs, Gratien Alguet, as well as representatives from the DL. Finally, I
received help and guidance from people within academia such as Howard Van Trease,
Anna Naupa and Anne Naupa\textsuperscript{29}.

2.2 Access and the Implications of Becoming Part of it All

The access to my informants’ knowledge was mediated through a number of
gatekeepers\textsuperscript{30}. Obtaining a research permit from the Vanuatu Cultural Centre was the first
step by which I gained access to Vanuatu in a more general sense. As I entered Mele Maat
it was the hospitality of my host family which provided me with access, both to their
everyday lives and their knowledge\textsuperscript{31}. Furthermore, the trust they showed me became a
seal of approval which made it easier for me to establish contacts with their neighbours,
friends and extended family. By way of their assistance I also managed to obtain the
approval of the village chief, Chief Albea, through a ceremony where I was to say a few
words and offer him a token of my respect\textsuperscript{32}.

\textsuperscript{26} On types of informants, see Cohen (1984:224).
\textsuperscript{27} The Mele informants consisted of four knowledgeable and influential men including the Chief,
Simion Poilapa, and the first president of Vanuatu, George Sokumanu.
\textsuperscript{28} Ralf Regavanu was also former Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.
\textsuperscript{29} For more information, see preface.
\textsuperscript{30} On gatekeepers, see for example Bryman (2004[2001]:518), Wax (1971:42) and Højbjerg
\textsuperscript{31} Rosalie Wax points to the importance of the initial phase of the fieldwork. According to her it is
“during the first stage that the fieldworker finds, is offered, and accepts the lines of communication
and the social vantage points through and from which he will make his observations and will be
\textsuperscript{32} This consisted of a colourful piece of fabric, a kaliko, which my family gave me to pass along.
As I became part of the daily life in Mele Maat, I entered the position of a family member (daughter, sister, cousin et cetera) and as with any other social role it offered possibilities and limitations (Cohen 1984:222; Hasse 1995:54-56). On the positive side, it provided me with a natural relationship to the people around me, both inside and outside the home, and it meant that people quickly relaxed around me. Here it must be noted that researchers always affect the field, and the idea about being ‘the fly on the wall’ has long been abandoned (Cohen 1984:216). It was clear that my host family tried to live up to some kind of ideals when I first moved in. The food was nicer, for example. However, as the family got more used to my presence, their behaviour towards me changed as they stopped pretending. Based on this experience I find that my being there did not obstruct routines or conversational topics in any fundamental way.

Here I wish to add a note on language. Having visited Vanuatu the previous year, I had already decided to learn Bislama33, and so I did through self-teaching34 and the guidance of, and conversations with, my host family and their friends. Learning Bislama had several benefits. Firstly, I was able to speak with my informants without the assistance of an interpreter35. Secondly, being able to move freely and engage in casual conversations proved essential as appointments were difficult to make, and arranged interviews most often became stiff and awkward. Thirdly, I quickly discovered that most people did not speak (or were not comfortable speaking) English which complicated conversations and added to the awkwardness. Finally, knowing Bislama meant that I could understand most of what people around me were talking about, and engage in everyday life and join conversations as I saw fit36. Living with the family gave me a unique possibility to learn the language and it did without a doubt strengthen the relationship between me and my informants and improve my status in the village as I became more like them37. Of course, it

33 Being one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries in the world together ni-Vanuatu speak more than 105 vernacular languages. While most also know some French or English, it is Bislama - a type of pidgin with roots in English, French and local languages - that serves as the unifying language (Forsyth 2009:8).
34 I had found a textbook online which guided these efforts (Peace Corps 2012).
35 For discussions on the importance of language, see for example Buur (1999) and Leslie & Storey (2008 [2003]).
36 As the villagers also had their own local language which I did not speak, I was sometimes excluded from the conversations. However, most often people spoke Bislama.
37 This was a process where other factors were in play as well, for example the fact that I was eating local food and did not complain about the standard of living. I know that these things were important to my informants in general, and my family in particular, since this was often articulated in phrases such as, “Oh Gry, she is a good girl, she eats what we eat”.
took a while before I had obtained sufficient language skills. While acknowledging that this might have resulted in some misunderstandings on my part, I truly believe that the positive effects of learning Bislama by far outweighed the negative.

Returning to the discussion of my position as family member I will now turn to the challenges and limitations this entailed. While experiencing some problems with juggling the positions as researcher and family member, I felt a new and unwelcome role being forced upon me as time passed. Since all my informants wanted their truths to be documented they would continuously ask me to put their specific version of previous and current events into print. This, I believe was a result of the lack of written proof of who had rights, something which characterised the struggles and which I will explore in further detail later: my informants believed that the thesis I was to write could become such proof. Despite of my efforts to explain that this was not the purpose of my work, many still seemed to consider me a resource which could be used in their claims over legitimacy and rights.

This position was not easy to cope with. Living with my host family and feeling indebted to them for their friendship and hospitality made it hard for me to talk to those whom they considered to be their opponents. I did so nevertheless, but it was an extremely difficult balancing act between the fear of coming across as ungrateful, and the need to obtain a broader and more complex picture of what was going on. Trying to overcome this precarious situation I continuously informed my family about my reasons for acting in this way, and tried to remain as neutral as possible. The problem was that people in general did not want me to stay impartial. On the contrary they urged me to take their side. A similar problem became apparent as I initiated contact with people from Mele and they began to tell me their side of the story regarding Mele Maat’s land claims. That something was at stake was clear from the way people from each village asked me about what the others had told me, and subsequently accused them of lying. In general I felt a very powerful expectation from all my informants to take their side in the conflicts and put their version of past traditions and events into print.

An ethical aspect comes into play here. Ton Otto and Poul Pedersen discuss how anthropologists, when writing about tradition, easily can become caught up in moral dilemmas and political conflicts, and that their intellectual products can and will often be used, also in ways that were not intended (Otto & Pedersen 2005:42). The best way to
guard oneself against potential misuse, they argue, is on the one hand to work according to the highest professional standards for knowledge production, and on the other to be explicit about moral choices when required (ibid). Christian Kordt Højbjerg writes that the pragmatic solution to overcome such ethical dilemmas is manifested in the *informed consent sheet*\(^{38}\) (Højbjerg 2003:314). Arriving in Mele Maat I decided to compose one such and offer it to key informants\(^{39}\). While it proved to be a good way of explaining my project to them it did, however, not solve the ethical dilemmas I experienced to become more and more pressing. In the end, as Højbjerg writes, the decision regarding what to pass along and how to do it has to rely on a qualified insight into the specific empirical context (ibid:304). I am aware of the precarious position I enter as I write about these contested issues. Hoping that this reflexivity will prevent causing additional problems in this context of conflict, here I wish to emphasise that the purpose of the thesis is not to deem any truth more valid than the other. Rather, as I have already alluded to, my analysis is centred on the possibility and implications of truth as multiple.

### 2.3 Navigating the River

‘Method’ is a term used to describe the systematic search which the researcher uses in his work to obtain new insights, and the reliability of scientific knowledge is dependent on the transparency of the methods used (Hastrup 2003:29-30). The anthropological approach to methodology does not consist of a collection of strict precepts, but must, on the contrary be understood as a variety of strategies which can be applied in a multitude of ways according to the specific context in which the fieldwork unfolds (Robben & Sluka 2007; Sanjek 1990). These are the terms when the object of study is people in specific contexts. The methods chosen should make the researcher able to capture the implicit as well as explicit meanings and logics of the specific study object, and to do this the researcher has to act with flexibility in the field and be ready to adapt continuously. Similarly Kirsten Hastrup argues that, “The anthropological method must be flexible […] since the anthropologist’s empirical data has neither a fixed form nor does it constitute a given corpus; it is always in a state of becoming” (Hastrup 2003:399-400).

\(^{38}\)See also Scheyvens et al. (2008 [2003]: 142-46) and The Danish Social Science Research Council (1995).

\(^{39}\)The sheet held information about me, the project, and methods as well as an outline of potential risks and benefits of participation. I accompanied the paper with a verbal explanation and also gave people time to read it through before signing.
The object of study, as well as the specific context in which my fieldwork took place and the conditions under which it was performed indeed shaped how I chose to go about the data collection. First of all, since I was living among my informants I had the possibility to follow their activities on a daily basis which made it easy for me to obtain data through participant observation\(^{40}\). The participation included activities such as hanging out, cooking, going to the garden, *storian* (telling stories/talk) and *wokabot* (walk around the village or to the sea and river for a swim)\(^{41}\).

A second factor guiding my approach had to do with what I wanted to know. I quickly discovered that the questions I wanted answers to proved hard to obtain simply by asking. My initial interest in *identity* and *belonging* were not themes people could easily relate to, and I struggled to figure out what I could ask and how. When I tried, people would usually look at me confused and apologetic, or simply provide me with an answer which was more or less unrelated to what I had asked. Here I solely blame myself and my initial ignorance. My informants had no chance to answer what I asked them. As a consequence I decided to approach the data collection in a much more sensitive manner, and as time passed, and my own knowledge expanded, new insights dawned on me and I gradually found out which questions to ask – something which made it possible to change pace as I could begin to seek out informants more actively and perform semi-structured interviews.

Consequently, the first months of fieldwork took shape of what Finn Sivert has termed ‘the existential fieldwork’\(^{42}\) (Sivert 1996:204) which describes a fluid and reflexive way of generating data. In the existential fieldwork the informants decide the time, place, and topic of conversation, and the anthropologist stretches as far as possible to accommodate their needs (ibid). Following this approach I let my informants lead me inside their social and physical spaces by remaining flexible to their routines and interests. To a large extent

\(^{40}\) Many describe participant observation as a contradiction because the scientist have to become emotionally involved in order to participate, while keeping an analytical distance to the subject of study to make good observations of the same situation that he is participating in (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002:23; Tonkin 1984:216). This contradiction can be somewhat overcome by what Hastrup describes as a ‘double gaze’ (my translation from the Danish ‘dobbelt blik’) which enables one to be in the field not only as a ‘native’ but also as a scientist (Hastrup 2003:411). In this way the observing part of the scientist will be wondering about the things he participates in (Bundgaard 2003:66).

\(^{41}\) According to Simonsen, participation is essential to anthropological knowledge production, “To embody the field is to use our bodies [...] in order to grasp the experiences of our informants [...] The way the body is utilised in the field is therefore central to the anthropological knowledge production” (Simonsen 2006:20).

\(^{42}\) My translation of what Sivert has termed ‘det ekstentielle feltarbejde’.
I did not control the conversational topics, though I did ask clarifying questions and enquired about themes which had come up in earlier conversations.

Anthony Cohen notes that to create close social relationships with our informants it is necessary to strip the conversations of the rigid structure of a formal interview (Cohen 1984:226). In many ways this was also my experience. While I was working on establishing a close relationship to my host family and their relatives, I found it much more rewarding to engage in casual conversations where I took little or no control, since the situations became less rigid and produced richer data. These conversations mostly took shape of those between friends or teacher/pupil (ibid) which also steered the relationship between my informants and me in the same direction.

Following the same sensitive path as Sivert recommends above, Cohen writes that we have to navigate the river in order to discover its interesting features, and to “tune in” to local discourse in order to understand the relevant issues and render ourselves competent to ask questions which are meaningful in our informants’ terms (Cohen 1984:225)43. I find this to be very instructive and a good example of what happened during my fieldwork. By engaging in the everyday life of, and countless conversations with, people around me I obtained such fundamental knowledge which enabled me to find out what to ask and how.

Concurrently with my expanding knowledge I was able to approach the data collection in a more structured and intensified way in which I took more control of whom I wanted to talk to as well as the subjects of conversation. While keeping the interviews semi-structured, and by this leaving room for detours and new information to surface, these conversations were much more controlled, systematic, and asymmetrical than the ones characterising the first part of the fieldwork44. To sum up, with time I gradually moved onwards from the very loose to a more structured approach as I, in Cohen’s words, discovered the interesting features of the river.

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43 See also Spradley (1979:55).
Chapter 3: The Place, the People, and the Struggles

My aim in this chapter is to present the place and the people. This endeavour will be three-fold. First, I will zoom in on the home of my host family in order to make the reader able to picture what life could be like in Mele Maat. Secondly, I will consider the livelihood strategies employed by my informants to balance their lives between the so-called black man and white man way. Based on these observations I will argue that gardens and land in general remained a resource of undisputed importance – an issue which will be included in the last part of the chapter where I will describe the precarious conditions under which my informants lived, and point to different levels of uncertainty which characterised their present situation.

3.1 Snapshot of a Home

In the evening everybody comes back to the house. Most of the family has been at the church for some kind of communal meeting. It is nice sitting here in the living room talking. People are scattered around the room. The boys keep in the back while Leah and Thomson do most of the talking. It rains a lot and drops are falling heavy on the metal roof. The noise is intense. In the furthest corner, water starts to come inside from a crack between the wall and the floor. Enneth is very apologetic and keeps saying how bad she feels that I have to stay with them here in this house. “It is only a temporary house”, she says. However, as Thomson begins to explain, I discover that the family has now lived in it for 25 years. He says that they had planned to build a “nice house in concrete”. It should have had a first floor, a toilet inside, and a nice kitchen with a stove. Thomson had managed to borrow money to finance the project from his former employer, a white man who owned a big plantation. It was agreed that Thomson’s brother Maatson, who is a builder, should carry out the building project. However, at some point he suddenly left for Malekula for a while. With Maatson gone, the family found themselves forced to build this house instead, because they needed a place to live until the other house was finished. And so it was done in a hurry and not very well, Thomson adds. The other house was never finished because the money was lost somehow. I suddenly realise that the house he is talking about is the

45 Another island situated north-west of Efate, see map no. 2 (after Preface).
overgrown concrete walls standing just opposite of the house in which we now sit.

Thomson’s older brother, Maatson, was the first child to be born in the newly established village, and his birth was quickly followed by Thomson’s. Leah was born in Utas, a village in South East Ambyrm close to where Maat village is situated. Married to Thomson she moved to Mele Maat and stayed in the village with him and his family until 1979. Around that time the couple decided to move to Santo46 where Thomson’s mother and her family lived. Here Thomson found work on board a ship transporting copra, and the family stayed until 1997 when they chose to return to Mele Maat and settle down with their children. As such, the boys Sano (27), Paul (18), Tommy (15) and the two older girls Enneth (25) and Leimas (21) were all born in Santo. Only little Moala (3) had joined the family on Efate. Back in Mele Maat the family decided to build a house of their own on an available plot of land within the village, but as Thomson describes above, the project did not go as planned. Now the family had lived in the temporary house for 25 years and the concrete walls outside were overgrown and scarred by time47.

The family home was a place to sleep, cook, eat, and relax. And it was a place where most of the family spent much of their time. The home consisted of a main house, a kitchen building and a toilet shed. A living room made up the anterior of the house and further back four additional rooms appeared which the family members shared between them. Every room was filled with beds and shelving units stuffed with clothes and other. The family also owned a TV (though no working antenna) and a DVD player. Everything in the house appeared quite worn down, and the corrugated iron walls (many of which were painted salmon pink) had a layer of dirt attached to them. The windows were merely holes cut out in the metal, and the floor was made from concrete crisscrossed by cracks. Often rats ran around along the rafters making noise, and from early in the morning the sun burned down on the metal roof transforming the house into a sauna.

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46 Santo is the name people use in their everyday speech to refer to Espiritu Santo (the largest island in the archipelago).
47 Regardless of the fact that this house had been the home of the family for such a long time, the perception persisted that this was not a permanent residence. The overgrown blocks of concrete outside were, on the other hand, a symbol of permanence and of how their lives were supposed to be. A broken dream, in a way, though broken is the wrong word. The family still maintained hope that at one time in the future they would be able to complete it. Still, even if the family should succeed in finishing the new house it does not change the fact that their everyday lives had played out inside what they considered a temporary frame for more than a quarter of a century.
The kitchen was a smaller house of similar construction, a wooden frame filled out with corrugated iron sheets. Tools and building materials lay scattered around, and along one of the walls a table and some cupboards had been fitted. To the left of the entrance was a fireplace where the family cooked their meals while smoke filled up the room. Like in the main house electricity was installed, and in the ceiling a fluorescent tube had been placed. Behind the kitchen was the toilet shed. This was, too, made mainly from corrugated iron, and the concrete floor had a drain in the centre for leading away the water. The shed was divided into two parts by a shower curtain: an area to go swim (shower) in the front, and a toilet in the back. However, the drainage was not working properly, and every time it rained the toilet bowl would fill up from below, causing the family much grief. Thomson and Leah often told me that they were unhappy not to have a nice white man house, but in general their home looked similar to most others I visited in the village.

In the first picture (from left) Leah, Leimas, and little Moala stand outside the family home. Across from where they are, and just outside the picture frame, was the kitchen building where the family cooked their meals over an open fire. The next picture depicts Thomson’s mother. She was a kind old lady who gave me a warm hug every time we met. Here she is sitting outside the kitchen with Moala and another grandchild. The day where the picture is taken, she had come by to say hello and chat. In the last picture Thomson is sitting inside the kitchen cooking rice for lunch while Leah and Leimas are talking in the back.

3.2 Money and Taro

Sitting with Maatson outside his house, he tells me that, "You need to find a balance between white man work and tending to your gardens. It is not good to do just one of these things. You need to do both, because if you only have a garden then you cannot buy things like soap or electricity, and you would not be able to
pay for school fees; and if you only have a white man job then you need to buy everything and you might starve [for example if you lose the job]. No, you need to balance the two”. But, he continues, it is difficult to find time for the gardens when you have to work hard to earn money. “This is why so many people eat rice now... then they only need to supplement with crops from the gardens”. Rice is cheap and easy to prepare. People are aware, though, that rice is a bad thing to eat, Maatson says. “It is better only to eat island kakae [local foodstuffs48]. If people just focused on their gardens there would be an abundance of food, but this is not how it is now, since it is necessary to earn money too”, Maatson concludes.

Like Leah and Thomson, Maatson became one of my key informants. Happy to share his knowledge with me, I learned much about the history of Mele Maat, their way of life and their struggles over land from our conversations. Maatson was also positioned strongly in the internal conflict within the village. Above, Maatson talks about how people in general tried to balance their lives between the traditional and the modern influences. Most of my informants had up to several gardens in which they cultivated crops like yam, taro, manioc, kumala and various fruits, but despite of this almost everyone relied on money to some degree.

