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► **To cite this version:**

Marc Tabani. Constructions of cultural (in-)compatibility: Islam as kastom in Tanna (Vanuatu). PAIDEUMA. Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde, 2021, 67. halshs-03509400

**HAL Id: halshs-03509400**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03509400>**

Submitted on 4 Jan 2022

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF CULTURAL (IN-)COMPATIBILITY  
Islam as *kastom* in Tanna (Vanuatu)

Marc Tabani

*ABSTRACT.* This article presents ethnographic material and anthropological insights on the development of Islam in Vanuatu, where it has been studied even less than elsewhere in Melanesia. In Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, where dominant collective identities are firmly rooted in Christianity, converts to Islam remain few in number. In Vanuatu the Church authorities have nonetheless felt the need to reassert Christianity's hegemony nationally as a counter to the supposed advance of Islam. Also *kastom*, a widespread term for a specific local traditional heritage and an original way of living, has once again been invoked in recent debates on the politics of religious identity in Vanuatu. The aim of this article is to describe the conflicting arguments that people use in conceptualizing the moral or political aspects that show Islam to be culturally compatible or otherwise with Christianity and *kastom* on the island. I will examine how categories of continuity and change come to reinforce ideological discourses on the ability of Islam to conform to past Melanesian experiments in indigenizing foreign cultural influences. The case of Tanna in the south of Vanuatu will receive special attention. On this island, millenarian visions of a New World Order compete with local Muslims' interpretations of Islam. Older *kastom* social movements, having already experimented with ruptures from Christianity, like the famous John Frum movement, also participate in the construction of discourses on the continuity between *kastom* and Islam.

*Introduction*

In the past thirty years, concepts of continuity and change have often been used by anthropologists of the Pacific, particularly since the work of Marshall Sahlins, 'best known as a master of finding continuity in change' (Robbins 2005:3). The transposition of these categories into the specific field of the anthropology of Christianity has been criticized by Joel Robbins, now himself a renowned expert on the 'culture of rupture' (Robbins 2019:228), as a hindrance to the development of this sub-discipline. In his response to the former, John Baker, another 'agenda setter' among anthropologists of Christianity,<sup>1</sup> has expressed himself sceptically about the use of categories that are 'too broad and ambiguous [...] for the job that needs to be done',<sup>2</sup> namely to deal dialectically with two complementary models of religious change: the Christianization of traditions and the indigenization of Christianity. However, as Frazer McDonald and Christiane Falck (2020:128) point out, since Sahlins wrote there has been no shortage of specific works and publications on the anthropology of Christianity, especially in the Pacific. They nonetheless admit that the debate on 'cultural continuity and cultural rupture within the Anthropology of Christianity in the Pacific' (2020:124) still needs clarification in order to improve comparative perspectives on cultural change. Concluding MacDonald's and Falck's edited collection on changing Christianity in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Scott (2018:101).

<sup>2</sup> Barker (2007:18). Ton Otto and Poul Pedersen also noted that 'the issue of continuity is surprisingly under-theorized in anthropology, in comparison to the attention devoted to the question of change' (2005:22).

Pacific, Debra McDougall claims that appealing to these opposite concepts in debating religious change will be ‘futile’ so long as more attention is not given to the ‘details of the way that people on the ground conceptualize continuity and rupture’ (2020:208), as this is how they disconnect from or reconnect with the past ideologically.

Positioning ‘cultural change within Christianity’, for a region that is often described as the most Christian in the world seems an appropriate analytical framework. Adding to this proposition, McDougall suggests also retaining the study of non- or post-Christian phenomena in the field of the anthropology of Christianity. As non-Christian exceptions that should be analysed ‘within’ Christianity, she explicitly mentions conversions to the Bahá’í faith or to Islam, and she also refers to less recent indigenous politico-religious movements in Melanesia, dedicated to the return to ancestral ways.<sup>3</sup> In the Solomons and Vanuatu these are known locally as *kastom* movements (Akin 2013, Tabani 2013), though they are often condemned by today’s opponents for having colonial overtones as cargo cults (Lindstrom 1993, Jebens 2004).<sup>4</sup> For the followers of these movements, *kastom* includes pre-Christian survivals, as well as reinterpretations of a pre-European past, a situation of ‘traditional traditions’ and ‘traditionalist traditions’ being exploited together (Otto and Pedersen 2005:29, see also Tabani 2002). *Kastom* can indeed relate to any cultural element that is perceived as traditional, which does not necessarily mean indigenous or old, but whose historicity remains vague, although presented as undeniable. Since the colonial period, *kastom* movements have never ceased claiming their political autonomy and self-determination through the construction of cultural and religious compromises, as well as confirming their capacity to influence continuity in the future (Akin 2013:212). Many of these movements, by whatever name they were known, were extensively studied throughout the twentieth century, mainly in relation to the issue of the millenarian aspects of conversion to Christianity (Guiart 1962).

The expansion of Islam into the Pacific, on the other hand, remains a largely unexplored theme in anthropology. Studies by Debra McDougall (2009) in the Solomon Islands and Scott Flower (2017) in Papua New Guinea (PNG) have made valuable contributions to this ethnographic field. In Vanuatu, as in these two neighbouring states, the development of Islam has taken on indigenous forms. This is unlike other cases in Melanesia, namely Fiji, New Caledonia and West Papua, where the presence of Islam has been linked historically to the colonial context of foreign populations being displaced, deported or forced to migrate.<sup>5</sup> In all three countries, which have mostly been exposed to Christian churches since the mid-nineteenth century, the presence of Islam is also recent. Initial single and occasional conversions are not more than fifty years old, and only in recent years have they multiplied. Although data on the number of Muslims are incomplete, the growth of what is a minority religion in this region has been documented through the following statistics dating from the 2010s: between 4,500 and 5,000 followers in PNG (out of a population of more than 8,200,000), 2,000 in the Solomons (610,000 inhabitants) and 500 in Vanuatu (300,000 inhabitants).<sup>6</sup> This

<sup>3</sup> McDougall (2020:204). Should also be analyzed ‘within’ Christianity, in my view, Melanesian social groups that have invested in religious interpretations that touch on Biblical origins, or on links with Israel and Jewish identities. See the Special Issue of Oceania, ‘Descent from Israel and Jewish Identities in the Pacific, Past and Present’, Newland and Brown (2015).

<sup>4</sup> This term ‘kastom’ in Bislama, the lingua franca of Vanuatu, derives from the English term ‘custom’, while gaining a broader semantic scope. The symbolic efficacy of the word rest in its capacity to emphasize a political unity based on belonging to a shared cultural community rooted in a timeless past.

<sup>5</sup> See Ali (2004), Kohler (1982), Slama (2015).

<sup>6</sup> See the field data collected by Flower (2017:17–18).

growth has been more than obvious among Melanesians, since apart from a few Muslim expatriates, Islam was completely absent until the late 1970s in PNG and Vanuatu, and until the late 1980s in the Solomon Islands (Flower 2017, 17–20). However gradual its progress, Islam has therefore already gained a certain permanence in this region. In Vanuatu for instance, it already embraces three generations of believers who collectively proclaim themselves Muslims (or ‘man-muslim’ as they are locally called in the Bislama language) and who have forged numerous links with Islamic communities and organizations abroad.

