

8

Urban castaways: The precarious living of marooned islanders

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Abstract

On Mota island in north Vanuatu, the attitude towards urban migration has changed significantly over the past 20 years. Due to rapid population growth and consequent pressure on already scarce land resources, leaving for the two urban centres of Luganville (Santo) and Vila has become a livelihood strategy for entire households rather than a temporary arrangement usually involving young unmarried men. With conflicts over land rights on the rise, long-term absentees find it difficult to defend their claims. This challenges their safety net and consequently exacerbates their sense of precarity: if they can't make it there, they can't make it anywhere. This chapter shows how various factors involved in decision making, such as education, cash crop prices, droughts, urban sorcery, job opportunities and sheer adventure-seeking, fluctuate and cause constant reassessment among the urban-dwelling Motese of whether to stay or return to the island.

Introduction

The inhabitants of the island of Mota in the Banks Islands in north Vanuatu have always been ambivalent towards urban life, yet throughout the 150 years for which we have historic records, young women and men have left the island in search of adventure and an unlikely pay-off.¹ In the latter half of the 19th century, people from Mota were eager recruits for the Anglican Melanesian Mission's Central School, first in Auckland and later on Norfolk Island. Much to the mission's dismay, they also enthusiastically signed up for the 'blackbirding' labour trade, citing the prospects of adventure and change of scenery rather than financial gain as prime motivations (Kolshus and Hovdhaugen 2010). In those days, Mota was itself a centre of the Anglican Melanesian world of northern Vanuatu and the south and central Solomon Islands. Being the site for both the mission's Summer School and for the experimental Christian village Kohimarama, Mota had the attention of a mission with a distinct cosmopolitan flavour, manned as it was by Oxbridge-educated Englishmen of noble birth (Armstrong 1900; How 1899; Kolshus 2013, 2014). The language of Mota was used as the mission's lingua franca, serving as the medium of teaching in the extensive Anglican school system and as the language of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and the much-cherished Hymns (Firth 1970); and Mota figured prominently in the imagination of the Melanesian Mission's numerous supporters, both in the British homeland and in the antipodean colonies.

But at the stroke of the pen that in 1893 erected the first of the expanding boundaries between the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and its neighbours, and cemented by the establishment of the Condominium of the New Hebrides in 1906, Mota found itself moved from the centre of an island world with immediate global connections to the periphery of a peripheral political unit. This process of gradual marginalisation continued after Vanuatu's independence, an experience that has been particularly discouraging to the Motese and the other Banks Islanders after being the most solid pro-independence supporters of all of Vanuatu's regions.

1 In pre-contact days, canoe expeditions would have served the same purpose, although not of the scale nor the regularity of the visits to Mota from Tikopia, a Polynesian outlier some 200 kilometres north-east of the island (see Kolshus 2013).

In this chapter, I address some of the changes in how people on Mota imagine life in *taon* ('town'), and how they act in accordance with these changing imaginaries. I have no theoretical axe to grind: I do not apply any distinct analytical framework exogenous to the ethnography itself, and I do not engage the misrepresentations, alleged or real, of previous scholarship. I aim for little more than presenting a historically informed, multi-temporal, ethnographic account of how the prospects, promises and perils of travelling to and living in an urban setting are conceived by the 1,000 people living on a small island at the periphery of a small Pacific state and by the 400 who live on other islands but still hold that 'home' is elsewhere (cf. Rousseau 2015: 24).² I intend to show how their choices of whether, and when, to stay or to go are informed by a multitude of factors, some of which are structural—ecological, demographical, economic, political—while others relate to worldview-based³ risk assessment, adventurism or sheer opportunism. I show how a gradually increasing disenchantment with the promises of a more 'refined' city life has brought a new conviction that staying put is the better option. Partly, this is affected by the realisation that few Motese possess the combination of being well-educated and confident that gives them the edge in a labour market characterised by 'diploma disease'. But it also coincides with the increase in urban sorcery that has become the topic for a number of recent publications, both from urban Vanuatu and elsewhere in Melanesia. This has brought a sense of entrenched uncertainty that is particularly severe to people from Mota, whose island is sorcery-free. Combined, these developments have triggered a revaluation of the virtues of the 'simple life on the island' that on the one hand strengthens their pride, but also serves to limit their options. Given an increasingly dire shortage of land, exacerbated by climatic hazards like droughts and cyclones, such a limiting of options might in the long run prove unfavourable.

