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An Unsettling Seascape: *Kastom* and Shifting Identity among the Lau in North Malaita, Solomon Islands

Ryuju Satomi*

This study discusses the contemporary dynamics of the notion of *kastom* among Lau speakers in North Malaita, Solomon Islands. The Lau are known for dwelling on "artificial islands," massive coral structures constructed in a shallow lagoon. Today, their attitudes toward these artificial islands and their identity as a maritime people are markedly ambivalent, and sometimes explicitly negative, due to concerns about the shortage of gardening land and their subordinate position in the local land tenure. The notion of *kastom* plays a crucial role here, with its complex, apparently paradoxical relationship with the maritime homes and identities of the Lau. On one hand, under the current ideology of *kastom* and land, the artificial islands are typically referred to negatively as material evidence of the Lau's detachment from their ancestral land and *kastom*. On the other hand, these islands are often seen as embodiments of *kastom* in its potentially dangerous aspect, particularly in that they house pre-Christian ritual spaces. These apparently contradictory views of the artificial islands combine to create a situation in which Lau identities and homes are continuously called into question in relation to *kastom*.

Keywords: kastom, *landscape, Christianity, saltwater people, artificial islands*

1. Introduction

In this study, I examine the contemporary dynamics of the notion of *kastom* among Lau speakers in North Malaita, Solomon Islands. In doing so, I pay particular attention to how this notion relates, first, to their collective identity as a maritime people, and second, to their everyday experience of the characteristic land- and seascapes that surround them.

Kastom is a widely used Neo-Melanesian term that denotes indigenous culture or traditional customs. Since the 1980s, this concept has been the subject of intensive examination by anthropologists, against the backdrop of the postcolonial political situation in this region, as an expression of the Melanesian people's reflective awareness or objectification of their own culture (e.g. Keesing and Tonkinson, 1982; Jolly and Thomas, 1992; White and Lindstrom, 1993). Malaita Island, the long-term research site of Keesing, a pioneer on this subject (e.g. Keesing,

* Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo, Japan.
[e-mail: ryuju.satomi@gmail.com]

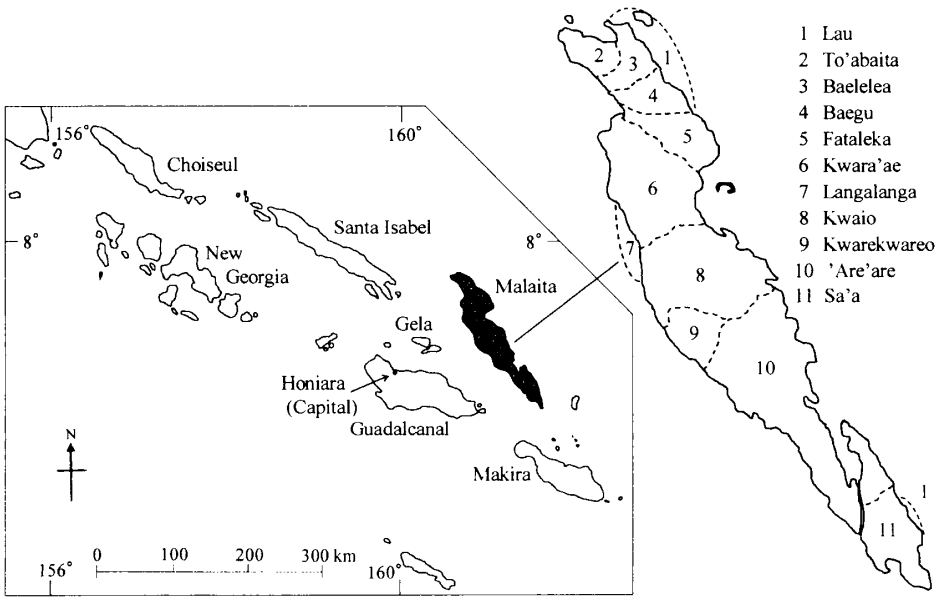

Figure 1. Malaita Island and Its Linguistic Groups

1982a, 1992), has occupied a somewhat symbolic position in this discussion. More recently, political conflict in the Solomon Islands, locally known as "ethnic tension" between Malaitan and Guadalcanal people, has again made *kastom* a highly contentious concept (Fraenkel, 2004; Kwa'ioloa and Burt, 2007).

Malaita is an island with a population estimated at around 13,500 in 2009 (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2011) (Figure 1).[1] This population is divided into 10 to 12 different linguistic groups, 5 of which—namely, To'abaita, Baelelea, Baegu, Fataleka, and Lau—reside in the northern part of the island. In everyday interactions between locals, the distinction between "saltwater people" (*too 'i asi*, or Asi for short) and "bush people" (*too 'i tolo*, or Tolo), based on places of residence and subsistence patterns, matters more than linguistic divisions.

The Lau speakers, who reside on the northeastern coast of Malaita and offshore on the coral sea known as the Lau Lagoon, are generally considered "saltwater people" or Asi (lit., the sea),[2] in contrast to the neighboring "bush" or inland people who speak Baelelea and Baegu. Along with the Langalanga on the western coast of central Malaita, the Lau have been known as maritime people who depend for their subsistence on active fishing and bartering with their "bush" neighbors (Akimichi, 1978; Ross, 1978a). The Lau are also known for dwelling on what have been called "artificial islands" (Ivens, 1978 [1930]; Parsonson, 1966). These islands, called *fera 'i asi* (lit., village or residential place on the sea) in the vernacular,[3] are massive structures of coral rocks

[1] The linguistic boundaries in Figure 1 are shown according to Keesing (1982b: 13).

[2] In North Malaita, the group category of "Asi" refers exclusively to Lau speakers living on the coast and the lagoon. The two categories of "Lau" and "Asi" are thus virtually interchangeable.

[3] Below, I adopt the term "artificial islands" for convenience, although the "natural/artificial" dichotomy that phrase implies does not seem applicable to the Lau conception of the structures.

constructed in the shallow lagoon. The oldest are estimated to be a few hundred years old. According to speculation, they may originally have served as 1) residences secure from continual intergroup raiding in precolonial times, 2) refuges from malarial mosquitoes on the coast, or 3) convenient bases for fishing and bartering activities (Ivens, 1978 [1930]; Parsonson, 1966).