This article presents some ethnographic material and anthropological insights on the development of Islam in Vanuatu, where it has been even less documented than elsewhere in Melanesia.<sup>7</sup> I will focus mostly on the main Muslim community in Vanuatu, spread in several villages around Tanna. This island in the southern part of the archipelago is also the home of the famous John Frum politico-religious movement, born at the end of the 1930s (Guiart 1956, Tabani 2008a), which for several decades challenged the missionary influence and the colonial order, and whose followers have been prophetically summoned to leave the church and return to *kastom* – ‘to go back long full darkness’, as former colonial administrative agents described it (Tabani 2018:118). As a result of the eventful history of the island’s Christianization, Tannese society proved prolific in religious reinterpretations and changes. On Tanna the John Frum movement led a collective reaction to the missions and the colonial authorities, giving its followers experience in adapting to Christianity. The movement therefore led to a complex rearrangement of local denominations. Already in the 1950s, according to Jean Guiart, distinctions could be made between (a) ‘ex-Christians’ who had returned to ‘strict paganism’ or adopted the John Frum movement’s ‘neo-pagan’ visions; (b) neo-Christians and ‘Presbyterians in principle who had reverted to customary rules’; (c) ‘dubious Christians’ and ‘indeterminate customary’ groups; (d) Presbyterians who had become Seventh-day Adventists before going over to John Frum or the Catholics; and (e) pagans who had left the John Frum movement because of its exuberant ‘neo-traditional’ practices.<sup>8</sup> Today, however, a majority of Ni-Vanuatu (indigenous inhabitants of Vanuatu) consider Tanna to be the island in the country where *kastom* is still the strongest.

In the uninterrupted religious quest that has been pursued by the Tannese since their first conversion to Christianity, and given the presence on their island of at least half of its fifty churches in the capital Port-Vila (Eriksen and Andrew 2010), the interest in Islam could appear as merely a curiosity, one among many frequently occurring religious changes. In the post-9/11 global context, however, followed in the Asia-Pacific area by the terror attack on Bali in October 2002, given the Islamic aspects of Indonesian colonial control over West Papua, the development of Islam is becoming a complex and conflictual issue in Vanuatu, a situation very similar to those observed by McDowell (2009) in the Solomons and Flower (2017) in PNG. The debate raised by the development of Islam in these three countries has already reached geopolitical dimensions in line with usual hostile discourses on Islam in the West. Nationally in

<sup>7</sup> On Tanna, where I have done most of my fieldwork over the last twenty-five years, I first discovered the presence of Muslims when I was visiting the village of Iwel in February 2008. Discussions and interviews that followed were supplemented by material collected from October to December 2017 during a survey of the presence of Islam in Port Vila and Mele on Efate Island and on Tanna.

<sup>8</sup> See Guiart’s ‘inventaire sociologique’ (1956:263–402; translations from the French M.T.).

Vanuatu, the growth of Islam also becomes an argument for fostering legal restrictions on religious freedom, including religious expressions of *kastom*.<sup>9</sup>

The aim of this article is to describe the conflicting ways in which people in Vanuatu decide which moral or political aspects are culturally compatible with Islam and which are not. McDougall and Flower have indeed pointed out that for Muslims the rupture with Christianity is merely ideological, with no major impact on the lifestyle of the faithful. According to McDougall, Muslims in the Solomons ‘approach their new faith through the lens of the faith they hope to leave behind’ (2009:483). Similarly, in PNG, new converts frequently find Islam much better able to ensure the permanence of traditions than Christianity (Flower 2015:59). However, whether asserted or contested, this continuity is no less problematic when the introduction of Islam proves conflictual, as is currently the case in this western part of Melanesia (PNG, Solomons, Vanuatu), where polemical discourses on the supposed rigidity of Islam towards Christianity or local cultures are multiplying. The danger of a gradual abandonment of Christianity, raised by Christian and political leaders, is placed on the same level as that of the Islamization of Melanesian cultures. Christians and Muslims accuse each other of wanting to impose their vision of *kastom* for political purposes.

This very tense debate on Islam in Vanuatu echoes sensitive questions in the national and local politics of identity. While incompatibility can be expressed as plain rejection, compatibility offers the capacity for complete adaptation and empathy. More than ever in this conflictual context, continuity and rupture prove to be adjustable notions. While Tannese Muslims assume the existence of total continuity between Islam and their cultural past – Islam, they claim, is just *kastom* – Christian and state leaders strive to give the general public and the international press the idea that Islam is compatible neither morally with Christian principles nor culturally with the preservation of *kastom*, while politically it is in serious opposition to the Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu. I will therefore interrogate and contextualize ideological discourses that depend on the argument of a radical cultural incompatibility of Islam with Christian ideals in Vanuatu. This will mean confronting actual interpretations of Islam, mostly those of Muslims on Tanna, with interpretations of *kastom* given by John Frum leaders of Christianity and their opportunistic interpretations of Islam at the present day.

### *Islam in Vanuatu and the first Muslims of Mele (Efate Island)*

For more than a decade, Henry Hussein Nabanga was the only indigenous Muslim in Vanuatu. His biography was mentioned for the first time in a short booklet on the birth of Islam in this archipelago (Ahmadu and Shuaibu 2004). In 1973, at the age of thirty, Nabanga responded to an advertisement for a Catholic religious training course in Bible translation in India. There he discovered Islam, to which he converted in 1978 on his return home. In Mele, a village in the Port Vila suburbs, his proselytism convinced a few members of his family group from Imere Tenuku, a small island opposite the present-day village, where his Polynesian ancestors had settled centuries before. Until his death in 1993, his preaching led to a hundred or so conversions. A prayer hall was opened in Mele in 1992 and, after some delays on the part of successive governments, in 1997 the Vanuatu Islamic Society (VIS) was registered with the Finance Services’ Commission as a charitable association. Mustapha Kalaos and Mohammed Seddiq

<sup>9</sup> Attacks on the non-Christian aspects of *kastom* should remind us of a recent scandal in PNG, when, in December 2013, the speaker in the House of Parliament ordered the removal of traditional artefacts, which Christian evangelical groups labelled ‘satanic’. See Schram (2014).

Sambo were its first general secretaries. Most of the Mele converts were former Presbyterians or members of the Neil Thomas Ministry, a Christian denomination developed from Methodism.

Kalaos stressed Nabanga's personal qualities and irreproachable morality to explain the success of his forerunner's teaching. According to Kalaos:

Islam became generally acceptable to [the people of the village community of] Mele due to the good humour and moral character of Hussein [Nabanga] and other local who supported him during the early days of Islam in Mele. One of the important things that convinced Mele to accept Islam was because they have come to realise Islam is a complete way of life, in this world and in the hereafter (Kalaos in Joy 2004:2).

The notion of a pious life that would make believers' access to paradise easier was neither new nor foreign. According to Kalaos, the fact that Islam recognizes the same God as does Christianity made Nabanga's preaching simpler to adopt. Muslims' respect for other religions and their closeness to Christians speak in favour of reunification around an original faith, 'The Islamic belief is that religion is one beginning with Adam' (Kalaos in Joy 2004:2). But above all, Islamic principles are said to correspond to Melanesian values: 'As a Muslim, I do not have any problem between my custom and culture and Islam. Many [aspects of my custom (*kastom*) and culture] are similar to the way of life in Islam' (Kalaos in Joy 2004:2). Moreover, these shared rules are quite common: 'respect, honesty, loyalty, responsibility, impartiality, justice, ways of eating and living within the community' (Kalaos in Joy 2004:2).

Nabanga's life and preaching are openly idealized by his surviving family. Their ties of kinship with the country's first convert enable them to justify their privileged role in the official representation of local Muslim communities. However, just as decisive as the role of Nabanga in introducing and spreading Islam to other islands was the commitment of Dr Mohammed Lawal Ahmadu. This Nigerian national lived in Port Vila from 1995 to 2007, where he had gone to pursue his law studies at the University of the South Pacific before teaching there as a lecturer in commercial law. After living and working in Fiji for two years, he discovered an embryonic Islam in Port Vila. Along with his proselytizing activities, he also sought study grants for the children of Muslims from Mele and those of new converts from various other islands in the archipelago. Ahmadu left the country in 2007, after an agreement was made with the University of Kuala Lumpur for it to accept students and another agreement was entered into with the Regional Islamic Da'wah Council.<sup>10</sup> In an interview, Mohammed Seddiq Sambo described Ahmadu's positive achievements as follows:

Right now, 28 Muslims from Vanuatu are studying in Islamic colleges overseas: in Fiji, Malaysia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan. Given that it is the smallest country in Melanesia, it is likely that at any one time hundreds of Pacific Muslims are studying overseas in madrasahs [Islamic higher education centres] throughout the Islamic world (quoted in Bohane 2007a).

