This paper is about chiefs in Vanuatu. The archipelago of islands now known as Vanuatu is inhabited by people who speak 113 different languages and have many different systems of knowledge and practice, including many different forms of community leadership. In Vanuatu today, knowledge and practice understood to derive from the pre-colonial past—traditional ways of doing and being—is called kastom in the national lingua franca, Bislama. The word provides a way of summing up what the ni-Vanuatu understand to belong to themselves and to their place, in opposition to all that contact with other people and other places has introduced into their way of life. Kastom is thus a flexible term used to denote a category of knowledge and practice, the content of the category is left largely undefined.

‘Chief’ is not a term that was used in any language in Vanuatu, but is derived from English. The word has been adopted into Bislama, where it is spelled jif. The term ‘chief’ and the developing formulation of leadership which that term invokes today, is something which was introduced in the colonial process. In the central islands of Vanuatu, and in the far south of the archipelago, there were and are hereditary leaders who have, ideally, total authority over the land and people in their domain, and who could, fairly easily, be described as ‘chiefs’ in the English sense of the term. In most areas of the country, however, leadership was achieved through a combination of ritual, economic and political achievement and personal qualities, and was often very fragile, highly dependent on ongoing community support.

This paper is about how the ni-Vanuatu took hold of the introduced concept of chiefs, and modified and incorporated it with respect to both traditional systems of authority and the structure of the independent state. The Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs was founded in 1977, as part of the leadup to Independence (gained in 1980), and it has continued to be an important body. In the late 1990s, both in rural areas and in the towns, chiefs are the primary community leaders, and the idea of chiefs has been so far incorporated into local contexts that when people speak about chiefs, they speak of them as ol kastom jif (traditional chiefs). Indeed chiefs are seen as having a special role and responsibility to preserve and promote kastom.
I consider this transformation through one particular man, Chief Willie Bongmatur Maldo, both because I think that this complex history is helpfully seen from an explicit personal position, and because I am increasingly convinced that Chief Willie had much to do with the way in which the concept ‘chief’ is presently understood in Vanuatu. Chief Willie himself comes from the north Vanuatu island of Ambrym: his own personal knowledge and understanding of kastom has suffused his contribution to public life in Vanuatu. This contribution has been considerable—he was influential in the formation of the Vanuatu state, and was the founding President of the Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs.

In 1996 Chief Willie asked me to record his life history. This paper is largely based on his reminiscences. Of course my account is suffused with the rose-coloured light of Chief Willie’s remembrance, which places him more firmly at the centre of events than others would. However, such a positioning is a useful corrective to many accounts of Vanuatu’s Independence, which tend to overlook the role of chiefs. I supplement Chief Willie’s account by drawing on a report summarising political events in the country from the 1950s until 1978. This report was prepared by Keith Woodward, who, as Political Advisor to the British Residency until 1978, was another participant in the events leading to Independence.

Chief Willie is wise and charming, something of a visionary, a man with considerable personal authority. Into his own experience he has compacted much of the history of ni-Vanuatu engagement with the western world. Raised in an unevangelised village on the island of Ambrym, he worked first as a plantation labourer, then in his twenties and thirties for the Condominium, and just before Independence became the first President of the Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs, a position he held until 1993. Although his life has often taken him away from his island, and from a daily engagement with local practice, Chief Willie has always been distinctive for his respect for indigenous knowledge and practice—for kastom—and for his emphasis upon its importance. He has great skill in speaking and telling stories, making effective use of proverbs drawn from island life—he describes, for example, the Condominium grasp of the archipelago as that of an octopus sitting on a box. One of his greatest skills is his recognition of the importance of symbols and symbolic action, an ability he has used in particular with reference to the National Council of Chiefs. He is, in 1999, in his early sixties.

I will first discuss the nature of chiefs in pre-Independence Vanuatu, and then take up the story of their changing role through Chief Willie’s own experience. I will take an Ambrym-centric perspective on chiefs, drawing on information on north Ambrym published by the anthropologist Mary Patterson. The introduction and acceptance of the concept of chiefs varied greatly through Vanuatu—this paper inevitably makes general what occurred as a diversity of particulars.

In the pre-colonial era a number of different political systems existed in what is now Vanuatu. In the southern island of Aneityum, for example, leadership was hereditary; while on Tanna leadership was ‘situational and contextual, diffused and dependent on acknowledged access to and control of ritual knowledge’ (Douglas 1998:228). In central Vanuatu there were titled positions of community leadership, transmitted on a hereditary basis, similar to those found in Western Polynesia. In the northern region, into which Ambrym falls, leadership was rarely hereditary, but instead associated with participation in a series of rituals concerned with status alteration. These ceremonial sequences, often referred to as graded societies, are frequently based on pig-killing rituals. By performing the stages of the sequence an individual can achieve considerable social, political and spiritual power and status. Achievement in the graded society is not determined by kinship, although a high-ranking man is in a position to assist his child or other kin to move more quickly up the steps of the system.
One of the marks and expressions of rank was, and sometimes still is, that of ‘taboo fires’—men of a certain rank together eat food cooked on a fire dedicated to them and them alone. However, leadership in north Vanuatu was not axiomatically the product of achievements in the graded society. To exercise authority, a man needed to establish and maintain his personal legitimacy as a leader, rather than rely on his structural legitimacy as a member of the graded society (Rodman 1973:314). In the north, the exact nature of high status was and is often contested, and a man needed considerable acumen and flair in order to be able to maintain any authority he might gain over his fellows (Patterson 1981:218–9).7