Independent of these hypothetical origins, what is remarkable about these islands is that they have been continuously inhabited. Even today, people are constructing new islands and expanding existing ones. As of 2009, there are about 94 artificial islands in the Lau Lagoon, 79 of which are currently inhabited. They vary considerably in both area and population, and while the largest islands have several hundred residents, the smallest are home to just one family. In North Malaita, the Lau are those who live or have lived on these islands and who, as a result of their maritime lifestyles, share a language and activities like fishing. The Lau as a cultural and linguistic group have thus been fundamentally identified with their maritime life on these islands, as their local designation as the Asi or "saltwater people" testifies.

2. *Kastom*, Identity, and Landscape

In the most general sense, *kastom* for the Lau now refers to things, places, knowledge, and customs closely associated with their pre-Christian ancestors.[4] As elsewhere in Melanesia, *kastom* is commonly seen in opposition to Christianity (*lotu*), and the sense of cultural and historical rupture caused by Christianization forms a major element in the Lau conception of *kastom*. In the past, the Lau people maintained a system of ancestor worship (*foa*) whose central practice was the sacrifice of pigs to ancestral spirits (*agalo*) by priests (*aarai ni foa*) (Maranda and Köngäs Maranda, 1970). This practice was gradually abandoned in the course of conversion to Christianity in the 20th century.

The use of the word *kastom* is quite common in everyday speech among the Lau. For example, people often mention the times before general Christianization—which can be defined, at my research site described below, roughly as anytime before the 1970s—as "the time of *kastom* (*kada kastom*)," in contrast to the present "time of church (*kada lotu*)." Similarly, a person (usually male) known to be well versed in traditional knowledge such as genealogy and oral traditions can be referred to as someone who "knows *kastom* very well (*haitamana 'asia na kastom*)." Several terms in the vernacular can be used interchangeably with *kastom* in these

[4] This is in accordance with the following description by Keesing of the notion of *kastom* in Malaita: "*Kastom* canonically denotes ancestrally enjoined rules for life: pollution taboos, rules about cursing and swearing, rules governing the purity of women, and procedures for sacrifices and purification. Genealogies, lands, and shrines, all closely associated with ancestors, are *kastom*" (Keesing, 1982a: 360).

and other contexts, including 1) *biranga* or *falafala* (traditional rules and customs that should be observed); 2) *fera gia* (lit., of our home country), used as a modifier, as in *fanga fera gia* (local food), in contrast to *aarai kwao* (of white men); and 3) *agalo* (ancestors and their spirits) and *foa* (ancestor worship and its rites), often directly opposed to *lotu* (Christianity). However, such interchangeability is only partial—for example, *biranga/falafala* covers only the positive and normative aspect of *kastom*—and *kastom* today should be understood as a complex, multivalent notion with its own range of referents and connotations.

Instead of simply enumerating the different usages of the Lau notion of *kastom*, many of which will be common to other groups in Malaita and elsewhere, I focus below on the characteristic relationships between this notion and the Lau people's maritime dwelling, because it is in these relationships that *kastom* acquires its most problematic significance for the Lau today. In doing so, I adopt an ethnographic approach that focuses on the present-day status of the Lau notion of *kastom*.

Several authors to date have discussed the *kastom* concept in Malaita in historical terms, particularly within the historical framework of anticolonial struggles (e.g. Keesing, 1982a, 1992; Burt, 1982, 1994a; Akin, 2005, in press). They have pointed out in particular that Maasina Rule, the pan-Malaitan anticolonial movement that arose after World War II, was the crucial phase in the formation of the notion of *kastom* in Malaita. Akin, in the latest and most comprehensive study of Maasina Rule and the historical emergence of *kastom*, traces the origin of this concept and its political significance to the policy of "indirect rule" adopted by the colonial administration of Malaita during the 1930s and 1940s (Akin, in press). His analysis shows how this policy provided Malaitans with a realm in which they were granted a certain level of authority and autonomy—a realm designated by the administration as the "native custom," which, during Maasina Rule, Malaitans appropriated and reconstructed for their own purposes of political autonomy and social reform. Such historical studies on Malaitan *kastom* form an important basis of my discussion below, and my ethnographic approach is intended to complement them and to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this notion.

Now, my point below is that the case of the Lau exemplifies certain aspects of kastom that were relatively unexplored in earlier discussions, particularly in ones relating to the politics of identity construction. Here, I point out two such aspects.

First, in previous studies, *kastom* was often treated as a political symbol of collective identity, such as that of a local ethnic group or a newly independent nation. For example, referring to Vanuatu at the time of independence, Tonkinson wrote: "It is evident that *kastom* is intimately connected with identity at all levels, from individual to national" (Tonkinson, 1982: 302). This view was particularly dominant in the 1980s and 90s, and most studies published

during this period treated *kastom* as an ideal positively asserted or defended by Melanesian people in their political struggles for identity construction.[5] Certain authors seem to have recognized ambivalence in attitudes to *kastom*, especially among Christians, but most did not delve into the matter.[6] Others paid attention to cases in which *kastom* was directly negated in an attempt to formulate oppositional discourses (e.g. Thomas, 1992), but then too it was the construction of collective identity that was at stake.

In marked contrast, *kastom* for the Lau today is not something to be asserted or negated in an attempt to construct collective identity. Instead, it is something that calls into question their current identity as the Lau or "saltwater people," destabilizing that identity due to its problematic associations with their maritime homes. It is an unsettling relationship that exists between the idea of *kastom* and the Lau identity, very removed from the "identity politics" of the earlier discussions of *kastom,* that this study attempts to analyze.[7]

Second, the understanding of landscape as a basis for indigenous identity is well established in contemporary Pacific studies. For example, Toren (1995) discusses the importance of everyday experiences of landscape to the Fijian notion of indigenous identity rooted in ancestral land. The relationship between identity and landscape is also relevant to the notion of *kastom*, which has often been tied to the symbolic importance of land for local identity in Melanesia (e.g. Jolly, 1982; Rumsey and Weiner, 2001). In this perspective, everyday experience with local landscapes is seen to back up, in its physical concreteness, the ideological connection between land, *kastom*, and identity. However, such a view is not applicable to the Lau case. As the following discussion will show, the characteristic landscape, or rather seascape, that constitutes their environment is associated with *kastom* in complex and sometimes paradoxical ways, rather than in a straightforward, mutually affirmative fashion. While this seascape is certainly inseparable from the definition of the Lau as "saltwater people," today it seems not so much to offer them a

5 Some authors have recognized a similar politicization of *kastom* in the context of recent conflict in the Solomon Islands, particularly in compensation claims made against the central government (e.g. Fraenkel, 2004).

