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Cultivating Wellbeing: Young People and Food Gardens on Tanna, Vanuatu

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Article abstract

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Jean Mitchell, Lesbeth Niefeu and Joan Niras

Abstract Gardens in Vanuatu, an archipelago in the SW Pacific, materialize the multiple relationships between land, humans, and the more-than-human world that facilitate self-reliance, and wellbeing. This paper analyzes a collaborative project (2016-18) undertaken on the Island of Tanna in Vanuatu. A project for and with youth and their communities, it aimed to train young people to do basic research on customary food gardens and to document Indigenous customary knowledge, practices, and customary stories about food and gardens. The project started after a catastrophic cyclone destroyed gardens and infrastructure, rendering the self-sufficient islanders dependent on food aid at a time of rising rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). There is also concern about the declining interest in traditional knowledge among youth. With about 60% of the population under 30 years of age, this paper argues that youth are critical actors in ensuring the continuity of customary knowledge and practices that are essential for food sovereignty, the maintenance of social relations and wellbeing, all of which are embedded in relational ecologies of care.

KeyWords Vanuatu; Tanna; youth; traditional knowledge; gardening; food; wellbeing; relationality; care

"If we don't have a garden how will we live?
Who are we? We are able to live because we have gardens."

Lesbeth Niefeu

Ba kisasim, mi sangnien tukun.
Yumi wokem karen, yumi glad.
We are making a garden, we are glad.

Gardens matter in Vanuatu. Most people in Vanuatu still live in villages on clan-held land that entitles them to grow their food. Root crop staples such as yam and taro and a host of other vegetables are grown in numerous gardens through swidden or shifting horticulture. While such food production in gardens is often rendered as mere subsistence or allocated to the non-formal economy, it provides nutrition and livelihood for over 70% of the population.

Its importance is increasingly recognized as central to the customary economy of Vanuatu. Gardens are also the basis of the gift exchanges that create and sustain social relations. Vanuatu, a y-shaped archipelago in the southwest Pacific with a population of 290,000 and more than a hundred languages, is characterized by an extraordinary cultural and linguistic diversity. Custom or *kastom* in *Bislama*, the lingua franca, refers to the hybrid set of discourses and practices that encompass the knowledge, economy, and sociality that are unique to ni-Vanuatu.[1]

This essay draws on a collaborative research project entitled "Ecologies of Care, Youth and the Cultivation of Well-being," undertaken between 2016-18 on the island of Tanna with the late Chief Jacob Kapere, Director of the Cultural Centre in southern Vanuatu. A project for and with young people and their communities, we worked together with young people to do basic research on food gardens and to document Indigenous customary practices related to gardens. The idea for this project sprang from several contemporary issues: the 2015 catastrophic category five cyclone that destroyed all gardens in Tanna creating dependency on international food aid for months; the effects of climate change evident in food gardens; the expansion of the seasonal migrant agricultural labour program which draws gardeners to the neighbouring countries of New Zealand and Australia (Craven 2015) and the rapid rise of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) as a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in Vanuatu. There are also pervasive concerns about meeting the demands of a growing population, shortage of land in some areas and the fear of declining interest in traditional knowledge among youth.

By engaging young people in the ecology of food gardens, the project aimed to spark their interest in their island's unique land tenure system and in the intricate knowledge of gardening that has accumulated over many generations. Focusing on gardens and identifying young people as key social actors, we wanted to understand youth perspectives on customary gardening and what wellbeing meant to them. The research was conducted by young people in their own or nearby villages, most often with a small team of young researchers from other areas of the island. This created a stimulating context for discussion among the young researchers and community members. I researched with young people over seven months while living in two very different villages in West and Southwest Tanna. Lesbet Niefeu and Joan Niras were two of the young researchers who became deeply interested in the research project and the video documentation of customary (*kastomary)* gardening practices. Lesbeth left school in class seven due to family reasons while Joan is now in university studying social science and plans to continue doing research in the future. Lesbeth continues to document customary practices.