It was clear that education (and, consequently, school fees) had become a priority which demanded much from the family economies. Also, many wished for the sufficient means to build a “nice white man house” or obtain commodities such as mobile phones and imported foodstuffs. In order to get the sufficient funds many engaged in so-called white man work such as a job in town or the surrounding plantations, in tourist resorts, or outside the country borders for example in Australia, New Zealand or New Caledonia where most were hired as planters or fruit pickers. This took time away from the gardens and had a direct consequence on people’s diet. As Maatson said above, most now ate rice and other imported foods such as tinned meat and noodles on a daily basis, something which placed an even greater pressure on people to earn money.

48 For example crops from the gardens or fish from the sea, that is, the food (kakae) which was traditionally eaten on the island (here referring to Ambrym). However, my data indicates that the term island was in itself double-sided since it was used to refer to a physical place (the outer islands where traditional lifestyle was upheld to a larger degree and where imported foods were not as widespread), and a place in time (before the arrival of white man and his influences).
While white man work and money in general were of great importance to my family and most people around them, I find that the importance of gardens should not be underestimated. First of all, gardens had symbolic significance. They represented the true Vanuatu way of life and contrasted all which had come from outside the borders of the country, that is, all which was white man. Like Gladys, Thomson's sister, told me:

"Here in Vanuatu people do not have to work for money, they can just live of their gardens. If you concentrate on your garden and live of it, then it is good. It is the clean way of life. White man work is bad [no gud]. That people want to build white man house and buy food in the supermarket, this is bad too."

The gardens also served as form of safety net. To my host family, having gardens meant that they would never starve in case none of them was able to generate Vatu (Vanuatu's national currency). That they were living for free in their own village also took away the pressure of having to earn money all the time. Below, Thomson explains how such freedom comes from having land:

"Men, here in Vanuatu, do not always work. Sometimes they do not feel like working for other people, because they have the possibility to live for free. All they need to pay for is electricity. In earlier days things were different. People lived without the need for money. They just lived of the land, eating local food. Now we have electricity and spend money, but it is always possible for us to return to the way things were back then, since we still have our land. All you need is a little money for clothes, soap and electricity."

While Thomson in this quote somewhat downplays the need for money which the family normally expressed, and leaves out the substantial expenses for school fees, his observations are still on point since all of these expenses were optional. The family did not have to send their children to school or spend money on imported foodstuffs and the like. To do so was their choice. In this manner, gardens provided both security and the option of not working. Like Thomson said, sometimes men just do not want to work for others. This is a possibility when you have land on which to build a house and cultivate gardens.
In the first picture Leimas is smiling at the camera as we make our way to the gardens. Usually my host family would walk the 30 minutes to their gardens two to three times a week. The second picture depicts Enneth in the airport. The day where the picture is taken, she is on her way to Australia. There she was to board a cruise ship on which she had obtained work for eight months in order to earn money for the family. Her father, Thomson, often told me that Enneth by way of this job was to finance the nice white man house which had never been finished.

3.3  *Yu Blong Wea* (where are you from)? The Struggles Unfolded

I comment that people with land have many benefits, that they have security and more freedom to choose which life to live. Maatson nods his head and says that, "*Man Maat* [the Mele Maat people]⁴⁹ are very fortunate. We are lucky to have our own land. We bought the land from the plantation owner who had already bought it from native people". Thomson adds that the situation in Mele Maat is something special since they arrived so long ago and own the land on which they live. "For many people, this is not the case", he says and continues, "People from Mele Maat have titles [leases⁵⁰] to land both here and on Ambrym. We are lucky".

In this field note excerpt Maatson and Thomson describe the Mele Maat people as lucky while hinting at the specific historical development which had shaped this luck. However,

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⁴⁹ As was described earlier in the thesis, the Mele Maat people came from Maat village on Ambrym, and the term *man Maat* had become the way they referred to themselves. However, as I will discuss below, who belonged to this category was not a given and had become a matter of great dispute.

⁵⁰ My informants often referred to leases as titles. However, in order to clarify the distinction here I use the word *title* to refer to a plot of land while *leases* describe the actual lease which could be obtained (see page 14).
as will be discussed below, the fortunate conditions Thomson and Maatson allude to above were fraught with uncertainty and struggles. Legitimacy was at the heart of these struggles: being recognised as the right kind of people was the way to obtain rights over land. As we shall see, the question regarding who were and who were not the rightful people was expressed through an abundance of narratives which by different routes asserted the storyteller’s position as part of a people who belonged, or kept others from this strived for position.

Taking its departure in the unique historical trajectory of the Mele Maat people and linking it to the radical transformations taking place in the country’s political sphere the ensuing analysis will show that Mele Maat’s right to the land on which they lived was ambivalent at best, something which created uncertainty on different levels for the villagers on a whole. Having done this, I will turn to another context of conflict which entailed further uncertainty for a specific group of people within the village.

3.3.1 “We Have the Right to Keep the Land Always”

To my knowledge no other village shared a similar history and, as such, Mele Maat held a quite unique position carrying with it certain benefits and disadvantages. As a result of the volcanic eruption which covered most of South East Ambrym in a thick layer of ash (destroying crops and polluting fresh water sources), the villagers from Maat were forced to evacuate their home island in 1951. Arriving to Efate the villagers succeeded in obtaining work from the French plantation owner, André Houdié, who after a while agreed to let them buy four of his land titles. On one of these titles they established the village, while the adjacent one was chosen as their cemetery. The two remaining titles were cleared for gardens (see Appendix 2 for map). In settling down on this land the Maat people became neighbours to the village Mele who held original ownership to the area which Mele Maat had purchased. This did not create any bad feelings between the two, though. Informants from both Mele and Mele Maat told me that because the land had

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51 This assertion is based on my general observations as well as an interview with representatives from the Department of Lands (DL) where I asked about this directly. The DL is a government agency in charge of processing claims to land and issuing leases.

52 Robert Tonkinson writes that the decision to relocate was made by the colonial administration which received guidance from the Presbyterian Church. The locals were not being heard. Many were not thrilled to leave, but it was being made clear to them that they had no choice, everyone had to go. Because there was no immediate danger, many people wanted to stay, and they argued that they had been going through times like this before, and there was nothing to be afraid of. Many wanted to return to their villages and it was only by dissuasive power of the District Agents and Hebridean policemen that people remained in the embarkation area (Tonkinson 1968:96).
already been alienated by white man it was of no great concern to Mele that ownership was transferred to the people from Maat. However, as independence drew near things started to change. In order to understand how independence could bring with it such radical transformations it is necessary to look towards the issue of status.

Having moved away from their original land and settled down on Efate the people from Maat village were attached the label man kam. This is a term used by ni-Vanuatu in general to refer to all people who had come from somewhere else to settle down in a place where they did not belong originally, and it is a label which can be difficult to escape. Migrants moving to town in search for work or the bright lights of the city are one example of people who are labelled man kam. However, the category is disputed and constantly negotiated in local contexts. Like Howard Van Trease\textsuperscript{53} explained to me, "People might get absorbed into the new community, but it will never be forgotten that you are not originally from the place. But the more absorbed your family gets, for example through marriages with the landowners of the place you came to, the better you stand. The less you get absorbed the bigger chance for getting thrown out at one time" (personal communication). So how was Mele Maat negotiating their status and with which results?

While managing to buy land from the French plantation owner during the 1950's, Mele Maat did not shed the man kam label, but were in some ways aligned with white man occupying customary land: they were alienators. In the introduction to the thesis I described how independence brought with it the declaration that all alienated land should be returned to the true kastom owners, and to Mele Maat this meant that their land could be reclaimed by families from the neighbouring village, Mele, who held original ownership. Occupying a status as man kam - or alienators as such - the Mele Maat people had no official rights, but in spite of this Mele did not claim back their land.

I find this to be a consequence of many things. First of all, traditional land tenure systems left open the possibility for people to make use of land which was not their own as long as they had the consent of the kastom owner\textsuperscript{54} (see page 17-18). I believe the Mele/Mele Maat relationship should be seen in this light. To Mele, letting man Maat stay on their land did not contradict traditional ways of sharing and using land. In chapter 4 I will elaborate further on the changing understandings of land ownership and belonging. Here it is merely

\textsuperscript{53} For information on Van Trease, see preface.

\textsuperscript{54} See also Bonnemaison (1984:2).
mentioned to offer an explanation as to why Mele at independence did not claim back their land despite of their constitutional rights to do so.

Another factor influencing this choice was pointed out to me by Van Trease during one of our conversations. While discussing the effects of the Constitution and the new land laws which followed, he pointed out that these were directed at diminishing the power of white man over ni-Vanuatu territory, and for this reason people might not have been that concerned with the few cases where ni-Vanuatu themselves were the alienators. In this way, Mele probably did not consider the law to apply to man Maat.

While the above factors probably had some influence on why Mele let Mele Maat stay I believe that part of the answer explaining this choice of action is to be found by acknowledging that the status of Mele Maat was far from univocal.

From my conversations with the Mele informants it was clear that the special circumstances by which man Maat had been forced to leave their own land on Ambrym affected their status. Simion Poilapa, one of the two chiefs in Mele who were presently claiming to be the rightful head of the village²⁵, described the situation as follows:

"In Vanuatu, up until today many disputes exist about who has the right to land. In the case of Mele Maat, what happened was that a volcano erupted at Ambrym, and because of this people were evacuated. So why man Maat came here was because of humanitarian reasons. So up until now, Mele has accepted Mele Maat’s rights to be here, because they needed help back then".

Other factors had softened the sharp edges around the man kam category. Informants from both villages agreed that the passing of time and growing neighbourliness had made Mele and Mele Maat like one in a way. The chief in Mele Maat, Chief Albea, who also became one of my key informants, explained it like this:

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²⁵At the time two men were claiming to be the rightful chief, and both based their arguments on different interpretations of what was the right way according to kastom. According to Forsyth such struggles over chiefly titles is a general issue in Vanuatu (Forsyth 2009:81).
"Mele mo Mele Maat stap osem wan naoia [Mele and Mele Maat are like one now]. This is also why we adopted the name Mele Maat. It was a way to make clear the bond which exists".

From this it appears that while the Mele Maat people were considered man kam, they were also becoming more and more like people who belonged (like Mele). While this was the general understanding among the Mele and Mele Maat informants alike, among the latter it was argued that something took place just prior to independence which changed their status from man kam into kastom owners, that is, those who held true ownership:

“When we heard that independence would bring with it the annulment of our titles we decided to give kastom\(^{56}\) to Mele. It consisted of 7 cows, 12 pigs, 50 bags of rice as well as a number of local mats and food crops such as yam. In this way we bought the land from Mele in a traditional way. We had already bought it from Houdié [the French plantation owner] but just before independence we paid for it again, black man way. So now the law says that we are the rightful owners and we have the right to keep the land always”.

In this quote, Maatson describes the kastom which Mele Maat offered Mele, and argues that this was a traditional payment through which Mele Maat became rightful owners of the land. Giving kastom to Mele had been necessary, I was told, because of the risk brought about by independence and the annulment of pre-independence titles. Informants expressed that they had feared to be forced away from the place which had been their home for 30 years, and in order to protect themselves and consolidate their rights to the land they had decided to give kastom to Mele in 1978. Chief Albea told me that the fact that Mele had accepted this kastom meant that they approved of Mele Maat’s rights to all four land titles, and that man Maat now undisputedly were people who belonged. However, this opinion was not shared by informants from Mele. In the ensuing quote George Sokumanu\(^{57}\) offers me his version:

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\(^{56}\) Kastom here refers to a gift, that is, a traditional offering. In the ensuing chapters I will use italics (kastom) when referring to this specific kind of traditional offering in order to make clear the distinction between this and tradition in a more general sense (kastom).

\(^{57}\) Sokumanu was, apart from being man Mele (a person from Mele), also the first President instated after the country gained its independence.
“Originally our kastom says that when people move from their own island to another, like it happened with the people from Ambrym who came to Mele, they need to *klinim fes*\(^\text{58}\). This means that you must make a *kastom* towards the rightful land owners so that your presence can be recognised, and you can be allowed to stay. This is the most important thing to do. *Klinim fes* means that you have to follow the traditional way to obtain rights to live on the land which is not yours. This was what Mele Maat did towards Mele. They paid. They brought pigs, rice and many other things and gave them to Mele. I was there, I saw it happen. Mele Maat bought the four titles from Houdié, but the *kastom* they gave to Mele was a different kind of payment. Really, it was not a payment, but more like an acknowledgement of Mele’s ownership and a way of saying *thank you*. By giving *kastom* to Mele, Mele Maat did not obtain ownership to the four titles. What they are saying in Mele Maat is not true”.

In this quote, Sokumanu argues that the Mele Maat people never obtained true ownership of the four titles of land which they bought from Houdié back in the 1950’s. The *kastom* given merely represented a way of saying *thank you* to Mele for letting them stay on their land. In this way Sokumanu emphasises Mele’s undisputable rights over the land and Mele Maat’s status as outsiders who had been granted permission to live on land which was not their own.

From the above it becomes clear that different understandings of status and, consequently, rights characterised the present relationship between Mele and Mele Maat. Having moved away from their own land to settle down on Efate, the Mele Maat people had become man kam. However, this status was countered somewhat by their history as refugees and the close bond which had been established with Mele over time. By giving *kastom*, however, the Mele Maat people believed they had consolidated their own status as rightful people, but this understanding was opposed strongly in the stories told by people in Mele who upheld their own claims as kastom owners. In this way the meaning of the *kastom* remained as unsettled as Mele Maat’s status. Because the struggle to become recognised as rightful people was not settled yet, man Maat remained suspended in between the

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\(^{58}\) Rousseau writes that this translates literally as “cleaning your face well”, but that, in the context of *kastom*, it would translate to “remove shame”. It indicates that matters are now over and that there is no further need for shame (Rousseau 2008:21).
categories man kam and people who belonged as they maintained their efforts to tip the scales to their advantage.

Having argued that the Mele Maat people had obtained an ambivalent position, now I will discuss what this meant in terms of land. While Mele had not forced the Mele Maat people to move away or lease the land which they now occupied, the difficulties experienced by the Mele Maat people to shed the man kam label for good still affected their current rights and entailed uncertainty in different ways.

No matter the claims made by my Mele Maat informants to be kastom owners of the four titles of land, they remained unrecognised as such both by Mele and by officials from the DL. During a conversation with representatives from the DL they told me that:

“The case is like this... Mele wants its land back. And the land does not belong to Mele Maat. They have only obtained official rights to the land for 75 years [through the obtainment of leases]. After the lease expires they can try to renew again [negotiate with Mele about a new lease], but maybe they will not succeed”.

Emil Mael, a Mele Maat informant working for the Shefa Provincial Council\(^59\), continuously stated that "alienator status hem i stap" (the alienator status remains) despite the kastom given since its significance had not been officially recognised by the DL. While opposing this lack of recognition, Emil felt its consequences along with his fellow villagers.

First of all, while Mele did not claim back the land during the years following independence, several Mele individuals and families chose to settle down on, and take control over, areas which Mele Maat considered theirs. These tresspassers\(^60\) had caused great concern among my Mele Maat informants, and in order to curb the development they had lodged a complaint with the DL who told them to secure their land by obtaining leases on it. As the land which Mele Maat had bought from the plantation owner consisted of four titles it entailed that they obtained leases on each of these. Following this advise the Mele Maat Chief and his Council initiated the process, and by 2008 they succeeded in obtaining

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\(^{59}\) One of the many area councils (see page 17).

\(^{60}\) This was the term used by my Mele Maat informants, and therefore I use it here. It should be noted that people in Mele might not share the same idea of these people - or use similar terminology for that matter.
leases on the two titles on which the village and cemetery were situated. Despite of this the Mele tresspassers still refused to move away. The reason for this, a Mele informant told me, was that these people did not care about Mele Maat's leases since they considered themselves to be true kastom owners of the land and only found it right to settle down on it.

This was not the only problem faced by the Mele Maat people as a consequence of their ambivalent status. While having obtained leases on the village and cemetery titles, the two titles on which they cultivated their gardens remained to be secured in this manner. These titles were part of a larger dispute between several Mele families all claiming to be the original kastom owner of a vast area of land. The case between the Mele families had been in court for many years already, but still no result had come of it. The Mele Maat people were excluded from this process as they were not recognised as people who belonged, and instead they turned to the possibility of obtaining leases. Different opinions were expressed to me regarding whether or not the claims of the Mele families posed a problem to their efforts to obtain leases. However, the fact remained that Mele Maat had not succeeded in obtaining leases on these titles yet, and it seemed uncertain when this would happen.

Being man kam without a lease, the Mele Maat people had no official rights to the garden land, and Mele informants argued that when the case had been decided in court, Mele Maat would not be able to use the land like they had up until then. George Sokumanu described the situation as follows:

He tells me that before, many Mele families were part of the strife (regarding the large piece of land of which Mele Maat's gardens were part), but now only two uphold their claims. I ask him what will happen to Mele Maat when the dispute between the families in Mele is settled. He answers that when this happens the two pieces of land on which Mele Maat have gardens will be subjected to negotiations between the kastom owner and Mele Maat. I ask if this means that Mele Maat occupies a rather unsecure position, and he says that: "Yes... it is a matter of kakae [food/livelihood]."

The general opinion among both Mele and Mele Maat informants was that if man Maat were fortunate they would be able to lease the land from the kastom owner for a certain
amount of money, but in case the kastom owner decided to claim back the land, they would lose a very important livelihood strategy. Whether or not Mele, when the time came, would have sufficient money to compensate Mele Maat for the developments made during their time as lease holders is hard to say. However, among my Mele informants the general opinion was that they needed to claim back all their leased out land when possible since land scarcity was becoming a growing problem.

The third level of uncertainty I wish to highlight here had to do with the issue of leases. As I have already described, the Mele Maat people had succeeded in obtaining official leases on the village and cemetery titles. Since such leases expire after a period of 75 years, at some point in the future these would have to be re-negotiated, and what would happen then nobody knew.

As we see from the above, some aspects of uncertainty were experienced by people already and were, as such, contemporary problems, while others were situated in a future lying ahead. In chapter 5 I will elaborate on the latter, and analyse how these folded into the present-day conflicts and shaped their production.