6 For example, in the article cited above, Tonkinson reports a sense of "trouble" among Christians in Vanuatu, a concern that "they have too little of their own *kastom* left to attempt any kind of revival, let alone a return to *kastom* as lived practice" (Tonkinson, 1982: 304. In Section 5 below, I will point to similar feelings among the Lau today). Immediately after pointing this out, however, he turns to the now-familiar idea of the political "invention" of *kastom* without elaborating on any sense of trouble or ambivalence.

7 In this respect, Akin's analysis of the contemporary dynamics of *kastom* among the non-Christian Kwaio (Akin, 2004) is particularly important to my own study of the Lau, in that it successfully distances itself from earlier discussions of *kastom* in terms of cultural invention and identity politics. In that study, Akin analyzes how the Kwaio experience *kastom* in everyday practices, focusing on the seemingly unbounded intensification of women's taboos and confessions that goes on among them, and describes their sense of being troubled and perplexed in relation to ancestral spirits and *kastom*. Similarly, my aim below is to analyze ethnographically how the Lau experience the dynamic and ambivalent nature of *kastom* in their contemporary lives.

solid basis for collective identity as to unsettle their current identity. It is the aim of my analysis to articulate these complex relationships between *kastom*, the Lau identity as a maritime people, and their land- and seascape experiences.

3. The Research Site

The research base during my fieldwork in Malaita was Foubaita (lit., large rock) (Figure 2),[8] a village of Lau speakers on the northeastern coast of mainland Malaita. Foubaita has been a parish station of the Marist Mission of the Roman Catholic Church since 1935.[9] Today, it is a relatively large settlement with approximately 260 residents in 39 households. It faces the Lau Lagoon on its northeastern side and borders on the "bush" or Baelelea area on its southwestern, inland side. There are 16 artificial islands off the shore of Foubaita, 10 of which are currently inhabited. The total population of the inhabited islands is approximately 190. Most residents of these islands have their gardens (mainly of sweet potato and cassava) on the coast around Foubaita and thus commute regularly between their islands and the mainland. Like the coastal

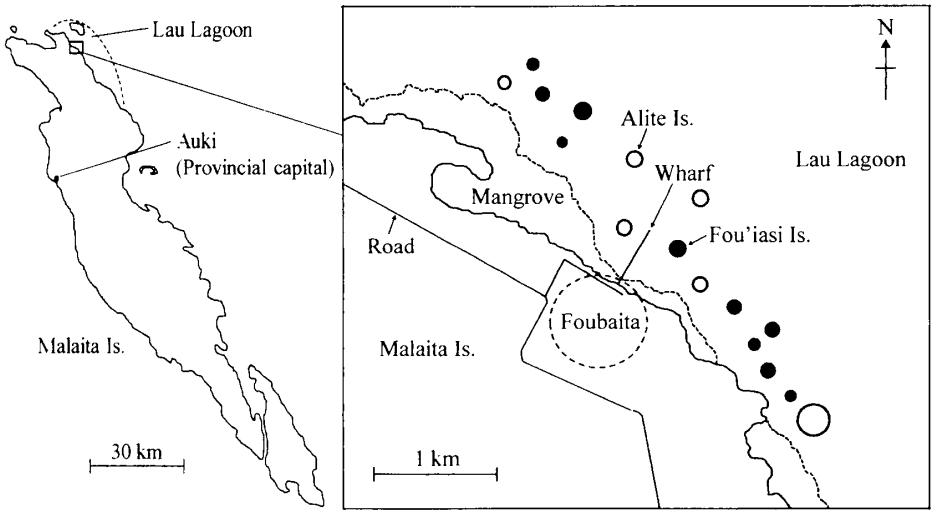

Figure 2. The Research Site

8 All personal and place names hereafter are pseudonyms. The fieldwork on which this study is based was conducted for a total of about 16 months between 2008 and 2011. Some of the ethnographic facts below are discussed in a more theoretical context in Satomi (in press). In Figure 2, the black and white circles represent currently inhabited and uninhabited islands, respectively.

9 The Catholic missionary activity in Malaita began in 1912, when the Marists established their first station on this island in Rohinari, South Malaita (Laracy, 1976: 48). It has been pointed out that, in Malaita as elsewhere in Melanesia, different Christian missions have taken quite divergent attitudes toward what is locally designated as *kastom*, and that the Roman Catholic mission has been particularly admissive and flexible in this respect (e.g. Ross, 1978b: 175–177). While recognizing certain Catholic influences on the conception of *kastom* in my research site (footnote 23, for example), I maintain that most of my analyses below are equally applicable to Lau areas influenced by other denominations.

dwellers in Foubaita, all of these islanders are parish members of the Catholic Church. Below, I refer to Foubaita and the offshore islands together as "the Foubaita area," following the local tendency. In most local interactions, the inhabitants of this area, coastal dwellers and islanders, are referred to and refer to themselves as the "saltwater people," in contrast to their "bush" neighbors.

This categorization is in accordance with the settlement history of this area. Current residents of the Foubaita area trace their ancestry to various groups of migrants who came north from older artificial islands in the central to southern Lau Lagoon. These migrants arrived at today's Foubaita in separate groups at different times, establishing their own islands one after another. It is important to note that most of the islands off the coast of Foubaita were established relatively recently. Based on the literature (e.g. Ivens, 1978 [1930]) and local accounts, I estimate that only one of the 16 islands existed when regular European contact began here in the mid-1870s.[10] Most were constructed during the early colonial period, from the 1890s to the 1930s. While some islands may predate contact by far, this pattern of generally recent establishment is likely to hold true for most of the artificial islands in the Lau Lagoon.