Central to life and customary practices in Tanna is the land tenure system and the social

[1] It is important to note that the practices of *kastom* (custom) in Vanuatu are variable and not always equitable in terms of land entitlements as Margaret. Rodman (Critchlow) (1987) has shown in Ambae. Siobhan McDonnell charts the increasing disparities and the concentration of wealth derived from illegal land transactions in Efate. Anna Naupa has analyzed (2017) the need to recognize women's entitlement and rights to land in Vanuatu. A number of young people in our research in Tanna cited the shortage of land as key reason for their lack of involvement in gardening.

relationships that are contingent on its clan ownership. According to Joel Simo (2005), a customary land advocate, "land is the web of life that holds together custom, culture, history, and beliefs of each person in a community" (p. 1). Joel Bonnemaison (1984), who studied customary practices in Tanna, underlined the material and spiritual centrality of land which informs a particular vision of the world. The customary land tenure in Vanuatu offers entitlements for food production absent in many places. This land tenure system and the garden ecologies and economies that it facilitates have had a strong capacity to buffer ni-Vanuatu from colonialism and the vagaries of global capitalism. Vanuatu, formerly New Hebrides, had been jointly administered by French and English officials from 1906 until independence in 1980. At that time, the land alienated for plantations was returned to customary clan owners. Customary practices have persisted in Tanna despite more than two hundred years of "compelling historical events" (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 153).

Over the past two decades, non-communicable diseases have emerged as a global health issue linked to food and "life-style" (Montesi, 2017, p. 99). The rapid rise of NCDs in the Pacific Islands has drawn attention to food production and the impact of food imports on health. There is now a pressing need to better understand and appreciate small-scale rural food producers and how they contribute to health and wellbeing through the local production and consumption of food. In the Pacific context, Plahe et al. (2013) argue that the fundamental principles of food sovereignty are embedded in food-growing practices that privilege access to land and care for the community, land, and water (p. 320). Communities engaged in such local or "subsistence" production continue to be food secure in many parts of the Pacific (p. 321). Scholars and policymakers are now compelled to consider health and nutrition in a broader context connecting those issues to access to food, land, and social justice. In their re-examination of diet in *Doing Nutrition Differently*, Allison and Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2013) argue: "It matters whether foods are derived from just social and environmental relationships or not; it matters what kinds of historical, cultural and emotional linkages food have" (p. 8). The authors believe these issues are at "the heart of food-body relationships" (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013). Jacob Kapere was a strong advocate for these relationships. He also promoted customary knowledge and practices that he was engaged in documenting through film and video throughout his lifetime. Genuinely interested in food gardens, he was instrumental in organizing the Regional Melanesian Slow Food Festival in Tanna in 2016. He also conducted community workshops on slow food in Tanna before his untimely and sudden death in June 2017. Jacob frequently stated, "When you change your food, you change who you are." He was pointing to how the embodied knowledge and the practices of food growing on customary land are integral to the production of particular kinds of persons who have specific relationships to the human and the more-than-human worlds. Lesbeth Niefeu's queries cited above also point to the centrality of these relations materialized through food gardens.

By focusing on how food is grown, consumed, and exchanged, we draw attention to the generation of wellbeing located within relational realms rather than in individual bodies. In a critical review, Mahali et al. (2018) argue that approaches to wellbeing in the global South

are often framed by normative assumptions and conceptual methods from the industrialized global North. Our project shows how wellbeing is rooted in relationships to land and human and more-than-human relations. In so doing, it resonates with research in Indigenous communities elsewhere, such as Zoe Todd's work in Paulatuuq in the Canadian Artic (2011; 2014) and Adelson's work in a Cree community (1998) and in the global South (Langwick, 2018). Emily Yates-Doerr's articulation of health as a "practice of living" (2015, p. 171), which she developed during her research on obesity and hunger in Guatemala, is useful for framing our research findings. Yates-Doerr raises several simple but powerful questions that draw attention to what food "does" in everyday life: How is it used? What relations does it bring about? By tracking these questions, we explore how health and wellbeing materialize through customary gardens on the Island of Tanna. Before doing so, we shall first describe our project, locating it within the contexts of engaged scholarship and Tanna.

Engaged Anthropology and the Ecologies of Care Project

While anthropologists have often privileged engaged scholarship in various ways and in a "myriad of contexts," there is currently a renewed interest in engaged scholarship (Low and Merry, 2010; Mullins, 2011; Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006). Sherry Ortner (2019) has recently commented that many sociocultural anthropologists have now taken what might be called the "engaged turn," that is, "the decision to formulate research projects in such a way as to critically engage with important issues of our time" (p. 1). Kyriakides et al. (2017) connect this "engaged turn" to the experience of working in ethnographic field sites that "display a political volatility and precarity that anthropologists must increasingly grapple with" (p. 4). This is the case in the South Pacific islands and in many other regions of the world that are experiencing the "slow violence of climate change" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Political and economic changes are also adversely affecting access to land and food. In engaged anthropological research, the biases "are declared up front" (Ortner, 2019, p. 1). Medical Anthropologist Merrill Singer has emphasized that engaged anthropology means attending to relations of power and social justice (2010). Setha Low and Sally Merry (2010) agree with Singer, but note the possibility that universalizing discourses can undermine the specificity and diversity essential to engaged anthropological research. Low and Merry raise the critical point that engaged anthropology requires rethinking of methods and modes of writing. A key question is: "How can anthropology be engaged without replicating its colonial past?" (2010, p. 203). Such issues are essential for engaged scholarship in postcolonial sites such as Vanuatu. Catherine Besteman's summary of engaged anthropology as "collaborative, critical, reflexive and practical… and values driven" (2013, pp. 3-4) usefully identifies some of the key elements that help to "operationalize" and begin to evaluate efforts to engage with communities using decolonizing methods.