Gradually official links with important international Islamic organizations were established, namely the World Association for Muslim Youth Australia & South Pacific, Muslim Aid Australia and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). As well as grants and study visits, the IDB financed the provision of land and buildings for the Port Vila Centre for Islamic Studies in Bladinière District. This Centre is also used as a

<sup>10</sup> The term 'da'wah' refers to encouraging the preaching of Islam.



prayer hall, and **its foreign sponsors pay** the salaries of the country's two imams.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there is a plan to build a great mosque in the Islamic architectural style.

Ahmadu's proselytism was accompanied by humanitarian actions in favour of Vanuatu's Muslims, thus strengthening the organization of this community by opening it up to the Islamic world abroad. He also managed to convince influential men, such as Chief Jimmy Noankan of Tanna, to stimulate a programme of conversion to Islam on his island:

On Tanna, Islam began in 1999. As a politician I was staying in Port Vila and while there I met a law lecturer from USP [University of the South Pacific] in the street, Mohamed [Ahmadu], an African. When he took me out for a meal, I noticed during our discussion how much he respected Vanuatu people's *kastom* and how similar *kastom* on Tanna is to that of the *muslim* religion. I then wanted to convert. This was done on 24 December when Mohamed was spending four days at my home in Tanna. He also told me he could help children of the poor in their schooling. He obtained grants. Thus I was able to send young people from my group to study in Malaysia, Fiji, Indonesia, Pakistan and Africa (Chief Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017).

According to figures given by Imams Abdul Karim (interview, Port Vila, October 2017) and Sheikh Mustapha (interview, Tanna, November 2017), there are no more than five hundred Muslims in Vanuatu, of which just over fifty are foreign residents. Port Vila and its suburbs are said to be home to a hundred and fifty converts from Efate, a hundred Ni-Vanuatu from other islands (half of which are from Tanna), about fifty Indo-Fijians, a few Solomon Islanders and other foreign residents. About 110 Muslims live on the island of Tanna, and a few dozen others, individuals or whole families or individuals, are scattered over the rest of the archipelago. These estimates vary depending on whom they include. They are in any case five times higher than those suggested by Franco Zocca for 2004 (2006:259). Conversions increased steeply after the very destructive cyclone Pam hit the islands in March 2015. On this occasion, the non-governmental organizations Muslim Aid Australia, the Fijian Muslim League and the Rasheed Memorial Dawah Trust (NZ) intervened in Vanuatu for the first time and prioritized Muslim families for food distribution. Several hundred Ni-Vanuatu then claimed to be members of Islam and took an Arab name, but failed to make their professions of faith concrete once the humanitarian aid dried up.

In 2016, Mohammed Seddiq Sambo was able to claim in the press that there were a thousand Ni-Vanuatu Muslims (Garae 2016a:1), a statement deliberately exaggerated in order to make an impression on people's minds. This symbolic statistic has therefore been taken over by the Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC) for its own **propaganda**. In the same article, Sambo suggested that the progress of Islam would make Muslims a political force, and he announced his intention to put forward a candidate from his community for the next parliamentary elections. The students regularly sent to be trained in Islamic countries were considered evidence of how the economic success of Ni-Vanuatu Muslims was benefiting everybody. On the other hand, Sambo claimed that he himself had not profited from any material gains (Garae 2016a:1). With this

<sup>11</sup> An imam is the head of an Islamic community. Abdul Karim and Sheikh Mustapha (thirty and forty years old in 2017), two of Jimmy Noankan's grandsons on the paternal side, were the first Ni-Vanuatu and Tannese men to be trained as imams at the end of their studies in Fijian *madrasahs* belonging to the Fijian Muslim League (Karim began his Islamic studies in 2000 in Lambasa, Mustapha in 2004 in Suva). Their training was in Urdu (**the official national language of Pakistan mutually intelligible with Hindi**) and both admit that their understanding of Quranic Arabic is very limited.

justification, he was replying not only to criticism from the VCC's side, but also to complaints made by Chief Noankan himself:

Islam first arrived in Mele, but it did not work. There were actions, financial aid from abroad, for projects, for helping the poor in Vanuatu financially, but it was the people of Mele who made use of this money. In Mele people pray above all in order to obtain things. When they obtain something, they keep it for themselves. Today they have become jealous of *man Tanna*. After converting, it was I who went to Vila, who took action in Mele, prayed and brought men together so they returned to Islam, who came to bring Allah's message to Tanna. Now, my island has a thousand *man muslim*. They have joined Allah and accepted the *kalima* [profession of faith] (Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017).

The Muslims who live in Port Vila attend Friday prayers in one of the two mosque halls found in Mele or Bladinière. The thirty square metre Mele hall is fairly basic, built out of breeze-blocks and corrugated iron, with two basins at the entrance for ablutions. Except during Islamic festivals or visits by representatives of foreign organizations, few believers go there for Friday prayers anymore, usually fewer than ten. Since 2016, the centre of activity has moved to Bladinière District, where the VIS has a large, well-equipped building two storeys high, with classrooms, offices, separate prayer halls for men and women, and an on-site house for the Imam Abdul Karim. The Friday prayers I attended were led by this Imam. There was no preaching or sermon with the prayers. The atmosphere was cosmopolitan. Half the men were foreigners: Indo-Fijian residents, a few Pakistanis working for the telephone company Digicel and some Solomon Island students from the USP campus. One half of the Ni-Vanuatu followers came from Efate and other islands, the other half from Tanna. There was only a handful of women present, non-Ni-Vanuatu for the most part.

This mass abandonment of the Mele mosque for the larger building at Bladinière is evidence of the numerical growth and increasingly diversified sociological profile of Port Vila's Muslims. In the suburbs, Muslims live in their own areas, on their own land, and belong to a middle class of small business-men, self-employed craftsmen, employees and civil servants. Well integrated in their social environment, their daily lives are dictated by an urban lifestyle that is far removed from *kastom*. As a result, they only attach secondary importance to the question of possible cultural incompatibilities with Islam. With few exceptions, Port Vila's Muslims do not attempt to differentiate themselves from other Ni-Vanuatu through dress codes or conspicuous signs of religious belonging. They live in a multi-religious social environment, where celebrations are shared, people marry partners from other denominations, some eat *halal* food (permitted food), others raise pigs and many go to the *nakamal* (public place or house for village meetings) in the evening to drink *kava*, the traditional and national sedative beverage.<sup>12</sup>

Many Tannese Muslims living on Efate Island in the suburbs of Port Vila are related to the family group of Chief Noankan or to his relatives by marriage. Living in the town's deprived suburbs, theirs is a more precarious situation. They are bus drivers, night watchmen or labourers, but they form a united, structured group. Sometimes one

<sup>12</sup> Most of the Muslims to whom I talked openly consumed *kava*, while Seventh-day Adventists usually do so covertly. Some justified this by pointing out that the preparation of *kava* does not entail fermentation, so that its consumption is allowed by Islam. Sheikh Mustapha suggested an alternative explanation to me: Vanuatu is so small on a global scale that Allah had forgotten to concern himself with the use of this plant. As it is not mentioned in the sacred scriptures, it need not be prohibited (interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017).