2 It is based on 'dual-synchronic' long-term fieldworks in 1996–97 and 2002–03 and a five-week fieldtrip in 2012, 23 months of which were spent on Mota and two months among Motese in Luganville and Vila, Vanuatu's two main urban centres.

3 In recent anthro-speak, my use of 'worldview' would translate into 'ontology'. I readily admit to be less than enchanted by the multifarious strains that are subsumed under the heading of anthropology's 'ontological turn'. I find the critical realism of the likes of Andrew Sayer (2000), recently modified to cater to anthropology by David Zeitlyn and Roger Just (2014) and David Graeber (2015), both infinitely more constructive and appealing. This also informs my continued belief that ethnography has a different epistemological status than mere 'experience', given that on an interpersonal level, some experiences obviously are less, well, idiosyncratic than others. For a lively critique of the epistemological foundations of critical realism, see Martin (2015).

Santo city lights

Since the 1960s, Luganville, colloquially referred to as ‘Santo’, has been the destination of choice for Motese on urban adventures. Here they immediately learn from resident Motese that people from most other islands are temperamental fighters; and that sorcery is omnipresent, mainly because of the large Ambrymese contingent (see Rio 2007). Eventually, they learn from experience that it is hard to eke out a living without an established network, and that 1,000 vatu⁴ does not go a long way. They also find that the ‘ways of the town’, ‘*ō matevui tape taon*’, are characterised by haughtiness and lack of any expressed sociality beyond the boundaries of the household. ‘Contrary to the custom of the island’, they say, ‘people will only stare at strangers, never greet them or invite them in’. Thus strengthened in their belief in the virtues of island living, for which the lack of material goods is far outweighed by the companionship and sense of feeling safe in an island that has been free of sorcery since the 1950s,⁵ they return to Mota with some perishable merchandise and the much more cherished stories, which grow with every retelling. The ones who linger are those who marry someone from another island. Hardly any mixed couples choose to settle on Mota. This might be due to the matrilineal transfer of land rights, which, in spite of the customary practice of adoption of newcomers, might leave a Mota man and his foreign wife too reliant upon his matrilineal land and the children of the union with contestable land claims (Kolshus 2008). But the Motese insist that the reluctance of other ni-Vanuatu (as citizens of Vanuatu are called) to settle on Mota is due to the island being regarded as far too remote and backward. Many Motese take this disparaging outsider’s view lightly. It is simply a validation of the virtues of an island life that is independent in its own right. But to the youngsters and those with tertiary education, it used to sting. This is because it reminded them that everywhere else, people were moving ahead. Also, even though they appreciated the strong

4 Approximately US\$10.

5 To fully appreciate how exceptional this is, one needs to take into account how sorcery elsewhere in Vanuatu shaped the traditional sociocultural landscape (see for instance Hess 2009; Rio 2007; Eriksen 2008; Rio and Eriksen 2013), and the recent hike in sorcery accusations and extension of the phantasmagoric repertoire in urban contexts characterised by increasing social inequalities (Rio 2011, 2014; Mitchell 2011; Taylor 2015; Rousseau 2015). Cases that resemble the Mota situation can be found in south-east Ambrym (Tonkinson 1981) and Akhamb (Bratrud 2011). *Talking it through*, a recently published collection of articles (Forsyth and Eves 2015), gives ethnographic examples of sorcery from various parts of Melanesia.

position of Mota traditions and their regard for historic connections, they frequently expressed a sense of their options as steadily shrinking (cf. Knauft 2002).