Missionaries started work in the archipelago in the 1840s. The first outpost of the highly influential Presbyterian mission was in Aneityum. Miller reports that Geddie, an early missionary, saw the way in which conversion was undercutting the authority of Aneityumese traditional leaders, and in 1854 acted in cooperation with the Aneitymese community to reconstitute them as ‘a kind of local Parliament to consider the moral and social good of the island’ (Graham Miller 1978:86). As they expanded their influence, the Presbyterians continued to attempt reconstituting local leaders as leaders of the redeemed community. However, Europeans were disappointed in their search for established and authoritative leaders of the kind they had found in Polynesia (Adams 1984:21).

Consistently, missionaries and other Europeans looked for leaders in Vanuatu, and found influential individuals whom they described as chiefs. But the European notion of a chief rarely matched local conceptions of authority,7 and the very process of conversion separated people from local sources of power and authority such as the graded society. The word chief, applied to local leaders, was in effect a new term for a new and unwieldy category combining local practice and European expectations. In central Vanuatu, where traditional leaders most closely approximated to European expectations, the match was still not effective, as missionaries identified converts, instead of local hereditary leaders, as chiefs, and undercut the local system.9

The archipelago was not made subject to a colonial power until 1906, when the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides was established. Although the principal motivation for its establishment concerned the European appropriation of land, one of the distinctive characteristics of the Condominium was that, until the early 1960s, it had very little impact on the indigenous inhabitants. In 1913, after spending a couple of years travelling in the region, Felix Speiser wrote ‘the native is unknown to the Government except as a recruit or a malefactor’ (cited in E. Jacomb 1914:30); in many ways this remained true through the following decades. The Condominium provided no public education system until the 1960s. The Europeans who made an impact on the ni-Vanuatu were missionaries, and employers—the planters, store keepers and ship captains who took (mostly) men to work for them both in and outside the archipelago. The lives of the ni-Vanuatu were not unaffected by the Condominium, but the relationship of the local people to the Government was one of negotiation more than of submission.

The Condominium assigned district agents to the four administrative districts into which the archipelago was divided, but their influence was not extensive, especially in the remoter areas. The principal context of interaction was in matters of law and order, as Speiser’s comment implies. In order to establish points of entry into communities, the Condominium created two categories of person, and appointed community members to them—the categories of chief and assessor. Assessors were established in the Anglo-French protocol of 1911 to act as consultants in cases presented to Native Courts, which were hearings over which District Agents presided. As time passed the role of assessors was modified, and they were given increasing responsibility, being left to settle minor disputes themselves (Jolly 1994:50).

The second category of person introduced by the Condominium was that of chiefs. The
Presbyterian chiefly model was taken up and modified by the Condominium Government in order to establish individuals throughout the archipelago who could represent and act for their community in dealings with outsiders (MacClancy 1983:20). Unlike the Presbyterian system, chiefs established with respect to the Government did not have to be Christian. Although this category was imposed on many different indigenous systems of authority, its purpose—to negotiate with outsiders—gave it a usefulness which led to its appropriation. Margaret Jolly reports that in Bunlap in South Pentecost this position was initially taken by men who were already powerful and high-ranking in local contexts; that later, in the 1950s, the position fell into the hands of an ineffectual individual, who was in turn ousted by a powerful and influential man (Jolly 1994:49). This sequence suggests a gradual process of coming to terms with the idea of chiefs, and ultimately an acceptance of it.

Crucially, the category of chief was devised for an administrative system predicated on the concept of outsiders. Chiefs were created to represent and negotiate on behalf of their community with outsiders, with people who stood outside the indigenous system of interaction altogether. If, over time, the word chief became *jif*, the Bislama term for community leader, a term invoking and obtaining respect, one of the key sources of that authority and respect was the way in which the chief stood for the community in interactions with the outside world.

Chief Willie’s acquisition of the title ‘chief’ has a number of components. His great-grandfather Maltantanu was a very high achiever in the graded system—he reached the highest step (something many men never achieve) and started again at the bottom; when he died he was about half-way up the sequence the second time around. Maltantanu had five sons, one of whom was called Wurwurnaim. Wurwurnaim was captured by labour traders and taken to work on the Queensland sugarcane fields. There he came under the influence of missionaries, and returned to Ambrym a Christian. When the Presbyterians first arrived in West Ambrym—at Dip Point—Wurwurnaim became chief of the Christian community. Although Wurwurnaim had participated in the graded system before he went to Queensland, he didn’t continue to take grades after his return. Chief Willie’s analysis is that Wurwurnaim was made chief because his father had been so high-ranking, and indeed his appointment may have been more acceptable to local people on this account. However, the fact that Wurwurnaim was appointed chief ‘for the Church’, (interview 27 July 1996) and took no further part in the grade-taking sequence, suggests a radical discontinuity between pre-colonial forms of power and authority and the category ‘chief’.

