FRUIT of the MOTHERLAND

Gender in an Egalitarian Society

MARIA LEPOWSKY

Fruit of the Motherland

Gender in an Egalitarian Society

•

Maria Lepowsky

Columbia University Press · New York

Columbia University Press
New York Chichester, West Sussex

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lepowsky, Maria Alexandra.
Fruit of the motherland: gender in an egalitarian society /Maria Lepowsky.
p. cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-231-08120-0
ISBN 0-231-08121-9 (pbk.)
1. Tagula (Papua New Guinea people)—Kinship. 2. Tagula (Papua New Guinea)—Rites and ceremonies. 3. Tagula (Papua New Guinea people)—Social conditions. 4. Matrilineal kinship—Papua New Guinea—Tagula Island. 5. Gender identity—Papua New Guinea—Tagula Island. 6. Equality—Social aspects—Papua New Guinea—Tagula Island. 7. Sex roles—Papua New Guinea—Tagula Island. 8. Tagula Island (Papua New Guinea)—Social life and customs. I. Title.
DU740.42.L47 1993
305.3'09953—dc20 93-8314
CIP

∞
Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America
c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

Preface

Male dominance has often been described as universal in human societies. Female subordination, this would imply, either results directly from human biology or is inherent in human cultures, and perhaps unchangeable. But what would women's and men's lives be like in an egalitarian society, one with no ideology of male superiority and no male coercive power or formal authority over women? What idioms of sociality would prevail, and how would people relate to one another under conditions of gender equality?

In this book I describe the case of Vanatinai, a small, remote island southeast of New Guinea. It is a sexually egalitarian society that challenges the concept of the universality of male dominance and contests the assumption that the subjugation of women is inevitable. Vanatinai has its own distinctive language and culture, not previously studied by anthropologists. This book is about women and men as gendered beings and the ideologies that shape their perceptions, personal qualities, and actions in a gender egalitarian but distinctively Melanesian society.

The great island of New Guinea and the smaller islands off its shores are home to over seven hundred different ethnolinguistic groups. They, and other Melanesian cultures, have frequently been described by anthropologists as egalitarian. Almost all lack chiefs, nobles, or systems of ascribed rank typical of the Polynesian cultures to the east. But that egalitarian tendency describes only relations among men and not those between men and women. Melanesian

societies are generally unstratified, but most of them are based, like almost all societies, on a hierarchy of gender in which men have greater power. In addition, there are often avenues to power and prestige that may be taken by men of ambition and ability but not by women, resulting in further differences among men, with some having more authority, wealth, and knowledge than the rest.

Descriptions of powerful ideologies of male dominance and female pollution found among many of the cultural groups in the interior of New Guinea have become anthropological classics. Nevertheless, New Guinea has been known for the great diversity of gender role patterns in its many distinctive cultures since the pioneering, and still controversial, work of Margaret Mead in 1935.

In striking contrast to many Melanesian cultures and to most cultures worldwide, on Vanatinai there are no ideologies of male superiority and female inferiority. There is considerable overlap between the roles and activities of women and men, and the actions of both sexes are considered equally valuable. Men have no formal authority or powers of coercion over women except for the physical violence that both sexes abhor and that is rare in the extreme. It is not a place where women and men live in perfect harmony and where the privileges and burdens of both sexes are exactly equal, but it comes close. The rules of social life stress respect for the will and personal autonomy of each adult. There are no chiefs, and there is nobody with the formal authority to tell another adult what to do. The emphasis on autonomy is counterbalanced by a high value placed upon choosing to give to others, which is likened to parental nurturing.

The overlap of male and female roles on Vanatinai extends to the most important arena for the acquisition of personal prestige and influence over others, ceremonial exchange and an elaborate series of mortuary rituals. Both women and men give and receive ceremonial valuables, foodstuffs, goods made by women such as clay cooking pots, sleeping mats, and coconut-leaf skirts, and goods made by men such as carved hardwood bowls and lime spatulas. They exchange with partners of both sexes, and men and women may compete across gender lines to obtain the same valuable. Women travel on foot and by sailing canoe to far-flung hamlets and distant islands whose inhabitants speak other languages and have different customs. Women and men alike host the mortuary feasts held intermittently for years after

each death, giving and receiving enormous quantities of customary wealth.