The formation of today's Foubaita is also relevant, though it occurred much later than the emergence of the offshore islands. In fact, according to local residents, even in 1935, when the Roman Catholic mission established its base there, the coastal land was inhabited by only a few households of the Foubaita Clan, whose members are currently recognized as the primary landholders in the area.[11] At that time, most people, who belonged to different clans and from whom current residents of the area are directly descended, lived on the offshore islands. Foubaita as it exists today did not emerge until the late 1970s and the 1980s, when successive cyclones compelled islanders to take refuge on the mainland. Many refugees are said to have resettled there, near the church, instead of returning to their islands. Foubaita was formed as a result of this gradual resettlement, and some islands evacuated during this period have remained empty until today.[12]

The present-day land- and seascapes of this area, with their histories of island construction

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[10] See Corris (1973: ch. 4) regarding early European contact with the Lau Lagoon in the form of the labor trade.

[11] Following Maranda and Köngäs Maranda (1970), I gloss *'ae bara*, the Lau term for their patrilineal kin category and group, as "clan." I will discuss customary land tenure in Malaita and its transformation in the next section (footnote 14).

[12] The establishment of large coastal settlements like Foubaita in the course of Christian conversion has been observed widely in Malaita and elsewhere in Melanesia (e.g. Burt, 1994a: 161–162). However, the case of Foubaita is characteristic in that considerable time elapsed—40 to 50 years—between the establishment of the Christian church and the formation of the coastal settlement. Although a detailed examination is beyond the scope of this study, this time-lag seems attributable to the complex structure of the Lau residential space (the mainland/offshore islands) and the flexible spatial practice (between Christian and non-Christian spaces) that this made possible. I will discuss the spatial dimensions of Christianity and *kastom* among the Lau in Sections 5 and 6.

and repeated resettlement, are not only striking for visitors like me but also considered unusual both historically and regionally by the locals themselves. For example, the coastal landscape with the large, dense settlement of Foubaita at its center did not take shape until the 1980s, which means that it is still a relatively new living environment, especially for the older generation. This settlement pattern is also recognized locally as being typically coastal or "saltwater" in that it is never seen in the "bush" area, where people continue to live in much smaller hamlets scattered throughout the rainforest. Off the shore of Foubaita is the vast, bright lagoon whose surface is dotted with artificial islands. People in the area often contrast this open seascape with the "bush" landscape, which is typically dominated by thick, dark secondary growth. Also noticeable in this seascape are the abandoned islands, most of which have been overtaken by vegetation and look like bushes of different sizes floating on the sea. They too are relatively recent products of the wave of resettlement in the 1970s and 80s. Such distinctive land- and seascapes and their settlement history—from the formation of offshore islands to resettlement on the coast—form important backdrops to the present-day conception of *kastom* in this area, as is discussed below.

4. The Lau Migration History and Land Rights

The notion of *kastom* plays a crucial—even problematic—role in the contemporary sociocultural situation of the Lau, particularly in relation to the current destabilization of their self-definition as a maritime or "saltwater" people. During my fieldwork, I was struck repeatedly by the ambivalent and sometimes explicitly negative attitudes the Lau expressed toward their maritime homes and related identity as "saltwater people." Many remarked that they are not really Lau or "saltwater people" because they are originally "from the bush (*faasia tolo*)." Others pointed out that they should be living not on the artificial islands or the coast but rather in their "homeland (*'ae fera*)" in inland Malaita, as if they were not happy with their current residence and identity.

What lies behind such remarks is the migration history of those who are called Lau today, as well as the problematic implications that history has acquired in the contemporary issue of land rights. The Lau migration history is narrated in a group of oral traditions called *'ai ni mae*, which are today regarded as an important part of *kastom*.[13] According to these traditions, the ancestors of the current Lau clans were "bush" dwellers, living in different places in inland Malaita. They then went through long and diverse courses of migration from the inland to the coast. At some point, each either reached an artificial island that others had built or built one for themselves,

[13] Oral traditions about ancestral migration are observed widely in Malaita (e.g. Burt, 1994b: 324–328).

thereby acquiring the "saltwater" identity that would be passed on to their descendants. These traditions thus narrate the simultaneous formation of the Lau's maritime dwellings and their collective identity as "saltwater people."

It is the inextricability of their maritime homes from their "saltwater" identity that seems problematic to the Lau, mainly due to perceived land shortages in their area. The Lau often express concern about the scarcity of land on the populated coast of North Malaita, and many of them, coast dwellers and islanders, worry that someday they might be compelled to leave their current homes and gardens and resettle elsewhere. Indeed, under the principle of precedence in Malaita's customary land tenure, most Lau people are not primary landholders in or around their current residences because they are descended from migrants from other parts of this island.[14] The Lau are thus generally subordinate to the primary landholding clans, which are usually categorized as "bush" clans with little or no background in maritime dwelling.

The recent political crisis in the Solomon Islands has heightened the Lau's sense of insecurity. The massive displacement of Malaitans from Guadalcanal has without doubt impressed the Lau with the risks inherent in their subordinate position in the current land tenure. During the crisis, the people of Foubaita also experienced disruptions to land and sea transportation and the collapse of urban fish markets in Honiara and Auki (the national and provincial capitals), which meant that they lost their principle source of cash income. The memory of those days when they could not sell the fish they caught is still vivid for many. The resulting loss of confidence in fishing as an economic activity has clearly prompted a renewed focus on (what is in their view) more secure land-based subsistence activities.

Thus many Lau today believe that they had better leave their current place of residence and "go back (*'oli*)" to their ancestral homeland, which according to oral traditions is located in the inland "bush" of Malaita and where, at least in theory, they can claim to be primary landholders. There has thus far been no collective attempt to act on these convictions, but many individuals have initiated sporadic negotiations about land rights with relatives living in the relevant "bush" area.[15]

It is against this backdrop of intended resettlement to the "bush" that the Lau exhibit marked ambivalence toward—even explicit devaluation of—their artificial islands and their related

[14] Anthropologists have shown that the customary land tenure in Malaita is based on the principle of precedence and seniority of patrilineal descent, modified and extended by other factors such as cognatic descent and alliance (e.g. Scheffler and Larmour, 1987). Traditionally, this latter aspect appears to have granted varying degrees of authority over land to different clans, including the immigrant clans of the Lau. It has been pointed out, however, that with increasing pressures on land (especially in coastal areas), present-day Malaitans tend to develop a notion of more unilineal and exclusive landownership (e.g. Burt, 1994b), with seriously unfavorable implications for the Lau.