The value of engaged research is evident in Vanuatu where the issue of land is politically charged. While the customary clan control of land was ensured at independence in the 1980 constitution, land has been signed away in long leases over the past 15 years. Anthropologist Siobhan McDonnell (2017) has engaged in research in Vanuatu that documents "a dramatic

land grab" (p. 285) which means that 10 percent of all customary land is now leased.[2] Ralph Regenvanu (2017), the official opposition leader in Vanuatu, who started the Land and Justice Party argues that retaining adequate land access is "a major social justice issue" (p. xiv). Access to land is now a major issue in many parts of the world as the "global land rush has drawn new attention to land, its uses and value" (Li, 2014, p. 499). Such land transactions are related to the integration of places like Vanuatu into the global economy now shaped by neo-liberalism (Plahe et al., 2013). However, McDonnell (2017) points out that the political elites of Melanesia are pivotal to inequitable land transformation. Ni-Vanuatu and, more generally, Melanesians are now caught between two very different worldviews, "the idea of land as property and the concept of land as life, which is central to *kastom*" (Regenvanu, 2017, xiv).

My involvement in engaged scholarship began in the mid-1990s while doing my doctoral research in a rapidly growing and under-serviced urban settlement in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu. I was struck by the large number of young people living in settlements who felt marginalized in both the worlds of work and custom. While young people now comprise the largest segment of the population, they often do not have a voice (Mitchell, 2011). To address the issues related to urban youth, I worked with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre to start a collaborative project (*Vanuatu Young People's Project*) with young people living in urban settlements to undertake research, advocacy, and action with and for young people across the capital. The project culminated in more than a dozen years of programming and support with and for youth. The extensive research flagged issues such as police violence, young people's feeling of estrangement after being forced out of school due to a shortage of school fees, and their desire to know about customary practices. The project addressed some of the practical needs identified by young people for further training for work and provided opportunities to learn about customary knowledge. It was a pivotal project that drew local and national attention to the situation of young people in urban settlements and opened up possibilities for many of the young researchers who went on to work in research, advocacy, and programming in various government and NGO organizations. Sherry Ortner (2019) has argued that engaged anthropology "always involves attempts to create new opportunities, new possibilities, new programs that will make some kind of contribution to the lives and futures" (p. 6) for those people with whom anthropologists work. This is often a complex undertaking, and power imbalances must always be recognized.

The Ecologies of Care Project began with a group of rural youth, to learn more about customary gardens and the perspectives of young people on Tanna — where customary knowledge is vibrant and essential. We also wanted to build the research skills and capacity for action and advocacy among a group of young people who would then have opportunities to work on future projects with Jacob Kapere at the Cultural Centre. We started the project with a week-long workshop held in July 2016 with 18 young people representing ten different villages from five different areas of Tanna. The young people who came were interested in acquiring

[2] On the Island of Efate 56.5 per cent of customary land along the coast has been leased reducing islanders' access to land for gardens and to the sea for fishing (McDonnell, 2017, p. 285).

new skills, meeting new people, and telling their own stories about gardens and their lives. We offered basic training on qualitative research methods such as participant observation, mapping, designing research questionnaires, digital storytelling, and video documentation. The young participants, through a series of animated discussions, formulated the research questions that informed the project through an interactive process that sparked lively conversations about gardens, customs, and gender, generational, and ecological differences. They decided that the following research areas were vital: the detailed knowledge and practices of gardening, documenting custom stories and the experiences of the 2015 cyclone, and the perspectives of youth on gardening and the social, economic, and environmental changes underway in Tanna. The research project also obtained information on the relationship between gardens, food, and wellbeing. The research project included extensive structured and semi-structured interviews developed in tandem with the young researchers that featured open-ended questions enabling youth to have detailed conversations with gardeners and elders. The project generated data from over 40 villages of various sizes, some of which were very small while others were large. The research focused on gathering detailed information from each person interviewed.[3] The material collected included 335 extensive and open-ended structured interviews along with documentation of gardens, customary stories, and ceremonies.