In 1913, West Ambrym was devastated by a volcanic eruption, and the community moved to North Ambrym (Ranmuhu) which is where Chief Willie now lives. Chief Willie’s father, Simon Solip, was brought up as a Christian and never took part in the grade-taking system. Instead he became an indigenous evangelist—teacher and preacher—who was sent by the Presbyterians to the Ambrym village Likon. Thus although Chief Willie’s family still come from Dip Point, and are now resident in North Ambrym, he was actually brought up largely in Likon. Although raised as a Christian, he lived, in Likon, in what he describes as ‘heathen times’. Chief Willie remembers when the old men in Likon relinquished their grade status and hence their own knowledge and practice, in favour of Christianity. This transformation was effected when these men relinquished the taboo fires on which they had cooked their food, and ‘came down’ to eat together with the whole community food cooked on one fire. This act was a horrifying sacrilege to an extent hard for an outsider to grasp.

Chief Willie was taught to read and write by a ni-Vanuatu mission teacher, David Bule, but his schooling was limited (he was never taught arithmetic, for example). In his mid-teens he began working on plantations on various islands in the north of the archipelago for about eight years, before taking work first as a trainee
mechanic in the country’s second town of Santo, and then for the municipal council in Port Vila.

In 1963, by then in his mid-20s, Chief Willie returned to Ambrym. In this period the Condominium administrations were beginning to devote more attention, and more services, to the islands. Chief Willie married Lala Sera, and in 1965 was chosen as chief by his village. Chief Willie was appointed as chief with respect to the Condominium, not, as his grandfather was, with respect to the Church. As chief he acted as a middle man with the Government in many contexts. He was also appointed as an assessor and as a member of the District Education Committee, he worked with the Agriculture Department and with the District doctor. In 1972 he founded the North Ambrym Local Council, and began developing his own ideas about how Independence could be achieved.

In 1974, in response to increasing pressures for Independence, the Condominium Government agreed to set up a Representative Assembly, the majority of whose members were to be elected by universal suffrage. The Assembly also included a number of seats allocated to represent economic interests—the Chamber of Commerce elected six members, the indigenous Cooperatives three. At the time this decision was made (at a conference held in London) there was no plan to identify chiefs as a special category in the Assembly. However a number of ‘leading New Hebrideans’ suggested that chiefs be elected to the Representative Assembly as a special category ‘to represent custom’ (Woodward:5). It was decided that four chiefs be elected to the Representative Assembly, each chosen by an electoral college of chiefs drawn from one of the four Administrative Districts. This decision formalised chiefs as a group, a distinct category, within the archipelago. It gave them an importance beyond the local level, and created a potential ranking within the category which had not existed before.

An equally important consequence was the conflation between chiefs and kastom, which is so taken for granted in Vanuatu today that it is hard to unpick. The role for chiefs as brokers for interaction with outsiders was well-established by 1974, but this proposal recognises a crucial modification to it. It redefines that brokership not as a point of entry for outsiders, but rather as a voice for insider interests speaking to the outside. From being individuals selected to represent the community in non-traditional contexts, chiefs here become individuals selected to represent the community’s traditional face to outsiders. The process of selection used is election, by chiefs of chiefs, a procedure quite alien to indigenous practice: chiefs were to be chosen to represent kastom by means of an entirely non-customary process. This new role for chiefs as representing kastom significantly, and subtly, underlines the identification of chiefs as traditional leaders—not as a matter of European perception, but of local practice. As a consequence, the relationship of chiefs to the traditional sources of authority they were now to represent became much more crucial and was disputed at a local level. This was made more than evident in the 1975 elections for the Representative Assembly.

Ambrym fell into Central District 2 (CD2), an area which also included Malakula and Pentecost. In November 1975 chiefs from throughout these islands were brought together on Malakula to elect the CD2 representative. This election was further complicated by inevitable tensions between the French and British District Agents who jointly managed the proceedings. When the chiefs from Ambrym arrived at Norsup, French soldiers separated their group, sending four of the Ambrym chiefs to stay at a nearby town, Lakatoro, while the others stayed at Norsup. Chief Willie was sent to Lakatoro, while another chief from North Ambrym, Chief Tofor, a man politically and socially hostile to Chief Willie, stayed in Norsup. All the arriving chiefs were so divided. Seventeen members of the CD2 electoral college found themselves at Lakatoro, and ten at Norsup. Then, in the best tradition of political double-dealing, the group at Lakatoro heard that the group at Norsup, under the influence of the French, had chosen the candidate to be elected by secret vote. So the group at Lakatoro decided that they also would chose a candidate. Chief
Willie was nominated by a man from Labultamate, Pentecost, Chief Malture. Chief Willie argued against his own nomination, on the grounds that the French would never accept him as the successful candidate. But Chief Rion Rabinmal, from Litslits, Malakula, said that if the French opposed Chief Willie he would answer them because he had the right to speak, as the election was being held in his place.