bumps into men, often from Tanna, ostentatiously displaying a *kufi* ('Muslim' hat), a flowing beard and close-cropped hair, and occasionally wearing a *djellaba* (traditional outer robe worn in Arabic countries) and hailing one another using Arabic names or forms of greeting. However, they do not attend the mosque or pray. Another Tannese Imam, Sheikh Mustapha, said: 'They simply call themselves Muslims, although they drink, go to nightclubs, and eat pork. When they come to Tanna, I remind them that their ways are not in keeping with the law of Islam' (interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017). Whereas most people in Vanuatu are habitually scared of 'terrorist Muslims', some young men adopt the appropriate look out of a sense of rebellion. Formerly, such provocative young men were nicknamed 'Rambos'; today they are mocked as 'Bin Ladens'.<sup>13</sup>

### *The rise of an anti-Islam discourse in Vanuatu*

In the late 1990s, the term 'arch of instability' came into vogue among Australian politicians and journalists to describe Melanesian countries as a geopolitical concern. Before the Islamist terror attacks in the United States in 2001 and in Bali a year later, Islam was not yet one of the alleged factors of destabilization. Thereafter newspapers in Vanuatu started to pay attention to local Muslims, soon to be followed by the international media. In an interview with the *Vanuatu Daily Post* (Joy 2004), the words of the former general secretary of the VIS, Mustapha Kaloas, were meant to be reassuring, and his concern was to prevent the media from giving his religion a distorted image. He remained vague about the number of converts, preferring to stress themes like Islam's compatibility with his culture, its capacity to support young people's development and education, and its ability to contribute to the harmony and well-being of communities through the promotion of respect and tolerance (Kaloas in Joy 2004). When Kaloas thanked the journalist, it sounded as if he considered his communications a success: 'I am happy that through this interview your paper has taken a positive attitude towards finding out about our beautiful and practical religion' (Kaloas in Joy 2004:2). Unfortunately, the article was translated and reproduced the following year on a website run by Chechen jihadists (Islamic crusaders), which, once discovered, did not fail to suggest direct links between the VIS and Islamic extremist organizations (Flower 2009:187).

During the 1990s, with the exception of members of the more educated urban classes, the rest of the population, knew virtually nothing about the world's religions. People in rural places like Tanna often expressed curiosity regarding African magical practices, Hindu worship of a 'bullock' and the 'lack of religion' attributed to the Chinese, apart from their supposed veneration of money. References to converts to Islam in Vanuatu, called 'man muslim' in Bislama came later. Commonly seen, among non-Muslims, as a 'new religion' ('wan niu relijin'),<sup>14</sup> Islam is often described as 'the

<sup>13</sup> Debra McDougall (2009:486) has reported the same provocative adoption of Islamic-style dress among urban youth in Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, where, as in Vanuatu, 'rebellious styles' also include the figure of 'the rasta'.

<sup>14</sup> The word 'relijin' in Bislama is a recent Anglicism, absent, for example, from Terry Crowley's dictionary (1995). In the colonial era, Christians were those who had abandoned *kastom* for the Church (Bislama: 'skul' and also 'jos' nowadays). Depending on whether one belonged to a reformed or a Catholic Church, religious teaching was done in English or French. Church and school were synonymous. Since independence, the meaning and use of *kastom* has largely been secularized. The accepted way of expressing belonging to a non-Christian group is: 'mi stap long kastom nomo' ('I only follow custom'). Such groups are listed in the official designations of the

last Church' ('wan las jos') to have appeared in the country. Thanks to a rising level of education, relations based on direct contact with converts or information conveyed by the media, the once-general ignorance about Islam is gradually disappearing behind an abundance of questions concerning the position to be adopted regarding its practice, which is usually treated with mistrust. Islam is now regarded by many Vanuatu citizens as globally incompatible with either Melanesian values or Christianity. The importance of pigs in social exchanges, the consumption of *kava*, various other daily practices (clothing, eating), *kastom* rites and ceremonies, and political institutions such as *kastom* chiefs – non-Muslims regard all these cultural items and identity markers as culturally too different to be continued by converts to Islam.

Frequent claims of a distrust of Islam also find a place in “Yumi toktok stret”, the most frequently consulted Facebook discussion forum in the country. Almost every mention of Islam gives rise to a surge of negative, contemptuous, even threatening comments often related to the oppression of the ‘Melanesian brothers’ of Western Papua by ‘Indonesian Muslims’. Assimilating the colonial occupation of Western Papua to a war of religion is a common reflex in public opinion. Frequent marks of hostility also stress the foreignness of Islam and, by extension, of its followers. The first Ni-Vanuatu woman to wear a veil in public told how she felt she was being categorized as a foreigner:

The first time I came here [to Port Vila in 2004] some others saw me and maybe asked, ‘Where are you from?’ Because they see I choose to dress like this [veiled]. Maybe some are angry or some are – I don’t know [...] When I came back to Vanuatu [after a long stay in Malaysia] I was scared. I was shy, so when I came back some people saw me and they saw that I was a Muslim woman, but they didn’t call me a Muslim woman, they called me an Arab woman (quoted in Corcoran 2005).

Strict identification or total separation between religion – imported in the case of Islam – and ancestral cultural traditions permits measuring the extent to which collective conceptions of the idea of conversion differ from the individual path of believers in so-called Western countries, where the main need is to distinguish between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’.<sup>15</sup> An important activist in the public campaign to incite people to reject Islam and its foreign traditions ‘imported from Arabia’ was the late Presbyterian pastor Alan Nafuki, President of the VCC from 2016 to his death in June 2021. In an interview I conducted with him in December 2017 in Port Vila, he stressed his tolerance for ‘the various very small faiths’ (Bislama: ‘ol smol smol fet’), notably the Bahá’í faith, Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses and other non-Christian ‘churches’ (a term used by Nafuki to refer to any religious institution). However, with regard to Islam, he pleaded for new rules:

As far as Islam is concerned, it is a totally different faith, which belongs only to Muslims. To spread it, they use flowers, but these flowers conceal a sharp knife. In Iran, for example, once the Bible had been translated into the [Arabic] language of Islam, many Muslims converted to Christianity, for they were then able to verify how false the discourses of Islam were. Because of this, they were repressed. That is why we do not want Islam in Vanuatu. Islam is not like the Bahá’í faith – it is a great and powerful religion. The people who had joined Islam came to see me to tell me it was a good

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census as following ‘customary beliefs’ and are said to comprise three percent of the population (Vanuatu National Statistic Office 2009).

<sup>15</sup> On this issue, see the introduction to the collection “Conversions à l’islam, culture et religion: tensions et articulations” (Galonnier *et al.* 2019).

religion and that they would help to promote the VCC. But that is only one of the faces of Islam – another is the desire to seize power. Since freedom of belief is written into our Constitution, we and the Members of Parliament decided that it needed to be revised by adding to the conditions for the acceptance of new religions the obligation for them to speak the truth and show respect. If, for example, someone wants to convert to Islam, they must inform the members of their community and their chief. The chief will then be able to see that this person in fact wants to establish a new Church, and he must ask himself: is this a Church which wants to unite or divide? We will then support the chief's opinion if he notices a lack of respect. Muslims asked us if they could build a mosque at Teouma. We informed the authorities so that they could refuse pending the proclamation of a law on 'respect' [a law proposed to forbid new denominations to propagate their faith in rural areas without an agreement from *kastom* or Christian local authorities]. On Tanna, the provincial authorities were unable to prevent one being built in a village because it has many Muslim inhabitants. Besides, it is because there are people on Tanna who live entirely according to *kastom* or belong to movements like John Frum that we cannot simply change the Constitution as was done in PNG. New religions such as Islam can apply to become established, and it is up to the VCC under government orders to give them a reply. Religious freedom is no longer what it was. There is now a condition: respect.<sup>16</sup>