Diversity: Villages, youth, and gardens

Engaging youth in the ecological and customary knowledge connected to gardening necessitated understanding smallholder production of food gardens and the specific opportunities and constraints that they face. Attending to the specificity and diversity of local knowledge was an essential part of this engaged research project. While Tanna is a relatively small island of 549 square kilometers, it has varied ecological niches that shape gardening practices. There is Yasur, the active volcano with a commanding presence in the Whitesands area. At the same time, Mount Tukuwasmena in the Southwest of Tanna favours that area with rain in contrast to West Tanna, which experiences drought resulting in lower garden yields. This makes large-scale customary exchanges more challenging to stage in the West than in the Southwest, where there are food surpluses. Understanding local context is critical even in a seemingly "small island." During the project, we visited and stayed in many different villages and these experiences offered insight into how ecological, social, economic, and historical factors shape gardening practices. Factors such as proximity to the Yasur volcano (which showers ash over gardens in the nearby villages), rainfall, population, access to roads, the influence of churches, and the colonial past all converge to create differences in contemporary gardening and exchange practices.

[3] Some of the questions included in our research: the number of gardens each person had including new and old gardens; the different kinds of food plants and the varieties of the plants grown; the division of labour; fallow periods; knowledge sharing and transmission; how garden produce is used; customary practices associated with each phase of gardening; the problems and advantages related to gardening in each person's village, as well as questions about food, health and wellbeing. Information about youth and the 2015 cyclone was also collected.

Based on research in Nepal, Stacy Leigh Pigg (1992) argues that in the contexts of national and international development "the village crystalizes into a distinct category" (p. 491) and "the essence of villages" becomes "distilled from diverse villages" (p. 507). Within the universalizing framework of development, the village comes to stand for "the locus of under development" and "a space of backwardness" (p. 507). It is, then, not surprising that for many young people, the village becomes that which "imprisons people in what is considered an inferior and outmoded way of life" (Pigg, 1992, p. 507). Youth, too, are often essentialized as "a distinct category" distilled from a multiplicity. However, young people in Tanna are by no means a homogenous group. Several of the main differences among youth evident in this project were gender, geography, and access to education.

Regarding education, Narau, a young man from the Southwest of Tanna explained: "Those who don't go on in school, go to work in the garden." Access to higher education spatially and temporally separates young people into different domains. Evermore significant numbers of young people attend school, where the instrumental logic of Western education and markets often undermine the value of Indigenous knowledge practices. In postcolonial Vanuatu, access to education and wage labour has been the basis of emergent class differences (Lindstrom, 2011). During our project, we learned that many of the young school-leavers who were interviewed felt alienated, as they expected to work in the wage sector upon completion of their education but only about one-third of all school-leavers find wage work in Vanuatu. It was often hard for them to return to the village after having been away at school.

This project was rural-based. However, we found that youth are highly mobile, moving between and within places, including towns and villages, and transiting into new spaces of adulthood such as marriage and parenthood. Throughout this project, some of the young people were married, became parents, found employment, undertook humanitarian work on a northern island, started a successful business, and migrated to the capital to assist relatives, while others returned to school. As we worked in villages some young people, such as Lesbeth and Samuel, asked to join the project. We had a core group of nine young people who stayed for the duration of the project.

There are systemic reasons (such as the shortage of land and the need for wage work in Tanna) contributing to the disinterest in food production among youth, now common in many parts of the world (Montesi, 2017). When we talked to young people in Tanna, they conveyed the complexity of their particular situations and aspirations, giving a fuller picture of what is often elided in the term 'youth disinterest.' At the same time, the loss of intergenerational knowledge related to food production has serious consequences. In Vanuatu and in other areas of Oceania, environmental risks experienced over centuries, have led to the development of deep knowledge of bio-diverse and sustainable food gardening among local populations. These smallholder garden systems are diverse, complex, and resilient as inputs are supplied within the system without reliance on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides. Such traditional gardens are highly efficient and designed to minimize risk (Kaoh et al., 2014). These features are crucial as erratic weather, cyclones, and climate change adversely affect food gardens.