Vanatinai women's participation in economically and ritually essential and prestigious activities leads to their influence over others. They have equal access to material resources, and they form the core of a matrilineal kinship system. A postmarital residence pattern that alternates between the hamlet of the wife and that of the husband gives each spouse equivalent security and support. Women also have access to the culture's most significant form of authority and influence, the role of *gia*, which literally means "giver" or "big man/big woman."

The typically Melanesian institution of the big man has been the subject of anthropological debate for over a generation. Big men gain power through their assertive personalities and their ability to mobilize labor and publicly give away on ritual occasions valuables and food that they have accumulated with the aid of their supporters. This personal form of authority, achieved through competition with others, has been regarded as the hallmark of "egalitarian" Melanesian societies, which lack classes and chiefs. That these are big men, and that women in most of these societies are disenfranchised from access to the predominant form of power over others, has usually been taken for granted by anthropologists. The big women of Vanatinai offer a fresh perspective on forms of authority and constructions of personal power and influence in egalitarian societies.

On Vanatinai the same qualities of strength, wisdom, and generosity are valued in both sexes. Both sexes have access to supernatural power, through communication with ancestors and other spirits, said to underlie all human prosperity, good fortune, and health. And both sexes use techniques, gained from their elders, that harness the powers of spirits to destroy or injure others through sorcery or witchcraft. The prominent position of women in daily and ritual life is reflected in key myths about the origins of the physical world and of social relations. Gender ideology and mythology associate both women and men with crucial forms of customary knowledge and practice. Female beings first possessed the knowledge of how to cook with fire and how to exchange ceremonial valuables. Women, the islanders say, give life while men kill, and life-giving is morally superior.

I went to Sudest Island, the European name Vanatinai has been given on maps and nautical charts, because I had admittedly romantic visions of being on a South Sea island as little affected as possible by Western cultures where people lived according to "tradition." I wanted to do a holistic, old-fashioned ethnographic study, not one on a narrowly focused topic, like those most frequently published during the years that I was a graduate student. And I wanted to do it in a place that had never previously been studied by an anthropologist. I had grandiose ideas, long a staple of ethnographers, of having "my own people" to study, but I could justify them with good, scientific reasons: putting another culture on the anthropological map, value for comparative studies, efficient use of my ethnographic labor by not reworking a place that had already seen lots of anthropologists. This last was a particularly urgent problem, because several months of searching the University of California at Berkeley libraries convinced me that practically every inhabited coral islet in the Pacific had seen one if not many anthropologists. I was clearly not the only eager researcher to be lured by the South Sea island mystique.

Finally, I wanted to do research in a place where "the status of women" was high. I wanted to study a people I could really admire. I do not find ideologies of male superiority admirable, and, as a woman, I preferred not to do research in a place where such ideologies were prevalent. I had already lived with sexual inequalities in the United States. I did not want to spend my time in the Pacific trying to cajole my way into the men's cult house in order to see interesting rituals or hear esoteric ancestral lore. The more I thought about the hypothetical possibility of living in a sexually egalitarian society, the more compelling it began to be as a research problem, one that by its nature necessitated a holistic perspective on social life and custom. Did sexual equality exist? How would it come about? How was social organization engendered? Would privileges and restrictions, power and influence be parallel at each stage of the life cycle for males and females? What kinds of personal qualities would be expected, and socialized, in each sex? This was in 1974, when a feminist resurgence was starting to make an impact in anthropology but when studies of sex roles (the word gender had not yet come into vogue) or women

were still unusual. In 1972 I had taken a seminar on the anthropology of sex roles, convened by May Diaz—the first ever offered at Berkeley. From across San Francisco Bay, at Stanford University, we heard reports of the course on women in cross-cultural perspective that Michelle Rosaldo, Jane Collier, and others had recently organized, which later resulted in the publication of the influential volume *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974).