[15] Miyauchi (2003) reports a similar tendency in the Fataleka area in North Malaita, although the points I make below seem peculiar to the Lau because of their inherent connection to their maritime homes.

identity as "saltwater people." People in the Foubaita area often say that they would rather go back to their homeland in the "bush," because "there is no land for gardens (*lan go ta gano 'uria raoa*)" on the islands. As this common remark shows, the artificial islands are no longer valued or taken for granted as places of residence, and the group's identity as a maritime people is accordingly called into question.

My point is that the notion of *kastom* plays a crucial role in this situation, as indicated by the renewed interest in oral traditions of migration. In the following sections, I will illustrate a paradox that characterizes the present-day notion of *kastom* among the Lau—a paradox that is reflected in its relationship to their maritime dwelling and identity. In the next section, I will show that today, the Lau as a whole are often regarded as people who have "lost their *kastom*,"[16] and that they tend to accept this negative view passively. Conversely, however, their everyday life is also characterized by close contact with what is seen to embody *kastom*, particularly its unsettling and threatening aspects, as discussed in Section 6, and it is again the artificial islands that are crucial in this respect.

5. The Lau, Who Have Lost Their *Kastom*

5.1 The Negative Relationship with *Kastom*

What is first noticeable in the local discourse of *kastom* in North Malaita today is that the Lau are frequently spoken of negatively as people who have lost or are detached from their *kastom*. For example, their "bush" neighbors frequently make critical comments about residents of the Foubaita area, saying, "They don't know *kastom* (*Gera lafusia kastom*)," or "They don't live according to *kastom* (*Gera si too sulia kastom*)." These "bush" people are pointing to, among other things, sometimes apparent ignorance or confusion among the Foubaita people regarding their genealogy and migration history. Also at play are the latter's dependence on cash income—obtained by fishing and market activities—and imported food, as well as their reported neglect of subsistence gardening, which is seen to be the basis of "life according to *kastom* (*toolaa sulia kastom*)."

It is characteristic of North Malaita today not only that the "bush" neighbors make such moral accusations but also that the Lau themselves accept them. It is very rare to hear Lau people make positive statements about "our *kastom* (*kastom gami*)," that is, the *kastom* unique to them as the Lau or "saltwater people;" and even their artificial islands are seldom mentioned as part of their *kastom*. The way they speak of *kastom* in relation to their own "saltwater" identity is predominantly negative, as if this identity inherently signified "non-*kastom*," or the loss and

[16] This is my gloss. In the vernacular, it is more commonly remarked that their *kastom* "is lost, disappeared (*langi na*)."

absence of *kastom*. This stands in marked contrast to discourse on the "bush," which is usually referred to as the place where authentic "life according to *kastom*" is maintained. Throughout my fieldwork, people in the Foubaita area worried about my research, warning me repeatedly, "You say you are interested in our *kastom*, but it is all lost here. If you want to know about *kastom*, you should be in the bush." Similarly, when I spoke with a male Foubaita resident in his 40s, he cited the commonly recognized fact that most pre-Christian customs among the "saltwater people," such as menstrual segregation, were common to the "bush people." He then added, "This is naturally so, since people on the islands are originally from the bush. They simply continued the *kastom* of the bush on their islands." This explanation, in accordance with the Lau migration history mentioned above, implies that *kastom* essentially belongs to the "bush" and not to the "sea," and that the latter is only secondary in terms of *kastom*.

5.2 Historical and Ideological Background

There seem to be at least two reasons for this negative definition of the "saltwater" identity in relation to *kastom*. First is the history of Lau relationships with Europeans. As is generally the case with coastal Melanesian populations, starting in the late 19th century, the Lau are known to have had earlier and more regular contact with Europeans, such as labor traders, missionaries, and colonial officers, than did their inland neighbors (Corris, 1973; Laracy, 1976). European products such as tobacco, knives, and firearms were introduced to them earlier and in larger amounts, and the influence of Christianity too worked from the coast inland. One result of this pattern in North Malaita is that the Lau are stereotyped as being strongly influenced by the "white men (*aarai kwao*)" and accordingly estranged from their *kastom*.

The second, more ideological reason concerns the Lau migration history mentioned above and its implications given Malaita's land tenure system. As mentioned in Section 2, it has commonly been observed that the idea of *kastom* is deeply tied to the ideological significance of land in contemporary Melanesia. Jolly (1982) makes this clear in her discussion of the notion of *man ples* in Vanuatu, a Bislama term derived from "man" and "place" in English, which relies on an idealized view of a person as essentially rooted in a specific land or locality. It further implies an authentic life according to *kastom*, a life defined by its supposedly unchanging attachment to ancestral land and opposed to increased human mobility under exogenous, European influences such as land alienation and urbanization. A similar ideological connection between *kastom* and land is recognized widely in Melanesia (e.g. Keesing, 1982a; White, 1993).

This ideological connection is of course problematic for the Lau, whose lifestyle is characterized above all by its relatively minor dependence on land. Their maritime lifestyle itself renders them vulnerable to accusations of being detached from their ancestral land and thus from

their *kastom*. The previously mentioned fact that many of the Lau are not primary landholders in or around their current homes makes them even more ideologically suspect. Such situations may seem common in contemporary Melanesia, where many coastal dwellers, residing in recently established Christian settlements, are seen and sometimes stigmatized as being alienated from their ancestral land. The distinctiveness of the Lau case lies, however, in the fact that the problematic aspects of their image are understood to be inherent in their maritime, non-land-based identity, rather than external or contingent to it.

5.3 *Kastom* and the Lau Landscape

The points made above about the maritime identity of the Lau are equally applicable to the artificial islands that form the very basis of that identity. Today, these islands are often seen as material evidence of the Lau's separation from their ancestral land and *kastom*. This perception offers a possible explanation as to why, as previously mentioned, the Lau rarely speak of their islands positively as "our *kastom*." This point also introduces an important aspect of the Lau notion of *kastom*: its embeddedness in their everyday experiences of land- and seascapes. In Section 3, I pointed out the peculiarity of the present land- and seascapes in the Foubaita area, a peculiarity recognized by its inhabitants. Their everyday experiences with these land- and seascapes seem to contribute somewhat to their negative self-definition as people who have lost their *kastom*, and perhaps it is the physical concreteness of these experiences that causes them to accept such a negative image so passively.