In October 2016, Nafuki was also a main promoter of the first demonstration to be organized in the streets of Port Vila to reassert the country's Christian foundations while denouncing the progress of Islam (Garae 2016b:1). In July 2017, the Presbyterian Revd Tallis Obed Moses, recently elected President of the Republic, announced he was in favour of a revision of the Constitution to restrict freedom of worship for non-Christian religions, and he claimed that 'we have only one religion in Vanuatu and that is Christianity' (Garae 2017a:1). For several years already, the media in Vanuatu have targeted public opinion with the rhetorical image of a threatening Islam. In 2015, the Vanuatu Daily Post reported that the website of Island Life Magazine had been hacked into in order to show images and slogans in favour of Islamic State (McGarry 2015:1). In an interview, Sambo had to justify himself regarding the VCC's accusations according to which 'Islam is training young people [of Vanuatu] to become terrorists' (Garae 2016a:1). An illustration entitled "Muslim women and custom" published in a sensationalist photomontage in the Vanuatu Daily Post (Sokhin 2016:1–3), showed Tannese women dressed in traditional bark skirts, but veiled, performing a customary dance after prayers at the mosque. The following year the media reported on parliamentary debates concerning a decree on counterterrorism and against transnational organized crime. The name of Jeff Patunvanu, a businessman from the island of Malekula and spokesman for the political party of the Nagriamel *kastom* movement,<sup>17</sup> was mentioned as a reminder that he had been the first Pacific islander to send a message of condolence to Al Jazeera after the deaths of Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden (Joshua 2017). Continuing in the same vein, The Vanuatu Independent (29<sup>th</sup> June 2017) reproduced from "Russia Today" an article entitled "'Wake-up call': US Admiral warns of ISIS danger in Pacific", based on arguments of the Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., in charge of the US Pacific Command.

<sup>16</sup> Lamont Lindstrom has commented on the importance of the discourse on 'respect' (Bislama: 'respek') in public space in Vanuatu. This is intended to affirm the importance of good behaviour in social relations and obedience to prevailing hierarchies (2017:25).

<sup>17</sup> This is a traditional political movement born at the end of the 1960s in Santo Island (Vanuatu). Led by Jimmy Stevens, it engaged into a rebellion during the troubled days leading up to independence in Vanuatu (Tabani 2008b).

*Islam in Tanna and the New World Order*

In Vanuatu today, the Muslims of Tanna outnumber their precursors in Mele. On their home island, they are mostly concentrated around Iwel ceremonial ground, in the middle-bush region, where they have a permanent house they use as a mosque. The Friday prayer led by Imam Mustapha usually attracts a hundred followers, with a majority of women and children among them. Those from other districts who do not attend this weekly meeting regularly, as they cannot walk there or pay for a bush taxi, are nonetheless considered members of the community. However, it is Chief Jimmy Noankan who has played the most prominent role in the development of Islam in Tanna. His personal progression to become the patriarch of Tanna's Islamic community is partly based on his traditional status as a spokesman (*iani niko*) for a group of families linked to the Iwel ceremonial meeting place (*nakamal*). This title allows him to be an influential leader of the Nalhyaone 'canoe' (*niko*), one of the social groups that constitute Tannese society. Sometimes inappropriately translated as 'tribe', the term 'niko' refers to a fleet of mythical canoes in which the places occupied by particular crews, supposedly since time immemorial, have determined the social attributions and hierarchical positions of their descendants. The memory of the political influence of Noankan's *niko* in the pre-colonial era has lived on in numerous accounts (cf. Bonnemaïson 1996). Their colonial history was marked by their early abandonment of the Presbyterian mission and their return to *kastom*. Although they became involved with the John Frum movement, they gradually distanced themselves from its inventiveness in matters of *kastom*. The Iwel traditionalists preferred to join the Kapiel movement, named with reference to the magic stones at the base of Tannese cosmology, and stricter in its representations of *kastom*.

Noankan contributed to complex strategies made up of local political, land-related and religious issues, and employed by the Nalhyaone so as to maintain their influence. While still in his thirties, he gave up his father's traditional position to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church, along with members of his group of residence. At the same time, he became involved in the independence struggle alongside the nationalist political party, the Vanuaaku Pati (VP) of which he became a local official. In the late 1970s, Tanna, like the archipelago's main islands, experienced rising tensions between one half of the population in line with the position of France in favour of postponing full sovereignty, which France considered premature and the other half supporting Britain's preference for a swift transition towards independence. Noankan then left the VP to join the opposite political camp of the pro-French groups and parties (locally made up of John Frum, Catholic and customary groups), in which he could better express his traditionalist convictions (Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017).

During the 1990s, he distanced himself from the Adventist Church and joined a confederation of traditionalist groups called the Twelve Nakamal (Tabani 2019:85–91). This name refers to the twelve great ceremonial dancing grounds where the great Nekowiari ceremonies are prepared and take place. This ritual cycle is famed for its beautiful dances, lavish exchanges and the sacrificial killing of large numbers of pigs. Noankan became an influential member of the Twelve Nakamal, which advocated a total return to *kastom*, full sovereignty for Tanna and a political alliance with France. During this period, however, an atmosphere replete with strong millenarian hopes developed on the island. New churches tried to outdo each other in prophecies announcing the end of the world in the year 2000. Noankan's commitment to a return to full *kastom* was not in tune with other rumours then circulating of John Frum's

imminent second coming. Islam appeared to him to offer better eschatological perspectives. However, he could not foresee that a global event as chaotic as the 9/11 attacks were to turn the media spotlight onto his new religion.

Noankan's proselytism was temporarily hampered by powerful millenarian revivalism within the John Frum Movement. In 2000, internal divisions had led the movement to split into two conflicting groups. One had formed under the leadership of Chief Isak Wan (the main John Frum leader), the other under that of Fred Nasse, a commoner, whose eschatological visions attracted a large number of followers who called him a 'prophet'. The rivalry between these two factions first took on a theological form concerning how to interpret signs of the end of time, the Christ-like identity of John Frum and the imminence of his second coming. A new phase of dissension, characterized by geo-politico-mythical standpoints caused the movement to split irremediably. The American Army's interventions in Afghanistan and then in Iraq led Prophet Fred and his followers to call into question the historico-mythical relations between the John Frum movement and the United States. Fred thus declared himself in favour of rejecting the pro-American symbolism perpetuated by Chief Isak Wan's faction of the movement. Fred accordingly tried to dissuade his followers from holding American flag-hoisting ceremonies or the annual parade of the Tanna Army on February 15th, considered an island branch of the US Army (Tabani 2016).

However, Chief Isak's faction also reacted to local discourses about Islam to counter the possibility that the sudden appearance of anti-American feeling among the population might give credence to Prophet Fred's rival faction. Pro-Bin Laden slogans were painted on the corrugated iron walls of a few houses. In 2002, guitar bands associated with Chief Isak's group composed new songs about Bin Laden and Mullah Omar's exploits in escaping from the American army on a motorcycle through the streets of Kandahar. Faced with anti-American sentiment on Tanna, Chief Isak responded as a theologian. In several interviews he granted me in 2002 and 2004 in his village of Lamakara, he explained his view of America's war expeditions and their symbolic implications for his movement. His exegesis of global events painted Islam as a respectful *kastom* religion of the *man muslim*. The story of a link between John Frum and Bin Laden caused quite a stir and was heard as far away as Port Vila. According to Chief Isak, contrary to what Prophet Fred's movement denounced, America could not be bad because of the alliance John Frum had sealed with this great power, which had supported the people of Tanna historically in their desire to maintain their *kastom*. The reason America was now attacking the *man muslim* – who, just like the *man Tanna*, were only protecting their *kastom* – was to be sought elsewhere. The government of the United States alone was responsible. George Bush, its leader, was a good man, but his spirit had been possessed by Nakua (Satan). Despite appearances, however, John Frum was still more powerful than Satan, his eternal enemy. To get rid of the latter, John had invested a holy man, Osama Bin Laden, with some of his powers. Without the help of Tanna's magic stones, one man alone would not have been able to strike at America and then disappear with impunity and hide from the American Army. Once George Bush was freed from the hold of Nakua, America would understand that Bin Laden too was a valiant defender of *kastom* (Chief Isak Wan, personal communication).