I concentrated my search for a field site on matrilineal areas of the Pacific, figuring that a horticultural society where descent was traced through women would accord at least some cultural weight to them. This was also a way of addressing the riddle of how to find a culture with a high status of women if such a culture had never been studied. Months later I returned to an anthropological beginning. I found my research site on the map on page 30 in Malinowski's (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, arguably the single most important work in shaping modern anthropology. About three hundred miles southeast of the Trobriand Islands, site of Malinowski's pioneering research in 1915–18, there were two islands in the lower right-hand corner of the map, Sudest and Misima, that had not been studied, as far as I knew. They were large by Pacific standards, not just dots of coral, with distinctive cultures and languages. As I describe later in this book, the whole culture area, the Massim, which is largely matrilineal, had been repeatedly described by anthropologists, for seventy years, as having a "high status of women," but nobody had yet, I thought, documented this. (Annette Weiner's influential restudy of the Trobriand Islands of 1976, focusing on women's ceremonial exchange, was published two years later.)

Fired with enthusiasm, I wrote a research proposal for a holistic study of sex roles and culture, hypothesizing—because I was applying to the National Science Foundation—that if Sudest or Misima really did have "a high status of women," it would be reflected in equal treatment in each stage of the life cycle and that women would be prominent in the interisland ceremonial exchanges and the mortuary rituals that were characteristic of the Massim culture area. Apparently, feminist winds of intellectual change had reached the anthropology panel of the National Science Foundation, because they funded my research, although a variety of circumstances delayed my departure for Papua New Guinea until 1977.

In many ways I found what I hoped to on Sudest Island, or, as those who live there call it, Vanatinai, which literally means "motherland." This includes, most importantly, a people for whom I have the greatest respect and admiration. The island culture is sexually egalitarian overall in its principles and in the daily and ritual lives of its people, but I cannot describe it as one in which there is perfect equality between the sexes.

I have tried not to write a "Western feminist allegory" (Clifford 1986) or to idealize the people of Vanatinai for rhetorical or political effect. Still, the example of Vanatinai is a countermodel to Western gender relations, one that, by its difference, is both an implicit and, finally, an explicit critique of Western ideologies of domination (cf. Marcus and Fischer 1986). But this book, I think, will fail to satisfy either of two conflicting feminist agendas that I have encountered previously when describing my research to others. The first is the wish to find corroboration of universal male dominance and the universal oppression of women, and the second is the desire to learn that, somewhere in the world, there is a place where sexual equality is real and absolute. Vanatinai is much more in the direction of the latter, though; it is a society in which there is no ideology of male superiority, and one in which women have the same kinds of personal autonomy and control of the means of production as men.

I no longer believe it possible to describe "the [single and invariant] status of women" in any society. I have tried to document multiple social positions and gender ideologies as articulated in words and actions in varying contexts, looking for congruences and contradictions and for individual variations. I have, as I initially proposed, focused on exchange and mortuary ritual—finding that women were indeed prominent in these prestigious and influential arenas—on the life cycle, and on indigenous notions of personal power.

I came to realize, beginning with my first days on the island, that "tradition," or custom, *mumuga*, as Vanatinai people say, is not something static, unified, and unchanging, but flexible, continually modified, and reinterpreted. I encountered rituals that were said to date from the "time of the ancestors," a rich and detailed body of myths, customs, and beliefs in sharp contrast to my own about such things as sorcery and witchcraft, and women in coconut-leaf skirts. I also found

professed Christians who petition ancestor spirits, rituals that involved axe blades of polished greenstone but have changed dramatically within living memory, myths about a spirit who departed for the land of Europeans with gold and machinery, elderly men and women who spoke an English-based Papuan Pidgin the younger generation could not understand, and men in well-worn Bruce Lee T-Shirts. Vanatinai is a "traditional" culture, but not because it exists in (as nearly as you can find these days) some kind of pristine, primeval isolation. Its people, most of them, are militant and self-conscious cultural conservatives, who have been eclectically adapting certain ideas, customs, and technologies from Europeans over the last century and a half, from other islanders for millennia, and actively resisting others. Accordingly, I have focused on historical transformations that have shaped island lives, particularly constructions of gender.

I use a variety of approaches in this book to the problem of how to communicate my perceptions, experiences, and constructions to multiple others, an audience that includes both educated Vanatinai people and educated people from my own country. I make no claim of presenting an objective reality. I try to locate myself as a positioned subject, in Renato Rosaldo's (1989) phrase, in this text, not only to establish my ethnographic authority (cf. Clifford 1983), which I see as a worthy objective in anthropological writing, but as a way of indicating my experiences with Vanatinai people and their customs and how I have represented them.