Since I started my work on Mota in 1996, leaving for Santo has acquired an ever stronger tinge of necessity. A rapid population growth of 4 per cent annually for the past four decades has made land scarce for several matrilineages, and in particular land suitable for growing coconuts in order to produce copra, which is the only available cash crop. The shortage has been exacerbated by frequent droughts, with both 1997 and 2003 being El Niño years. Consequently, in the village of Lorovilko, some 20 kilometres outside Santo town, more than 60 Motese had by 2003 established a hamlet of their own, growing tobacco, kava and vegetables for sale in the Santo market house. Most of them belonged to the same lineage, which had simply too many members to provide for on Mota. When I visited them in 2003, they admitted that relations with their Lorovilko neighbours were strained, to say the least. Those local villagers had vehemently opposed selling the piece of land that enabled the Motese to settle. And in the recent past there had been numerous physical attacks made by them. Stones were regularly thrown into the hamlet, houses had been torched, and people had been assaulted on their way to their gardens.

Over and above these physical attacks, their main concern was sorcery. Several of their adversaries were renowned and feared sorcerers, who during earlier conflicts in the East Santo area had proved their willingness to harm or even kill people in order to have things their way. Faced with such intangible threats, the Motese had sought the assistance of the *tasiu*, ‘brothers’, of the Melanesian Brotherhood, an indigenous Anglican order. Anglicans hold that because of their close association with the bishop the *tasiu* have access to particularly powerful *mana*, extra-human agency (Kolshus 2013), which is believed by people of all denominations to be highly effective in counteracting sorcery.⁶ The brothers had prayed and performed various rituals that established a protective perimeter around their hamlet. Conventional attacks, such as garden plundering, arson and assaults, had not stopped. But at least they were now safe from the dangers of sorcery that they had neither the experience to detect nor the knowledge to defuse. Everybody seemed to agree that they would much rather lead

6 In an article titled ‘The ecology of faith’, currently undergoing peer review, I address the role played by the Anglican Church, and the Melanesian Brotherhood in particular, in manipulating weather conditions and protecting people against sorcery.

a less refined life on Mota than endure the menaces of Lorovilko. This option was not available to them, however, since virtually everyone belonged to land-deprived matrilineages. If they were to return, they would have to rely on relatives whose resources were already stretched to the limit during the critically long period between clearing and planting new gardens and their first harvest.

They had left home in search of a new life and now they were stuck. But, they said, at least we have enough food and water. From what they had heard from me and others, the drought on Mota made life difficult. There was a measure of solace in others' misfortune, or perhaps rather in knowing that at least for the time being, their lot seemed the more attractive.

In terms of subsistence, the situation of the Motese living in the actual town of Luganville was different from that of the Lorovilko settlement. There, virtually everyone was engaged in the urban equivalent of hunting and gathering. This involved a perennial search for short-term employment in a labour market increasingly characterised by the developing world's 'diploma disease', in which the usually poorly schooled Motese consistently fell short of the better educated contestants from less peripheral islands. Very few of these town dwellers stayed on for more than a year or two before returning to Mota, richer in histories but otherwise with little to show for their urban adventures.

But some managed to secure more steady employment, or find spouses who did, and consequently spent many years in Luganville. One of these was Ata⁷, who had lived there permanently since 1982. His household, next to the bridge crossing Side River, was a landmark and social anchorage for all Motese arriving in Espiritu Santo. When I last met him as an octogenarian in 2003, he insisted that life in Luganville had been good to him. But lately, he said, interisland violence had been on the rise, and the dramatic increase in sorcery and sorcery accusations was particular cause for concern. The culprits were mainly men from Ambrym, and people from other islands were forced to seek preventive measures. Anglicans like Ata relied on the assistance of the clergy and the *tasiu*, who also would help members of other churches who came to them for advice and protection. But as a supplement, many sought the services of sorcerers from the mainly Anglican island of Maewo,

7 Most of the names in this chapter are pseudonyms.

whose magic was considered to be even more powerful than that of the Ambrymese. Nonetheless, anyone walking alone in Luganville after dark would be exposed to attacks of a kind that in Mota is called *varalōlōqōñ*, (lit. ‘unconscious steps’), by which the victim later falls ill and usually dies with no recollection of what has happened because the sorcerer has erased the victim’s memory. All Motese were careful never to let anyone move around unaccompanied. Even though I as a non-Melanesian most likely was safe from harm, which according to local exegesis is due to my use of deodorant, they insisted on following me home after nightly kava sessions, keeping a watchful eye out for any item along the way that might resemble a charm or a harmful substance (cf. Taylor 2015: 39–40). These were skills the Motese had to acquire as soon as they arrived in Luganville.