Intergenerational knowledge

The loss of intergenerational knowledge has been identified as problematic by many experts concerned with food production in Vanuatu and the Pacific. They have argued that while the food production system has been robust in dealing with rapid population growth, increasing production of traditional staple crops and cropping systems will be critical for the future. Koah et al. (2014) have noted that the challenge to intensify traditional food systems is more difficult when young generations are disinterested in the traditional knowledge accumulated by Elders. This project provided opportunities through research and documentation for young people to engage with senior and experienced gardeners to learn more about customary gardening practices. Many of the young researchers, for example, were unfamiliar with the full range of varieties of yam and taro and other garden plants that play an essential role in bio-diversity, an issue raised by many of the experienced gardeners. The young researchers were able to learn the names of the diverse varieties, including Indigenous, imported, and hybrid varieties grown in gardens in different areas. Stacey Ann Langwick (2018), in her study of therapeutic gardens in Tanzania, foregrounds the importance of the garden as a site of anthropological inquiry: "Gardens explicitly intervene into relationships between plants and people-remaking them in ways that unsettle assemblages built through colonial plantations, national development, and extractive capital" (p. 417). Langwick further argues that gardens throughout the global South, are now drawing on "local knowledge of how to support the flourishing of plants and people together with ecological and health movements" (p. 417).

Participating in the Ecologies of Care Project and spending time with many different gardeners influenced the young researchers in important ways. Lesbeth Niefeu explains her own experience:

> Before this project I sometimes made a garden, but I didn't think much about it. I'd plant a garden one year but then the next year I wouldn't bother. When I came to this project, I saw that the garden is very important. It is our life. If you just walk around doing nothing – you are not alive.

Yaris, a young woman who grew up in town, returned to her village in Tanna when she married. While she gardened in the urban settlement where she lived in Port Vila, before joining the project, Yaris knew little about ancestral stories and the relational customary practices attached to gardening, which included ancestors, spirits, and the agencies of plants. Similarly, Jako from West Tanna, a hardworking young single mother, was also unaware of the customary knowledge attached to gardening. Samuel, who grew up in the administrative center of Tanna, was surprised by the many different kinds of yam and taro grown in gardens we visited. He also videotaped the large-scale exchange ceremonies associated with the circumcision of 30 young boys in Southwest Tanna and was again impressed by the complex customary gift exchanges.

What Gardens Do: Foregrounding Relational Practices

Wellbeing is at the intersection of humans and their environments that provide not only food, but also shelter and medicine. In Vanuatu, traditional or "leaf" medicine is derived from a variety of plants in the forest and the "bush." These plants are still regarded as essential for the care of bodies, the protection of people, and for fostering relations between people and plants. Plants, Langwick (2018) succinctly writes, are both "remedy and relation" (p. 434). This is the case in Vanuatu. In Tanna, respect is foundational to the customary practices attached to gardens that entail a myriad of relations between humans, non-humans, and spirits. Human effort is essential for gardens, and as many elders have reminded the young researchers, gardens do not grow well without humans attending to and respecting the plants, land, and ancestors.

Respect manifests in multiple ways. In Tanna, respect is accorded to the *tupunis* or customary stones that facilitate the vitality of the gardens. The cultivation of the highly valued yam and taro is informed by rules that promote growth in new yam and taro gardens, and these create mutuality between plants and humans. By joining the research project, Joan Niras recognized that the new yam gardens are marked off as "sacred and special places." Through the research process in various villages, the young researchers heard the importance of rules governing new yam gardens. Several of these include: If you eat meat, fish, or shellfish, you must avoid the garden until you have showered: If you eat turtles you must avoid the new gardens for a full day, and if you are angry you should not go to the garden as such human emotions can adversely affect the growth of yam. Such rules acknowledge the sentience of plants and other non-humans and the complex relationships between humans and gardens. They also show that respect is integral to cultivating not only gardens, but making particular kinds of persons and social relations. Raymond, who follows customary practices explained: "If you respect the land, the garden, and the spirits, then you will be the kind of person who respects others." Customary knowledge of gardens encompasses relationships between humans and the more-than-human worlds such as the spirits of plants and ancestors. While adherence to customary gardening practices varied in our research, there continues to be a deep respect for rituals attached to both the planting and harvesting of new yam and taro gardens. People only plant their new gardens in unison after the custom specialist or "taboo man" performs a customary secret ritual to promote the growth of gardens. Similarly, rituals are performed at the harvest of the first yam and taro before anyone else in the area harvests and eats yam or taro. Respect for these rituals informs the collective ethos based on reciprocity and care.