For example, on the outskirts of the present-day settlement, small gardens cultivated by residents of Foubaita and the offshore islands form a huge (by local standards) expansion. This scene, typically coastal or "saltwater" according to the local perception, heightens concerns about the shortage of gardening land, which has resulted from population growth and concentration. One day during my fieldwork, I accompanied a middle-aged woman to her garden just outside the settlement. She is from one of the islands and currently resides on the mainland. As we stood in the middle of the expanded garden plots, she looked around and sighed, "Ah, there is no bush at all here!" However casual it may sound, the remark has serious implications, for it reveals the current impasse that subsistence horticulture faces in this area. The slash-and-burn horticulture of Malaita requires periodic fallowing and relocation of gardens, so gardening on land without secondary growth is almost unsustainable. The woman was thus expressing, even if unwittingly, awareness of an approaching crisis in "life according to *kastom*." This anecdote demonstrates that it is their everyday experience of the land- and seascapes that supports locals' awareness of their own sociohistorical situation, and this experience further confirms or reinforces their negative self-definition in relation to *kastom*, a definition that they share with their "bush" neighbors.

6. The Unsettling Presence of *Kastom*

6.1 "*Kastom* Sites (*Bae*)" on the Artificial Islands

The negative aspects discussed in the previous section comprise only one side of the Lau relationship with *kastom*, however, and I will examine in this section its other, equally significant side. The apparent paradox here is that, while the Lau accept their image as people who have lost or abandoned their *kastom*, they appear to maintain a close and uneasy relationships with certain things that are seen to embody *kastom* in a strong sense. It is again the artificial islands and the seascape they constitute that matter here. As discussed above in relation to the land-based ideology of *kastom*, today these islands are often cited as material evidence of the Lau's detachment from their ancestral land and its supposedly authentic "life according to *kastom*." At the same time, however, the Lau see and experience these islands as concrete embodiments of the more unsettling aspects of *kastom*.

This phenomenon is particularly manifest in the pre-Christian ritual spaces called *bae*. The *bae* is the space that the Lau, particularly their traditional priests, used in the past for sacrificing pigs to their ancestors and burying their dead.[17] These ritual spaces are understood to be inseparable from the migration traditions mentioned above, in that people usually established them upon settling new places in order to continue their ancestor worship. These *bae* are well preserved and still exist on many artificial islands as well as on the mainland.[18] The *bae* on the islands, which belong to the Lau "saltwater" clans, are particularly striking in appearance. Having fallen into disuse after general Christianization—which in Foubaita took place around the 1970s—they look like dark bushes of different sizes floating over the lagoon, and people traveling by sea never fail to recognize these "bushes" dotting the utterly clear, bright (on sunny days) seascape.

Today, people regard *bae* as embodiments of *kastom* in a strong sense, as their Pijin label as *kastom saet* (*kastom* sites) indicates. *Kastom* in this case denotes, in line with the term's general usage, people's relationships to their pre-Christian ancestors, whose spirits are thought to be present in the ritual spaces. Where *bae* are concerned, that relationship engenders unease and even fear in the Christianized Lau. It is generally forbidden for them to enter the *bae*, given the policy of strict separation between the realms of *kastom* and *lotu* (Christianity). It is believed that displeased ancestors punish trespassers or their relatives, usually by inflicting death or illness.[19]

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[17] The Lau *bae* is equivalent to the Kwaio *ba'e* (Keesing, 1982b: 86–87) and the Kwara'ae *fera aabu* (Burt, 1994a: 56–57).

[18] Of the 16 islands off the coast of Foubaita, 5 have recognizable *bae* on them. In the past, inhabitants of recently constructed islands normally used the *bae* on preexisting islands. This is the main reason for the absence of *bae* on some islands.

Stories of such punishments are related quite frequently among the Lau today. The following incident, related to the *bae* on Fou'iasi Island (lit., rock(s) in the sea) (Figure 2), is well known both because of its severity and because of the social and spatial proximity of this island to Foubaita.[20] This episode concerns the death of an old man in 1992 who was a secondary priest of ancestor worship on Fou'iasi. The primary priest of this island had already died in the 1970s, and most parts of the worship ritual had been discontinued at that time. Thus the secondary priest was the last of the non-Christian generation on Fou'iasi and indeed in the whole Foubaita area. When he died, his sons, who were already Christians, decided to bury their father in a rather syncretic way, neither purely pagan nor Christian. According to the second son, their father expected to be buried "according to *kastom*" in the *bae* of Fou'iasi, but it was neither technically possible nor religiously permissible for them as Christians to conduct such a burial. They decided to bury him in the *bae*, but "in a Christian way (*mala lotu*)," with a Catholic priest present to say a prayer. Their hope was that this alternative might liberate them from their duty to inherit ancestor worship.[21]

Similarly syncretic burials, in which people resorted to Christianity as a refuge from the obligations of *kastom*, were in fact common during this period, although their forms and reported consequences varied considerably. In the Fou'iasi case described here, about 10 years after the burial, two teenage daughters of the second son mentioned above died successively from an unspecified illness, a disaster well remembered in Foubaita today. This son painfully attributes these deaths to the "wrong (*garo*)" that he and his brothers did in burying their father: namely, their muddying of the distinction between *kastom* and *lotu*. Similar narratives related to *bae* and the *kastom* they embody are common, though none is as dire as this one. Many men, for example, can relate boyhood experiences of having fallen sick after entering *bae* out of curiosity. These stories clearly demonstrate that *bae* are regarded as embodiments of the potentially dangerous nature of *kastom*.

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19 Burt (1982: 384) reports a similar view of the potentially dangerous presence of ancestral spirits held by the Kwara'ae. In the case of Isabel Island to the northwest of Malaita, White (1993: 479) observes that, while the spirits were the source of both power and danger in the past, they were redefined in the course of Christianization and have come to be seen as predominantly harmful and destructive beings. The Lau notion of ancestral spirits can be understood as an outcome of a similar process of redefinition.

20 At the time of my fieldwork, 12 of 39 households in Foubaita included one or more cognatic descendants of past Fou'iasi residents. This indicates the centrality of this island to the formation of the current Foubaita settlement. Accordingly, incidents related to Fou'iasi have more or less general significance for the area's population today.

21 Similar behaviors in which people seek protection in Christianity when detaching themselves from ancestral spirits have been observed widely in Malaita (e.g. Burt, 1994a: 257). See footnote 23 for different implications of this type of action under different Christian denominations.