Luganville, nine years on

Shortly into my five-week fieldtrip to Mota in June 2012, news of the death of Mark, a man in his early 20s, came through from Luganville. As people mourned, snippets of new information trickled in regarding the circumstances of his death. It seemed that he had hanged himself following a quarrel with his Ambrymese girlfriend. His mother Anne, overwhelmed by grief, insisted that he never would have ended his life this way. Her brother Woros, on the other hand, was of a different opinion: Mark had a troubled relationship with his girlfriend and her parents, and had in his despair chosen to end his life. Casually, bordering on callous, Woros stated in front of the mourners, amongst them Mark’s father and me, that the young man would never enter ‘*Paradaes*’, the afterlife where all believers in Christ shall meet again.⁸ But in the days that followed a richer background story expanded, which endorsed Anne’s refusal to accept the initial accounts. Mark’s fiancée had indeed found him dead with a noose around his neck, but, the story went, a number of factors indicated that this had been the work of sorcerers. They would need an official autopsy to confirm, but three diviners, in Bislama called *kleva*, from Maewo discovered leads suggesting that Mark had fallen victim to one of the most dreaded sorcery methods: he had been killed and his inner organs were removed and replaced with leaves before he had been magically brought back to life and sent home only to die five days later.

8 According to the logic of the Mota kinship system, as Mark’s mother’s brothers, Woros and his brother Baddeley are heads of the matrilineage.

The guiding hand behind the young man's suicide had not been Mark's. Even though the autopsy results allegedly were inconclusive, people had no doubt: Mark had been killed by Ambrymese sorcerers, commissioned by his father-in-law.

In addition to preparing the regular mortuary feasting cycle, the days that followed were filled with attempts to reach relatives in Luganville, who, it was believed, were now living in the utmost danger. Making matters worse, this was not the first fatal attack by Ambrymese on Motese living in Luganville. Mark's elder sister had been killed by sorcerers 10 years earlier, allegedly because her Ambrymese partner's kin did not want to pay the brideprice that was required to seal their union in marriage. Christina, Mark's mother's sister's daughter, who had left Mota a few months earlier, sent us a message pleading for someone to buy her a return ticket. According to her, the Motese on Santo were in constant fear of what the Ambrymese would come up with next. They took refuge in the homes of the permanent residents, while those who were in a position to return looked for a way home. People on Mota were deeply worried about their diasporic relatives. Califord, one of just a few young men who held a secondary school diploma and who also had lived for several years on Malekula and consequently knew the ways of the world, was adamant: those who did not study or were otherwise occupied should return immediately! Amidst all these worries, the fact that Mark had actually been killed and that his soul of baptism, *ō atai tape vasōgōrōñō*, consequently would find peace in heaven was cause for some comfort. His life soul, *ō atai ta lō marama*, would find its way home to Mota and eventually dwell on its matrilineal land.

A couple of weeks later, I spent a day in Luganville with Stella, Mark's mother's sister, and her son, Fisher Young. Stella had been widowed around 1994, after which she married a carpenter from Maewo and moved to Luganville, while Fisher Young had joined the Melanesian Brotherhood as soon as he was old enough and served seven years as a *tasiu* on various islands, including Maewo, before he settled in Luganville with his mother. Once off the island, most Motese would become more socially restrained and less outgoing. Not so with Fisher Young, who apparently had adapted to the more fluid relationships of the town. His conviviality and social skills secured short-term engagements with various building firms, and he was consequently able to support his wife and small child as well as his mother and now-retired stepfather. On the wall of their kitchen house was written 'Keep your heart save [sic] from evil spirit

and whichcraft [sic]'. I asked him what they did to protect themselves from sorcery, or *malagagalag*, (lit. 'harmful schemes'). He immediately mentioned the members of the Melanesian Brotherhood. In addition to the Brothers, individual prayers were also effective, he said. He was vaguer when he talked about the third means of protection, but it gradually became clear that he referred to the *kleva*. With a stepfather from Maewo and an extensive social network from his long service there, he personally felt safe. But he quickly acknowledged that most Motese had reason to be afraid, since they lacked his experience and consequently would be easy targets. Young women like Christina, with no regular employment, should return to Mota as soon as possible. Luganville was no longer a place for Motese in search of adventure.