The value of these relational practices was evident during the catastrophic cyclone of 2015 when gardens across the Island were destroyed, and the landscape was transformed with leafless and uprooted trees. Entire villages were flattened. Most people lost their houses and gardens, and many also lost animals and all possessions, including gardening tools. People across the Island worked together clearing trees, debris, and dead animals from each village and the roads. With gardens destroyed and food aid arriving late, people, as Joan Niras explained, "experienced hunger in Tanna for the first time in living memory." The islanders pooled and shared their meager cache of food salvaged from damaged gardens. Many relied on their customary knowledge to find and share edible wild foods to survive. The resilience

of gardeners was evident when immediately after the cyclone, they planted gardens so they could have local food as quickly as possible. When the Ecologies of Care project started in 2016, people were still preoccupied with dealing with the aftermath of the cyclone. Young people and their families described the fear induced by the violence of the cyclone, as they remembered the destruction, the stench of dead animals and birds, and the cries of injured animals and birds left in the wake of the terrifying wind. Despite the ferocity of the cyclone, there were only three human deaths during and immediately after the cyclone.[4]

What Gardens Do: Fostering Multiple Relations

The research confirmed the centrality of the gardens in everyday life and revealed the depth of the knowledge that male and female Elders possessed. The interviews offered insight into the lives of many people who are passionate about their gardens. Food gardens have multiple uses in Tanna that may be summarized in three overlapping categories: food, custom exchanges, and income. We found that food from gardens in Tanna is used to feed extended families and people who do not have enough food due to illness or old age. Food is also sent to extended family in the capital, as Petrou and Connell (2017) have shown in a detailed study of food remittances from the island of Paama. Many Tannese earn money by selling vegetables and other plants such as kava, and the funds are used for paying school fees and different basic needs. The multiple benefits from the garden have allowed Tannese to be self-sufficient while remaining connected. Heather Paxson (2013) has developed the concept of *economies of sentiment* to convey how market and non-market relations are entangled. She argues, "Market rationality is one organizing principle of economic activity but not the only one" (p. 20). Medical Anthropologist Elizabeth Roberts (2015), who analyzes food and health in Mexico, draws attention to another organizing principle: the importance of care, by which she means "an affect of tenderness, empathy, compassion and respect" (p. 154). Roberts (2015) argues, "Care is another way of operating in the world" (p. 154). The practices of care outlined by Roberts are integral to the relationality at the heart of wellbeing in Tanna.

The concept of relationality has been captured by Moreton-Robinson (2000), who writes, "In Indigenous cultural domains relationality means that one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self: this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, co-operation and social memories" (p. 16). In Tanna, many of these processes are embedded in gardening, where ancestors from the past and the relations-to-be forged in future exchanges are present. The emphasis on growing and sharing food in the everyday and in the ritual exchanges of privileged foods, such as yam and taro, speak to a relational worldview. Based on reciprocity, these customary ceremonies mark every critical phase of life from birth to death and take place within the network of kin relations. All of the young researchers had taken part in such customary ceremonies, as did everyone interviewed. In addition to the life cycle customary ceremonies, there are two major customary gift exchanges

[4] Another category five cyclone hit northern islands in Vanuatu in April 2020, creating massive destruction. Cyclone Harold is the second category five cyclone within five years in Vanuatu and suggests the intensifying effects of global warming.

in Tanna: the *Toka* and the *Niel*, which are performed periodically in some areas but quite regularly in the South and Southwest region of Tanna. The research project underlined how essential these gift economies were in defining and informing Tannese social relationships and how they depend on and are facilitated by plants from gardens. In Tanna these exchanges forge, maintain, and restore their social relations (Lindstrom, 2011). Access to land for food gardens allows relational sociality to flourish. During the project, we had the opportunity to learn about the large-scale *Niel* held in 2017 on the dancing grounds of Yarukuenwi village in Southwest Tanna. This multi-village customary exchange was one of the largest of its kind held in many years. In this exchange, islanders from six upland villages sculpted more than 50,000 taro into a large ship as part of an exchange with six coastal villages of Tanna. Drawing thousands of people, the *Niel* exchange was designed to draw attention to food-sharing and the centrality of gift economies in the lives of Islanders despite the rapid socio-economic changes underway. Many of the young people from other areas of Tanna in our project had not participated in a *Niel* gift exchange. Learning about it was valuable to all of us. The Chiefs explained that the *Niel* is rooted in myth that privileges protecting land and feeding allies who are usually affines. This exchange, we were told, reminds people that everyone can make gardens, grow food, and share it. We humans may be different in some ways, but we all have the capacity to create relations.