Before moving on to discuss how uncertainty also asserted itself among people taking part in the internal struggle within Mele Maat, I wish to add a final note on why Mele after having lived side by side Mele Maat in a peaceful manner for more than 30 years suddenly began to place these kinds of pressures on their smaller neighbour. Here I must emphasise that the following remains conjectures based on my own assumptions. Still I find these able to shed some light on the changing situation. First of all I think part of the answer can be found in the new focus on land rights introduced at independence. As I mentioned before (page 36), and which I will discuss in further detail later, an emphasis on ownership had now replaced the more fluid notion of use rights. Also growing land scarcity was becoming a problem which formerly was practically non-existing. As I mentioned above, all Mele informants pointed out that land was becoming increasingly scarce concurrently with the growing population, and that this was a problem which needed to be handled. I was told that this could be done either by claiming back leases when these expired in the future or by relocating their village to another area to which

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61 As I discussed earlier, this was the terms when a kastom owner were to claim back land (see page 15). In this way, to claim back the land Mele would have to compensate Mele Maat for their investments in the land.
they had rights, but which was not as appealing as the place in which the village was situated presently. Furthermore, I believe one needs to consider the money issue. Land in Vanuatu has in an increasingly manner become associated with money, and many people now see land as a possibility to earn Vatu for example by leasing it to others. I find it likely that the ongoing struggle between Mele families, who all claimed rights to the large area where Mele Maat’s gardens were part, were influenced by such interests.

Having discussed how Mele Maat on a general level struggled to become recognised as kastom owners, I will turn to the internal conflict within Mele Maat which, as we shall see, created further uncertainty for a large part of the inhabitants. Similar to the conflict between Mele Maat and Mele, also here different categories were a subject of struggle as people through their narratives tried to assert themselves as people who belonged or keep others from obtaining such status.

3.3.2 “The Problem is With all Those Man Kam...”

*Belonging* in the Mele Maat context was expressed through the term *man Maat* which pointed to the original village Maat and the people who had lived there. In the narratives this category was most often contrasted to the label *man kam*62 which, as described above, referred to those who did not belong to the place originally. Before moving on to an analysis of how people in Mele Maat engaged in this labeling of self and other, I will provide a short introduction to the oppositional positions apparent within the village in order to provide the reader with a backdrop by which to understand the ensuing discussion.

From the day of my arrival Leah and Thomson as well as members of their extended family told me stories about the others/man kam/the temporaries/the troublemakers. Sometimes these labels referred to the same group of people, but not always. No matter the label used, it was clearly expressed that these people were to move away, because they did not belong and were making trouble for man Maat. In taking this position my host family associated themselves with Chief Albea (the village chief) and others of the same opinion. None of my informants had a name for this group of people, but would instead just call people by their names, often referring to Chief Albea, who was the front figure in

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62 *Man kam* was the term most often used, but other labels were brought in play as well. See below for examples.
the actions taken against man kam. However, in order to make it easier for the reader to keep track of who was saying what I have chosen to name this group the chief supporters. While these people often referred to man kam as a uniform group, as we shall see below it was actually made up from a quite diverse collection of individuals and families, some of which stood passive in the conflict while others engaged in active opposition against the Chief’s allegations. The latter had an additional label attached to them – the opposition⁶³.

In general it was difficult to obtain exact numbers of how many supported each group, since people would tell me very different things. It appeared, though, that the chief supporters made up the largest group of those taking active part in the struggle.

The struggle between the chief supporters and man kam had been underway for a while, but came out into the open in 2003 when Chief Albea made an announcement in one of the national newspapers declaring that all man kam were to be banished from Mele Maat⁶⁴. Around that time the number of people to be banished counted 300, but I was told that it had now increased to about 500. Of a total population of approximately 1000, this was a substantial part of the village. According to the chief supporters the reason for this banishment was two-fold. First of all it was founded in a concern over land scarcity, and secondly, it was a necessity in order to control some rambunctious elements within the village who did not show respect or behave in a proper manner. Emil Mael, who supported the Chief and his decision to banish man kam, expressed the issue in this way:

"It is because so many man kam have arrived over the years and settled down in Mele Maat that we are now experiencing problems. So now the Chief wants to make a court order because he sees that land is becoming scarce. The population has become big and so now the land is small. That is the first problem. The next is respect. Many people do not respect the Chief or his Council and these man kam also fight and steal. This is why they have to leave”.

Similarly, Thomson told me that these people did not only take up space, they also lacked respect, and as a result they could be expected to do all sorts of things:

⁶³ This was a term used by people from both sides of the divide although the chief supporters used other names as well, depending on the situation.
⁶⁴ Here I wish to note that when and why the struggles began in the village were disputed matters. While some claimed that the struggles began in 2003, others said it had begun far earlier. Still it seemed that this was the year where conflict began to escalate.
"The problem is with all those man kam. They do not have respect for man Maat. And when people do not have respect, they will create trouble. They fight and steal and make trouble".

While land scarcity and problematic behaviour was offered as main reasons explaining the banishment of man kam, the question of who were to be categorised as such was a disputed subject. Like was the case with the categorisation process unfolding between Mele and Mele Maat, belonging proved central to the claims over rights to land in this struggle as well. In the following I will show how struggles remained as people attached different meanings to what constituted belonging.

Living with Thomson and Leah it was naturally their side of the story I was introduced to first, and in their narratives a certain understanding of man Maat and man kam was expressed where precedence obtained superior significance; and being part of the people who belonged was a matter of claiming precedence to the original land back on Ambrym. Maat village had, in this way, become a symbol of belonging, and in claiming to be the original people - those who held precedence - the chief supporters disclaimed the rights of those who had arrived later. These latecomers were made up from two different groups of people who on the basis of their specific historical trajectories were now considered man kam.

During my many conversations with people supporting the Chief it was mentioned continuously that in Mele Maat two nakamal (see below) made up the community. This, I was told, was the way it had been back on Ambrym, and so it was the way it was supposed to be here. In the following excerpt from my field notes, our neighbour Fran and Thomson's older brother, Maatson, explained it like this:

As I return to our house, Leah tells me that Maatson and Fran are sitting over at Fran's house talking, and that I should go join them. Turning the corner I find them beneath the shelter which blocks out some of the heat from the sun. They offer me a chair, and I sit down while thanking them for taking time to talk to me. Maatson asks me if there is anything in particular I want to know, and I seize the opportunity to ask them if they can tell me more about land tenure and rules regarding land ownership both here and back on their original island Ambrym.
They nod, and Maatson begins telling me about nakamal, “Back on Ambrym [in Maat village] there exist two nakamal. A nakamal is a gathering of different clans [families], and a nakamal is governed by its own chief. In Mele Maat the two nakamal work together to solve existing problems and make decisions”. Continuing he says that one of these is named Peas and the other Sanoe. Both Fran and Maatson belong to Sanoe, they tell me. “Back on Ambrym each nakamal still has its own land, but right now it is only people from Peas who live there. Our chief, Albea, is from Peas nakamal”, says Maatson.

In Maatson’s narrative the members of Sanoe and Peas were discursively constructed as the rightful people, that is, those who belonged to Maat village and therefore held superior rights in Mele Maat. However, as I was to discover a third nakamal of ambivalent and disputed status existed in the village as well:

Leah is standing at the washbasin inside the house doing the dishes. Rain is pouring down, and I have decided to stay inside. Leah and I have talked the morning away while waiting for the water to cease coming down from the sky. Trying to make myself heard above the noise of raindrops on metal roof, I tell her that I need to talk to some more people from Peas, since I, up until now, have mainly spoken with those from Sanoe. Leah agrees with me and adds that I ought to talk to people from the third nakamal as well. Confused I listen to her while she tells me that people from this nakamal also originally came from Maat village. The name of this nakamal is Namunei, she says. While she talks I wonder why I have not been told about this before. People have only told me about Peas and Sanoe.

Like I disclose in this field note, the existence of Peas and Sanoe had been emphasised many times while Namunei had been excluded from the stories until Leah brought it up. As she later that day asks Thomson to take me visiting people from this nakamal as well, it became clear that Namunei’s invisibility in the stories had not been coincidental:

At first Thomson looks bewildered, but then he shakes his head and begins explaining that yes, at one point there were three nakamal in Mele Maat, but the third one was illegitimate. Thomson explains that this group of people originally came from the bus (bush/jungle) and settled down in Maat village. As such, they
did not belong to Maat originally. At the time of their arrival they did have their own nakamal, Thomson continues, but as Sanoe decided to let the newcomers stay with them, the nakamal of Namunei was disbanded as these people gathered under Sanoe and their chief. In this way only two nakamal remained in Maat, Thomson states and continues to say that he does not want me to talk to these people, because “they are not the real man Maat; they do not have the right knowledge and position. It is much better only to talk to the right people from Sanoe and Peas”.

As becomes clear from this statement, Namunei’s late arrival in Maat village was used as an argument in the narratives of the chief supporters to disclaim their status as man Maat: since Namunei was not originally from Maat they could never claim to be the rightful people. Like Thomson’s statement exemplifies, this lack of status was connected with Namunei’s relinquishment of their nakamal. However, this was not the only existing interpretation of the events taking place back then, and as I began to collect narratives from people in support of the opposition, a quite different picture emerged. During a conversation with Kurtis, a man from Namunei who took active part in the opposition against the Chief, I asked him whether it was true that Namunei came from the bush and gathered under Sanoe, disbanding their own nakamal:

“Yes, originally Namunei lived in the bush, but because of some things which happened... I think it was malaria, we had to move away. We came to Maat and settled down. That is true. But we never disbanded our nakamal. When Chief Albea now says that Namunei does not hold this right, he is not telling the truth”.

This understanding was shared by all informants who were supporting the opposition. Thus, while these agreed that Namunei had once come from the bush and settled down in Maat village, they dissociated themselves from the statements disclaiming Namunei’s status as an independent nakamal. This might require a short explanation. Above Maatson disclosed that Sanoe and Peas were governed by their own chiefs (see page 46). However, during later conversations with him, Chief Albea, and others, I discovered that these chiefs held different positions. While Peas was represented by a paramount chief who was governing the village as a whole, Sanoe’s chief was a smol jif (small chief) who dealt with

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65 It should be noted that the relocation of the Namunei people had taken place around 1860 (Tonkinson 1968:45). Their presence in Maat must, as such, be considered long-term.
issues within his own nakamal or assisted the paramount chief in certain ways. According to these accounts Chief Albea was the paramount chief, and the chief of Sanoe sat in his Council. Namunei, it was argued, did not hold this right, because, as Thomson said, they had disbanded their nakamal and settled under Sanoe and Sanoe’s chief. As Kurtis pointed out above, this was not a fact accepted by people from Namunei who claimed to be a nakamal (with rights to have their own chief), and, consequently, to be man Maat just like Peas and Sanoe.

People from Namunei were, however, not alone in being challenged by the man kam category. In the narratives of the chief supporters this label was also attached to a group of families and individuals who had come and settled down in Mele Maat during the years since the establishment of the village in the 1950’s. To my knowledge, these people originated from villages in South East Ambrym where also Maat was situated. They had, as such, a form of relationship to the Mele Maat people which probably affected their choice to settle down in this specific village instead of choosing another location on Efate. Still, in the minds of the chief supporters this did not change the fact that these people were man kam who had no right to live in Mele Maat. Like Chief Albea told me:

“These people came later. They did not help to pay for the land. Now they have just come and settled down, but this land does not belong to them. It belongs to man Maat. This is why they have to leave now”.

Among my informants taking part in, or giving support to, the opposition, precedence was not nearly as important as their common history. Consequently, in these narratives time lived together was highlighted as the most significant determinant of belonging. For example John, who together with Kurtis was one of the front figures in the opposition, told me that:

“Many of us have grown up together. We went to school together as children and have shared this place in unity. Now the Chief wants to banish people, but this is wrong. It is very wrong to banish people who have lived in this place for such a long time, and who have taken part in the construction and development of the community”. 
In this quote John clearly opposes the banishment of people who had lived as members of the community for so long. Other informants furthermore stated that many of the families whom Chief Albea wanted to banish had arrived in Mele Maat as early as the 1950’s and had helped pay for the land, a fact which according to their view consolidated these people’s rights to stay.

From the above it becomes clear that my informants had different understandings of what constituted belonging, and that these interpretations were brought in play by people on either side of the divide to establish rights or disclaiming the rights of others. Precedence became contrasted with the importance of time shared together in the diverging stories told by people in their efforts to assert themselves as rightful people.

Although precedence was often emphasised by the chief supporters as the factor determining belonging, I discovered some ambivalence apparent in the way these people considered the status and rights of Namunei. It was clear that the man kam label in most cases did not refer to everyone from this nakamal, but only those who were engaging in active opposition against the Chief. This proved that something else was influencing the categorisation process, and in the following excerpt Chief Albea discloses that this was indeed the case:

Talking to Chief Albea once more I ask him who he wants to evict from Mele Maat. I point at a piece of paper he has shown me. On it is a long list of names. “Are these the people?” I ask. He says that, yes, these are the families who must move away, but there are others who have to leave as well. “It is all those man kam who must move out. They have gathered under Sanoe and Namunei, but now they must leave”. I ask him if all of Namunei are to be evicted too. At first Albea answers that they are, because Namunei came to Maat “later” and are not real man Maat. Then he adds that it only concerns those from Namunei who are troublemakers.

According to Albea and others, behaviour, or rather, what was considered bad and rebellious behaviour had also become a determinant of who were to be banished from the village. The troublemaker label was attached to people who were part of the opposition, and did therefore not only refer to people from Namunei. On the contrary it was constituted by a mix of individuals and families from Namunei, man kam (here referring to the people arriving after Mele Maat had been established), and some families from Sanoe,
all of whom took part in the struggle against Chief Albea and his wish to banish people. The degree to which these people were involved in the struggle varied to some extent, though. While some, like Kurtis and John, had been bringing the case to court and thereby openly fighting the Chief’s allegations, others merely showed their support through financial support or friendship.

That behaviour had become an important factor in the way the chief supporters categorised people as either man kam or man Maat was expressed very clearly by Emil Mael who, in support of the Chief, pointed out that:

“As a group they now oppose the Chief (oli agenstem jif). So now the Chief is saying that all those who are part of the opposition must leave [...] Because the others have started to create trouble they must leave. When people do not behave in a proper manner, when they refuse to listen and make rebellion, then they are not real man Maat”.

In Emil’s statement it appears that if people were troublemakers, that is, if they were fighting the Chief and refusing to behave in a proper manner, then they were no longer to be considered man Maat. In the narratives of the chief supporters a dividing line was established between those who “made trouble” (who faced banishment) and those “showing respect” (who could stay)66. Here it should be noted that while Namunei occupied an ambivalent status, the group of people who had arrived from other villages on Ambrym after the establishment of Mele Maat did not. To my knowledge, all of these (no matter if passive or active in the conflict) were to be banished if the chief supporters got their way.

Taking part in the opposition was not only presenting a risk for people from Namunei. Individuals and families from Sanoe had also felt the consequences of positioning themselves in the conflict. In order to illustrate this I will provide the example of Bruce.

Bruce belonged to the nakamal of Sanoe, and his position as man Maat should have been clear-cut and undisputed, but since he had decided to reconcile (make peace) with families

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66 However, this did not entail that the opposition could refrain from taking further action against the Chief and thereby be forgiven and allowed to stay. Albea told me that it was too late for apologies.
who were part of the opposition his current status was now uncertain. Because Chief Albea considered Bruce’s actions to be an act of rebellion against him and his decision to banish man kam, he argued that Bruce was not real man Maat anymore – a statement similar to that above by Emil Mael. During another conversation, Emil Mael described the proceedings in the following way:

“The Chief decided that all man kam must leave, and he made sure that everyone from Peas, Sanoe and Namunei could stay67. But Bruce went ahead and supported man kam. The Chief then said to Bruce ‘why are you doing this? You should stay on our side’, but Bruce did not want to listen [...] He is making it difficult for the Chief. It is wrong not to support your chief. And now the Chief is angry”.

In the eyes of the Chief, Bruce’s actions aligned him with the opposition and he was now facing the same uncertainty as the people he was trying to support. From this it appears that when people (no matter prior status) chose to act against the will of the Chief it affected their current status. In the case of Bruce he, along with his extended family, had been denied the status as man Maat. Here it should be emphasised that the categorisation of people as man kam was an act of the chief supporters. Bruce, for example, along with like-minded people among his friends or in his family, tried their best to reject this category and demonstrate their status as man Maat, and the same did the others to whom the label had been attached. As I discussed earlier, similar negotiations took place between Mele and Mele Maat.

The negotiation and struggle over categories clearly show that group boundaries are not just a given which exist in the world. Rather, they are dynamic matters, involving ongoing production68 (Kibria 2000:78; Cerulo 1997:387), and among my informants group identity was defined relationally and shaped by existing power relations. The politics of identity construction has been dealt with by many scholars in recent years. One of these is Joane

67 It should be emphasised that this was Emil’s opinion. Not everyone agreed that Namunei was allowed to stay in the beginning. Albea, for example, told me otherwise.
68 This understanding of group boundaries and identity construction is a general one which has shaped most academic works on identity and ethnicity since these broke with the essentialist idea about a natural distinction between people and groups (Cerulo 1997:386). As such, social constructivists rejected any category that put forward essential or core features as the unique property of a collective’s members (Alba 1990; Waters 1990; Anderson 1991 [1983]) while post-structuralists under the influence of Derrida and Foucault emphasised the role of power in the classification process (Cerulo 1997:391).
Nagel (1994) who stresses the two-sidedness of the process by which people establish group boundaries, and emphasises that boundaries are "continuously negotiated, revised, and revitalised, both by [...] group members themselves as well as by outside observers" (Nagel 1994:152-53). Similarly Nazli Kibria (2000) writes that many studies have ignored that not all identities are equally open to all people, and that specific power relations within the social and political context determine which identity labels are available for people to choose (Kibria 2000:79).

As this analysis has shown, through their narratives my informants negotiated and struggled over the drawing of boundaries while making the attempt to assert themselves as rightful people or refuse others this status. However, some stood stronger in the negotiations than their opponents. It was clear that the chief supporters in Mele Maat had far more power to assert their position than the opposition, since their status as man Maat was official and undisputed, and because the position of Albea as chief was accepted by most, if not all, kastom authorities (chiefs) on Efate and Ambrym. The opposition, on the other hand, did not enjoy such a solid position. Although their rights were supported by fellow villagers and outsiders such as individuals from Mele and certain representatives from the Presbyterian Church, their status remained ambivalent and disputed. Similarly, while people from both Mele Maat and Mele each claimed to be kastom owners, the Mele people clearly occupied a more influential position, since they were recognised as the original owners – those who held precedence - by outside authorities like the DL.