I have interwoven the distancing rhetoric of abstraction, generalization, and interpretation with narrative and anecdote and with dense ethnography, following an old-fashioned, Malinowskian tradition. I have tried to evoke island scenes and describe islanders' thoughts and actions as I perceived or experienced them to allow readers to reach their own partially independent understandings, inevitably refracted through my subjective constructions. I present descriptions of the value of girl babies, land tenure patterns, excerpts from Captain Owen Stanley's diary from the summer of 1849 in which he relates that the women have "a certain amount of Command," warfare customs, the multiple roles of women in mortuary rituals, sorcery practices, and the myth of Bambagho, the female snake who produced the first ceremonial valuables and taught the first magic of exchange to a wise old woman.

I use the arrival trope, a convention both of ethnographic writing and other accounts of travel, because I have found it to be an effective narrative device, both in making sense of my own experiences and in communicating them to others, verbally and in writing. Mary Louise Pratt (1986) has perceptively noted that classic opening narratives of anthropological accounts from the Pacific Islands use the same devices as accounts of Pacific "discoverers." These include "the classic Polynesian arrival scene" where the European is first welcomed on the beach to a utopian world and led to the chief, and the metaphor of the castaway, at first reluctant to be, literally, stranded with the islanders but eventually absorbed into their world.

My own arrival in the islands had remarkable, and slightly unnerving, resonances with some of these earlier accounts. An island is not a bounded cultural universe, but still, the moment when you wade ashore and step onto the beach, both you and the islanders recognize that you have crossed a boundary into someplace unique and apart, a place that is theirs and where you are the visitor, *bwabwali*. The arrival narrative has a particular aptness for evoking to others what it is like to go and live on a remote island. I had the eerie, and unexpected, experience of feeling that I was living out some description of early contact written in the last century, but that was mixed with the jarring and distinctly postmodern effect of seeing such things as men wearing T-Shirts with the words "Boston Giants" (made in Singapore?) or a picture of Muhammed Ali. But it was First Contact—between me and them—and my description is First Contact for the reader. It shows the radical otherness I perceived and the otherness with which some islanders saw me at first—me with my corpselike white skin and long hair (uncut, like someone in mourning) and the island women in long "grass" skirts, bodies bare to the waist and blackened with charcoal for a mortuary ritual—and how, from my perspective, we negotiated our relationships and gradually came to know each other.

I have changed many personal names and some place names in this account of Vanatinai life in order to protect the privacy of individuals and their families.

Chapter 1 contains the narrative of my first encounters with Louisiade Archipelago peoples and of the mutual perceptions that generated my field research experiences and shaped my understand-

ings of Vanatinai custom and thought. In chapter 2 I present a theoretical overview of gender equality and inequality, outlining different arguments and hypotheses about male dominance and female autonomy, setting the stage for using the ethnographic example of Vanatinai to see if it fits various models of dominance or equality and associated gender roles and ideologies. I introduce aspects of the social life and history of Vanatinai and their relation to changing gender relations, religious philosophy and worldview, and exchange and ritual practice. Chapter 3 focuses on the life cycles of islanders of both sexes, comparing the ideologies and expectations, privileges and proscriptions attached to being male or female at different life stages. Chapter 4 examines religion, cosmology, and supernatural bases of power and efficacy, relating them to gender ideologies and symbolism as reflected in myth, magic, and ritual. Chapter 5 looks at gender and the destructive powers of sorcery and witchcraft. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on ceremonial exchange and mortuary ritual, key arenas for the performance and validation of personal and gender identity. Finally, in chapter 8 I discuss gender roles, ideologies, and power in this egalitarian society, their cultural and historical contexts, their significance for the cross-cultural analysis of gender relations, and their implications for the possibilities of changing relations between women and men elsewhere in the world.