What Gardens Do: Generating Health and Well-being

People, as noted, care not only about gardens being productive, but about the plants, the land, ancestors, and future generations. Bonnemaison (1984) has framed the relationship as follows, "The clan *is* its land, just as the land *is* its ancestors" (p. 1). The gardeners cared for their gardens and paid attention to the relationships among plants and between plants and humans that make the garden and the gardener flourish. People derived pleasure from their gardens and embraced the aesthetics of vitality that they experienced in their gardens. Plants cultivate wellbeing or as Langwick (2018) frames it, "Plants collaborate with people to make vital spaces that enable healing" (p. 434). In Tanna many people spent long hours gardening through necessity, but they also reported that they "liked to visit their garden to see it grow" for it generated feelings of happiness. Nouka, a 51 year old father of five children, explained, "My life is the garden, and the garden takes away all of my worries."

In discussions about nutrition and health, the consumption of food is often privileged over its production (Montesi, 2017). However, Allison Hayes-Conroy and Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2013) argue "that understanding the process by which a body is nourished," necessitates understanding of "the complex ways in which people, foods, lands and places come together" (pp. 2-3). This intersection of people, foods, lands, and places in Vanuatu is expressed by the *Bislama* term *manples* or *womanples* (man of the place or woman of the place). Sanabria and Yates-Doerr (2015) also extend "nourishment beyond what is eaten" arguing that it entails "care for socially, economically and ecologically viable food systems and sustainable diets" (p. 119). As scholars now locate food in the broader context of its cultivation, distribution, and consumption, it is essential to point out that Indigenous peoples such as the Tannese have

long understood and operated within this wider context. In Tanna, wellbeing is constituted through associations dependent on access to communally owned land, growing and sharing food, and the large-scale reciprocal exchanges that nourish bodies and relationships.

What Gardens Do: Enacting Bodies

Anne Marie Mol and John Law frame embodiment and the enactment of bodies in ways that resonate with our work in Tanna. They explain, "We all *have* and *are* a body…As part of our daily practices, *we also do (our) bodies*. In practice, we enact them" (Mol and Law, 2004, p. 45). In the Tanna bodies are enacted in some important ways through gardening and ingesting local food. Tamara, a 23 year old woman with three children, explained, "When I make a garden I eat food that I planted. It gives me power. I, then, have power to work in the garden." Alphine, a 24 year old woman with three children, remarked that food from her garden gives her "power and strength." Sila, a 17 year old young man, told us, "Local food makes me alive, with power and blood."

Margaret Jolly (1991), in her research in South Pentecost, Vanuatu, found that customary gardeners depicted imported foods such as rice and tinned food as "weak and soft" (p. 58), in contrast to taro and yam which are "strong" foods creating strong bodies because they are rooted in and part of the land. "The human body, the products locally produced by human effort, and the land itself are conceived as intrinsically and substantially connected" (Jolly, 1991, p. 48). Throughout our project we heard that growing, eating and sharing food from one's land is deemed essential for good health and wellbeing. Linda, a 21 year old mother, explained, "People are eating too much imported food like rice, sugar, and oil…they are not working too much in the garden, they are only sitting down which makes them sick." In another village, Berto, who is a 62 year old father of seven children, told us the new sickness is from overeating food from the store. He goes on to say that the new NCDs are appearing because people "don't sweat or work hard in the garden." Through gardening, the body and its sweat produces the food that staves off sickness and promotes health. At the same time, when people garden, they maintain social relations enacted through reciprocal food exchanges. Nancy Pollock (2017), who has extensively researched and written about food in Oceania, has also noted that store-bought food is not shared in the same way as garden food**.** Gardening and sharing food is part of a broader moral economy (Petrou and Connell 2017), and, as Langwick (2018) contends, the vitality of gardening locates "the body into alternative economies of people and plants" (p. 421).

Many of the people interviewed believed that the emergence of NCDs revolves around the consumption or overconsumption of imported or "white man's" food. Leo, a 30 year old father of four, explains, "We are not following the ways of our ancestors and eating as our ancestors did." When asked about health and wellbeing, Fina Sam, who has eight children, responded, "Food from the store is killing me, but I am well when I eat food from the ground, it makes me fit." Rosline, a young gardener, also clearly stated her views: "I think that people eat too much from the store, which makes them have high blood pressure and diabetes."

People often characterized store-bought food as "dead," in contrast to the vitality of

garden food equated with life. "The garden is life" was a refrain we heard very often as people described the "aliveness" of their garden food. Jira, who is 70 years old, explained, "When I eat Island food, I feel strong because it is live food." Frozen, tinned, and processed foods are examples of "dead" food that cannot be genuinely nourishing. Nouka felt that NCDs are a problem "because we no longer are eating local food, we depend too much on buying from the store and that food is made with chemicals." Store-bought food was described as having sickness embedded in it, in contrast to local garden food.