Despite of these unequal power relations people from all sides of the divisions kept engaging in the process of categorising self and other by emphasising different factors constituting belonging. As I have discussed, being labelled as either man kam or rightful people had consequences in terms of rights to land, and seen in this light the categories were not just labels, they were social constructs with rights, status, and power attached to them.

3.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I first provided a description of the home of Leah and Thomson and their life in Mele Maat. This was followed by an analysis of the way people balanced their lives in between different livelihood strategies in their efforts to make the most of both. Based on this I argued that while white man work had become important to people as they
struggled to obtain money for things such as school fees and imported commodities, gardens still occupied an essential part of people's lives. Being able to cultivate gardens reduced the risk of starvation and made people able to choose to which degree they wanted to rely on money earning activities. Not only gardens proved essential for the way my informants lived their lives. Land in general provided people with security and freedom to choose which kind of life to live.

While my Mele Maat informants often told me that they owned the land on which they lived, and that they were indeed kastom owners, I soon discovered that things were not as simple as people made it seem. First of all, the Mele Maat people on a whole were struggling with an ambivalent status which entailed different levels of uncertainty. In the analysis I highlighted three such levels: the trespassing of Mele families, the difficulties in obtaining leases on the garden land, and the expiring date on leases. Within Mele Maat other levels of uncertainty were apparent. As was discussed, the chief supporters were troubled by growing land scarcity and social problems, which they understood to be caused by those they had termed man kam. These people, on the other hand, worried about the threat of banishment.

In both these struggles it was clear that people produced their own stories about what constituted belonging and what consequently gave a group the right to stay - or not. Through these stories a categorisation process was taking place where people from all sides of the divisions tried to attach or shed the man kam label in their efforts to claim legitimate rights or disclaim the rights of others.

Having discussed how people through their narratives negotiated and struggled over where to draw group boundaries, in the next chapter I will explore in further detail the meaning and ramifications of the narrative practice.
Chapter 4: *Giaman Stori* and the Multiplicity of Truth

Leah is sitting next to me on the wooden bench as I ask Norman about his life and the conflicts. He is an elderly man and a friend of Leah and Thomson. After the interview Leah asks him to whom she ought to introduce me to next. She is worried about who she can trust to tell me the true story, and seeks his advice. They agree that many people do not know about tradition and history. Also, Norman tells me that, "many will tell you *giaman stori* (lies)".

Norman and Leah were not the only ones to warn me against the lies other people were likely to tell me. Many informants told me that I should not trust what others might say, because many would tell me things that were not true. Further, not only did my informants tell me that other people would either not possess sufficient knowledge or deliberately lie, everyone claimed that they were themselves telling the true story, and that they would never lie to me. As such, my informants told me truths. So many that it was difficult to keep track. Since no *one* story existed about almost anything, I found myself struggling to find a way to understand what had *really happened*, what was *the true tradition*, and similar questions which were equally impossible to answer.

I must admit that I arrived to Mele Maat expecting to find one truth on which my informants to a large degree would agree on. Or, rather, I did not imagine the question of truth to become such a central issue. While I anticipated different sentiments to be apparent regarding the issues I wanted to raise I did not expect to step upon such a diverse amount of interpretations about historical and present-day events - such a myriad of stories - and it threw me off balance. However, as the fieldwork progressed I began to discover certain patterns and themes in the storytelling which gradually made me understand that something more than just a retelling of the past was at stake. Before digging deeper into the meaning and significance of the many stories I wish to elaborate a little on the characteristics of the storytelling and of those who were talking. As will be discussed, being part of either *the talkers or the silent*[^69] had serious consequences.

[^69]: These are labels of my making, but the division they underline was clear among my informants, and it is from them I learned that it mattered much whether you were one or the other.
It should be noted that the talkers are overrepresented in this thesis, because of the simple fact that they were doing the talking. Since I am concerned with the meanings and effects of the storytelling practice, it has been necessary to present (some of) the many stories in the text. However, this is not meant to imply that I have only spent time with those who engaged in the storytelling practice. Those who were silent (regarding the conflicts – not in general) make up almost as big a part of my group of informants as the talkers do.

4.1 Speaking One’s Mind

The people who engaged in the storytelling practice were a group consisting predominantly of middle-aged or elderly men. Though some women and young people did partake in the storytelling, most did not. The talkers were characterised as knowledgeable and aware of a historical past, political developments, and most importantly they had a strong sense of what was right or wrong, notions which were expressed in their stories.

In Mele Maat, the people taking active part in the opposition were the talkers of the group labeled man kam, meaning that they were those who positioned themselves actively in the conflict. The individuals I have termed the chief supporters were among the talkers of the group of people belonging to Sanoe and Peas whose status as man Maat was not questioned, and who quietly supported Chief Albea’s leadership.

Who were and who were not talkers in Mele is difficult for me to say as I did not establish a solid foundation on which to build such a claim. Since my main focus was the Mele Maat people and their experiences I found it necessary to limit my involvement with the Mele villagers to a few informants. A common characteristic shared by these people was, however, that they were all recommended to me by others, because they were respected and influential people in the community. Furthermore, they were considered people of knowledge, and they were definitely not afraid to speak their mind.

As I have already touched upon and which I will discuss in further detail later in this chapter, engaging in the storytelling practice was a way to get one’s opinion heard and a tool by which to achieve certain goals. But the storytelling was not innocent. Taking part in the practice meant that people were positioning themselves in the conflicts. On this note I will turn to the silent.
Those whom I have termed the silent were actually made up by people facing different circumstances. Some merely chose not to take part in the storytelling practice, because of lacking interest or knowledge. For many the conflicts seemed to be irrelevant compared to the everyday concerns. This mostly regarded people who were not at risk, such as those from Peas and Sanoe who supported Chief Albea in silence. Other people had more deliberate reasons to refrain from engaging in the storytelling. In the following excerpt from my field notes, Bruce, who had reconciled with the opposition, offers an explanation as to why some chose to stay silent:

Sitting beneath his shelter with smolbubu (grandchildren) running around us in excitement, Bruce is telling me about his choice to reconcile with families of the opposition. “How many people are supporting either the Chief or the opposition”, I ask. He answers that it is hard to say, because “many families are afraid to show their support to the opposition... they fear that their names will be placed on the list of those who are to be banished”.

As was clear from the example of Bruce himself (see page 50-51), speaking your mind could have severe consequences. This was not only the case within the village. In a similar manner, some Mele informants told me that Mele Maat had to tread carefully and not create trouble, for example by claiming ownership to the garden land. George Sokumanu, who was one of my informants from Mele, phrased it in the following way:

“Mele Maat should be careful not to disturb a calm sea, since this can have consequences. When you begin to make trouble, there is no way to tell what can happen”.

Malkki talks about ‘strategies of invisibility’ (Malkki 1995:156) by which she refers to ways by which people can try to conceal certain aspects of their past or affiliation in order to avoid social exclusion or political persecution (ibid:156-57). I find that the strategies employed by these silent people in Mele Maat worked in a similar way. Above I argued that the talkers positioned themselves in the conflicts through the storytelling and that the narrative practice was not innocent. By doing the opposite, that is, by not engaging in the creation of stories people hoped to stay neutral and out of harm’s way.
Before moving on to the analysis I wish briefly to outline the characteristics of the storytelling. Through this it will become clear that while struggle persisted, it often did so in indirect ways.

What I found to be one of the most characteristic features of the storytelling practice was that nobody was discussing the disputed issues openly. Take into account that the opposing families and individuals in Mele Maat lived side by side in the village and this seems even more peculiar. While not confronting each other directly, people shared their stories with people of the same opinion. In my host family, for example, Thomson and Maatson often discussed the problems regarding man kam. Sometimes they would include Chief Albea or their friends and family in the conversations as well. But, at least while I was with them, they never sought out anybody from the opposition and initiated an argument. John, who was active in the opposition, told me that back when the struggles arose in 2003, he had been harassed by some of the chief’s supporters. However, it seemed like this practice was never widespread and now a thing of the past. While the arguments between the struggling parties were not carried out in the open, they unfolded through other channels. As will be discussed later, in their efforts to obtain their goals people moved the disputes into other spheres such as the national courts where the arguments continued through lawyers hired to speak out for their rights.

Having briefly outlined how the storytelling unfolded, I will now look closer at how it was produced and maintained, as well as how it affected the ongoing conflicts. In the previous chapter I showed that my informants through the narratives tried to assert themselves as rightful people by emphasising diverging parameters, each of which determined what constituted belonging. In the remaining part of this chapter, first I wish to discuss how these parameters obtained their legitimacy and force. Here I will argue that people established links to a past, or rather to past traditions which validated their claims. The parameters were, as such, not pulled out of thin air. Rather, they emanated from different interpretations of the meaning or significance of the traditional way - expressed through the term kastom. In the last part of the chapter I will provide an analysis of the multiplicity of truths produced. Based on this I will argue that my informants by way of their stories established different social worlds through which they interpreted their past, their present and their future, and that, according to its own frame of reference, each truth was indeed true.
4.2 According to Kastom...

I have already described how kastom was afforded a quite prominent position when the country became an independent state (see page 16). However, while being written into the Constitution, the meaning of kastom still remains utterly multifaceted and disputed, and as I will discuss in the ensuing paragraphs, the openness of this symbol had specific ramifications for the ongoing land disputes.

Benedicta Rousseau points out that kastom is a concept that appears repeatedly in the ethnographic, historical and popular discourse of independent Vanuatu, and that it has been much discussed in anthropological literature on Vanuatu (and other Melanesian countries) over the past thirty years (Rousseau 2008:15). However, while most people emphasise the importance of kastom, many seem unclear about what it actually entails (Brown & Nolan 2008:6).

Throughout my fieldwork I experienced how kastom was used to signify a great variety of things. However, many of these fall outside the scope of this thesis, and in the following I will only deal with those which appeared to be influencing the ongoing conflicts over land and rights. I have identified two levels on which kastom was used in the narratives to claim rights: the first had to do with the question of significance by which I refer to whether kastom (as culture and legal system) was considered more or less significant than the Constitution (an overall term used by my informants to refer to the new land laws introduced at independence) in settling disputes over rights to land. The second was more concerned with the specific meaning of kastom. While the former characterised the conflict between Mele and Mele Maat, the latter was apparent in both conflicts although it was mostly articulated by the chief supporters and the opposition within Mele Maat.

4.2.1 Significance: “Kastom Hem i Stap”

The conflicting opinions regarding the significance of kastom materialised in arguments about the meaning of the kastom (the gift) given just prior to independence. During a conversation with a Mele informant we touched upon the subject of this gift. Contrary to my other informants from Mele he stated that the offering changed Mele Maat’s status into kastom owners of the land. Whether or not this included the garden land was unclear, but he was the first (and only) Mele informant to agree with Mele Maat in their claims.
However, as our talk progressed, it became clear that with independence the rules of kastom no longer stood unchallenged:

I ask him why the Mele Maat people need to renew (obtain leases on) their titles if they, like he had just said, had become the rightful kastom owners of the land by giving kastom to Mele. He answers that, yes, through the gift they became kastom owners, but a shift took place at independence, “Around this time came the Alienation Act which was directed at making the influence of white man smaller... so the new laws became important”.

Here the informant points out that at independence kastom (the traditional way of doing things) was shoved somewhat into the background. From this it becomes apparent why the significance of the kastom given had become subject to dispute. According to the traditional way Mele Maat had gained rights to the land, but these rights were compromised with the introduction of the new land laws. The contradictions between the two diverging opinions about which system to follow were articulated in the many stories told. During a conversation with the Mele chief, Simion Poilapa, he tells me that:

"Mele Maat is privileged. If we in Mele decided to follow the Constitution, then Mele Maat would have to lease the land on which they live".

In this statement Simion argues that by letting Mele Maat stay without demanding them to lease, the Mele people were exhibiting a large amount of goodwill which should not be taken for granted. According to him, the reason why man Maat were so priviledged had to do with Mele’s choice not to follow the Constitution. Throughout our conversation, Simion continuously pointed to this issue and argued that no doubt existed regarding Mele's rights, since it was clearly written in the Constitution. Furthermore, when I asked him about the titles which were currently being claimed by Mele families (including Mele Maat’s gardens) he argued that the families in question were just following their constitutional rights. Here it should be noted that the Constitution itself also highlighted the importance of kastom. In this way, by emphasising its importance, Mele did not oppose

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70 The law stated that only alienators had to renew, not kastom owners. For this reason I found it odd that Mele Maat had to renew if they were indeed kastom owners.
the significance of following the traditional way in general. Rather, they used it to argue that with it all prior agreements (based on kastom or not) had been annulled.

As I discussed in chapter 3.3.1 a rather different interpretation was apparent among my Mele Maat informants who emphasised the significance of the kastom (gift) given to Mele prior to independence which according to them had entailed a transfer of ownership and status. In commenting on the trespassing by Mele families on their land, Lik⁷² made clear the importance of following the traditional way:

"It is very wrong what these people are now doing. Because of the kastom we gave to Mele in 1978 they ought not come here and take the land which is rightfully ours. Kastom hem i stap [kastom remains]."

Here Lik argues for the everlasting importance of the traditional way which in his opinion clearly outweighed any of the new laws.

In the above statements we see how diverging understandings of the significance of kastom and the Constitution, respectively, were articulated and used actively to bring force to the claims of legitimacy. Now I will turn to the diverging interpretations regarding the meaning of kastom.

4.2.2 Meaning: "This is not the Way of Kastom"

In the literature on kastom most authors agree that at independence the concept was attached new meanings as the newly instated government promoted it as a symbol to unite the country⁷³. Forsyth argues that in doing so, the government changed kastom into a symbol of common culture, that is, all which ni-Vanuatu share, in contrast to all which is foreign (Forsyth 2009:76-77). Roger Keesing points out that in order for the concept to work on a national level it has to remain open for interpretation, "The diversity of meanings Meleanesians attribute to kastom underlines the way these symbols do not carry meanings: they evoke them. Their very abstractedness and lack of precise content

⁷² Lik was an elderly man from Mele Maat who opened his home to me. Lik had travelled around most of Vanuatu through his employment for the colonial government and knew much about the country’s history. Now he was retired but still functioned as elder (a term referring to an influential person within the Presbyterian Church).

⁷³ For example, Brown and Nolan writes that the term kastom emerged in part as a modern, nationalist identification of traditional values and practices (Brown & Nolan 2008:2).
allow a consenus which would otherwise be impossible among people whose material circumstances, class interest, and ethnic affiliations are different and often deeply divided” (Keesing 1982:299). While kastom has been utilised by the government to evoke ideas of unity, homogeneity, and national identity, its unifying potential has proven weaker at the local level than at the national. Tonkinson writes that where the concept of kastom at the national level has to be largely empty of specific content to work as a unifying symbol, at the local level it normally has detailed content and specificity, and is used for defining differences and marking boundaries between competing groups (Tonkinson 1982a:302).

Agreeing with this notion, Joan Larcom argues that the understanding of kastom as common culture has affected how ni-Vanuatu establish group boundaries (Larcom 1990:175). While such boundaries were formerly of a more fluid nature with emphasis placed on time shared together in a location\textsuperscript{74}, now, she argues, they are becoming far more fixed as people draw lines between self and other on the basis of blood ties and inherent culture. Referring to the former as ‘contiguity’ and the latter ‘consanguinity’ Larcom aims to show that new meanings have replaced the old, and that this has had significant consequences in terms of boundary construction (Larcom 1990:182-83).

Though I agree that new meanings have been attached to the concept kastom, I do not see this as a finalised movement from one state to another. Rather, my data shows that what Larcom has identified as prior and contemporary meanings, respectively, exist simultaneously in Vanuatu today. As I will show in the ensuing paragraphs my informants emphasised diverging aspects of kastom which all brought force into their arguments.

As was discussed earlier, in the conflict unfolding within Mele Maat the chief supporters most often emphasised precedence as the factor determining who should, and who should not be considered legitimate people. I find this understanding of kastom similar to what Larcom has identified as ‘consanguinity’. Emphasis was placed on inherent culture shared by the group of people who claimed to belong to Maat village originally. Like Maatson told me:

“Many people came later and settled down, but they are not the right people... they do not belong. Only Peas and Sanoe belong to Maat village originally. Now

\textsuperscript{74} See also Linnekin and Poyer (1990), Sahlins (1985) and Bonnemaison (1985).
they want to do things in their own way, but this is not the way of our kastom. So they must go somewhere else, and do their things there”.

In these and other statements the chief supporters described man Maat as a group with inherent traits and a unique tradition, something in which man kam could not take part, because they, as the argument went, were not originally from Maat village. As such, precedence was equated with kastom as cultural essence. As has been argued earlier a similar understanding was apparent among my Mele informants who emphasised their precedence in the area, and the status of the Mele Maat people as man kam. In both cases the understanding of belonging was characterised by a rigid boundary construction by which each of the two groups (the chief supporters and the Mele informants) established themselves as the rightful people while trying to keep others from obtaining this status. Though the context of conflict differed, I will suggest that each of these groups created boundaries on the basis of a shared cultural essence by establishing links to a history of precedence.

In contrast to this, time lived and shared together as a community was highlighted in the stories of the opposition as the factor granting legitimacy (see page 48), and this understanding is characteristic for what Larcom has termed ‘contiguity’, and which describes a more fluid boundary construction based on shared experience in a location (Larcom 1990:83). Often people would highlight that according to kastom it was their right to stay in the village, exactly because they had become a part of it through time passed. Such statements were often followed by the argument that Chief Albea did not follow true kastom when he wanted to banish people. In this way the arguments of the opposition also found their force in a certain notion of kastom, although this interpretation diverged much from the one expressed by the chief supporters.

From the above it appears that different meanings were attached to kastom, and that these became a matter of dispute as people struggled to convince others that their interpretation was indeed the true one. By using Larcom’s terms I aim to show that my informants emphasised different aspects of kastom as they struggled over legitimacy, but the use of kastom in the narratives was far more fluid and moldable than this suggests. My point here is that kastom was a way by which my informants interpreted and formulated their claims over land, and that it could be used to bring force to very diverse arguments.
Before elaborating on this I wish to make a note on how the term kastom was articulated in the narratives. While used repeatedly by people to depict their way of life in contrast to that of white man or to describe features of their way of life such as a building style or traditional livelihood strategies, in the case of group boundaries kastom was often not explicitly mentioned. However, as I have discussed above the understanding of group membership as based on either consanguity or contiguity refers to different conceptions of kastom, one which understands it as something you share and exchange and another which finds it to be an inherent trait, a cultural essence, in a group. Based on this I will argue that kastom was central in the negotiations over group boundaries and legitimacy, even though it was usually not mentioned by word.