The rise and fall of Patteson Roy

On 22 September, 2014, after an unprecedented eighth round of voting, the Vanuatu electoral college managed to come to agreement on a new head of state. *Mama*⁹ Baldwin Lonsdale from Mota Lava, Mota's northern neighbour, was elected to serve as president of the Republic of Vanuatu for the next five years. In Torba, the news was greeted with celebrations across the province. Throughout Vanuatu's time as an independent nation, people in Torba have harboured a strong sense of being ignored by the rest of the nation, due to the province's relatively few inhabitants, peripheral location, and lack of economic significance. With only two MPs and unpredictable lines of communication between the province and the capital, there was a general feeling that their concerns were not heard and, more certainly, never met. So the choice of a Torba man as the head of state came as a very welcome surprise. And the fact that *Mama* Baldwin was an Anglican priest gave additional cause for celebration in a province that 150 years ago became the cradle of Anglicanism in Melanesia and remains predominantly Anglican to this day, even boasting its own bishop, who oversees the Diocese of Banks and Torres, the smallest in the entire Anglican Communion.

9 *Mama* is the usual term of address for Anglican priests. It is an abbreviation of the Mota term for father's brother, *mamagai*.

On Mota, however, not everyone celebrated. In the village of Tanorosa, Patteson Roy, a former deacon and headmaster, and once an MP and government minister, had pinned his last glimmer of political hope on the presidential election, only to realise that this window of opportunity was now firmly shut. For the past four decades, Patteson has been an influential figure on the island. He is the only Motese to visit Europe, having spent six months at a seminary in Scotland. He has also served as headmaster of the local Mota school and as principal of Arep, the only secondary school in Torba. After Patteson successfully ran as an independent candidate in the 2002 parliamentary elections, he became the first Mota MP. With a hung parliament, he went on to become an unlikely kingmaker, siding with the second Edward Natapei government and earning himself the ministerial portfolios of Ni-Vanuatu Business and then of Education for his support.

Patteson Roy's success went beyond the Motese's wildest dreams. And in the months that followed his election, around 30 Mota men and several complete households left for the capital of Vila.¹⁰ These were either Patteson's entourage of loyal supporters expecting reward for their faithfulness by being offered positions, or adventure seekers eager to use the opportunity while they had friends and relatives with stable incomes that could provide for them if they failed to make ends meet—which they invariably did. Consequently, en route for my second fieldwork in December 2002, much to my surprise I discovered that almost 100 Motese were living in Vila. When I left Vanuatu five years earlier, the Mota diaspora in the capital city counted a mere 20, mainly young bachelors on short-term adventures and a few uxorilocally married men. The people I met in Vila this second time around expressed either a clear understanding that this was the beginning of a new era of golden prospects or that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to be capitalised upon before it inevitably would be taken from them. The sentiments of the people on Mota were divided more or less along the same lines. To his many supporters, Patteson's election marked the beginning of proper '*development*', which, in their opinion, had been kept from them due to the nepotistic islandism of people further south. Now, the time had finally come for the Motese to benefit from pork barrel politics. Patteson's political opponents, on the other hand, insisted that the successful strategy of an independent

10 Without exaggerating the connotational impact, it is worth mentioning that in Mota, *vila* means 'lightning'—which in the Mota Hymn Book frequently features as a metonym for all the earthly dangers from which the Motese require the Lord's protection.