6.2 *Kastom* in the Lau Seascape

The presence of *bae* in association with *kastom* is also significant in the context of Lau experiences of the seascape that surrounds them. As noted above, the *bae* on the artificial islands constitute a marked peculiarity in the contemporary seascape of the Lau Lagoon. This seascape is generally characterized by its striking visual clarity and brightness, in which one can see islands 6 km away or farther on sunny days. The Lau often comment upon such remarkable visibility—that people "can see far and clearly (*ada tau, ada folaa*)"—as a distinctive quality of their maritime environment, in contrast to the "bush" landscape dominated by thick rainforest.[22] As elsewhere in Melanesia, the contrast between "saltwater" and "bush" landscapes here mirrors the contrast between Christianity and *kastom*. The presence of *bae* on the artificial islands, dark bushes of *kastom* in the typical "saltwater" landscape, is therefore markedly exceptional.

The *bae* on the islands are also characterized by their physical closeness to the islanders and coast dwellers. This is especially clear in cases of relatively small islands—often less than 600 m^2 in area—on which these spaces of *kastom*, potentially or actually inflicting disasters on trespassers, exist inside the everyday living space of their inhabitants. These *bae* are also within sight of coast dwellers, who often visit the sea for fishing and other purposes. In contrast, most *bae* on the mainland lie in isolated locations outside present-day Christian settlements. Thus the paradox of this seascape is that the Lau, who are defined and who define themselves negatively as people detached from their *kastom*, experience the close and threatening presence of *kastom* in their everyday environment.

6.3 The Artificial Islands as Embodiments of *Kastom*

The association with *kastom* is not confined to the *bae* specifically; it encompasses the islands as wholes. This much is evident in the common Lau practice of "blessing (*faa-aabu*)" these islands in the course of their conversion to Christianity. For instance, on Fou'iasi Island, after the death of the priest described above, the elders invited Foubaita's Catholic priest to "bless" their island so that it would be free from ancestral taboos once and for all. Such a "blessing" is usually bestowed in the context of a mass, during which the priest walks around the island sprinkling "holy water (*kafo aabu*)" from a bottle. Similar rituals are known to have taken place on other islands in the area, and the frequency with which they occur indicates how closely the artificial islands are associated with *kastom*. For the Lau, these islands are inseparably connected to their pre-Christian ancestors through their construction work, residence according to traditional

[22] In this respect, today's Foubaita landscape on the coast, with relatively open spaces such as the extensive garden area mentioned above, lies precisely in the middle between the "saltwater" and the "bush" landscapes.

restrictions, and burial in *bae*. They consider it necessary to redefine and Christianize the island spaces so that current and subsequent generations might live there safely, free from the possible displeasure of their ancestors.[23]

Ambiguity exists in the case of Fou'iasi, however, where a *bae*, the space of *kastom* par excellence, has been preserved until today. This ambiguity remains a source of concern for Fou'iasi residents and their relatives on the mainland, relating of course to the episodes of *kastom*-related disaster. For example, many people with ties to Fou'iasi attribute the mental disorder of a young male relative, reported to have lasted for several years in the mid-1990s, to ancestral wrath toward the attempted "blessing" of the island mentioned above. For the Lau, then, the artificial islands are inherently connected with *kastom*, this connection having survived the process of Christian conversion and remained a potential source of danger to them.

Among various reasons for the artificial islands' strong association with *kastom*, the most fundamental seems to be their continued material presence since "the time of *kastom*." While some islands were abandoned in the course of Christianization, many continued to serve as homes for the Lau and are still inhabited by them today. The result is a characteristic paradox in the contemporary Lau environment: while pre-Christian customs such as sacrifices to ancestors and menstrual segregation have been largely discontinued, the artificial islands that were their spatial bases are still present. The *bae* on the islands discussed above are but the most outstanding and clearly symbolic expressions of this paradox. It is under such spatial and material conditions that the disastrous incidents described above have occurred.

This paradox has problematic implications for present-day inhabitants of the Foubaita area, where the wave of resettlement from the islands to the coast was accompanied by the practical abrogation of ancestor worship during the 1970s and 80s. The case of Iroi, a male Foubaita resident in his 60s, is illustrative. Iroi moved to Foubaita in the early 1980s from the island of Alite (lit., a name of a tree species) (Figure 2), which is said to have been constructed by his paternal grandfather around 1930. It is a small island and was inhabited by only a few households of Iroi's patrilineal relatives. Alite has been uninhabited since Iroi resettled in Foubaita, and the island is currently overtaken by vegetation. Now, Iroi occupies a peculiarly problematic status in Foubaita's current social relationships, especially in terms of land rights. A certain number of people in the area believe that he is one of the few patrilinial survivors of the "true (*mamana*)"

[23] It is important to note that, in Catholic communities like Foubaita, such a "blessing" is not meant to be an act of desecration or Christianization of the *bae* itself. It is rather an act of establishing a strict separation between the inside and the outside of *bae*, and thus between the spaces of *kastom* and *lotu*: the goal is usually expressed as being "to seal off the *bae* (*bibi faafia bae*)" along with its ancestral spirits. Compare this with the practice of explicit desecration of ancestral shrines among fundamentalist Christians in Malaita (e.g. Burt, 1994a: 128, 256–257).

landholding clan of Foubaita, which occupied the area even before the Foubaita Clan, the current "landowner" group. The matter of land rights remains unclear, however, because Iroi has no close relatives to support his claim and he is not versed in the genealogical knowledge required to legitimate it.[24] He is in fact known to be a quiet and unassertive man, in contrast to certain more aggressive leaders of the Foubaita Clan.

What is striking in Iroi's case is the peculiar presence of the now-abandoned Alite Island in his conception of his own problematic position. According to his explanation, he is vaguely aware of some grave events related to his patriclan in "the time of *kastom*"—interclan feuds and massacres (*omea*), and child adoption against ancestral taboos. Iroi says that it is most likely because of these events and the "wrongs" inherent in them that the land and kinship relations in today's Foubaita remain so obscure. He attributes the death of his young brother in a truck accident in the 1980s to the same causes. Iroi's narrative is characterized by repeated references to Alite. According to him, the island was built by his young grandfather as a kind of refuge from the problem-laden land of Foubaita. As such, it is material testimony to all those "wrongs" related to his family, and its continuing presence reminds him and others of unresolved conflicts from "the time of *kastom*." A paradox here is that, while this abandoned island is a material embodiment of past history, it does not convey anything specific about that history. Although the case of Iroi and Alite Island is exceptional in the breadth of its significance, the local people perceive a similarly paradoxical connection between "the time of *kastom*" and many other islands, and it is this connection that makes the islands' continuing presence so problematic.