I have now argued that the various claims found their legitimacy and force in kastom, and that kastom became attached with multiple meanings as my informants struggled over rights to land. In this sense, kastom was shaped through social action and therefore in a constant process of becoming. This mouldable nature of kastom has received much attention in academia.

Discussions about whether or not kastom should be understood as true representations of past traditions appeared in the wake of the special issue of the journal *Mankind* from 1982 where Keesing and Tonkinson as editors argued that attention should be given to the invented aspects of kastom (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982). In a later text, Keesing (1989) refers to the ‘invention of kastom’ and the ‘refashioning of the pre-colonial past’, arguing that there is a wide gap between the authentic past and the representations of the past in contemporary ideologies of cultural identity (Keesing in Forsyth 2009:78), and that ni-Vanuatu’s conceptions about culture, otherness, and primitivity often are creations of Western imagination75 (Keesing 1989:29).

This growing awareness about the constructed aspects of kastom took place simultaneously with a more general turn in anthropological theory which was initiated with the publishing of the influential anthology by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger of the telling title *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). Here it is highlighted that tradition is not

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75 This view has been supported by many other scholars who illustrate how kastom is being reinvented or recreated today, stressing that whereas kastom was previously fluid, accommodating of change, and deliberately borrowing from and incorporating notions from outside influences, today it is becoming recreated as something far more fixed, changeless, and unresponsive to foreign influence. See for example Tonkinson (1982b), Larcom (1990) and Forsyth (2009).
static, but on the contrary remains subjected to change, continuous development, and conscious manipulation. Hobsbawm defines ‘invented tradition’ as a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawm 1983). In Hobsbawm’s definition, continuity stands out as an essential aspect of such invented traditions, but the word *invention* points out that the practices are in fact new and therefore do not constitute a direct continuity with past practices. In this way Hobsbawm argues that the claimed continuity is largely factitious (ibid:2).

A central point in Hobsbawm’s theory is that traditions must be understood as either *genuine* or *invented* (Hobsbawm 1983:8). However, I agree with Otto and Pedersen when they argue that this distinction is over-emphasising the contrast between real continuity and a constructed sense of performance (Otto & Pedersen 2005:13-14). Underlining this point, they write, “We do not believe that the opposite of an invented tradition is a genuine one, for one can argue that all traditions are constructed or ‘invented’ at some stage in history, and this quality does not necessarily make them less genuine” (ibid:31).

While I remain apprehensive of a view on kastom as pure invention, it is impossible to ignore that my informants each highlighted certain aspects of kastom which suited their situation the best. This is central. Kastom was a symbol open to interpretation. As Keesing writes, symbols do not carry meanings: they evoke them (Keesing 1982:299). Which aspects of kastom to emphasise was a matter of choice, and in their narratives people did choose. Past traditions and events were brought into the present day conflicts through the narratives, exactly because of their ability to establish legitimacy. In the following analysis this aspect will be explored in further detail as I look closer at the multiplicity of truth.

### 4.3 Worlds in the Making

The invention debate has not been alone in challenging the issue of truth. Much has been written about historical knowledge and its expressions, and questions have been raised about the possibility of one true historical record. As I touched upon in chapter 1.2.1 Malkki emphasises that while truth is relative and context specific, not all versions of the truth should be accorded equal validity (Malkki 1995:240). However, according to Malkki
we ought to examine what is “taken to be the truth” by different social groups, and why,
instead of trying to sort out “true facts from distortions”. Different regimes of truth exist
for different historical actors, and particular historical events support any number of
different narrative elaborations\(^76\) (ibid:104). In her analysis Malkki finds her inspiration in
Goodman’s (1978) theory of worldmaking and the relativism it entails. Referring to
Goodman she writes that, “The worlds made through narrations of the past are always
historically situated and culturally constructed, and it is these that people act upon and
riddle with meaning” (Malkki 1995:104).

Goodman applies the term ‘worldmaking’ to explain how people engage in an ongoing
practice of creating social worlds. In describing some of the processes that go into
worldmaking he writes that, “Much but not all worldmaking consists of taking apart and
putting together, often conjointly: on the one hand of dividing wholes into parts and
partitioning kinds into sub-species, analysing complexes into component features,
drawing distinctions; on the other hand, of composing wholes and kinds out of parts and
members and sub-classes, combining features into complexes, and making connections\(^77\)”
(Goodman 1978:7). Worldmaking is, in this way, a process of categorisation where people
produce specific orders through which they make sense of their social reality. An
important point in Goodman’s proposal is that because social worlds can be established
around very different orders of categorisation, one social world may be fundamentally
different from other such worlds. Below I will discuss this perspective in relation to my
empirical data. More specifically I will show how my informants through their narratives
engaged in a worldmaking process by which multiple truths were produced, and explore
how this multiplicity shaped the ongoing struggles over land.

As I have already argued, my informants held on to very different interpretations of what
was true, both regarding past events and traditions, and present-day developments.
Through their narratives people were able to express such notions, but I find that the
stories told were more than just a description of these things. Rather they were a way by
which my informants categorised the world. By way of their narratives people constructed

\(^76\) Similarly, Rasmussen (2009) points out that what is important is not how true or false historical
consciousness is, but rather wherein resides its power or hold over those who believe in it, and how
its uses produce consequences, intended and unintended (Rasmussen 2009:567).

\(^77\) Apart from this ‘composition’ and ‘decomposition’, Goodman outlines four additional ways of
worldmaking: weighing, ordering, deletion and supplementation, and deformation. He emphasises
that this is not to be understood as a comprehensive list, and that the various ways of worldmaking
he has listed often occur in combination (Goodman 1978:10-17).
categorical schemata through which they interpreted their past and their present. Applying Goodman’s terminology I will suggest that each of the conflicting groups established social worlds upon an order which was unique to the group creating it. I have already discussed how people based their arguments in diverging interpretations of kastom. Combining this perspective with the point made here I will argue that the social orders and their categories were built upon diverging notions of the meaning and significance of kastom, and that kastom provided the language by which people articulated their claims. Since kastom could bring force to many different arguments, the orders produced became multiple in numbers. In this way each truth expressed through the narrative practice referred back to a certain order, whether this was an emphasis on the significance or the meaning of kastom, and so each statement was true according to its own specific frame of reference.

I have come to understand my informants’ narrative practice as a way of worldmaking, because in the process of classifying the world according to certain principles, people were simultaneously creating it. As such, the stories told were more than just a description of the past. They were a subversive recasting and reinterpretation of it in fundamentally moral terms. Through the narratives people seized historical events, processes, and relationships, and reinterpreted them within a deeply moral scheme. As we have seen, the main theme of the storytelling had to do with who was the right kind of people and who was not; who were the good ones and who were the bad, and in their stories people were concerned with ordering and reordering social as well as political categories, and with defining of self in distinction to other, according to their own specific interpretation of what constituted belonging.

A similar argument is proposed by Malkki in her examination of the narrative practice of her informants among Hutu refugees in Tanzania (Malkki 1995:54-56). However, it is clear that the difference in context and scope of conflict produced very different kinds of narratives which both differed in content and purpose. While morality was at the heart of the Hutu worldmaking as well, here it was centred on the question of good and evil. It is clear that the extreme violence experienced by the Hutu refugees had influenced their narrative practice and shaped the other (the Tutsi) as fundamentally different: they were evil by nature. Contrary to this, my informants shared a past which, while not harmonious, was characterised by peaceful co-existence which affected their view of the other, as one who in many ways was similar to themselves.
Furthermore, by telling their stories my informants produced more than categorical schemata of a moral order. They produced proof of rights. As we have seen, the stories told about past traditions and events were turned into resources by which my informants tried to establish legitimate rights over land. In the following it will become evident how utterly contemporary this articulation of the past was in the present of Mele Maat. Indeed, it will become obvious that the narratives represented a form of social action which affected the present day struggles in significant ways.

As was discussed in chapter 3 different levels of uncertainty characterised the lives of my informants. These conditions created a need for every group to produce proof of their rights to the land in question. Here I find it beneficial to linger a little at the specific form through which the claims to legitimacy were expressed: the oral narrative.

John and Jean Comaroff (1987) argue that narrativity is one out of several ways of expressing historical consciousness, and that narrativity should not be taken for granted. However, when it does take narrative form, the role of the imagined audience would appear to be crucial. Specifically, insofar claims to legitimacy imply an outside world as an audience they almost necessarily demand a narrative form (Comaroff & Comaroff in Malkki 1995:250-51). The need for narrativity was clearly apparent in the Mele Maat context. I understand the lack of written proof about the meaning and significance of kastom, as well as certain historical developments to be an important factor here.

The issue of proof was brought to my attention many times throughout the fieldwork. For example during a conversation with Mneto Nganga78 about Mele Maat’s claims to the gardens he said:

“Well, when they say things like that [Mele Maat claiming rights] then they have to produce evidence of the agreement [that the kastom entailed ownership to all four titles of land]. They need to show proof in writing that the agreement gave them this right”.

78 Mneto was man Mele and worked for the Presbyterian Church Assembly Office.
Since such proof was needed but nowhere to be found in writing, people had to seek other ways to obtain acknowledgement of their status and rights. In the process of doing so my informants had identified different audiences to whom they told their stories (myself included). This was indeed necessary. In order to claim rights, the stories had to be told.

From this it becomes apparent that the uncertainty created by the continuous struggles was part of what held the storytelling going. However, the narrative practice and its many versions of the truth produced uncertainty itself by making the conflicts continue year after year. Here we arrive at the question of the chicken or the egg, since it was clear that conditions of uncertainty such as land scarcity and incidents of rebellious behaviour had been major factors in setting the conflicts in motion to begin with. Still, now it seemed like a reciprocal relationship was in evidence between conditions of uncertainty and the storytelling practice: the storytelling added fuel to the fire of conflict while simultaneously being spurred by it.

4.3.1 Multiple Worlds – Multiple Truths

Above I have argued that through their narratives my informants established diverging worlds each of which was ordered according to its own categorical schemata. Consequently, within its frame of reference each truth was indeed true. As such I align myself with Goodman’s understanding of worldmaking and the relativism it entails. Here it must be noted that such relativism does not imply that all truths are equally valid. Goodman’s perspective on worldmaking does not deem every world possible, but it shows that many are.

Likewise, in Mele Maat not all claims could enter the conflicts as possible truths. For example, if I had wished to claim status as kastom owner I would not have been able to do so convincingly. As an outsider, a white man, this claim would be deemed invalid by all involved. The same would be the case if a man from Tanna79, for instance, should suddenly decide to settle down and claim the land. Having no prior connection to the place his claims would be dismissed immediately. As such, certain limits existed regarding which truths could be produced and maintained. They had to fit into an already existing scheme about what constituted valid claims. In this way, the worldmaking was restricted by what was already there.

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79Tanna is an island situated in the southern part of the archipelago.
While the various truths established by my informants were contested by others, still they proved able to resist the pressure and did, as such, fit into what could be accepted as possible truths. Still, all did not have the same force or persuasive powers since their creators occupied very different positions in terms of status (see last part of chapter 3.3.2). Despite of their unequal positions, however, it appeared that no one truth was able to take precedence over others. So to which extent, one might ask, did the truths affect the production of one another?

Earlier I have mentioned that in their struggles over land and rights my informants engaged in various practices to obtain the acknowledgement needed to reach their goals. Within Mele Maat people from both opposing groups appealed to outsiders such as the Mele people and their chief and council, representatives from the Presbyterian Church, the DL and the national courts. Despite of these efforts it seemed that although some people were in a stronger position to claim rights because of their status, none of the groups had been able to obtain a level of recognition, or a judgement as such, with enough force to actually take action against their opponents. As a result the chief supporters and those they had termed man kam still lived side by side in the village. It is important to recognise that this did not entail happy co-existence since anger and resentment were general aspects characterising the situation. While living alongside one another many refrained from associating with the individuals they opposed and consequently sharp lines of division cut through the village. However, this did not change the fact that everyone still remained in Mele Maat and were able to keep living their lives in this place which they considered home. The same situation was apparent in the struggle between Mele and Mele Maat. Despite of the Mele families’ efforts to claim ownership over the area in which Mele Maat’s gardens were situated, no result had come of it (yet), and consequently the inhabitants of Mele Maat were still allowed to grow their crops. Similarly, the Mele Maat people had been unsuccessful in forcing the Mele tresspassers away, and so they stayed.

In the introduction to the book *Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices* (2006 [2002]) Law and Mol argue that while the different spheres of knowledge which make up a complex phenomenon might be fundamentally different and multiple, they are not necessarily unrelated and their production not unlimited (Law & Mol 2006 [2002]:10). Elaborating on this they state that, “[while] we are not dealing with a single body [body refers to a coherent whole in which different spheres relate], we are not dealing with
many different and unrelated bodies neither: the various modes of ordering, logics, styles, practices, and the realities they perform do not exist in isolation from one another. As such, they are not islands unto themselves, closed cultures, self-contained paradigms, or bubbles” (ibid). Drawing on Donna Haraway (1991), the authors conclude that such paradigms interfere with one another (Law & Mol 2006 [2002]:10-11).

As has been discussed throughout the thesis, the various versions of the truth were contested by other such truths and they did, as such, not exist in a vacuum. It was clear that the interference between the different worlds was part of what spurred the ongoing production of truths as people kept up their efforts to assert their own truth over others. Still, as I have argued, each version was allowed (and able) to exist quite independently from each other. Since none of them were able to exclude the others I find that their actual interference with one another was quite restricted. Goodman’s perspective on multiplicity is useful here as it explains how such diverging stories were able to be produced and maintained, while Law and Mol’s discussion on interference opens up for an investigation of how and to what extent the various worlds created relate, interfere and shape each other’s production. As I have argued, while the worldmaking of my informants was multiple, the worlds established were not unrelated ‘bubbles’ floating around, but neither were they able to exclude the others and so every truth remained intact.

By bringing together the arguments of Law and Mol and those by Goodman in my analysis I recognise that their analytical aims are very different. While Goodman has a philosophical approach and an interest in some more general questions about sociality, Law and Mol deal with specific social phenomena and practices. Such difference makes a comparison difficult. This said, both perspectives are helpful to my analytical endeavour. Besides from the point made above, through Law and Mol’s perspective on complexity it becomes possible to make some sense of the multiplicity produced through the narrative practice: it was exactly because of the complexity, that is, the co-existence of multiple orders, that the multiplicity of truth was possible.

That no truth was able to take precedens over others was strongly influenced by the difficulties which the state and customary authorities were experiencing in putting an end to the ongoing struggles. The reasons for this apparent state of paralysis and its consequences will be discussed in further detail in chapter 5, but for now it suffices to say that the various orders created by people - the multiplicity of truths produced – created
more than the apparent struggles. I will suggest that while the multiplicity of truths spurred the struggles onwards as people engaged in actions to deem the truths of others invalid, the same multiplicity also produced social stability on a general level by maintaining the status quo where no one truth seemed able to render other truths null and void.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I started out with discussing how people by way of their stories established legitimacy through diverging interpretations of the meaning or significance of kastom. I argued that kastom, like traditions in general, must be understood as containing both continuous and constructed aspects, but that this does not make them less genuine. Further, I showed how kastom had become a symbol open for interpretation. In their stories my informants emphasised or downplayed various aspects of kastom which could grant them the status sought for. As was discussed, claims to legitimacy on the basis of kastom consequently became a matter of dispute as different people struggled to get their version of the truth acknowledged.

By including Goodman's concept of worldmaking in the analysis I showed how people through the narrative practice established social worlds of their own, each of which contained its own categorical schemata (system of order) through which people interpreted issues of rights and ownership and notions of legitimacy. Based on this I argued that each truth was indeed true according to its own frame of reference. Furthermore, I suggested that the narratives produced more than categorical schemata of a moral order. They produced (or tried to produce) rights. As such, the stories of the past were related to the present day struggles over land, each folding into one another and affecting each other's production.

Moving the analysis forward I argued that though some limits existed to which truths could be produced, the already established truths of my informants were all accepted as possible, because they fitted into an already existing scheme of what constituted valid claims. Further, it was clear that none of the truths produced had the power to exclude the others and so truth remained multiple. As I alluded to above, this multiplicity shaped the context of conflict and had specific social ramifications. This will be dealt with in further detail in the latter part of the ensuing chapter where I, by introducing the issue of hope to
the analysis, will elaborate on the argument that the multiplicity both kept the conflicts in motion and upheld a certain kind of social stability. However, first I wish to examine another way the future folded into the present context of conflict.
Chapter 5: Anticipation, Hope, and the Wait

That the conflicts over land and rights were complex phenomena did not only show through the multiplicity of truth. In this chapter I will explore in further detail how also time added to the apparent complexity, and discuss its implications for the ongoing struggles. Law and Mol make the argument that the idea of order (the single order) has grown out of the linear history in which most orders are presented, and that insofar as orders are put into time, the time that is mobilised is linear. It flows in one direction only: on and on (Law & Mol 2006 [2002]:12). However, as I will elaborate on below, this understanding is insufficient if we are to make sense of how my informants considered their situation and how they chose to act. As my data indicates, time did not only flow in a linear way. Rather, different temporalities folded into the present and shaped the ongoing conflicts over land.

Having already discussed how the past was brought into the present through the narrative practice I will now focus on the way the actions of my informants were shaped by a future lying ahead. The ensuing analysis will be two-fold. First, I will consider how certain assumptions about the future shaped the ways in which people chose to engage in the conflicts in order to avoid that these should turn into reality. In the second part of the chapter I will suggest that we look into the issue of hope. Through the analysis I will show that not only fears but also the potential for future success kept the conflicts alive. Furthermore it will be argued that by engaging in these struggles year after year, people became suspended in a state of waiting which maintained peace on a general level while the conflicts continued to unravel.