candidate backed by a majority of his fellow islanders would be a one-off. Once the more populous islands in Torba realised that their fission along party lines had cost them a seat, they would replicate the Mota tactics and easily regain lost terrain. As might be expected, his opponents did not have much faith in Patteson Roy's dedication to the welfare and development of their backward island. In order for Mota to rise, *kalkalō*, investments in school buildings, new teachers, transportation and other infrastructural developments were needed. Otherwise, the rest of Vanuatu would continue to move ahead while Mota fell even further behind, and those who aspired to lead a different life from that of their forebears would have few other options than to leave for Santo or Vila. They were convinced that Patteson and his group of newly minted and salaried civil servants would not provide more than the equivalents of beads and mirrors: meat, kava and tea for the Independence Day celebrations, and some iron roofing for the church in the villages where he had carried the vote.

Patteson did his best to prove the naysayers wrong. He and his political secretary Jeves set aside a significant share of their monthly salary for community purposes. Less than a year after he assumed office, we received a radio message announcing that a new 16-foot community boat with two outboard engines would arrive the next day, to replace the leaking aluminium dinghy that had been donated by the French colonial government at the dawn of independence almost 25 years earlier. Even Peter, the local National United Party leader, grudgingly acknowledged that they had done well. The boat and other minor projects were signs of the longer-term changes that constituted Motese notions of *developmen*, the very changes that he had been adamant would never be forthcoming during Patteson's tenure. But Peter was nonetheless convinced that the boat would soon succumb to mismanagement and lack of caution negotiating the treacherous Mota reefs. He also made sure that no NUP supporters showed up for the boat's inauguration ceremony. By circumventing the long-established fault lines between the political parties, Patteson's election had destabilised the structure of allies and opponents. His extraordinary good fortune in holding the balance of parliamentary power could be tolerated, but faking gratitude at a public display of an opponent's political success was simply beyond the pale. Also, in Vanuatu, the political tide turns quickly. Peter knew that his time would come.

Eventually, he and the other sceptics were proven right. The boat was not carved out for such rough landings, and after a mere two years, it was beyond repair. So when Patteson Roy lost his seat in the 2006 election

to an independent candidate from a more populous island, again as Peter had predicted, he returned to find the boat permanently resting on the reef. His intentions had been for the best, but this could not outweigh the ineptitude of some of his supporters. So apart from hurricane lanterns to all villages and a couple of new church roofs, his many initiatives to improve the conditions of his fellow islanders had failed. Time had now come to improve his personal lot. The severance pay he had received after losing his seat was substantial by most standards. By Mota terms it was a fortune, which he used to buy stocks and open a store in his village of Tanorosa. But managing a sound business while juggling the requests that followed a bigman's sense of noblesse oblige soon outstripped his resources. The demands of his political supporters were particularly difficult to meet. Since he had tried to distribute his allowance and other gifts in ways that showed no particular political bias, those who had supported him felt they had more legitimate claims to his relative wealth now that his tenure was over and he had returned significantly better off than when he left. After all, his gains had come through their agency. Even a deft political player like Patteson found no way around these expectations. Also, he had invested all his hopes in a successful rerun in the 2010 elections, and he realised that he would not stand a chance without his supporters. So he dished out.

Deprived, yet hopeful

When I met Patteson again in 2012, I could not help feeling sorry for him. The suit-wearing minister who had seen me off at the Bauerfield airport in 2003 was now a pauper in rags. He had built no less than six houses on his land, but several of these were dilapidated and the rest lay in varying states of disrepair. On the door to his store was a note saying that he no longer allowed credit, while pleading for those who owed money to settle their debt. I learnt from others that he no longer had goods to sell since he did not have money to restock. None of his children lived on the island, so he could not rely on them for support in gardening and copra production. Ruth, his wife, had resumed her position as a nurse at the Mota dispensary after their return from Vila, but her income did not go very far. In short, Patteson had become the epitome of the Mota *masara*, 'a man without means'. This became all the more painful as he struggled to keep up appearances of his earlier dignified existence, and his failed attempts only exposed him to ridicule by his political opponents.