### *Islam as Tannese kastom*

No sooner had Islam been discovered than it became the subject of interpretative conflicts in Tanna. Noankan needed to assert his viewpoint and legitimacy. As his

community's patriarch, he slowly managed to impose himself as the exclusive expert concerning discourses on Islam. He denounced the John Frum group's speculations as being just as fantastic as the way in which the latter envisaged *kastom*. However, at the same time, he had to treat these allies in defending *kastom* with tact. There was also the fact that Islam was continuing to attract ex-John Frum members (who since the 1980s have also provided a large part of the island's Bahá'í community).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he had no hesitation in adding a symbolic title to his name as did the John Frum leaders: 'Kapten' [captain] Naïm Noankan. His perseverance enabled him to get non-Muslim Tannese to recognize that on their island it was he alone and his group who had the monopoly in forming alliances with Muslim countries.

His strategy paid off: for twenty years, Tanna's Muslim community has continued to grow. The Muslims of Tanna received many practical benefits from their conversions. They are regular beneficiaries of study trips and grants, financed development projects (a school under construction in Iwel and a second one planned for Lamnatu) and the presence of expatriate volunteers. In 2015, Revd Tom Richards from the Presbyterian Church of Australia witnessed massive humanitarian aid being provided by Islamic NGOs (from Fiji, Australia, Indonesia and Turkey) on Tanna after the devastation caused by Cyclone Pam. Being provided for the benefit of local Muslims, it caused the number of converts to triple temporarily.

[People] were asked to sign [a] form that they have converted to Islam] in order to receive the rice, but to the Tanna mind which tends to view religion as a road to receive material goods and relationships as foundational to receiving, signing came with the implication of a promise. The number of people attending Muslim prayers, most of whom came from the Seventh Day Adventists, has declined since they stopped handing out rice. But some are continuing as Muslims and others won't ever return to their previous churches (Richards 2015).

The criticism most often directed at Muslims (and at Mormons) on Tanna is not simply their choosing a denomination out of their personal interests, an attitude which is all too common throughout Vanuatu. The main reproach stems from a feeling of covetousness with regard to their all too conspicuous success. Father Nathanaël, who has been in charge of Loanatom Catholic parish for years, remembers being unfailingly surprised when he came to pick up goods delivered by the cargo boats. The small group of Muslims invariably received much larger deliveries than those intended for the many Catholics of the mission (Fr Nathanaël, interview, Port-Vila, October 2017). An elected representative of the Provincial Government of Tanna, which is administratively responsible for local religious affairs, told me how disillusioned he felt concerning the expectations and covetousness of the members of new Churches or religions:

Christianity has been established for a long time, all over Vanuatu. The Church has taught it to everyone. Today, on Tanna, people are turning to new Churches solely out of material interest. If a Church has money, they will follow it. In order to gain members, they now have to construct buildings, buy a car, help people out, and the white people

<sup>18</sup> The introduction of the Bahá'í faith, two or three times as large as Islam, on Tanna followed a path comparable to that of Islam on the island. According to Graeme Hassal, 'Bahá'í beliefs were not necessarily antagonistic to custom, and some of the largest concentrations of Bahá'ís have emerged on islands such as Tanna in Vanuatu and Malaita in the Solomon Islands, where custom has remained particularly strong. This is not to say, on the other hand, that customary laws were in complete accord with Bahá'í laws, and some accommodations of the former to the latter have had to be made in the application of Bahá'í laws in the Pacific context' (Hassal 2005:282).



who run them are well aware of this. The problem is worse on Tanna because its inhabitants have always been materialistic and individualistic, even before white people arrived.<sup>19</sup>

Tanna's Muslims explain their economic prosperity with reference to the particularities of their new religion. Its originality is said to lie in the equality that exists between all its followers. Unlike the divisions and competitiveness that troubles Christian congregations, Islam is said to involve fraternal generosity, in which there is no hierarchical consideration or will to dominate: 'When our Muslim brothers from abroad come to visit us, they share our meals and eat with their fingers; they thus show us that we are equal; no one claims to be more important or calls himself a minister or pastor' (Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, February 2008). These moral considerations are not without certain political and ideological implications: for Noankan, the universal morality promoted by Islam clearly distinguishes it from the ambition displayed by America and its supporters in the Anglo-Saxon world, namely to 'grab the resources of black peoples' (Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, February 2008).

Noankan regards Islam as more compatible with the values attributed to France, which has the reputation of having protected Tannese *kastom* in the past and is therefore considered more likely to provide development aid in a way that shows respect for local traditions. This is evidenced for most Tannese by the fact that France counts respected black people and Muslims among its citizens, who are said to have the same rights and benefits as other French people. America, in contrast, is thought to discriminate habitually against such minorities. *Kastom* movement's members say that the ties between France and Tanna are older than those which John Frum established with America at a time when this powerful country still protected the freedom of peoples in Tanna to retain their own *kastom*. The relationship with France goes beyond the framework of an opportune alliance. According to Noankan, France and Tanna share common ancestors. Moreover, Tanna is the island of origin of the French, who left it in ancient times:

France is in the forefront with America. My ancestors call our link with America 'nuk nanimien', referring to a tree as slippery as soap. If there are no other feasible routes left for America, we must trust in France to bring Tanna back on to the right path. France is the true doorway. Moreover, we also know that soon there will be a black president in the United States, and our chiefs see that as a sign that black people should seize power. When white men are in command, they ruin everything, cause lots of problems in the world. Their law is not in harmony with *kastom*. They decide that there should be a vote for the return of our *kastom*, which in fact has lost its powers. It is still present in our hearts, although it has disappeared in practice. In the world, all Muslims, all black people want to keep *kastom*, but America, also called the US, sends its planes to the east, to the other end of the world to fight, to seize the resources of black people, the resources God has given to black people so they can live. It is only white people who always claim they are the kings, that they are going to be the masters and threaten to humble us. The history

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<sup>19</sup> Anonymous informant, interview, Lenakel, Tanna, December 2017. This point of view is partially shared by Revd Richards: 'Material giving is not a new missionary strategy on Tanna. Mormons have a standing offer to pay the school fees of children whose parents sign to say that they will attend their church. Nor is it confined to non-Christian groups. It is not uncommon for our mission fields to join a different denomination because they perceive it to be a better deal. One of our former mission fields is now split between Mormons who pay school fees, Apostolic who provided water supply, Upper Room [a denomination which has its roots in The United Methodist Church] who gave water tanks, and now Islam. That's a lot of slices in a small community pie' (Richards 2015).

of the Muslims means that there is going to be a change. If you go somewhere and beat someone until they bleed, you can no longer return to their home (Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, February 2008).