Chief Willie’s account of this election is dramatic and colourful, in a way I can never hope to reproduce in English. He always refers, for example, to the District Agents as ‘tufala Gavman’—the two governments. When all the chiefs gathered together at a place called Aop, for the election, then, he said, ‘the two governments sat down at a table’. They talked to the chiefs, and then sent them off to sit under a line of coconut palms to select their candidates for the election.

There followed a contest concerned primarily with definitions of what a chief is. Sitting under the line of coconuts (the two governments presumably remaining in tense proximity at the table), the chiefs debated the basis for selecting a chief. The debate began when Chief Tofor nominated the French choice for the position, Chief Andrei Urambat from Malakula. Chief Tofor attempted to squash all further debate by forbidding further nominations. However, Chief Rion from Litslits stood up and nominated Chief Willie. Then Chief Tofor exploded. He said that Chief Willie was a nobody, that he had never killed a pig, and did not belong to a chiefly family. Chief Andrei, by contrast, had been educated in Noumea, and had taken grades. So then Chief Malture asked Chief Willie to defend his status as a chief, specifically to explain if he was descended from a high-ranking family.

In this exchange Tofor suggests that the title chief should only properly be held by a man with status in the graded system. However, perhaps in recognition that in changing times men did not always participate in the graded system, he also suggests that authentication is dependent on inheritance. Although in Ambrym high rank is achieved, not inherited, in the context of choosing chiefs heritage becomes relevant. Not oneself a high-ranking man, one could validly become a community leader if descended from high-ranking men. Chief Willie’s successful rebuttal of Tofor’s accusations was couched in exactly these terms. He referred to his high-ranking great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather, and explained how the labour-trade halted his grandfather’s own career. Then Chief Willie pointed out that Tofor’s own status as a high-ranking man was in fact obtained from Chief Willie’s family. One of Chief Willie’s grandfather’s brothers had obtained a special grade title from Malakula when he had lived there for a while after the 1913 eruption. Later, Tofor’s own father had bought that title from this man. So Chief Tofor’s right to speak was derived from Chief Willie’s family.

Chief Malture, the man who had nominated Chief Willie originally, said (I translate Chief Willie’s version of the speech) ‘Tofor, we are chiefs, and we are meeting in this place. You have brought all your pigs tusks [badges of rank] here, but they belong on a nasara [a ceremonial ground], not in a place devoted to politics. If I had brought all my things, they would be as plentiful as yours’ (interview 27 July 1996).

The argument between the chiefs was unresolved and they went back to the two governments, waiting at the table. There first Chief Andrei and then Chief Willie were nominated. When the French District Agent heard the nomination for Chief Willie, he banged the table with his fist in anger, and stormed off down to the beach to cool his temper. The British District Agent eventually sent a policeman down to the beach to bring him back, and when he got back the two agents sat at the table and argued in French for so long that Chief Malture got up and said to them: ‘We’ve made our choices, why are you arguing?’ So they voted, and the vote was seventeen to ten in favour of Chief Willie.

The dispute over Chief Willie was not resolved by this election. Although he took his seat in the Representative Assembly a cloud continued to hang over his right to do so.

Chief Willie, then, was first appointed as a Chief for his own community in North Ambrym.
without reference to his status in the traditional system, and as community leader initially operated mainly in interaction with the Condominium Government in matters of school classrooms and dispensaries. However, when objections were raised to his election to the Representative Assembly, there was no established process by which his eligibility for the position could be argued. As far as I know, at this point in his life Chief Willie had not performed a grade-taking ceremony at all.

There were in fact several disputes in operation in the CD2 election, notably the question of the degree to which a chief should embody traditional modes of authority, and the question about how traditional modes of authority should be applied in making that very decision. Two traditional bases for the right to contribute to the debate were asserted. When Chief Willie doubted that the French District Agent would accept him as a candidate, Chief Rion Rabinmal asserted his right to speak to the French District Agent on the basis that the election was being held in his own area of Malakula, his place. The other basis, achieved status in the graded system, was asserted visibly by Tofor in the wearing of his rank regalia, and verbally by Malture in replying to him. So although the chiefs were debating the relevance of traditional forms of leadership and status in the selection of a chief to represent them all, at the same time they laid claim to traditional sources of legitimation for their right to speak.

However, Malture, who, in Chief Willie’s account at least, has the parting shot, also questions the relevance of such sources of authority in an arena concerned with politics.