Shortly after his return, the Mota Chiefs' Council had chosen him as the island's head chief, *mwōe maranaga*, and president of the council. But he had not called a meeting in a long time, allegedly because he had embezzled the 42,000 vatu sent by Torba Province to pay for the construction of a meeting house, or *gamal*, where they could teach children *kastom* stories. People believed that he failed to call new meetings to prevent the topic of the lost money from being raised. The consequence was a communal stalemate on the island, with very few decisions being made beyond the village level.

However, when I talked to him about his prospects, Patteson was remarkably upbeat. He told me that all he had to do now was wait for one thing: the appointment of a new head of state. And this would inevitably be him. When I cautiously asked why this was so, he provided two reasons. First, that the office of the president of the Republic of Vanuatu rotated between the provinces, and it was now Torba's turn. Second, in Torba there were only two candidates, himself and one other, who was ineligible due to his criminal record. Consequently, when news of the impending presidential election came through, his fortunes would change yet again. '*Sowlue, i nau we tōga nereī gap*', 'so, you see, I am simply waiting'. The result of the presidential election would turn out to be an agonising end to Patteson Roy's last shred of hope. But, after all, he did return to Mota. The fate of some who failed to do so is even less enviable.

Stranded futures

After Patteson lost his seat and left for home in 2006, a number of his staff and voluntary entourage stayed on, hoping for another opportunity and knowing that life on a drought-plagued island had little to offer. By 2012, the tables had turned. Mota had enjoyed a succession of more than ample rainy seasons and rich harvests, while virtually every Motese in Vila had endured long pecuniary dry spells. Among them was Bill, who when I first arrived on Mota in 1996 soon became one of my closest friends and helpers. His generous enthusiasm had always been an encouragement in the midst of fieldwork turmoil. His awe when listening to stories from the world outside Vanuatu and his seemingly naïve curiosity on virtually any topic imaginable were heartening to a fresh arrival struggling to come to terms with a new and unknown existence: 'I know something that is worth knowing, it's not just the other way around'. I soon realised that

his inquisitiveness fuelled a remarkably analytic mind. He had followed Patteson Roy to Vila in 2002 to work at the reception desk in one of the government ministries and had later been joined by his wife Veronica and their children. When I met him again in 2012, he had not held a single job in several years, and the family relied on Veronica's meagre income from picking eggs in a chicken farm. Even though he still did his best to present an upbeat version of life, he readily admitted that the outlook was grim. His only hope now was to save 7,000 vatu, approximately US\$70, to pay for a passport. This would make him eligible for an apple-picking scheme in New Zealand, by which ni-Vanuatu would spend some months working in orchards and usually return with a decent surplus. Even though most of the local recruiters preferred men from their home islands, with a passport at least he would stand a chance. Bill gave only one reason for wanting to go to New Zealand: that the earnings would cover the return fare to Mota for the whole family. He had news from his brother Selwyn, who had moved back to Mota a few years ago after having worked almost 20 years for a diving company in Vila, that parts of their matrilineal land had been encroached upon and that use rights to other parts of their land had been challenged.

Veronica's lineage, to which their children belonged, faced the same problems. RōLea and Sogov, her mother and father, had come to Vila to look after their grandchildren when Veronica and Bill were still regularly employed. After their income declined, Veronica and Bill found shelter in a small house next to the chicken farm, while RōLea and Sogov moved to a shack in the opposite direction 10 kilometres outside Vila, where they had leased some land for cultivation. First they had sold their produce in the Vila market, but now they would prepare the food themselves and sell it as '*wasemaot*', hors d'oeuvres-like treats to counter the foul taste of kava, in a kava bar in downtown Vila. The elderly couple would usually walk the 10 kilometres to and from town, since the Vila minibus drivers rarely took the trouble of going to such remote places, at least not without demanding the full taxi fare. We discussed the rumours of the challenges to their land rights as well as the outright land grabs. Veronica's brother, Welgan, had remained on Mota in order to protect their rights but his mild manner made him an accommodating counterpart to the much more assertive claimants. RōLea had instructed her more temperamental children not to talk back, even though their opponent's claims were outlandish. One of their opponents, RōLea's brother's son, was the regional head of a political party and would in that capacity pay irregular visits to Vila. RōLea and several other members of their family were always there to greet him at

the airport. They never mentioned the land issues but welcomed him in a manner befitting a dear family member—in the hope that he might take example from their magnanimous conduct and change his ways, RōLea said laconically. But she was deeply concerned about the future of her children, and the lack of opportunity to go back to Mota and present her case on their behalf weighed heavily on her mind.