The research on which this book is based was carried out in Papua New Guinea for sixteen months in 1977–79, two months in 1981, and three months in 1987. I am grateful for the following sources of financial support: the National Science Foundation, the Chancellor's Patent Fund and Department of Anthropology of the University of California at Berkeley, the Papua New Guinea Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of the National Institutes of Health, and the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The maps were prepared with the assistance of the Cartography Laboratory, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Short sections of this book were previously published in earlier versions as parts of "Big Men, Big Women, and Cultural Autonomy," *Ethnology* (1990), 29(1):35–50; "Gender in an Egalitarian Society: A

Case Study from the Coral Sea," in Peggy Sanday and Ruth Goodenough, eds., *Beyond the Second Sex: New Directions in the Anthropology of Gender*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, pp. 171–223; "Sudest Island and the Louisiade Archipelago in Massim Exchange," in Jerry Leach and Edmund Leach, eds., *The Kula: New Perspectives on Massim Exchange*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 467–501; and "Death and Exchange: Mortuary Ritual on Vanatinai (Sudest Island)," in Frederick Damon and Roy Wagner, eds., *Death Rituals and Life in the Societies of the Kula Ring,* De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989, pp. 199–229. The table and figures 1 and 2 previously appeared as well, in slightly different form, in my chapter in *Death Rituals and Life in the Societies of the Kula Ring.* I thank the publishers for the permission to use this material here.

Since 1977 I have been helped in diverse ways by many sympathethic and knowledgeable people. In Port Moresby these include Mary-Jane Mountain, Barry Shaw, the Honorable Rabbie Namaliu, Margaret Nakikus, Charles Lepani, Sue Andrews, Gary Simpson, Mac Marshall, Leslie Marshall, Michael and Elahe Walter, Jacob Simet, Wari Iamo, the students, faculty, and staff of the Department of Anthropology and the Department of Community Medicine of the University of Papua New Guinea, and the staff at the Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research. In Alotau I am grateful for the assistance of Jack Bagita, Lepani Watson, Virgil Matalale, John Rorossi, Murray and Cathy Abel, Dr. Colin Lewis, Dr. Festus Pawa, Ron Baloiloi, and the staff of the Milne Bay Provincial Government Office and the Milne Bay Provincial Health Department. I thank Weli Edoni at Samarai. At Misima I would like to thank the Honorable Jacob Lemeki and to give special thanks to Rachel and Teddy Imatana and family. Three district officers, Jon Bartlett, Victor Arme, and Kevin Kadadaya, and their staffs provided assistance. I also thank Albie and Ruth Munt, David Hanton, Benoni Kadulu, Meri Latu, John Fifita, and the captains and crews of MV *Lilivaso*, MV *Misima*, and MV *Laba*.

At Tagula Station, Sudest Island, I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Officers in Charge Matthew Pabarikia and his wife, Josephine, Nou Labui and his wife, Philomena, and Mr. and Mrs. Francis Yuwa. I also thank John Maika, Boas Tubaria, and the staff at

Tagula Station. Special thanks go to Mathew and Timaima Paulisbo at Badia and to Theodore and Veronica Kopu. At Nimowa I thank Father Joseph Ensing, Father Kevin Young, Mother Antoninus, Sister Margaret, Sister Maria Cornelia, Sister Juliana, and Sister Marlene for their kindness and hospitality. At Jinjo, Rossel Island, my thanks go to Father Kevin English, Sister Brenda, Sister Mary, and Sister Caritas, and, at Pambwa, to Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel Kieke.