From the point of view of the Condominium, the dispute about Chief Willie’s appointment, which continued unabated after the election, was a political debate. During the 1970s the New Hebrides National Party, afterwards known as the Vanuaku Pati, was founded. This was an Anglophone Party, committed to Independence, which was supported by the Protestant churches and also, implicitly, by the British Residency. The foundation of the National Party prompted the foundation of a number of small Francophone political parties which eventually grouped together in an alliance with Jimmy Steven’s Nagriamel Movement. Nagriamel was initially less a political party than a social movement, founded in response to land alienation by cattle ranchers on the island of Santo. It involved a residential community at a place called Fanafo, with headquarters in other islands (including Ambrym), and developed pan-regional syncretistic cultural practice.

Once it got started, political development in the country moved very fast. Keith Woodward comments that political developments were so rapid that, although the election of chiefs was envisaged at the start of 1975 as a non-political matter, by the end of that year ‘the politicisation of the chiefly elections had become more or less inevitable’ (Woodward:10). The chiefs were likely to hold the balance of power in the Representative Assembly. Chief Willie was, by 1975, a member of the National Party: it was for this reason that the French District Agent was so opposed to his election (ibid:22). Two administrative districts failed to hold chiefly elections at all. In the north, chiefly elections were complicated by disagreements between the French and British District Agents. In the south, Woodward says, ‘the lack of any clearly defined system of Chieftainship on the principal island of Tanna was the major obstacle’ (ibid:10).

Certainly Chief Willie’s commitment to Independence was not popular with everyone in north Ambrym, where some people supported Nagriamel. When he returned home after the election, Chief Willie faced strong opposition, which almost reached the level of inter-group warfare. Opposition, he says, was formulated as a demand from surrounding Catholic communities, that he and his people return to their own place, to Dip Point in West Ambrym, and take the idea of Independence with them. Opponents said that Chief Willie was no chief, that he had never killed a pig. Chief Willie says that he refused to be drawn into either debate or fight.

It may be that Chief Tofor’s opposition to Chief Willie’s appointment was party political, as
Woodward suggests. However party politics gave expression to more fundamental disputes including interpersonal differences, and provided a vehicle for debate about how traditional practice was to be carried forward in the changing social climate. Robert Rubinstein sums up the difference between the Anglophone and Francophone parties as it was experienced on Malo during this period.

The rise of political factions on Malo relates to orientations away from or towards custom. One orientation, supported in name by the Nagriamel cult, believes that ‘custom’ is an important part of life and must be salvaged and preserved. The other faction, supported in name by the National Party, believes that while ‘custom’ governs some situations, times have changed and new situations must be met with new techniques (Rubenstein 1978:31).

Rubinstein’s analysis of the relation of the two parties to kastom would be disputed by many. Chief Willie, for one, would never agree that the National Party was so dismissive of kastom. Rather than arguing for such connections, I wish to demonstrate that debates about how traditional practice should be transformed to suit changing conditions were much more important to ni-Vanuatu than the party political issues in which they were framed. Although framed as disputes about who truly supported kastom, such arguments were concerned with how and what should change, and were simplified as binary oppositions between the Francophone/Nagriamel alliance and the National Party.

The problem of the election of Chiefs to the Representative Assembly became a major issue which prevented the Assembly from meeting at all. Several solutions were proposed, each one increasing the number of chiefs to be included in the Assembly. Eventually, after much negotiation, an informal meeting of the Assembly held in June 1976 laboriously negotiated a solution to the impasse—the establishment of a Council of Chiefs to advise the Representative Assembly on all matters concerning kastom (Woodward:19). It was decided that the Council of Chiefs should have twenty elected members, and that the four chiefs elected to the Representative Assembly should also be full members. In effect, this decision depoliticised chiefs. They became advisors to the Parliament but had no direct political power. However the establishment of the Council to some extent restricted the powers conferred on the Representative Assembly: the Assembly could not validly deliberate on some subjects (including hunting and fishing and land) without consulting the Council (Woodward:26).

It is a massive oversimplification, but it is analytically helpful, to see what has happened to the category ‘chief’ in terms of a series of oppositions. In these terms the establishment of the National Council of Chiefs can be seen to represent a complex negotiation between the polarities of old and new, inside and outside. People elected to the Representative Assembly were, by the establishment of the National Council of Chiefs, defined as representing their community in the context of the new—the Condominium, services, development—the very contexts in which chiefs were formerly appointed to work. The chiefs were now prevented from commenting on the new, except from the perspective of the old, the kastom concerns of their communities. The creation of the National Council of Chiefs constitutes or formalises a modification in the role of chiefs themselves. Although the processes involved are highly complex, there is a basic alteration in the role: from being associated with what comes from outside (Christianity, the Condominium Government) chiefs have been redefined as exemplars of what belongs in the place (kastom).

Political events continued to develop at a hectic pace. The first meeting of the National Council of Chiefs took place in February 1977. Chief Willie was elected as the Council’s first Chairman. This election of a man whose very status as a Chief had been so much contested only a year earlier reflects above all on his own very considerable leadership skills. These skills were also more than evident as he contributed to the development of a role for the Council, always...
taking care of the symbols associated with it. At the second meeting, the following April, the Council changed its name to Malvatumauri.