5.1 Uncertain Futures and Ways of Anticipation

Before turning to the actual analysis I wish briefly to outline the discussions which have taken place within academia on how people orient themselves toward unknown futures. In recent anthropological writings the future and the imaginings of what it might hold have received a substantial amount of attention. In their introduction to an edition of Tidsskriftet Antropologi which zooms in on 'the future' Martin D. Frederiksen, Marie H. Bræmer, and Susanne Højlund (2011) point out that we live in a time which is almost obsessed with the future, and that this might be what has spurred the increased attention given this field of research in recent years (Frederiksen et al. 2011:3). With her critical essay from 1992 Nancy Munn was among the first to point out the importance of bringing
the future into the equation when dealing with human practice. While offering a detailed description of the existing research on *time*, Munn’s main purpose in this article is to point to an aspect, or rather an integral part, of time which up until then had remained outside the vision of most academic works on the subject (Munn 1992:115). The problem, writes Munn, is that anthropologists in general have viewed the future in “shreds and patches” in contrast to the close attention given to “the past in the present” (ibid:115-16). However, the future must be considered on equal terms with the past and the present if we are to explain social action since “the past-present-future relation [...] is intrinsic to all temporalizations” (ibid:115).

Since Munn made this call for a more balanced anthropology of time, many researchers have proven sympathetic to her arguments and followed up on the questions posed, producing a rich and nuanced body of work on how people orient themselves in relation to unknown futures (Nielsen 2011:398). Anticipatory action has gained a central place in many of these studies. In their quest to comprehend how anticipations about the future relate to present-day actions, the authors have developed an understanding of time which highlights the interrelatedness between different temporalities. For example Marilyn Strathern writes that temporal moments are not distinct from one another, because people’s actions are all the time informed by possible worlds which are not yet realised (Strathern 2005: 51). In a similar manner, Nielsen writes that imagined futures fold back on to the present, so to speak, to “ground the current act” (Nielsen 2011:398). In short, anticipatory actions connect otherwise detached temporal moments and potentially establish a meaningful relationship between the present and the future by making the latter a function of the former (or vice-versa) (ibid). Thus, people’s orientation toward the future is an orientation toward the world which has concrete expressions in the here and now.

Drawing on these analytical perspectives the ensuing analysis will investigate how people in their struggles over land were informed by certain assumptions about the future which shaped their choice of action and spurred the conflicts onwards. However, I find that

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80 While pointing out that both Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 2000) and Michel de Certeau (1984) were concerned with aspects of the future, Frederiksen et al. support Munn’s argument, and write that most anthropological works have been directed at the past with a focus on tradition, habit, and rites rather than the importance of future assumptions, imaginations, hopes, and the like (Frederiksen et al. 2011:3).

assumptions might not be the right word and have in the following chosen to use the term concerns instead, since this more accurately describes the nature of these possible future scenarios. While most of the concerns people expressed seemed very plausible, it is important to emphasise that these future events had not yet taken place which meant that they were, in fact, not reality but rather imaginings about a future not yet realised.

In both conflicts with which this thesis is concerned, people based much of their current actions as well as their plans for future action on what they thought their opponents might do in the future, as well as on assumptions of new problems situated ahead. Through the analysis I will explore the social implications of the imagined futures and discuss how these folded into the current conflicts and shaped their production. In the following I move from the more general concerns of Mele Maat on a whole regarding future control of land, to the more specific concerns evident among people positioned in the struggle within Mele Maat.

5.1.1 “We Need to Secure Our Titles”: Anticipating Risk of Future Land Loss

In chapter 3.3.1 I outlined how Mele's claim as original owners of the land and Mele Maat's uncertain status had resulted in specific concerns, some of which were contemporary while others were directed at the future. Here I will elaborate on the latter and discuss how concerns about future risk affected, how my informants understood their need to struggle and how they chose to do it. While it should be noted that not all of these concerns were stressed equally by all informants, still they were recurrent themes and had concrete expressions in the present-day struggles. This is why I have chosen to include them here.

First of all, among my Mele Maat informants a great concern had to do with the risk of losing the land on which they cultivated gardens. While this concern was most often expressed by the chief supporters, it was not confined to them. In my conversations with people of the opposition other issues of uncertainty were more pressing (such as being evicted from the village altogether), and these became the themes of most talks. Still, I find the concern about future loss of the gardens to be a general one, since a majority of the villagers relied on this land for food and income, although in various degrees. A loss of the gardens would have significant consequences for all their lives. When this might happen was pure conjecture. As of now the court case between Mele families had been ongoing for
years without arriving at a solution, and it is impossible to say whether it would end tomorrow or some time in the distant future. But the concern about future risk remained.

Another concern had to do with what would happen when their leases expired. Since Mele Maat had succeeded in obtaining leases on the village and cemetery titles in 2008 these would expire in 2083. In this way it was a problem situated far ahead. While some seemed indifferent to the risk of losing their rights to use the land in the future (finding it unlikely or too far off in time), others considered it an essential issue which needed to be dealt with immediately. According to these people Mele Maat occupied a very insecure position since they could be forced to leave altogether in case the kastom owner (Mele) decided to claim back the land in the future.

Thirdly, the settlement of Mele individuals/families on land which Mele Maat considered theirs had become a great concern among my Mele Maat informants. While this practice was definitely a problem already, it was also something which my Mele Maat informants worried would create increasing problems in the future in case more Mele residents should decide to follow the example. Part of this fear was connected to the lack of trust in authorities such as politicians as well as the DL. Much talk circulated about corruption and unstable political conditions which could lead to future loss of land. For example, Maatson told me that if the government changed and some of the new politicians had sympathy for Mele people interested in Mele Maat land, these might accept bribes in return for putting pressure on the DL to issue leases to these Mele people.

In order to counteract these imagined future developments my informants proposed two different routes of action. One of these was to obtain leases on the land and the other to attain an official transferral of status. Chief Albea and Emil Mael were personifications of these different courses of action. During one of our conversations Albea told me that:

"We need to secure our titles by obtaining leases. This we need to do by going to the Department of Lands. We have already secured the village and the cemetery in this way. Now we need to do the same thing with the gardens".
Already this process had been set in motion, Albea told me\textsuperscript{82}. In following this course of action, he believed leases able to secure Mele Maat’s existence in the future, since man Maat officially would obtain use rights. He did not express any concern about the expiring date of such leases, feeling confident that they would be able to \textit{renew} them (obtain new leases) when that time came.

In many of our conversations Emil complained about the Chief’s course of action, and argued that obtaining titles was not enough to secure their position in the future, exactly because these would expire at some point:

“So now the Chief is trying to renew titles, but I have told him that he needs to think about their limitations. At some point the lease will expire”.

Based on this, Emil found it imperative to take another route of action so that they could be safe in the future:

“We need to take the case to court so that they can acknowledge our status [officially changing it from man kam to kastom owners]. Once the court has given us such a declaration, we can bring it to the Department of Lands and make them cancel the leases [change them into \textit{freehold titles}\textsuperscript{83} which would be a recognition of their eternal rights to the land]. I have said ‘hey Chief, we are already kastom owners, it is very simple’, but he is \textit{strongheaded lelebet} (a little stubborn)”.

From this quote it is clear that Emil had no doubt in his mind about the true status of the Mele Maat people: they were already kastom owners. This status had been obtained through the \textit{kastom} which Mele Maat gave to Mele, but because it was an agreement made by way of kastom (the traditional way) it had not been officially recognised by the DL or the state as such. However, by getting the court to acknowledge this status Emil gathered

\textsuperscript{82} How far they had come to reaching their goals I was unable to find out, but it seemed to be a lengthy and difficult process. Though I have no substantial proof, my guess is that the DL was waiting on the court ruling (regarding the decision of which Mele family was to be considered kastom owner) before issuing any leases to Mele Maat.

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Freehold title} was a term used to describe land areas which had been recognised as kastom land, meaning that they belonged to a kastom owner who held eternal rights. Such a right was therefore much different from that obtained by long-term leases. As kastom owner you did not require a lease, because the land was officially yours to hold always. This is why Emil points out that they need to be recognised as kastom owner. If this could be done, there would be no need for leases.
that all their problems would disappear. Becoming officially recognised as kastom owners would put an end to the need to lease, because their titles automatically would become freehold. Further, in obtaining such a recognition no ambivalence of status would be left to haunt Mele Maat which would put them in a stronger position to force the Mele tresspassers to leave. While bringing their case before the courts was the course of action which Emil believed necessary in order to secure the future existence of Mele Maat, at the time of my departure his wish had not been fulfilled, but he remained hopeful that it would happen in the future.

As we have seen in the statements above, diverging attitudes were apparent regarding how to respond to the anticipated future risks. Still, a general attitude existed that action was needed if Mele Maat should be safe in the future. As will be discussed below, within Mele Maat people from each group had their own concerns about what the future might hold, and as was the case above, these spurred people to engage in specific forms of anticipatory action.

5.1.2 For the Common Good: Anticipating Trouble and Scarcity of Land
Among my informants who supported the chief, especially two types of concerns were apparent, although not everyone stressed these equally.

The first of these concerns regarded the growing population and the land shortage this was believed to entail in the future. According to Maatson, Albea and others land scarcity was a problem already apparent in the village, but it was considered inevitable that the problem would grow as time progressed. Future land scarcity was always connected to the presence of man kam. The problem with man kam, Emil conveyed to me, was that they just came and settled down regardless of their rights to do so. Consequently many people, "who did not have the right", were now living in Mele Maat, and as if this was not in itself problematic, he continued, the problem was growing because their presence was encouraging others to come and settle down as well. Furthermore, Emil stated, these people had many children – something which he concluded was a contributory factor in making their number *kam antap* (rise) in the future, "This is why the Chief says that the others must move away; it is for the common good of all of us". As such, the chief supporters feared to end up in a situation where land scarcity would change living conditions and hamper development and prosperity, something which they believed
would be the result if they allowed man kam to stay, or did not put a stop to the settlement of new man kam.

Another concern of the chief supporters was similarly spurred by a present-day issue which was considered likely to present increasing problems in the future, and this also had to do with the presence of man kam. The chief supporters worried that the future would bring increasing levels of crime and trouble concurrently with the escalating influx of man kam. During one of our conversations Chief Albea expressed his worries regarding his own diminishing influence which, according to him, also had to do with the growing numbers of man kam and their lack of respect:

"If more man kam come and settle down, then they might turn to the opposition. This will make it difficult for me to lead the village. When people do not have respect, it is a problem".

In this quote Albea argues that if more man kam arrive and join the opposition, it would become difficult for him to assert his power and influence. From this it appears that the more people who supported the opposition the less control Albea could exercise. Furthermore, I find that a more grave concern was expressed between the lines. While it was never mentioned in a direct manner, I believe that the chief supporters feared that the future might bring about rebellion in some form or other, if the influence of the opposition was not diminished.

While the chief supporters were already finding reasons in present-day conditions to banish man kam (see chapter 3.3.2), the concerns and assumptions about future problems seemed to add an additional pressure on them to follow this line of action. As was discussed above, it was considered to be of paramount importance that man kam left the village so that future trouble and upheaval could be anticipated, and more room would be left for those whom they considered man Maat. As I have mentioned before, in their efforts to obtain these goals they had sought the assistance of various outside authorities although with little success. Also, Chief Albea told me that he was planning to bring the case back to court in near future.

Bringing the case to court or appealing to outside authorities were not the only strategies applied by the chief supporters. In fear that the opposition might grow in number and
influence, they had found it necessary also to use the force of intimidation. The physical manifestation of this intimidation was a list of names of those individuals and families which the chief supporters did not consider to belong, comprised by a mix of people from Namunei, man kam, and the opposition who were to be evicted from the village. Chief Albea had presented this list of names to his lawyer who was expected to take the case to court. I understand this list to be an instrument which Chief Albea used to keep people in line. Like was exemplified earlier, Bruce and his extended family, along with others who had decided to reconcile with the opposition, had been placed on the list along with those labeled man kam (see page 51), and these individuals now stood out as a warning meant to discourage anyone who was thinking of following their example.

5.1.3 “We Will Keep Fighting”: Strategies of Resistance

The chief supporters were not alone in taking anticipatory action. People supporting the opposition also acted according to certain assumptions of what they considered likely to happen in the future, that is, unless they took a certain course of action. These concerns mostly had to do with what the chief supporters would do if they got the chance. As I have already discussed, the overall concern expressed by the opposition regarded the fear of future banishment. According to Kurtis, who was an active part in the opposition, it was because of this that they had decided to take the case to court in the first place:

"It is a way to be acknowledged as man Maat. We belong here, and the Chief is wrong in what he is doing. Therefore we will keep fighting against his allegations until we are recognised as rightful people".

Taking the case to court was a strategy applied by this group in order to resist the charges against them and work against the future prospect of being banished. However, according to people in the opposition other developments needed to be anticipated as well.

One of these had to do with the Chief’s efforts to obtain leases. If he succeeded, Kurtis told me, it could make it easier for the chief supporters to banish them in the future. Explaining to me how this was so, John, who like Kurtis actively opposed the banishment of man kam, said that Chief Albea was aiming at securing all the land titles (obtain leases) for himself and his followers in order to be able to get rid of those who opposed him. This may require a short explanation.
According to representatives from the DL whom I talked to, a lease is not to be used as a weapon, but this was exactly what the opposition feared would happen. This concern was not only aimed at the gardens. The existing leases on the village and cemetery titles also produced worry. Like John said:

“A lease is not to be used as a weapon, but this is what he [Albea] wants to do. Therefore we went to the DL and complained. They told us that the lease is already there in the name of man Maat, and so we will have to go to court in order to get our names inside”.

The existing leases were issued to Maat Tribe, and according to Chief Albea this was the name to which the garden leases were to be issued as well. The DL representatives from above told me that a family’s name did not have to be specified in the lease, in order for it to be included. However, since the question of who was man Maat had become a highly disputed matter the opposition worried that it could be used as a weapon against them, since the chief supporters could claim that they were not part of Maat Tribe. For this reason John wanted the names of those who had been termed man kam specified on the garden leases. While assuming that this wish was unlikely to be met, the opposition refused to help Chief Albea in his quest to obtain leases. John, for example, declared to have certain important documents which could support Mele Maat’s claims to the land, but he refused to share this information with the Chief and his supporters, since he believed they would turn it against them in the future. By doing so he hoped to prevent Albea from succeeding, or at least to slow down the process. The already existing leases issued on the village and cemetery titles presented a different kind of problem. Like John said in the quote above, in order to get their names specified on the leases they would have to go to court. This option had not been realised yet, but according to John it was something which had to be done.

Besides from this strategy, the generally felt uncertainty about what the future might hold, had led the opposition to turn to another and more controversial one: they had established their own council of chiefs. To my knowledge this oppositional council had been founded in 2003, and it consisted of several men (including Kurtis and John) who had taken it upon themselves to conduct the case of those whom Albea wanted to banish. At present this council had failed to be recognised by any outside customary authorities, and it was, as
such, illegitimate. However, according to informants active in the opposition it had been necessary to set it up, since without such an organisation they would be even more vulnerable. As Kurtis explained to me:

"This council was created when Chief Albea declared that so many people were to be banished. Since Albea wanted everybody out, we did not expect him to look after our interests or provide any help or support in the future. Also we needed to gather people in order to be stronger and fight against his wish to banish".

What the current purpose of this council was is difficult for me to determine, since also here many different stories co-existed. While some informants told me that it was there to support the families who were to be banished, but not, as such, to challenge Chief Albea, others argued that its main purpose was to remove him from power. This aside, the existence of the opposing council was a matter of great dispute, and to the chief supporters it remained a symbol of the rebellion.

The fight against the prospect of banishment by way of the strategies described above was supplemented with appeals to the DL as well as other outsiders such as representatives from the Presbyterian Church and Mele. In this way it was similar to the line of action taken by the chief supporters except from the more limited outreach and support which was a consequence of their lack of official recognition as man Maat.

Despite of the efforts made to reach their goals some found the prospect of success to be rather bleak. While taking active part in the dispute, Kurtis had lost much hope in the future and taken steps to secure himself and his family in case they were going to be forced out by Chief Albea\textsuperscript{84}. This he had done by obtaining leases on two titles of land in another location on Efate. Taking such drastic measures was not widespread (to my knowledge at least), but it does exemplify a final option available to the opposition as well as the rest of those whose rights were being questioned. Finding land to lease somewhere else was a possibility, but not a choice many wished to resort to. All informants felt that

\textsuperscript{84} Kurtis expressed great concerns about the future and was deeply worried that the situation would become critical. Having experienced attacks by witchcraft before (which, he told me, had killed his son when this returned to Ambrym), he had chosen to give up his family’s land on the island and was instead preparing a future on Efate while not necessarily in Mele Maat. He believed strongly that a conspiracy existed between the people wanting to hurt him back on Ambrym and here in Mele Maat, and for this reason he did not find his future in the village to be promising.
Mele Maat was their home and could not imagine moving away and settle down in a new place. However, as was the case with Kurtis, sometimes fears and threats could force people to do so nevertheless.

The discussion above has showed how distrust remained between the two groups, and explored how this affected people’s understanding of the conflict and their own part in it. As we have seen, people from both sides of the division tried their best to anticipate problems which they considered likely to appear in the years to come, and these anticipations resulted in actions which kept the conflicts in motion. A similar orientation towards the future was apparent among my Mele Maat informants in relation to the future risk of loosing their land to Mele. Also here concerns became causes for action. While this was so, it is important to note that the concerns felt by people had not been pulled from thin air. On the contrary it was clear that the uncertainty created by this context of conflict also had impact on people’s expectations for, and concerns about, the future. This will not be dealt with in detail here, but is mentioned to highlight that a reciprocal relationship existed between the context of conflicts and the ways people envisaged times ahead – a future which, too, was fraught with uncertainty. Future and present were, as such, intimately linked together, each folding into one another.

As Morten Nielsen writes, "time folds in multiple ways" (Nielsen 2011:399-400), and in the developing analysis I have shown how such non-linear flows affected the ongoing struggles. In chapter 4.3 I discussed how the past was both shaping and shaped by the present-day struggles. By holding together this argument with that proposed in this chapter I venture to argue that conceptions about tradition and past events as well as assumptions about the future folded into the present and added fuel to the fire of conflict. Furthermore, in a reciprocal manner the instability created by the current conflicts affected people's understanding and utilisation of the past as well as their assumptions of the time still situated ahead.