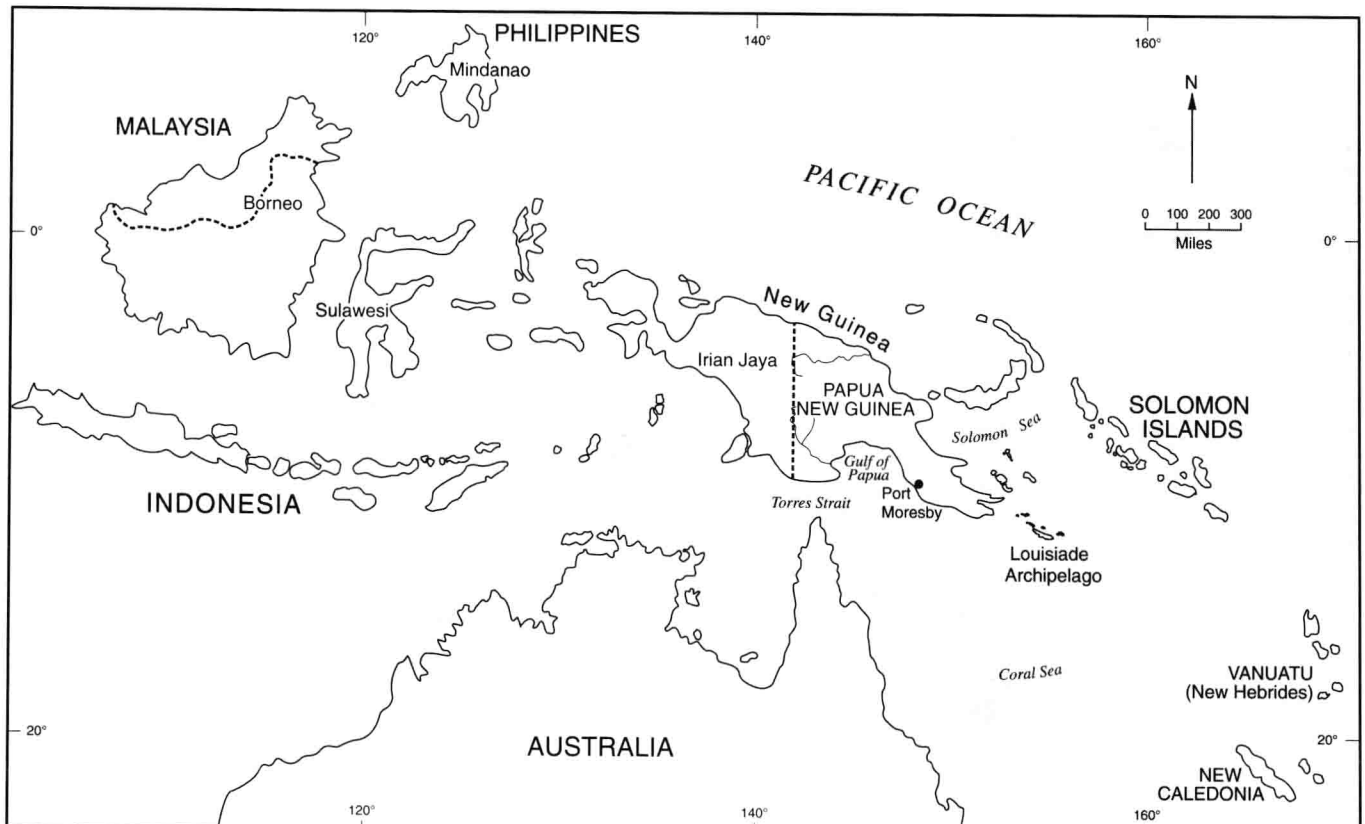
I am deeply grateful to many people on Vanatinai and nearby islands for their hospitality, interest, friendship, and assistance. In the Jelewaga area, I would particularly like to thank Kaile, Pode, Mulia, Salome, Dante, Denden, Malabwaga, Koita, Sebo, Sete, Josephine, Lote and family, Friday, Eimi, Beda, Kai, Kay, Gole, Sikoya, Bwaka, Ebenel, Saina, Sididi, Zilo, Barbara, Koya and family, Abel and family, Kelela, Nanosi, Kowak, Bwanaiwe, Sapili, Potete and family, Ludi, Yadama, Sale, Piron, Jita, Bwawa, Dobo, Boi and family, Kemp and Villo Harre, Tagilan, Dosin, Ulawa, and the people of Eyuba, with special thanks to Missis Joan Ulawa, Koita Dosin, Kasiman Dosin, and Tielly Tagilan. My thanks go also to Tabiau and family, Irene and Joseph, Theresa, Maria and Frank, Kandewe, Peter Edoni and Denise, Sisi, Geraldine, John Walia, Gus, Magani, Padi, Kadau, Stanley Siai, Dabua, Didimali and family, Latage and family, Patrick, Joseph, Bogau, Tom, Antonita, Barbara, Bwaileta, Martin Siyabibi, and Nilla. I give special thanks to Rorosi Tomiebe and family, Vitalis Rorosi, Noelene, and everyone at Grass Island Village.

My greatest debt and my deepest thanks go to Martin Peter, Nora Moses, Thomas Robutu, and Jimmy, Daisy, and Hina Martin, who accepted me into their home and family and tried to teach me about life on Vanatinai.