Those interviewed frequently pointed out that eating food from one's garden led to a feeling of fullness. This is expressed by 19 year old Darie Joe, who explains that when you have gardens, "the feeling is that you are rich because in the village the garden is the key to everything." There is reciprocity between a gardener and her garden as it "supplies everything." As Banya remarked, "When I make a garden, the garden feeds me and helps my family." This is echoed by Rose, who explained, "I like island food because it makes me strong and healthy. I have no money, but I always have food from my garden." However, you must take care of a garden if it is to take care of you. As Fina stated, "I think when you are lazy or not active, you worry, but when you make a garden, you don't worry because you have everything."

People were explicit about the value and "power" of garden food in contrast to store-bought food. However, rice and bread are part of urban and, to a lesser extent, rural diets. Tannese Islanders have long been engaged in some measure in the "modern" economy through migrant labour in the colonial and postcolonial eras. Jourdan (2012) analyzed the "localization" of rice in the Solomon Islands, paralleling the situation in Vanuatu. The introduction of rice was tied to both the colonial and mission past, as rations of rice were given to labourers on plantations and students at mission schools (pp. 262-4). While rice at one time indexed colonial and mission projects, it now plays a part in local foodways, particularly in urban areas (Jourdan, 2012, p. 208; Petrou and Connell, 2017). Pacific Islanders have long incorporated practices such as migration for wage work and new foods (Pollard, 2017). However, for many Islanders customary practices depend on maintaining traditional food gardens, protecting entitlements to land, and nourishing relationships.

Conclusion

During our project, the Civil Engineering Construction Corporation of China was undertaking the first phase of a multi-year project to construct costly tar-sealed roads by building bridges, carving through rocky landscapes, and cutting down ancient banyan trees. These roads (and the massive loans to be repaid) signify the changes underway in Vanuatu and on the island of Tanna, where tourists are drawn to its natural beauty, colourful customary practices, and the fiery abyss of the Yasur volcano. With about 60% of the population under 30 years of age, youth are critical actors shaping the land practices embedded in ecologies of care necessary for future Indigenous food sovereignty, the maintenance of social relationships, and wellbeing. However, they are charged with doing so as Vanuatu's integration into the global economic system deepens, and policies facilitate land speculation and land grabs. This includes signing onto the WTO agreement (Plahe et al., 2013), the growing participation in regional labour

markets, and the rapid expansion of digital technologies that remain too costly for creative or community work. Ever higher numbers of young people are now participating in formal education, and we found that when customary knowledge and practices are bypassed or marginalized, it is difficult for young people to privilege such knowledge. This is but one of the many intergenerational dilemmas of the postcolonial era, when climate change poses new dangers to food sovereignty and wellbeing.

While it is remarkably easy to stack up the difficulties and constraints facing Tannese islanders and other ni-Vanuatu it is important to take time to understand what islanders do and have been able to achieve (Hau'ofa, 1993). They have created an extraordinary capacity to live close to the land without mindlessly extracting from it, and their relational and imaginative vision of the world has allowed them to lead self-sufficient lives with vibrant social and ecological relationships. The Ecologies of Care Project in Tanna sought to underline the value of customary knowledge, ecological diversity, and a land tenure system designed to facilitate entitlements at a time when young people are negotiating social and economic changes, catastrophic cyclones, and the "slow violence" of climate change (Nixon, 2011). In conversations with Elders and gardeners, young researchers learned about the intricacies of customary gardens and how they generate wellbeing. We also met many, many young people who are fully engaged and deeply interested in gardening and possessed knowledge and respect for customary practices. Our project started just one year after Cyclone Pam, one of the strongest ever to make landfall in Vanuatu, which rendered the Tannese hungry and dependent on food aid until they could replant and harvest new gardens. How they cared for each other during the chaotic and hungry post-cyclone period illuminates the practices of care integral to a relational way of being and becoming in the world. Care, as Roberts (2015) stated, "is another way of operating in the world" (p. 254) and defies the commodity logic that informs neo-liberalism. The creativity of young people also challenges instrumental logic. The relationships facilitated through gardening matter to young people and, as Lesbeth Niefeu suggests, gardens imprint relational identities. The affect and the vitality of wellbeing generated through gardening that are evident in the chorus of the Garden Song Joan Niras wrote for the project:

Ba kisasim,mi sangnien tukun.
Yumi mekem karen,yumi glad.
We are making a garden, we are glad.
Maring norkeikeian ramsipan aikin (2x)
From lav i stap kam long hem.
Because love comes from it.
Ba kisangnien,misangnien,misangnien tukun nuhuaian.
Yumi glad from gudfala laif
We are glad because of this good life.

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