Until now my discussions have been focused on factors which upheld the context of conflict, and as I will discuss below, these were not alone in affecting the continuation of conflict. However, the prolonging of conflict entailed that a certain kind of stability was upheld where my informants refrained from taking the case into their own hands. As such, I believe it necessary to distinguish between the apparent struggles and the overall
retention of stability which also characterised the situation. In order to understand how this could be, I find it beneficial to look into the issue of hope and potentiality.

5.2 While There is Still Hope

It was clear that the ongoing conflicts over land and rights brought many negative consequences with them. In addition to instability and uncertainty the conflicts also entailed costs in Vatu. My informants told me that lawyers were necessary in order to bring their claims before the courts. A lawyer was used as spokesperson for the group and was the one to keep track of appointments and decisions, tasks which many informants did not feel confident in performing themselves. However, the expenses for salaries had become significant as the cases continued year after year. John told me that during the years in which the conflict between the Chief and the opposition had been going on, each party had spent about one million Vatu (62,000 DKK) on court expenses. Still no result had come of the efforts and according to John and others it had been a waste of money.

In spite of these negative consequences people kept engaging in the conflicts. In the first part of the chapter I discussed how fear and concerns about the future were both affecting and affected by the perpetuation of conflict. In what follows I will consider another way the future folded back onto the present-day conflicts and shaped their production. By including a perspective on hope I will explore how the potential for success remained as long as the conflicts were unsettled. Sustaining a context of uncertainty entailed that everyone involved could maintain hope that some day things would turn out to their advantage.

Until recently, hope was a neglected subject in anthropological theory. Unlike desire which has been a central focus in the social and psychological sciences, hope was rarely mentioned, and certainly not in a systematic or analytic way\(^{85}\) (Crapanzano 2003:5). Crapanzano was among the first to take up the challenge (Crapanzano 2003, 2004). In an effort to establish a definition he argues that hope is intimately related to desire. It is its passive counter-part, though it is sometimes used as an equivalent to desire (Crapanzano 2003:6). Desire is effective. It presupposes human agency: one acts on desire (ibid).

where it is used as an equivalent to desire, hope depends on some other agency - a god, fate, chance, another - for its fulfilment. You can do all you can to realise your hopes, but ultimately they depend on the fates - on someone else (ibid).

In studying hope and the effects it has on social life and action, it is important to recognise firstly that hope is not just one single state of mind. On the contrary it figures in complex ways, ranging from being quite specific, edging on desire, to open ended, lacking final definition, vague, and subject to chance (Crapanzano 2003:7). Secondly, it must be realised that hope, like desire, is itself embedded within historically and culturally specific understandings (ibid:15). Following Crapanzano’s lead I wish here to analyse in which way hope affected the struggles of my informants, while remaining attentive to the specific cultural and historical context which influenced the act of hoping, the actions it produced, as well as what was hoped for.

Among my informants, the most prominent subject of hope, cutting through all lines of division, was the hope of attaining legitimate status as rightful people. Among my Mele Maat informants this hope could take different shapes in the narratives according to which developments people wished for in the future. As an example, Lik, who was a friend of Leah and Thomson, told me that the Mele Maat people would succeed in obtaining leases on the garden land within a year. When I asked him if not the Mele claims to the land could present problems, he stated that:

"No it will be no problem. We in Mele Maat will get titles [leases] anyway".

Here we see how hope could take the shape of certainty. This was a general characteristic in the narratives. People seldomly used the phrase hope, but rather stated what they wanted to happen. However, it should be emphasised that although people in general made their future hopes sound like facts, these still remained unfulfilled and had been so for a long time.

Another kind of hope was expressed by Emil who, as was discussed earlier, was a strong advocate for the need of Mele Maat to take their case to court in order to officially obtain the status as rightful people:
“We will succeed in getting recognised as kastom owners by the court, because we have already obtained this status”.

In a similar fashion Chief Albea, who saw the solution to their current struggles to be the obtainment of leases (see page 76), told me that they would be able to get such leases soon, and that this would bring an end to their problems. Also among some of the Mele informants did the hope of being recognised as kastom owners shine through. The Presbysterian pastor in Mele Maat belonged to one of the Mele families who were struggling over the rights to the large area of which Mele Maat’s gardens were part. When I asked him about the developments in the case, he told me that:

“Yes the case is in court now, and different arguments are there. But we [he and his family] know that we will win, because we are the original owners. Everybody knows that we are, and the court will say so as well”.

Again hope was presented as facts. The pastor was certain that his family would be recognised as kastom owners, because he knew that they were. By emphasising that hope was being equated with facts I wish to show that people did indeed believe in their own truths, and that this shaped their hopes for the future.

In this manner, the families from Mele struggling over land rights hoped to be recognised as kastom owners, and the same did Mele Maat on a general level. Within the village the opposition hoped for such status, as well as the security it would foster. The chief supporters, who were already recognised as man Maat, had other hopes which had to do with the banishment of man kam. All these hopes were of a quite concrete and solid kind: the subject hoped for did not change, and it was something on which people chose to act. As such, these hopes took on an aspect of desire. However, as we shall see, limits existed as to how much people themselves could do to fulfil their hopes, and part of the process was consequently placed in the hands of others in which my informants had faith.

5.2.1 Conflict Persists...

People generally told me that they lacked the possibility and authority to change the situation (or their futures) on their own, and a prominent feeling expressed was that outside help was needed in order to obtain the sought for goals. As such, people lacked
hope in their own abilities and for this reason placed their hopes in others. This type of outside help became yet another resource which people made use of in order to claim their rights, but as will be argued it also impeded the settlement of the same conflicts it was brought in to end. In the following I offer a description of these outside authorities and elaborate on how the hope, which people placed in them, was part of what kept the conflicts in motion.

First of all, the state courts played an important role. Like has been described earlier, the families in Mele claiming rights to Mele Maat's gardens hoped to get their status recognised in court. While Mele Maat could not claim precedence they were unable to take part in these court proceedings since the case was about establishing who did indeed hold original ownership. However, as I have discussed, some wanted to initiate a new court case in order for the Mele Maat people to become recognised as true kastom owners. Furthermore, in their efforts to make the Mele tresspassers move away my informants from Mele Maat also wanted to make use of the court system. This, Chief Albea told me, was the only way, because these people did not respect Mele Maat's rights. To obtain a court order was, as such, understood to be essential if they should ever succeed in forcing the tresspassers to leave. A similar trust in the court system was apparent among people taking part in the internal strife within Mele Maat. By taking the case to court the opposition hoped that Chief Albea and his supporters would be forced to recognise their status and stop taking steps to evict them. On the other side of this divide, the chief supporters hoped the court would rule against the opposition and refuse to acknowledge them as rightful people. As the above exemplifies, the national courts had become an important resource for people in their struggles to reach the sought for recognition.

Secondly, both groups reached out to authorities outside the state apparatus, turning to more traditional problem solving measures. As far as I was able to tell, the two parties had sought support from the Chief in Mele and various councils on both Efate and Ambrym. By taking this route of action everyone hoped to obtain sufficient support in order to secure their victory.

Having outlined how people made use of various outside authorities in their efforts to reach the sought for goals, I will now look more closely at the challenges these faced in bringing an end to the conflicts.
5.2.1.1 The Issue of Proof

My data indicates that both courts and kastom authorities were experiencing difficulties with actually deciding in these matters over land ownership and rights. I believe that some of the reason for this can be found in the tension field between the understanding of kastom as “a generalised property of the majority of ni-Vanuatu” (Rousseau 2008:26), and the kastom which is experienced and lived out by people and which, as has been argued throughout this thesis, is multiple in meaning and content. How are kastom authorities and the state courts to judge between various notions of kastom if these are all equally true according to their frame of reference?

Forsyth writes that in criminal cases, traditionally, there was not so much importance attributed to the question of what had really occurred. Rather, what was important was finding out how relationships had been damaged and what needed to be done to restore them (Forsyth 2009:103). Today, however, there is a developing interest in issues of proof and evidence (ibid). Among my informants both of these understandings seemed to be in play. For example, Simion (the chief from Mele) told me that:

"Mele Maat needs to decide which system [of kastom] to follow. It does not matter how it was before, because the situation is different now. They moved from Ambrym to come here, so now they need to decide which system will work best in this place".

From this it appears that what mattered to Simion was not so much how things used to be. Rather, he wanted to find a workable solution in the here and now. As such, he was more concerned with mending relationships than actually finding out who was right. But, as we have seen, this was not an opinion shared by the opposing parties in Mele Maat, or between the struggling families within Mele for that sake. Here people expressed their claims on the basis of diverging interpretations of the meaning and significance of kastom, and these were presented as solid proof of their rights. Proof (like truth) was multiple. By bringing their cases before the national courts and the kastom authorities, people expected these to pass judgement on which conceptions of kastom were the true ones – something which seemed to be a difficult task, at least in the cases dealt with in this thesis.
5.2.1.2 Diminishing Authority of Chiefs

Another issue which made solutions difficult to come by had to do with the diminishing power of chiefs. Traditionally, disputes over land were resolved in ways of kastom, that is, by kastom authorities, but as Jowitt (2004) argues kastom is increasingly failing to resolve these matters, because people no longer are as willing to accept the legitimacy of kastom settlements when settlements are not in their favour (Jowitt in Forsyth 2009:7). This, Forsyth argues is connected to the presence of the state. Many of the chiefs’ previous sources of power are no longer workable since the state has a monopoly on the use of force (Forsyth 2009:115). These arguments are supported by the data collected for this thesis.

The lack of power to implement decisions was clearly visible in Chief Albea’s efforts to banish those he did not consider to belong. The others simply did not comply with his demands, but instead fought back with the various means at their disposal. Diminishing authority also influenced how the two groups responded to the settlements proposed by outside authorities from the kastom system such as the chief from Mele as well as chiefs from Ambrym and Efate. While these had all offered their solutions on how to solve the conflict within Mele Maat – some proposing that Chief Albea restored unity and let all but the individual troublemakers stay, and others pointing to Albea’s rights as chief to evict people who did not belong86 – the conflicting groups chose to disregard the recommendations and kept on struggling. When presented a solution not in their favour, the group in question ignored the decision and brought the case into the state court system (or other authorities such as the DL or the police) in order to obtain a more appealing result. But, as I have argued, the court system often failed to solve the matters as well.

Not only did the subject of struggle and the lack of chiefly authority make the process of conflict resolution difficult. As I will discuss in the following, part of the problem also had to do with the system of appeal, that is, the possibility for people to bring their case from one legal authority into another in order to obtain a better result. By including a perspective on forum shopping, a term which Forsyth uses to describe the way people

86 Many different interpretations were conveyed to me about the results of these conciliations. While Chief Albea and others argued that their wish to banish man kam had been supported by these outside authorities, people from the opposition such as Kurtis and John held that these had encouraged the groups to reconcile meaning that everyone should be allowed to stay.
choose between various legal authorities in search of one who will rule in their favour (Forsyth 2009:195), I will argue that this possibility as well created conditions in which a termination of conflict remained far away.

5.2.1.3 Shopping for Justice

Informants from both the opposition and the chief supporters told me that the case had already been in and out of court several times and through various levels within the court system. Though it was clear that the courts occupied an important position in their struggle, it proved difficult obtain a clear picture of what had really happened/was happening since the results of these efforts were highly disputed between the opposing groups. Looking beyond the struggle over results, a picture emerged of a system bestowed with certain challenges.

My informants expressed that the case had been *struck out* (meaning that they were terminated without a judgment) several times by the court in question, but had been resumed by one of the struggling groups after a while. This, I was told, was possible either by changing the claim or accusation. John told me that the Chief had done this by changing the case into a human rights issue by which it was allowed to enter the court system once again. It is likely that similar moves had been made by the opposition, but these were not brought to my attention. This aside, it is clear that the possibility of doing so was at hand though to which extent this practice occurred I cannot be sure.

The issue of appeal had also entered the kastom system. Forsyth argues that while this practice was not apparent in earlier days, it has come about as a result of influence from the state system which allows this kind of action (Forsyth 2009:111). People can now take their claim (or complain) from one level of chief to the next. Although the word *apil* is used often, what occurs is more like a rehearing or a renegotiation at a higher level than a strict review of the chief’s decision at the lower level (ibid:112).

While kastom authorities were drawn upon by my informants in their struggles it seemed that people placed more faith in the court system and its ability to fulfil their hopes. I find it likely that a different situation is apparent in areas where state institutions have limited outreach. Here chiefs remain the primary authority dealing with conflict management. Why the court system was ascribed such significance among my informants was probably
due to the specific location of Mele Maat. Because the village was situated on Efate, and so close to the capital city, the state courts were easily accessible. Furthermore, as I argued above it was clear that while my informants had much respect for kastom authorities it seemed that their actual power was decreasing.

It was clear that my informants through the system of appeal were able to move their case from one authority to the next without adhering to the decisions made. I find that this possibility prolonged the conflicts and made final reconciliation difficult. That a case could pass through so many levels within both systems, and from the kastom system into the legal system of the state (or vice versa), did indeed drag out the conflicts over land and legitimacy. In line with this argument, Forsyth refers to one of her informants who pointed out that chiefs, despite their efforts to solve the problems at hand, *no save flatem kwik taem* (cannot finish the conflict quickly) (Forsyth 2009:112). I agree with the critique and wish to add that not only chiefs were finding it hard to end the conflicts. The state courts faced similar problems.

While some scholars argue that people should be allowed to *shop for justice*, according to Forsyth the current freedom to do so is destructive and generates a variety of problems (ibid:195-96). The problems produced, she argues, can be classified into four groups: disempowerment problems, de-legitimation problems, destabilisation problems, and individual justice problems (ibid). Based on my data I am not able to judge whether this matched the situation of my informants. However, in the following I will show how the apparent difficulties which both state and kastom authorities were experiencing with putting an end to the conflicts entailed the possibility for all to maintain hope.

5.2.2 And Hope Remains

By engaging in the conflicts continuously and moving the case through the many levels of appeal, the potential of success was available for every group who took part in the conflicts. In this manner the ongoing conflicts fostered a state of possibility which would be terminated (at least for the losing party) once they were settled. Consequently, I find that my informants actively engaged in the conflicts not only out of present day concerns or assumptions and fears of the future, but also because being part of the conflicts enabled hope and the potential for future success.
However, as we have seen, people considered it beyond their own power to reach their goals and so they placed their fate in outside forces (kastom and state alike) which they hoped could help them succeed. As Crapanzano writes, hope depends on some other agency for its fulfilment (Crapanzano 2003:6), and this was characteristic for the way my informants chose to act. Because they found themselves unable to change the situation on their own, everyone agreed to wait until a solution was found by those in which they had faith. Consequently, none had yet resorted to force or violent action against their opponents. Since the state and kastom authorities had failed to bring about lasting solutions the waiting was prolonged, but nevertheless my informants emphasised that no change could come about before a solution was reached in court. For example, during one of our conversations Lik, who was a supporter of Chief Albea, told me that they had to wait for a court ruling before they could take action against the opposition:

“The case between the Chief and the opposition has been in court for eight years now”. I ask him why it has been going on for so long and he answers that “there are many things the court needs to examine before it can make a decision... and we have to wait for the court ruling before we can make the others move away. Yes, that is what is happening now. We cannot banish the others before there is a court ruling”.

The same attitude was apparent among the chief supporters in relation to the Mele trespassers, and it was also expressed by people from Mele when they talked about the land claimed by the two Mele families. Here people argued that the court case had to be settled before a family in Mele could claim ownership and engage in negotiations with Mele Maat about their future use of the gardens. As such, stability on a general level was upheld through the continuation of conflict. Hope was part of what created this stability, since my informants by maintaining hope that the court ruling would fall out to their advantage upheld the status quo - and peace as such - as they refrained from resorting to violence or similar use of force as long as the case was pending.

While other factors such as the system of appeal and the diminishing authority of kastom authorities were part of what prolonged the conflicts, I wish here to return to the impact of the multiplicity of truth which my informants established through their narrative practice. By bringing together the main argument of chapter 4 with that suggested above I will suggest that although such multiplicity brought with it much dispute and struggle, it
also produced a condition in which peace, on a more general level, was maintained. Deciding in these matters and judging which truth was more true than the other had proved a difficult task for both kastom and state authorities, and this prolonged the settlement of the conflicts as well as the waiting. In this way the multiple orders created through the worldmaking and expressed in the narratives brought with them a certain kind of balance, a sense of stability, within this context of conflict.

This argument is not meant to suggest that the status quo would continue to exist for ever. It was, in a way, a fragile condition, and there is no saying if, when or how this stability might crumble. In some areas this had already happened. For example it came to my attention that a group of man kam from Tanna, who had settled down on land which belonged to Mele, had had their houses burned down by Mele residents. As such, when status and ownership were not ambivalent, people did not always wait. Still, among my informants no such line of action had been taken, and to my knowledge no one was planning on doing so either. Consequently, peace on a general level was maintained, at least for now.

On a final note I wish to emphasise that while hope was maintained along with the conflicts, still, it was evident that the prolonged struggles and the uncertainty these fostered suited some better than others. Chief Albea, Maatson and the others who were in favour of the banishment of those they had termed man kam all seemed impatient for this to happen. Like Thomson told me:

"The temporaries [another word for man kam] make trouble for man Maat. They hinder development in the village, because the Council [of Chiefs] cannot make decisions. It has happened in many situations. For example we have not been able to construct good roads in the village, or establish proper drainage to lead away rain water from the footpaths. We also want to get back the Cascades\(^7\) and make a business, and we want to establish a shareholder community. All of this we will do when the others have moved away. When they move, there will also be more room for man Maat on which to build houses and make gardens".

\(^7\) The Cascades was a waterfall situated on one of Mele Maat’s pre-independence titles. Some years back it had been claimed by a man from Mele who had succeeded in turning it into a tourist attraction. To Mele Maat he was one of the trespassers which unrightfully had taken over their land. Despite objections from Mele Maat, he had managed to obtain a lease on the area, something which Mele Maat now wanted to stand up against in court.
I was unable to obtain a clear answer to how many kam were able to hinder the Council of Chiefs in making decisions, but it seemed that many initiatives regarding village development had been put on hold for now. Or as Thomson said above: until the others had left. The prospect of the departure of the others was therefore something which the chief supporters looked forward to. In this sense, they did not benefit of the uncertainty in the same way as the group who was in fear of banishment. In their case, as long as the dispute was not settled in favour of the chief supporters they could remain in the village. To be sure, this was an uncertain position which forstered much fear, but still it was clearly better than being forced to leave. This had to be so since very few had chosen the final option and found a new place to live. Kurtis was the only person I met who had done this, and still he had decided to stay in the village, for now at least.