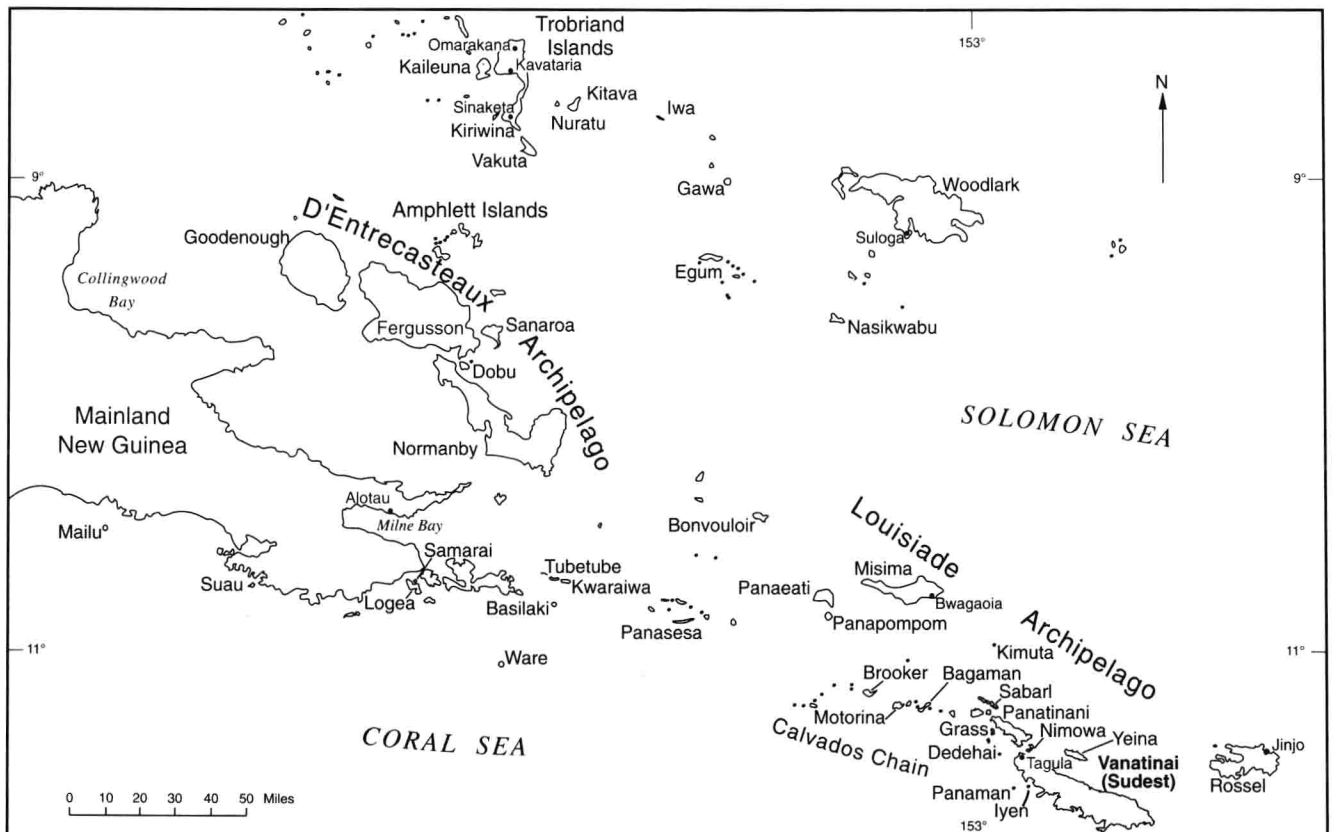
Ago laghie moli ghea ghemi giagia na!

I thank the people who have offered useful comments and criticisms of various incarnations of this book and its ideas. They include Margaret Mackenzie, Elizabeth Colson, Margaret Clark, Sheldon Margen, William Shack, Burton Benedict, David Baker, Wari Iamo, Sharon Hutchinson, Robert Brightman, Kirin Narayan, Fitz Poole, and several anonymous reviewers. I thank my parents, Robert and Florence Lepowsky, for their comments, for teaching me to value equality and to respect the will of others—values I found so prominent on Vanatinai—and for their continual encouragement and moral support.

I dedicate this book to the people of Vanatinai and their neighbors, with deepest admiration and respect. I hope they will forgive my mistakes and misunderstandings and realize that I have tried to do what I was instructed, "to write it down properly."



Southwest Pacific



Islands of Southeastern New Guinea — The Massim