America is said to be causing the same wrongs to Muslims today that the Presbyterians have inflicted on the *kastom* of the Tannese in the past. This encourages Noankan to make a lot of anti-Presbyterian remarks in order to show that he has no fear of them:

In the era of Tanna Law [during the political reign of the Presbyterian Church on Tanna], the Presbyterians had already tried to kill *kastom*. In these times, they used acid to contaminate the springs of men belonging to *kastom* groups. When they drank, there was blood in their faeces, and their teeth fell out. Fortunately, France came to save us, and now we are faithful to France and not to Australia which supports the Presbyterians, particularly Revd Alan Nafuki, the President of the VCC, who is the worst of them all. He was given money by the government and [was] commissioned to dismantle *kastom* and John Frum beliefs. Whenever he gets the chance, his obsession is to accuse us of being terrorists. The Presbyterians' real problem is that their Church is disappearing, everyone is leaving it (Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, February 2008).

Although Muslims enjoy relative economic prosperity and therefore exert political influence, the strictly religious and theological reasons for becoming a member of Islam are seldom spontaneously stressed. In the opinion of Tanna's Muslims, Islam, like *kastom*, is a unifying force; it rejects divisions and does not oppose Christianity, whereas for Muslim Tannese Christians oppose Islam. According to Tanna's Muslims, Islam is true, since the Quran literally re-transcribes the divine word, while the Christian Churches are constantly rewriting the Bible to suit their own purposes:

I chose Islam because it offered me a good relationship with God and respects *kastom*. I think that only Muslims can hope to go to Paradise, as they break no laws and follow all the laws mentioned by the Quran and the Bible. In the past, I was SDA, a religion which follows the (divine) law a bit. But today it wants to change the law. I've been able to see that the King James version of the Bible contains many errors. Because in fact, every year, they rewrite the Bible, while the Quran does not change. God said, 'My words must not change'. That's why I left the SDAs (Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017).

However, all the local Muslims with whom I was able to talk admitted, to some degree, that it is at times difficult to strictly follow Islamic prescriptions. It is indeed difficult for a *man Tanna* not to eat pork, to refrain from drinking kava, to force women to dress with the full-face veils they have seen Saudi Arabian women guests wearing, and to stop using agricultural magic. The lack of training and the inability to read the Quran are also mentioned as hindering the more orthodox practice of Islam. However, the priority for many Tannese Muslims is to focus on the prohibition of new offences and to stop immoral practices imported from overseas such as the consumption of drugs and alcohol, criminality and prostitution. According to Sheikh Mustapha:

On Tanna today there is a lot of marijuana, there are many criminals, the young want to reproduce what they see in films or on the internet. Thanks to the numerous community projects Islam makes it possible to develop, it is an efficient means of countering these bad outside influences (Sheikh Mustapha, interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017).

The Muslims of Tanna mainly give cultural reasons to justify the choices they make regarding religious conversion. According to Imam Abdul Karim, based in Port Vila, ‘many Ni-Vanuatu have adopted foreign ways, they have absorbed a lot of things from different cultures, with the result that today it is very difficult to maintain what existed before. The priority is to protect *kastom*’ (Imam Abdul Karim, interview). The force of Islam lies in its supposedly perfect compatibility with *kastom*, as both **faiths** are regarded as expressions of traditional religions, but even more importantly because these traditions are considered surprisingly similar. Just like Muslims, said Noankan, the people of Tanna practise animal sacrifices, circumcision, polygamy and the segregation of the sexes in several contexts, particularly ritual ones. Islam, like *kastom*, values decency and modesty, especially for women, and encourages men to wear the beard. This may seem something of an exaggeration, but through a combination of stressing all these similarities and totally suppressing possible divergences, the premise of an identity is derived from these perceived analogies. It was this vision of the religious and cultural unity of *kastom* and Islam that convinced Noankan to convert:

Mohamed [Ahmadu] talked to Tom, one of my sons, about Islam. He explained to him how to pray, how to ring the bell – or do *adhan* [the prayer call] – so that everyone can hear the call to prayer, and how to dress, eat and behave with others. When Tom came here, he asked me what I thought about this religion. I then invited two of my fathers to decide on the reply that we should give him. One of them, who was a chief, concluded that this religion was identical to our own *kastom*. So I went to Port Vila to find Mohamed [...]. When later he came to visit us here, I was very attentive to the way in which he prayed, quietly, without drinking wine and without using audiocassettes, and I was thus able to verify that his ways were in perfect accordance with the *kastom* of Tanna. So I agreed to become a Muslim (Noankan, interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017).

Based on the recognition of a remarkable similarity between these religious traditions and of their sharing a common spirit, the idea spread among the Muslims of Tanna that the source of Islam was to be found in Melanesia and, more specifically, on their own island. Islam was thought of as having always been part of *kastom*.

The manners of Tannese people, their ways of behaving, of acting, are totally in line with the path of Islam. This means that Islam is not a new religion but, on the contrary, the first religion in the history of humanity. If we look at things correctly, it can be seen that we on Tanna, in Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands or PNG, we were already Muslims, and that it was only later that the Arabs were influenced by our *kastom* (Abdul Karim, interview, Port-Vila, December 2017).

With reference to PNG, Flower suggests that this assimilation of *kastom* to Islam stems from a proselytizing zeal in the use of the ‘reversion’ concept which is part of Islamic theology:

The concept of reversion is likely to be prevalent among PNG converts because prior to, or upon, converting Islamic missionaries tell them about the term *fitra*, ‘reversion/reverted’ and the similarities between Islamic customs and their traditional ways (Flower 2017:50).

The view of Islam as not just a traditional religion (*kastom relijin*) but an authentic offshoot of an original *kastom* is not the first attempt by Tannese people to revert to a former social and cultural order, thereby reconstructing continuity in reaction to the

excess of Westernization, and thus restring *kastom*. The millenarian aspects of the John Frum movement have also focused on a reversion to *kastom*. Present at the beginning of time, the reign of *kastom* will also come back at the end of time. Through their modern religious history, one could say, the Tannese have become specialists in both cultural reversion and the eschatological creation of continuity.

### *Tannese cosmological centrism*

The idea of the primordial nature of monotheism or of a primitive moral revelation is not a novelty that is specific to Islam. The interpretation that places Tanna at the beginning of the world and attributes an anteriority to *kastom* over any other form of spiritual revelation seems characteristic of Tannese experience and representations concerning history as cultural change. As elsewhere in Melanesia or Vanuatu, some people on Tanna claim to be Hebrews, descendants of the lost tribe of Israel, an origin about which nineteenth-century missionaries had already speculated (Newland and Brown 2015:251). However, in the present case, it is the Hebrews who are seen as the descendants of the people of Tanna and not the opposite. John Frum mythology transposed the Biblical stories and their temporality to the local environment. According to McDougall's informants, the Muslims of Malaita in the Solomon Islands go even further in this equation between Islam and *kastom* by identifying their own ancestors with 'Arabs':

After migrating to the islands, these ancestors [the people of Malaita] became confused and began to worship their own dead instead of God. Christian evangelization [...] was a good thing, insofar as it enabled them to return to monotheism and worship of the one true God. In the process, however, it destroyed the ancestral taboos that were the remnants of Islamic [primordial] law (McDougall 2009:487).

Many Tannese, whether Christian or not, share an exegesis of Adam and Eve according to which they came from Tanna and lived on today's ash plain at the foot of the Yasur volcano, identified with the Garden of Eden. Mount Tukosmera, the highest point on the island, is also the point of departure of Noah's Ark. This ancestor took with him all the big animals that once inhabited the island and scattered them over the other continents. The tools used to build the ark were abandoned in the hills behind the volcano, near Embuitoka dance ground, where John Frum followers can still see these petrified relics. For having disobeyed Moses, the people of Tanna were dispossessed of their powers which today belong to the white people. Jesus gave them kava to console them (Sheikh Mustapha, interview, Iwel, Tanna, November 2017).

