

Chapter Five



Planting the Past, Tending the Future

Following Wycliffe's recounting of the Bulelala story and his comments that "yams are like children," that, like people, "they have spirit" (see chap. 3), I speculated that on Nuakata pregnancy was analogous to gardening.¹ My reading of Massim ethnographies bolstered this working hypothesis, for example, Battaglia's comments that people on Sabarl "think of their growing food, [and particularly yams] as being 'like children'" (1990, 94). As gardeners they consider themselves to be nurturing parents who will be nurtured, in turn, by their offspring or produce. Similarly, Thune (1990) writes of Loboda village, Duau, that yams are spoken of as human beings and, as such, possess spirit. In describing the sacred quality of gardens on Dobu, Fortune declares that yams are considered "humans in metamorphosis" ([1932] 1989, 95); they are "personal beings in metamorphized forms" (101). Only those possessing knowledge of garden rituals know how this transformation occurred within their own matrilineage. Each *susu* passes on to its members (male and female alike) its own strain of seed yams. When people marry they plant their own seed yams in separate gardens from those of their spouses, thereby ensuring that their seeds remain within, and may be continuously passed down, their matrilineage.

Aware of this, and because in Alina Nu'ata the word for pregnancy, *hiuma*, means "they plant in the ground or under the soil,"² I reasoned that an intimate knowledge of planting would beget local knowledge of pregnancy. It would provide insight into the relations between men and women, *susu* and affine, mother and child, enacted and expressed through childbirth. Most important, I hoped that gardening and birthing

knowledge and practices on Nuakata would express local understanding of the gendered person/self. I needed to understand knowledge and practices associated with pregnancy, contraception, birth, *and* gardening (e.g., garden selection, preparation, weeding, harvesting), taking careful note of who plants what, how, when, and for whom. For this reason, among others, I wanted—needed—to accompany Geteli, Sineliko, and Eunice on their treks to their gardens. Although founded on insubstantial evidence, this hypothesis subsequently functioned as a concealed reference point for my parallel investigations of Nuakatan gardening, pregnancy/childbirth knowledge, and practices.

Pregnancy and Kastom

Soon after our move to Gohiya I spoke with Susan, who was then aged twenty-one, divorced, and the single mother of a son, Rex, aged three. Susan volunteered to speak with me about her experience of pregnancy and childbirth. I asked her, “Are there any things that you do, any foods that you don’t eat, or any special customs that you have when you are pregnant?” Focusing on the things that she did while pregnant, she replied in Alina Nu‘ata:

When I [am] pregnant (*yahiuma*) I don’t walk about too much. I walk only in the daytime and then I return to my village. I cannot walk at night in case I accidentally break a spider’s web. Also, I cannot eat food that is forbidden. I cannot eat fish. If I eat it, then an accident might happen.

In this conversation Susan spoke of “doing” or “enacting” pregnancy—*yahiuma* (I pregnant). Although a common way of describing pregnancy on Nuakata (i.e., as a stative verb), women also referred to pregnancy as a state or condition that is their semialienable possession: ‘*agu hiuma* (my pregnancy). Like food planted, grown, and later ingested by the gardener and her kin, the active state of pregnancy transforms the woman as she, in turn, transforms it. Pregnancy was temporarily of, but not completely indissociable from, the (pregnant) woman. Susan refrained from eating fish, shellfish, and squeezed food during pregnancy, for she knew they would make herself and her unborn child sick. When asked, she could not explain these customary practices, imparted by her mother and sister during her pregnancy. Susan practiced these customs without contem-

plating their possible meaning or wider cultural significance. These, she said, were the only customs associated with pregnancy that she practiced.

Later in the year, however, when she had remarried, was two or three months pregnant, and was living at Gohiya, Susan also demonstrated her belief in the relationship between place and maternal health during pregnancy. Having lived at Gohiya for several weeks, she became ill. On Eunice's advice she returned to her matrilineal hamlet at Bolime. Explaining the move, Eunice told me that a pregnant woman should stay in, or return to, her natal hamlet when she feels sick. Even if the pregnant woman is not sick during pregnancy, she should return to her hamlet to give birth. Both the woman and her unborn baby will be healthier when staying in their own hamlet, with members of their *susu*. Female members of her *susu* will care for her and tend her gardens if she is too sick or too big to work. When pressed for a reason why, she simply said, '*wuwuma yadi dalava*' (because it's their hamlet). Although she did not elaborate, it seemed that not only does the unborn child already belong to its mother's *susu*, but it has a place within her womb and the *susu* hamlets where she lives, stays, and belongs. Carried by its mother, the unborn child stays where she stays, belongs where she belongs, is grown by the food grown on her land.

Seeking to understand Susan's fear of walking at night and breaking the spider's web, I asked Eunice to explain this custom. Dismissive, she described it as a belief akin to superstition. Later in the year, Mari—a woman in her mid-twenties who was then about seven months pregnant with her third child—gave the following explanation.

If we are walking about and a spider's web gets us, then when its our time for giving birth we will not be able to give birth properly. The baby will go down and get stuck. That's why we don't go for a spin at night, because if the spider gets us it will make us bad. That belief remains with the older women, but now in this time the "light" has increased, prayer has become meaningful to each one of us and so when we go for a spin at night and the spider gets us, it will be all right when we give birth. Before, in the time of our ancestors, it was bad. At that time they forbade women, if they were pregnant, from walking around in the night. This time it's a bit all right.