Bill followed me to the airport to see me off. Comparing his life when I first met him with his situation 16 years after was a disheartening exercise. He was involuntarily idle and chronically penniless, with no immediate prospects apart from the highly uncertain apple-picking scheme, knowing that his lineage land was gradually being seized by others, which would make it even harder to return home. This was even before adding the recent hike in violent crimes and sorcery in Vila to the equation, which in effect imposed an after-dark curfew on all members of his household. The factors that initially made him leave Mota for Vila were by now almost completely reversed. Mota was a land of at least some opportunity, in addition to having the virtue of being Home. Vila had become the site of their shortcomings as well as a site for fear.

Most Motese in urban settings share Bill's experience. The sense of terror that followed Mark's death further corroborated the perceived precariousness of life among the Motese diaspora. To the Motese on other islands, Mota's recent agricultural prosperity, combined with the limited access to wage labour and sorcery-induced bursts of moral panic and social turmoil, meant that most of the factors behind their decision to leave the island had now turned in Mota's favour. It was no longer just a safe haven where everybody knows your name. It had become a place of opportunity, at least by comparison to their current lot. The choice to leave for home seemed more appealing than ever before—and the inability to do so ever more taxing.

Concluding remarks: Beyond the point of no return

As I write these words, the climate change talks in Paris are moving to a close, while Vanuatu is undergoing the effects of the most severe El Niño-induced droughts in decades, aggravating the damages of Cyclone Pam, another weather phenomenon of virtually unprecedented intensity. Most scientific climate projections suggest that in the future, such extremes will

be the new normal. On Mota, which I will visit again in a few weeks' time, no water has been available since September, even though they are well into the usually wet summer season, whereas during my 2012 visit, in the dry months of June and July, it rained every single day. To a horticultural subsistence economy, such disturbances to the weather patterns seriously affect the traditional calendar for planting and growth, challenging the virtues of relative stability and predictability that island life, after all, has had to offer, which somewhat evened out the outsider's view that Mota lacked in *divelopmen* and sophistication of modern living. To the older generation, such disparaging assessments were tokens of pride rather than cause for offence, since they confirmed their self-image that Mota is the stronghold of Banks Islands tradition. But during my first two fieldworks, the educated and the younger generation felt slightly embarrassed by their neighbours' assessment of life on Mota as backward. However, during my last visit in 2012, their view had aligned with that of the elderly. It was now a widely held opinion that neither education nor migration had brought much increase in opportunities or improved quality of living. Life on the island had indeed proven to be the better way. The deprived returnees are emblematic of the disenchantment with the promises of *divelopmen*. Even the high-flying Patteson, who had returned as a man of means, ended up a pauper. Occasionally, his political rivals might gleefully express, 'He thought himself above us, but now he's back cutting copra'. But to most, this was yet another confirmation of an ever more established fact: That to people from Mota, the world outside the island had little to offer. By turning the very symbols of outsiders' scorn into a matter of pride, the embarrassment the younger generations previously felt has been transformed into a factor behind cultural resilience.

On the one hand, this upbeat attitude is an asset, since it bolsters cultural and economic self-sufficiency. And in 2012, it was heartening to see Mota being considered a place of opportunity and prospects. But given the changing demographic and climatic conditions, it is doubtful whether this turn towards isolationism will be viable in the long run. In order to secure sustainability and a measure of predictability, options must remain open. Put bluntly, diversification is part of the extended carrying capacity of the island. The possibility to live elsewhere for shorter or longer periods of time, because of education, employment, or sheer adventurousness, has throughout our 150 years of historic records formed a part of Mota ecology. The consequences of the current drought will remind the Motese that life on the island is volatile, while all the factors that made people fear an urban existence and long for home remain in place. To the Motese, the future seems to offer precarious livings, both on and off the island.

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