Chief Willie explains

*Mal* means chief. *Vatu* means stone or island or place. *Vatu* means stone because in the past when they ordained chiefs, they sat down or stood upon [took authority from] stones. That is why we chose malvatu. *Mauri* means something which is alive, which grows, which grows in the light. The Maori people [of New Zealand] may have their own meaning for the word that we don’t know, but this is what it means. You can say that a whale is mauri because it is the king of all fishes. So it is something which is big, and has life, and grows. So that’s why we called the Council mal vatu mauri. There are three words in the name (taped interview 28 July 1996).

By taking this name the Council of Chiefs laid claim to the two principal traditional sources of authority upon which speakers drew in the CD2 elections for the Representative Assembly. *Mal* does not mean chief, but is rather the name of a high rank in the graded system in a number of parts of north Vanuatu. As Chief Tofor and Chief Malture asserted their status in the graded system as a source of legitimation, so this use of the word *mal* brings to the National Council of Chiefs an association with traditional sources of rank and status in north Vanuatu. The definition of *vatu* has a number of components. In some graded societies rank is associated with the setting up of stones on a ceremonial ground, sometimes of stone platforms on which the grade-taker may kill a pig, so that the word alludes to grade-taking systems again (Layard 1942). In central Vanuatu traditional leaders had stones on which they sat for their formal installation. Stones are also very significant throughout Vanuatu as sources of spiritual power and magic, sometimes, as on Tanna, associated with the creation of the world (Bonnemaison 1994:115–22). In the metaphoric and allusive style of myths in many parts of Vanuatu, a reference to stones is often an allusion to people.

Chief Willie’s definition of *vatu* as stone or island or place refers to another source of locally understood authority—the authority of place. Chief Rion of Litslits said that he had the right to speak to the French District Agent if he caused trouble because the place where the meeting was being held was his place. Place is most definitely a crucial marker of indigenous identity, and there is a clear reference to this in Chief Willie’s explanation. The word *vatu* invokes an association with the power of the place.

The institution of the National Council of Chiefs formalised the existence of chiefs throughout the archipelago, and provided a role for them which could continue into the new context of the Independent nation. The name Malvatumauri linked this new institution to indigenous sources of power and status, reinforcing the perception that the position of chiefs was derived from pre-colonial practice. It is interesting to consider one expression of this perception. In a small book published to celebrate Independence in 1980, Godwin Ligo, a ni-Vanuatu from Pentecost, wrote a short article about *kastom*. Ligo had produced a regular programme about *kastom* for Radio New Hebrides, was on the Board of the Cultural Centre, and organised the First National Arts Festival held in 1979. He says that one of the traditions which keeps custom and culture alive is the ‘pig-killing ceremony to achieve the rank of chief’, continuing that ‘there are some other procedures to appoint a custom chief, in those islands where there is no pig-killing ceremony’ (Ligo 1980:59). Ligo’s comments reflect the way in which he has accepted modifications to indigenous practice, so much so that he is writing chiefs back into pre-colonial contexts.

When the National Council of Chiefs chose the name Malvatumauri, they decided to dedicate it with a *kastom* ceremony. This ceremony took place on 27 April 1977, in front of the former Parliament Building in the main street of Port Vila. The chiefs laid a stone with commemorative wording on it and sanctified both it and the name by killing a pig. The pig was killed by Chief Willie together with Chief Graham Kalsakau, a chief
from Ifira in Port Vila harbour. Beside the stone they planted a *namele*, a cycad palm used extensively through Vanuatu both as a sign of peace and as a marker of a sacred or taboo place. They also planted a sugarcane, a symbol of virility. This ceremony was a clear assertion of the power of chiefs within the country.

The next few months were a period of intense political activity. Disputes about election results and the allocation of seats to the respective political parties resulted in the failure of the Representative Assembly. New elections were to be held, which the National Party decided to boycott. During this period Malvatumauri met a number of times, providing advice on issues such as the lowering of the voting age. In October Malvatumauri met with both constitutional advisors and members of political parties in an attempt to resolve the deepening political crisis. A couple of days later a group of men from the peri-urban village of Erakor uprooted the Malvatumauri *namele* and threw it into the sea. They left the stone where it was, but also uprooted the sugarcane. Woodward comments dryly that ‘this action…caused deep offence to the Council of Chiefs’ (Woodward:55). Chief Willie says that this action diminished the power of chiefs so greatly that it was almost lost altogether (taped interview 28 July 1996).

The ringleader of the Erakor group was the Francophone Maxime Carlot, who subsequently became Prime Minister of Vanuatu between 1992 and 1996. At the time he was Chairman of the Erakor Community Council. In an interview on the radio station, Maxime Carlot explained the action as a response to what was perceived as the overly political actions of Malvatumauri (Woodward:55). Chief Willie comments that in acting in this way, Erakor failed to see that they were undermining a right that was also their own. When I asked him for an explanation of the Erakor action he suggested both that it was party political, in that Erakor supported Francophone parties, and also that this was a dispute between peri-urban villages around Efate. Chief Graham Kalsakau, with whom Chief Willie killed the pig, was from Ifira village, with which Erakor was engaged in a land dispute.