7. Discussion

I have pointed to an apparent contradiction in the present-day relationship of the Lau to *kastom*, namely, the paradoxical fact that they, who are seen and who see themselves as people who have lost their *kastom*, maintain close and troubling contact in everyday life with the material embodiment of *kastom* in their artificial islands and the *bae* on them. My point is that these apparently contradictory relationships with *kastom* actually constitute one and the same situation for the Lau, in which their current home and identity are continuously problematized and destabilized.

What is noticeable about the troubling presence of *kastom* discussed in the previous section is its continued ability to unsettle the current life of the Lau people. In the examples above, *kastom* as embodied in the islands and their *bae* is often perceived in terms of past "wrongs" that

[24] As previously mentioned, the lack of genealogical knowledge among the people of Foubaita is often cited by their "bush" neighbors as evidence of the "loss" of *kastom*.

have not yet been corrected. The priest buried in the *bae* of Fou'iasi Island in a semi-Christian way is perceived by many to be still buried "in a wrong way (*garo*)," and this perception leads them to doubt their own everyday understanding that they are living a Christian life in a thoroughly Christianized space. Similarly, for a certain number of people, abandoned Alite Island provides material testimony, albeit unspoken, to the contingency of current kin and land-tenure relations in this area. People perceive that these relations might someday be overturned by the revelation of the "truth" about Alite and its history in "the time of *kastom*."

What these examples suggest is that the consciousness of *kastom* repeatedly calls into question existing social relationships among the Lau—kinship, land tenure, religion, and so forth—often with misfortunes such as illness and death. The Lau understand these relationships to be outcomes of their history of sociocultural change, including their repeated migrations and Christianization, and it is these present-day relationships as historically contingent outcomes that *kastom* continually unsettles and problematizes.

From this viewpoint, the second troubling aspect of the Lau perception of *kastom* does not necessarily contradict the first aspect, namely, their perceived detachment from it. In fact, these two aspects should be understood to constitute together the current destabilization of the Lau people's dwelling and identity, which I discussed in Section 4 in relation to the intended resettlement on ancestral land. Today, the Lau generally accept a negative self-definition in relation to *kastom*, a definition based not only on ideology but also on everyday experiences with land- and seascapes. For example, residents of Foubaita perceive the unsustainability of their subsistence horticulture—and thus of their living where they do—by observing their gardens and other aspects of the landscape that surrounds them. At the same time, they regard the group of partly abandoned artificial islands offshore, another outstanding aspect of their land- and seascapes, as a constant reminder of the historical contingency of their present lives. These islands continuously problematize, through potential and actual disasters related to *kastom*, the status quo of the Foubaita area, suggesting potential other lives and identities for its inhabitants (other kinship, other land tenure, other places to live, etc.). Thus the notion of *kastom* functions in its different aspects as a persistent destabilizer of the Lau's current existence and identity. The contemporary inclination to resettle on ancestral land in inland Malaita should also be understood as a result of the destabilizing role of *kastom*. At the moment, this inclination seems to be adding further instability to the Lau people's situation by pulling them into a long process of searching for and negotiating about their ancestral land.

It should be clear by now how the Lau case challenges conventional anthropological understandings of *kastom* in contemporary Melanesia. First, while most authors have treated it as a symbolic basis for collective identity in Melanesian societies, the Lau experience *kastom*

as something that ceaselessly disrupts their identity as a maritime and Christianized people. The preceding analysis of the Lau concept of *kastom* reveals dynamics altogether different from those of "identity politics"—the conventional framework for discussions of *kastom* in the 1980s and 90s—and thus suggests an alternative, more nuanced perspective on the relationship between *kastom* and collective identity.

Second, regarding the relationship between *kastom* and landscapes, the case of the Lau again exhibits particular complexities that defy common assumptions about the positive ideological connection between them. As discussed above, the Lau people's experience of their land- and seascapes is characterized by apparently paradoxical relations to *kastom*. While some aspects of the present-day landscape are seen as evidence of their detachment from *kastom*, others are seen to embody *kastom* in its troubling nature, and my analysis has shown that these relations generate the current destabilization of their maritime identity and dwelling. The example of the Lau thus illustrates the importance of examining *kastom* in its concrete and intricate embeddedness in people's experiences of their living environment.

Finally, in contrast to historical studies of *kastom* in Malaita, my discussion, with its ethnographic focus on the contemporary situation of the Lau, illuminates the dynamics of the concept in the present. I propose that these different approaches be seen as complementary, together forming a more comprehensive understanding of *kastom* in Malaita.

As my discussion has shown, the concept of *kastom* among the Lau, as elsewhere in Malaita and Melanesia in general, should be understood as an aspect of their reflexive consciousness about the historical changes that they have undergone, such as Christianization and repeated resettlement. It is evident from the arguments above that the Lau see those changes as belonging to the present as well as to the past, and that their own understanding of life and identity in the present is continuously shifting. It is their conception of *kastom* that clearly demonstrates such ongoing instability. Furthermore, these sociocultural changes and their reflexive consciousness about them constitute a kind of recursive dynamics in the present situation of the Lau. Today, their reflection on their own history is generating further changes, as their self-image as people who have lost their *kastom* itself motivates potential or future resettlement in inland Malaita. This suggests that an ethnographic analysis of the present-day status of the notion of *kastom* can usefully extend and supplement historical studies by shedding light on the concept's complex historicity and dynamics.

All these points should not be understood simply as peculiarities of the Lau. In fact, the majority of Melanesian people today, Christians living in coastal settlements, are likely to share the Lau's feelings of estrangement from *kastom* to different degrees and in different contexts. Anthropologists can examine these diverse and dynamic situations without necessarily relying

on the conventional framework of *kastom* discussions. Thus, I hope that my suggestions above will be applied to and tested by other cases in contemporary Melanesia, thereby contributing to renewed interest in the notion of *kastom* and its present-day reality.

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