5.3 Concluding Remarks
This chapter was initiated with a discussion about how certain concerns about the future affected my informants understanding of their need to struggle and how they chose to do it. From this it became clear that the different groups involved each had their own worries, and that this together with their specific position made them engage in different kinds of actions which most often included kastom or state authorities. By doing so my informants kept the conflicts in motion as they searched for ways by which they could avoid that their concerns turned into reality.

In the second part of the chapter I introduced the theoretical perspective on hope in order to explore how social stability was upheld within the context of conflict. It was clear that while all my informants hoped to reach their goals, they lacked trust in their own abilities to bring about a solution. Instead they relied on various outside authorities in which they had faith. While these were experiencing a range of challenges in their efforts to terminate the conflicts, still my informants accepted to wait for a decision to be reached in court. This waiting entailed that none of them had decided to resort to violence or other kinds of force as long as the case was pending. Based on this I argued that the act of hoping upheld a more general stability while the conflicts continued to unravel.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

I started out this thesis with an introduction to the practice of telling stories. Throughout the fieldwork this abundance of interpretations of past events became a constant source of bewilderment as I struggled to understand what was going on. Although at the time the many stories felt more like a slightly irritating source of confusion, they became the inspiration for the analysis presented in this thesis. Realising that the narrative practice was concerned with more than just a re-telling of the past, I was spurred to explore its meaning and implications for the ongoing struggles over land to which they appeared to be intimately related.

The people presented in this thesis were all part of the ongoing struggles over land, although their engagement differed to some extent. In order to understand how and why people struggled, the wider socioeconomic and political circumstances which surrounded their actions was included. It was clear that the specific historical and political context of land struggle had much impact on how and why my informants chose to engage in the ongoing conflicts. Through the developing analysis I have shown how people attempted to strategise their way out of the uncertain conditions, and how they struggled to reach their sought for goals. Also, I have established that these practices often became part of what kept the conflicts in motion. Adopting a perspective which was sensitive to the complexity involved in the land struggles, I have explored two aspects which each and in their combination added complexity to the phenomenon. By analysing the production and implications of the multiplicity of truth, and the effects of the non-linear folding of time I have been able to investigate different elements which all, in some way or another, were part of the phenomenon while not necessarily connected in any simple or direct manner.

The first issue explored regarded the notion of uncertainty and the way my informants categorised self and other in order to establish rights to land. Through the analysis I showed how Mele Maat on a general scale was faced with different levels of uncertainty regarding the land on which they lived. Uncertainty also characterised the situation within the village itself. While the chief supporters experienced increasing levels of land scarcity and "trouble", the people who had been labeled man kam felt the pressure of banishment to be asserted on them by the other group. The apparent uncertainty was intimately connected to a production of narratives about what had happened and what was the true tradition, through which boundaries between self and other were established and
continuously negotiated as people tried to assert themselves as rightful people or deny others this status. In both conflicts and by people on either side of the divisions, importance was placed on belonging since the status as *people who belonged* entailed rights to land, and in establishing belonging different factors were drawn upon depending on where people were positioned in the conflict and what constituted their objectives. Drawing mainly on Kibria (2000) and Nagel (1994) and their views on boundary construction as a two-way process I suggested that the categories brought in play by my informants were not a given. Rather they were social constructs with rights, status, and power attached to them, and they were subjected to constant negotiation.

I then examined how the stories told obtained their force and legitimacy and suggested that through the narrative practice my informants emphasised or downplayed specific aspects of kastom which were then utilised as proof in their efforts to claim rights over land. Inspired by the *invention debate*, and Keesing (1982) and Tonkinson (1982) in particular, I argued that kastom was a symbol which evoked rather than carried meanings, and that its openness entailed the possibility for it to become attached with multiple meanings as people struggled for recognition.

Further exploring the production and implications of the narrative practice, I introduced Nelson Goodman's concept of 'worldmaking' (1978) to the analysis and suggested that by way of their narratives of the past, my informants established diverging social worlds each of which contained its own categorical schemata through which people interpreted their past and present-day situation. As such, each truth was indeed true in the sense that it referred back to its own specific order. Furthermore, I showed how the worldmaking produced more than a moral order: it produced, or sought to produce, rights. By evoking the past my informants turned the stories into resources by which they tried to claim ownership to land or to disclaim the rights of others. In this manner the narratives shaped the context of conflict as people used their stories actively to seek recognition from various outside authorities. While this was so, it was clear that the conflicts themselves produced the need for narration. Based on this I suggested that a reciprocal relationship existed between the instability entailed by the conflicts and the narrative practice.

Moving the discussion of truth as multiple one step further I explored to which extent the various truths produced by my informants were able to affect one another. Inspired by the argument made by Law and Mol's that various pheres making up a complex phenomenon
relate (although not necessarily in a simple and direct manner), I argued that while people did struggle over truth and contested the truths established by others, their actual interference with one another was rather limited. Consequently each version of the truth was allowed (and able) to exist quite independently from each other. This multiplicity, I suggested, upheld a certain kind of stability by sustaining the status quo, but other factors were significant as well.

In the last part of the thesis I explored in further detail how the non-linear folding of time added to the existing complexity. Having already discussed how the past was brought into the present-day conflicts through the narrative practice, I turned to the way conceptions of the future affected how my informants understood their need to struggle, and how they chose to do it. In the first part of the analysis I focused on the concerns people expressed regarding the future lying ahead. Inspired by Nielsen (2011), Munn (1995) and Strathern’s (2005) perspectives on anticipatory action I argued that my informants engaged in various actions in order to avoid their concerns to turn into reality. These actions kept the conflicts in motion as people on all sides of the divisions tried to anticipate undesirable future developments. And as I discussed, such actions often involved state or kastom authorities.

By including Vincent Crapanzano’s theory on hope (2006) I explored another way in which the future folded into the contemporary conflicts over land. Through this perspective I showed how not only concerns, but also the prospect of future success affected the way the conflicts unfolded. Crapanzano differentiate between desire and hope (Crapanzano 2003:6) and writes that hope is desire’s passive counterpart. One acts on desire while hope depends on some other agency for its fulfilment (ibid). In applying this perspective I discussed how my informants placed their hopes in the court system and kastom authorities, because they lacked confidence in their own abilities to fulfil their hopes. These were, however, struggling with certain challenges which made it difficult to bring an end to the conflicts. In the analysis I focused on three aspects which seemed to pose a problem. First of all, the existing multiplicity which my informants brought with them as proof of their status made it difficult to decide in these matters. Written proof was non-existing, and a judgement therefore had to be made on the basis of various interpretations of which kastom was the true one – something which was not easily done as kastom had come to signify quite different things. Secondly, kastom authorities were experiencing a decrease in respect and influence which made it easy for my informants to
ignore their recommendations. Finally, the system of appeal made it possible for people to move their case from one level of court to the next, or in between the courts and the kastom authorities, if the judgement of one of these was unacceptable.

These factors made any settlement difficult, and consequently the conflicts were prolonged. Despite of this my informants kept up their hopes that one day they would succeed. Based on the analysis I argued that the act of hoping entailed a certain kind of social stability because people, by placing their hopes in others, simultaneously refrained from resorting to violence or other kinds of force in order to push through their agenda. It was clear that a general consensus existed to wait until a decision had been made by others, before people could take any such steps. In this way, the context of conflict was characterised by a general stability although this did not necessarily entailed happy coexistence.

Throughout this thesis I have been concerned with how land struggles were shaped and maintained. It was clear that the issue of belonging had obtained a central place in these conflicts since being the people who belonged entailed rights. Becoming recognised as such was thereby a way through which my informants sought to strategise their way out of uncertain conditions and secure their future. However, as I have shown this was not an easy task, because the question of what constituted belonging had multiple answers. Through the developing analysis I have shown how many things folded into the present context of conflict and spurred its production, but it was clear that the multiplicity of orders produced was a central aspect which made conflict resolution a challenge. As such, I understand the openness of the symbol kastom to remain an issue which policy makers will have to consider in their efforts to find lasting solutions to the ongoing disputes. How to do this is another question which needs to be addressed.
Epilogue

On a final note I have chosen to include my own thoughts and recommendations on how the continuous land struggles can be addressed in the future. These I presented as part of my verbal presentation of the thesis where external examiner Søren Hvalkof and my supervisor Cecilie Rubow were in attendance.

I conclude the thesis by arguing that the openness in the symbol kastom is part of what is making it so complicated to bring an end to the ongoing struggles over land in Vanuatu, and that this is an aspect which must be taken into account if a lasting solution is to be found in the future. But how is this to be done in practice?

That truth and rights as such proved to be so ambiguous among my informants have made me consider that a more pragmatic approach might be the answer. First and foremost I find that future legislation on land rights must be based on an understanding of kastom as a multifaceted symbol. This means that in some cases it will be necessary to let go of the idea that one true owner can be identified. Instead I find it paramount that such legislation aims to facilitate compromises between the struggling parties in a given dispute and to find a solution which takes into account their various needs and goals. Like one of my Mele informants told me as we were discussing a different matter: what is important is not to find out what the true kastom is or what had really occurred at some point in time; rather, what is important is to find a solution which works in the here and now.

Such an approach is sensitive to the flexible nature of kastom and leaves open the possibility that more than one individual or group can be the rightful owners of a piece of land. As I have discussed throughout the thesis, in the specific struggles with which I am concerned I do find it possible to rightfully rule one party the true kastom owner at the expense of the other, since all involved were in some way all in the right, exactly because kastom as a symbol can support different claims simultaneously. It is because of this that I argue that compromises and a pragmatic approach to these struggles are so vital if a lasting settlement of conflict is to be reached in the future.

Many politicians and people within academia have come to the conclusion that the best way to settle the land struggles in Vanuatu is locally, and the best results have seemed to be a result of the efforts made by chiefs and other local authorities to facilitate an
agreement among the struggling parties (Rodman 1995; Fonmanu et al. 2003). I find such an approach to have several benefits. First of all it will bring down the substantial costs which is often a consequence of the prolonged court cases and which place a great pressure on people engaging in such conflicts. Secondly, through such a process it is possible to find a solution which meets the needs and demands of more than one party, since the traditional ways of conflict management are more concerned with restoring peace and unity than finding a winner and a looser. In order to strengthen such a process where land struggles is dealt with locally and with an emphasis on compromise, the state must offer the necessary support to ensure a fair process. Whether this is to be done by way of the already existing Customary Land Tribunals or by another institution which does not suffer from a tarnished reputation must be considered. In any case I find that a local reconciliation process is recommendable compared to an official court case where a judgement most likely will fail in bringing about a lasting solution where peace and unity is restored.

I am not alone in making this kind of recommendation, and it does not only apply to Vanuatu. In a report from 2009 Serge Loode, Anna Nolan, Anne Brown, and Kevin Clements (Loode et al. 2009) write that such an approach to conflict management has also been recommended in for example Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu. The advantages of such a process lie in the possibility to create a so-called win-win situation where all involved parties are able to have at least some of their goals and needs met. As Loode et al. point out, this is because interest-based processes explore the real interests, goals and motivations of disputants and aim to develop a solution which satisfies those needs (ibid:15). Furthermore, such processes are also more efficient at maintaining a balance between content gains, process fairness and relationship improvement, all important needs for people who undergo a conflict resolution process (ibid). In the traditional structures of conflict management this kind of approach is already apparent, but to solve the current land conflicts it will have to be strengthened, and measures must be taken to secure a fair process. Some critique has been put forward regarding biased authorities and the lack of recognition of women's rights, and these problems must be dealt with if a fair process is the goal.

On a final note I want to add a comment on the system of appeal. As I have already argued in the thesis, the system of appeal makes it possible for disputes to drag out as groups and individuals are able to move their claim from one legal authority to another when
discontented with the result of one judgement. In the light of this I will suggest that the current possibility to engage in this kind of *forum shopping* must be restricted to some extent at least. If a lasting solution to the struggles over land is to be reached, a judgement has to have more power and impact than it does today.
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Abstract (in Danish)


Specialet bygger på fire måneders etnografisk feltarbejde i foråret 2011, hvor jeg med udgangspunkt i landsbyen Mele Maat undersøgte to specifikke konflikter, som påvirkede mine informanters liv. I landsbyen blev jeg en del af hverdagslivet som medlem af en familie og fik derigennem mulighed for at indsamle data igennem deltagerobservation og mere eller mindre strukturerede interviews.

Min analyse afspejler den kompleksitet, som kendetegnede konflikterne over land, og fokuserer på to aspekter, som hver især gjorde fænomenet komplekst: multipliciteten af versioner omkring hvad, der var den sande historie og den rigtige tradition, samt den måde hvorpå både fortid og fremtid påvirkede mine informanters ageren i den konfliktfyldte kontekst.


I analysen bevæger jeg mig videre til den anden konflikt, som påvirkede livet i Mele Maat. Herigennem viser jeg, hvordan en lignede kategoriseringsproces udspillede sig internt i landsbyen, og jeg argumenterer for, at det centrale tema i begge konflikter var at opnå status som mennesker, der hørte til. En sådan status gav rettigheder over land og kunne sikre folks position nu og i fremtiden. Processen med at kategorisere sig selv og andre var kendtegnet af et væld af historier omkring betydningen af bestemte begivenheder, der havde fundet sted, samt hvad den *rigtige* tradition dikterede. Disse forskelligartede fortolkninger blev en kilde til stor undren og forvirring for mig igennem feltarbejdet, men de ansporede mig samtidig til at undersøge den narrative praksis, som mere en blot en genfortælling af fortiden.

Multipliciteten af historier udgør dermed det første aspekt af kompleksitet, som jeg beskæftiger mig med med i dette speciale. For at forstå betydningen af de mange historier kigger jeg nærmere på deres indhold og undersøger, hvordan *kastom* (tradition) blev en ressource, som folk igennem deres historier anvendte til at etablere sig selv som *rigtige mennesker* eller afholde andre fra at opnå denne status. Inspireret af Roger Keesing (1982) og Robert Tonkinson (1982a) argumenterer jeg for, at kastom var et symbol, som var åbent for fortolkning, og at det blandt mine informanter blev anvendt til at underbygge meget forskelligartede argumenter.

vis sande, da de alle refererede til deres egen specifikke orden. Denne multiplicitet havde implikationer for, hvordan konflikterne over land udspillede sig, men også andre ting var af betydning.


andre. På denne måde var den konfliktfyldte kontekst også kendte tegnet af en generel stabilitet, om end denne ikke nødvendigvis førte til lykkelig sameksistens.
Appendix 1: List of Informants

The following is a list of the informants which are included in the thesis. It is, as such, not a comprehensive illustration of all my informants. The people listed occur in alphabetic order.

**Bruce**: belonged to Sanoe nakamal and was, as such man Maat. However, his position had been compromised as he chose to reconcile with the opposition.

**Chief Albea**: was the chief in Mele Maat. Also, he was the front figure in the efforts to banish man kam. Albea was kind enough to let me interview him three times, and he always provided me with a lot of information.

**Emil Mael**: was also man Maat and in favour of the Chief. He worked for the Shefa Provincial Council, and I met with him several times in his office where he was kind to answer all my many questions.

**Enneth**: was the eldest daughter in my host family, and she was the one who introduced me to the rest of the family. Shortly after I moved into the home of the family, Enneth left to work on a cruise ship for eight months.

**Fran**: was a neighbour and a friend of my host family. He also supported Chief Albea.

**George Sokumanu**: was one of my informants from Mele. Also he was the first President instated after the country gained its independence. We met once for an interview.

**Gladys**: was Thomson's sister. Being a close relative she often came by our house, and we talked on many occasions.

**John Ramen**: took active part in the opposition against the chief's efforts to banish man kam. He was himself threatened by the banishment as Chief Albea argued that he was not real man Maat. Different opinions existed about John's affiliation, but he told me that he was part of Namunei. John was part of the group who had established an oppositional council and brought the case to court in order to fight against the allegations of Chief Albea. I talked to John on several occasions.

**Kurtis**: was, like John, active in the opposition against Chief Albea's wish to banish man kam. I was told that he held the position as Chief in the oppositional council. To my knowledge he also belonged to Namunei nakamal. Kurtis and I only talked on one occasion.

**Leah**: was the mother in my newfound family. She was aware about the ongoing struggles, but did not position herself so strongly against man kam as her husband. We shared many
days talking, and like with Thomson and their children she made me understand what life was like in Mele Maat.

**Leimas**: was the second eldest daughter in my host family. She helped Leah around the house and produced *kava* (a mildly intoxicating drink made from the roots of the kava plant) for the family to sell in the evening.

**Lik**: was an elderly man from Mele Maat whom I talked to on several occasions. Lik had travelled around most of Vanuatu through his employment for the colonial government and knew much about the country's history. Now he was retired but still functioned as *elder* (a term referring to an influential person within the Presbyterian Church). Lik supported Chief Albea and his wish to banish man kam.

**Maatson**: was Thomson’s older brother and did also support Chief Albea. Maatson became one of my key informant, and he often made time for talking to me.

**Mneto Nganga**: was *man Mele* and worked for the Presbyterian Church Assembly Office. We met once for an interview.

**Moala**: was the youngest daughter in my host family. She turned 4 the day before I left for Denmark.

**Norman**: was a friend of the family, and he supported Chief Albea.

**Paul**: was the second eldest son in my host family. During much of my stay he was attending school on another island.

**Sano**: was the eldest son in my host family. He worked for a company constructing roads, but shortly before my departure he quit and started looking for another job.

**Simion Poilapa**: was one of the two chiefs in Mele who were presently claiming to be the rightful head of the village. I met with Simion in his home on one occasion for an interview.

**Thomson**: was the father in my host family. He belonged to Sanoe nakamal and supported Chief Albea in his decision to banish man kam. Thomson became one of my key informants as he and his wife Leah invited me to come live with them in their home.

**Tommy**: was the youngest son in my host family. He often hung around the house and did not attend school.
During the 1950’ Mele Maat managed to buy four land titles from their employer, André Houdié. On one of these they established the village, and on the other their cemetery. The two remaining ones were cleared for gardens. In the map above I have left out one of the garden titles as I never managed to find out exactly where it was situated, despite my many questions directed at people in the village as well as the DL. However, I believe it was situated somewhere north of the village.