Over the following months, as Chief Willie toured the country, chiefs in the islands questioned him about the implications of the Erakor action. He says that they were surprised and troubled by it, asking him if the power of chiefs was entirely broken. That they should ask this question reveals the degree to which the category chief was constituted with the national arena, and not within local contexts. Chief Willie reassured them, he reports, by saying that Malvatumauri would find a way to bring the power of chiefs back. This he achieved through another pig-killing ceremony, held in Port Vila.27 Chief Willie explains that the blood of the pig, which he killed, washed away the problem, and restored the right or power by which chiefs work. When the pig was killed they butchered it and shared it out, with the food, sugarcane and kava which had been put with it. In sharing out the pig, Chief Willie called on an Erakor chief and presented the head of the pig to him.28

A challenge successfully rebutted often works as a strong reinforcement. Malvatumauri was established as the body representing Vanuatu’s traditional leaders, now called chiefs, understood to be wise in the ways of the place. In the new context of the nation, diverse forms of community leadership had been reconstituted within the framework of the one position or title: chief. In the late 1990s, chief is a term for men who have achieved status in local terms, but especially for those men acknowledged by their community as a leader, no matter how that leadership was negotiated.29

The term chief, like the term *kastom*, operates most successfully when it is not closely defined. Early Malvatumauri meetings spent considerable time attempting to define what a chief is. In the compromise solution that was eventually reached, the definition depends largely on *kastom*, and hence embodies uncertainty at a different location. In the *Custom Policy of Malvatumauri*, published in 1983, Article 7:A is devoted to the Registration of Chiefs. The criteria set out are that chiefs should be of the line or blood of chiefs, must be recognised and installed according to *kastom*, and must have titles which have
meanings in local languages. In that the definition of the line or blood of chiefs is dependent on successfully arguing that an antecedent was a traditional leader (there having been no consistent registration of chiefs in the past), this becomes a matter of negotiation about who or what constituted *kastom* authority in the past.

The foundation of Malvatumauri just before Independence seems to me to have been, to simplify again, a most skilful technique for connecting the old, pre-colonial practice, into the new, the nation of Vanuatu, by means of a third, a colonial fiction, chiefs. The skillfulness with which this was done was a matter, not least, of the more or less successful promotion of the idea that chiefs were not a colonial construct, but rather embodied, par excellence, indigenous, pre-colonial knowledge and practice. A far greater complexity was reduced to a simple opposition. Chief Willie himself played a crucial role, not only in the creation of the National Council of Chiefs, but in the way in which it was constituted and developed.

Vanuatu achieved Independence in 1980. The Vanuatu Constitution allocates to Malvatumauri the same advisory role which it had pre-Independence. It now has 39 members, elected by chiefs, and is intended to advise Parliament on all matters concerning *kastom*, especially with respect to land. The most important role chiefs now play is a judicial one. Chiefs adjudicate cases brought to informal courts within their communities, only referring them to the police and the wider judicial system when the issue is one they feel unable to manage. As President of Malvatumauri, Chief Willie had an office in Port Vila, where, for many years, he also adjudicated disputes brought to him by individuals. These were often land disputes, and marital and other family problems, which local chiefs had been unable to resolve.

The role of chiefs in Vanuatu, and especially their recognition through Malvatumauri, provided a sense of continuity between rural ni-Vanuatu and the new context of the nation. The widespread acceptance of chiefs as representing the *kastom* of the place, as validly leading and standing for their communities, and their representation in the structures of government, provided an avenue of connection between the local and the national for those for whom local autonomy and local practice were still experienced as realities. It also provides an avenue for those not educated in the western system nevertheless to participate in government. The redefinition of chiefs from a role relating to the outside to one representing the inside, simplified a complex process of change. The new, chiefs, introduced into the old, indigenous leadership systems, became a way to incorporate the old, *kastom*, into the new, the structures of the emerging Independent state.

Chief Willie’s role in the ceremonies which instituted Vanuatu’s Independence on 30 July 1980, reflects the degree of the incorporation of chiefs into the new nation. As President of Malvatumauri, Chief Willie was one of three people who made vows on behalf of the country, alongside the President of the new Republic, George Sokumanu, and the Prime Minister, Walter Lini. Chief Willie says of this occasion

The promise I made, which I made on behalf of chiefs, to the nation, was to look after the *kastom* and life of the people with respect to unity and justice and other such things, and to help the work of the Government. It was me who took the third Bible and made my promise at that time, in the middle of the day, when the flag flew high (taped Interview 29 July 1996).
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NOTES

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2 For the sake of clarity I will use the name Vanuatu throughout this paper to refer to this archipelago, which was known in the colonial era as the New Hebrides. ‘Ni-Vanuatu’ is the term used to describe the indigenous inhabitants of Vanuatu since Independence, again, for the sake of simplicity I will use the term no matter which period I refer to.