While John Frum is reminiscent of the character of John the Baptist, he is also connected to Abraham through two of his three children's names, Isaac and Jacob (the third name, Lastwan, is more Tannese). The name of the Chief, 'Isak Wan', is a reference to this. Other communities likewise claim a direct link to the Biblical world: the Bahá'í, like other Tannese people, have been seen as Hebrews, but as Hebrews who left Christianity in order to abide strictly by the Old Testament. Because of this they are called 'Jews' ('man jiu') or 'people of Abraham' ('man Abraham'). More recently, in 2000, the followers of Fred the prophet led almost a quarter of the population high up Yenkahi, behind the volcano, in order to rebuild Noah's Ark, rechristened 'Canoe of the year 2000' in anticipation of a new flood. They named their headquarters 'New Jerusalem' and the river at the foot of the volcano the 'Jordan' (cf. Tabani 2008a).

These constructions, in which Tannese *kastom* is situated in a mythological anteriority with regard to any other cultural or religious tradition, could be described as cosmogonically centrist. This radical indigenization of outside influences, in the form of an appropriation of the ancestral, may have pre-existed the missionaries' arrival, but with Christianity, this tendency towards an appropriation of outside cosmogonies was completed by a millenarian or eschatological ethnocentrism. The return of John Frum, at the end of time, will take place on the same island Noah left when the flood took place. In their way, the Muslims of Tanna hope that, in the future, Islam will lead them back to a spiritual state and social condition which, at the beginning of time, characterized the 'paradise of *kastom*'. This restoration of the ancestral rules will return the powers stemming from them to the Melanesian descendants of their legitimate owners. Thus on Tanna Islam rejects none of the cultural legacies or religious beliefs which preceded it. *Kastom*, Christianity and John Frum are different sources of strategic knowledge about the local political scene. It is Islam that is now awaited as a powerful means to transcend oppositions and contradictions between past, present and future *kastom*. As an old Tannese friend once told me: 'Tanna is small, small like the head of a matchstick, but Tanna has power, under the ground or on the ground, all over the world' (Taniel Sarawe, [interview](#), Port-Resolution, Tanna, February 2002).

### *Conclusion*

I have argued that religious principles and cultural elements, which have been imported or at least conditioned by outside influences, found themselves systematically opposed to each other in order to justify or contest their respective legitimacies. On this point, the propagation of indigenous movements or cargo cults, the ideological and political use of *kastom*, and membership of Islam have been subject to the same degree of hostility from the country's authorities both before and after independence. This has often taken the form of a systematic rejection motivated by the external origins of the contested religious influences.

Thus, for the colonial authorities as well as the missionaries, cargo cults appeared utterly alien to evangelization. The John Frum Movement, among others, was in their eyes a kind of attempt to re-establish paganism. Despite its many Biblical references, its members advocated a return to full *kastom*. In these circumstances, no compatibility between this movement and Christian principles seemed conceivable. A few decades later, Walter Lini, the father of independence and the first prime minister of Vanuatu, stated the first government's official position with regard to dissident politico-religious movements. John Frum, a 'true cargo cult' (Lini 1980:48), was said to express the spiritual distress of groups with 'problems in adapting to Western influences' (Lini 1980:46). But the political use they made of *kastom* was not Melanesian either; Lini even accused them of taking part in 'terrorist activities' (1980:53).

The ideological interpretations and political positions assumed by Tannese Muslims are denounced just as strongly as counter-colonial discourses about John Frum and *kastom* fostered by local social movements. For some Church and state leaders engaged in public campaigns against Islam in the archipelago, this religion has no affinity with *kastom* due to its radical cultural alterity. Nor does any continuity seem to be acknowledged with Christianity, since Islam is seen as a political movement cloaked in the finery of a religion which would have no hesitation in using violence to fuel its desire for power. Its alien nature is seen as preventing any possibility of adaptation; its dissemination would only lead to an irreparable rupture with a national identity based

on officially recognized cultural legacies. However, this argument is somewhat surprising when one considers that, in order to establish itself as the official religion and dominant spiritual reference, Christianity initiated the most massive challenge ever expressed to the ritual beliefs and forms of organization that had preceded it.

However, as soon as the first indigenous protest movements appeared in Melanesia, anthropologists emerged to advise the colonial authorities not to embark on repression. This was the case with the ‘Vailala Madness’, a millenarian movement which appeared in the Gulf of Papua in the late 1910s. While the colonial authorities saw it as a form of religious deviance, and even as a collective pathology, Robert Marett (1928:xi) warned that it was a structured ‘religious movement’ and that, due to ‘the unfortunate precedent of Pontius Pilate’, the repercussions of its repression could result in it acquiring a political dimension. In his turn, Walter Strong (1923:ix) suggested a comparison with the ‘great theological revelations’ of the past, claiming that the Vailala Madness resembled the ‘beginnings of a creed and a ritual’ similar to ‘Muhammadism, which, in its early days, began in this type of psychological atmosphere’ (1923:ix).

These ‘religious movements for the freedom and salvation of oppressed peoples’ (Lanternari 1962) shared a number of characteristics with the Abrahamic traditions: their millenarian leanings expressed a will to break with the past in order to re-establish society. If the indigenous movements assimilated to cargo cults resembled the religious manifestations of early Christianity and Islam, they have also inspired more recent religious phenomena. According to Annelin Eriksen (2009:68), the Pentecostal Churches have adopted many of the characteristics attributed to cargo cults in the past. They too could be compared to ‘social movements criticizing the present’ and be motivated by a desire to ‘create new unities here and now (...), [to] break with the past is their mantra’ (Eriksen 2009:68). While the Pentecostal Churches reappropriated the objectives previously claimed by cargo cults, both McDougall (2009) and Flower (2017) suggest that the development of Islam in Melanesia follows a strategy like that used by the Pentecostal Churches. In seeking to break with the latter, Islam also plays on an affinity with Melanesian traditions, on supposedly shared spiritual aspirations, as opposed to the so-called ‘cargoist mentalities’ that are allegedly obsessed with purely material desires (Flower 2015).

According to observers of the former Vailala Madness, cargo cults possess analogies with the beginnings of Islam in Arabia; Pentecostal Churches employ strategies similar to those of cargo cults and adopt some of their cultural codes; and Islam takes its inspiration from both the new Churches and ancestral traditions in order to progress locally. – Considering these similarities between competing doctrines – doubtless with fewer precautions than an anthropologist would take – journalist Ben Bohane argued that there was a direct link between the successes enjoyed by Islam in Melanesia and those achieved in the past by cargo cults. In his view, the two phenomena might be said to share similar sympathies and issues:

Islam could well become the next decisive ‘ingredient’ in the mix of religious belief in Melanesia and influence the evolution of *kastom* and various cult movements, above all if the latter found themselves supported in a ‘cargo bringing’ capacity in both the financial and spiritual sense (Bohane 2007c:211).

In this context, the fears aroused by the growth of Islam in Vanuatu might be justified. Unlike the illusory expectations of the former cargo cults, the countries and organizations which support the development of Islam have the material capacities to fulfil the new converts’ dreams of abundance and would be able to generate large-scale proselytism. However, Islam’s development on Tanna shows an original and interesting



picture in comparison with other places in the Pacific. On this island, often described as the Mecca of cargo cults, cultural and religious change have gone hand in hand with the unflinching desire of the people to preserve the threads of tradition. Since their first conversion to Christianity, Tannese have engaged in uninterrupted cycles of rejuvenating their myths and refreshing their ancestral practices. Making change look permanent and playing on the illusion of continuity are their preferred means of integrating original, foreign religious traditions into their past. They have proved that *kastom* is compatible with both continuity and change, with both Islam and cargo cults, but incompatible with any foreign cultural pattern or ideology that is seen as dangerous to their social stability and to the integrity of their collective identity and cultural heritage.

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