3 Bislama is a neo-Melanesian pidgin which draws on English, among other languages, for vocabulary.

4 There is a considerable literature which considers the concept of kastom in Vanuatu (and in Melanesia in general). This includes Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Jolly and Thomas 1992; White and Lindstrom 1993.

5 Woodward prepared the report for the British Residency. Woodward’s contribution to the events he reports should not be underestimated. Modest, capable and principled, he was much admired by many of the ni-Vanuatu with whom he dealt, and had a considerable influence over the formation of many of the political leaders who developed in the country in the decade before independence.

6 Another perspective on this history, one from the southern island of Aneityum, can be found in Tepahae (1997). Tepahae, himself an Aneityumese chief, discusses the influences on the role of chiefs since European contact.

7 Patterson (1981) writes of the importance of transgressive behaviour in the maintenance of power. By performing socially outrageous acts such as murder and wife-stealing a man laid claim to power, but he had to be able to legitimate his claim through his wealth in pigs, and through the performance of lavish and powerful kinship rituals.

8 Codrington wrote of Solomon Islands and northern Vanuatu: ‘in these Melanesian islands…chiefs exist, and still have in most islands important place and power, though never perhaps so much importance in the native view as they have in the eyes of European visitors, who carry with them the persuasion that savage people are always ruled by chiefs’ (1891:46).

9 For an account of one such appointment of Christian chiefs see Facey 1981:304.

10 However see Allen (1968:25–46) for an account of a Condominium attempt to create Christian chiefs on Ambae in 1911.

11 Macdonald-Milne and Thomas (1981:96–8) includes a brief biography of Chief Willie which differs in some places from the one he gave me himself, a contradiction I attribute both to the vagaries of memory and to the fact that one person may have several names. Thus in Macdonald-Milne and Thomas, Chief Willie’s high-ranking ancestor is called Notonaim.

12 Wurwurnaim was also known as Willie Bongwakon.

13 All translations of Chief Willie’s Bislama text are mine.

14 On Tomman Island, Malakula, the act of conversion from indigenous beliefs is expressed, similarly, as ‘eating with the women’ (Tim Curtis pers. comm. 1998).
Chief Willie says that the person from whom the idea derived was Iolu Abbil, from the southern island of Tanna, who was a member of the Advisory Council which had preceded the Representative Assembly.

The account of this election published in Kele Kele et al. (1977:82–3) differs in some details to Chief Willie’s account. Kele Kele was not present at the election. Chief Willie recorded another account of these events in an interview with Lamont Lindstrom, made in 1992, which Lindstrom has kindly made available to me. The versions Chief Willie provided to Lindstrom in 1992 and to me in 1996 are very consistent, differing only in that some details reported in one are not included in the other. I footnote the contradictions between Chief Willie and Kele Kele as they occur.

Kele Kele identifies this man as Chief Maxime.

This was Tainmalsaso, also known as Wingimal, brother of Wurwurnaim.

The British District Agent acting at this election was Darvall Wilkins. According to Darrell Tryon (pers. comm. 1997) Wilkins did not speak French. Since Chief Willie is fluent in neither English nor French, his identification of the language of argument may be in error.

According to Kele Kele (1977:83), the French District Agent stormed off when he realised that support was sixteen to ten in favour of Chief Willie, and that the ten supporters of the French nomination stormed out with him. Kele Kele says that the ten chiefs were recalled, but that the French District Agent did not return and that the election could not therefore be formally concluded.

Jimmy Steven was a charismatic character with Scottish and Tongan components to his ancestry. In the late 1950s, before Nagriamel was founded, when Chief Willie was training as a mechanic in Santo, he and Jimmy Steven used to play cards together most evenings, with a group of other young men.

Woodward comments, with a reserve that only underlines the antagonism between the two Governments: ‘It must regretfully be acknowledged that the realisation of the effects that the results of the chiefly elections might have on the general political balance in the Representative Assembly influenced the attitudes and actions of some district agents during this period’, (nd:11).

Rubinstein undertook anthropological fieldwork from 1975 to 1976 on Malo, an island just north of Malakula.


The idea of place as the basis of identity and authority in Vanuatu is a very large topic, which I will not attempt to address here. See Bolton (1993).

This ceremony took place outside the Federation Club.

The incident points to some of the difficulties of creating pan-national kastom. In making this presentation, Chief Willie implied that the head of the trouble, the source of it, was Erakor. However, according to D. Luders, an Erakor chief would accept the head as a great compliment, since in Efate the head is regarded as the most important part of the pig, reserved for the community leader (pers. comm. 1997).

In the late 1990s, a number of disputes about the role and importance of chiefs seem to be surfacing at both local and national levels. These debates lie outside the scope of this present paper. However, when riots took place in Vila in January 1998 in response to perceived Government corruption, it was chiefs, and not the police, who succeeded in bringing the rioters under control. This demonstration of the acceptance of chiefs as community leaders may have far-reaching effects on these debates.
REFERENCES