By Mari's account, her ancestors thought that spiders' webs effectively, if not actually, penetrate the bodies of pregnant women, ensnaring

their unborn children, thereby preventing birth. More recently, however, the power of these ideas has diminished as a result of people's belief in a Christian god. They no longer need fear the night, for they walk in the light of God's care. Because of her belief in God, then, Mari did not follow customary practices in relation to pregnancy. While she did not doubt the power of these ancestral beliefs, they were, for her, effectively obsolete. When asked if she knew and/or practiced other customs relating to pregnancy Mari told me:

If we are pregnant we eat plenty of food. In the past some pregnant women were staying and they fasted from some foods. They said, if they are pregnant they cannot eat plenty of food, especially fish and shellfish. They won't eat fish and shellfish, in case their children develop sores. It was taboo for women to eat these foods. That was an old custom of our old mothers, in their time. At this time we can eat any kind of food. Myself, I eat all kinds of food, fish and shellfish. Sometimes if we want we eat, and sometimes if we don't want then we don't eat. If we eat and we are vomiting or we don't feel like a particular type of food then we won't eat it. If we feel like roasted food or cooked food we will eat it.

From my observations and discussions with these and other women of both Susan's and Mari's as well as Eunice's generations it seemed that observance of customary practices associated with pregnancy was a matter of personal and familial belief on Nuakata. All these women regularly attended the United Church and Women's Fellowship meetings and identified themselves as Christians. Only some considered these customary practices to be incompatible with Christian beliefs. The range of foods eaten by pregnant women was not only contingent upon their belief in the efficacy of food taboos, but also determined by personal and familial circumstances: who was willing and able to assist the pregnant woman in her garden, the seasonal availability of food, family size, and the attitude of the woman's husband and kin to her condition. Some men, for example, were very supportive, assisting their pregnant wives in the garden and fishing regularly, while others seemed indifferent.

When discussing pregnancy with these women, I, and they in turn, employed the term *kastom*. People spoke of "our *kastom*" or "our ways" to describe specific practices enacted or done within their *susu*, clan, generation, on Nuakata, across Papua or the Milne Bay region. The meaning

and use of this term was unstable, differing according to the context in which it was spoken and the speaker. It was used to unite and divide or oppose. It was not a neutral term. For example, when spoken of in church or by Moses in relation to local health practices, *kastom* was often used pejoratively, denoting un-Christian or uneducated practices and values (cf. Dureau 1994, 15–18; see Keesing 1989c; Keesing and Jolly 1992)—barely civilized, traditional ways that should be discarded. In these contexts *kastom* was not thought of as practices unique to or constitutive of the contemporary Nuakatan community or culture. Rather, speakers implied that *kastom* referred to relics of a primitive—Papuan, if not national—Papua New Guinean past. By continuing to practice *kastom*, Nuakatan people and, by implication, Papuans and Papua New Guineans aligned themselves with this primitive past rather than a developed, civilized future. However, often these same speakers identified some Papua New Guinean, even Melanesian *kastom* as preferable to and distinguishable from *dimdim kastom*, most notably the *wantok* system in which people are obligated to care for family and friends. In addition, when describing feasts and mortuary ceremonies to me, people used this term to positively identify modified contemporary forms of Nuakatan mortuary practices. On these occasions *kastom* functioned as a synonym, of sorts, for an objectified culture—for collective practices that variously reinforced a sense of belonging to the people and places of Nuakata and/or Milne Bay (see Foster 1995; Keesing and Tonkinson 1982).

Teachers and, through them, children at the local primary school represented *kastom* as practices that the people of Nuakata *have*. For example, to fulfill a national education agenda, arguably conceived by post-colonial elites living and working on the mainland, the school designated each Friday as a cultural/*kastom* day. Girls dressed in grass skirts and boys wore pubic coverings made from pandanus. A part of the day was devoted to performance of local dances, songs, stories, and occasional demonstrations of “traditional” yet still commonly practiced ways of lighting fires, hunting, or fishing. Performed out of their usual context, these activities were identified and reified by teachers as *kastom*—ways that constitute unique and desirable aspects of Nuakatan culture. By performing these customary practices the schoolchildren would preserve and repossess them as a source of cultural identity and unity. While these ostensibly benign practices were designated and quarantined as cultural, other customary practices, particularly those considered harmful to people’s health and nutritional status (e.g., chewing betel nut, practicing all

forms of magic, using barks and plants for health purposes), were declared uninformed and therefore expendable. Adults and children alike found custom/culture days amusing, if not quaint. In my presence at least, children felt self-conscious, even embarrassed, when I saw them clothed like their forebears. Despite their reservations older people felt these events gave them the opportunity to tell and thereby pass on their stories. For this reason they continued to give this practice their tacit support.

Through the primary school cultural days and the preschool indigenous language program, culture on Nuakata was constituted as a set of benign customary practices. People were encouraged to imagine their forebears and, by implication, themselves as a collectivity with commonly held ideas and practices. Construed as extrinsic to people, as an overarching system, Nuakatan culture comprised a shared language and mainly traditional customary practices that were selectively and strategically revived and appropriated. It was worn, performed, and spoken. It was also Christian. In reinforcing, if not inventing (see Keesing 1989a; Wagner 1981), a unique Nuakatan culture, educators were effecting a broader sociopolitical agenda, one born of the colonial critiques central to the Papua New Guinean Independence (Crocombe 1994; Lindstrom and White 1994). Local people were actively encouraged to take pride in their island and those foundational stories, practices, and rituals of their forebears that were compatible with Christian beliefs. It was hoped that this pride would keep young people at home, on the island, committed to maintaining and developing their local community, rather than drifting to the mainland centers in search of illusive paid employment and an independent urban future.

In other contexts, *kastom* was not strictly construed as things to be “had,” as my questions and the *kastom*/culture days at the school implied. In these instances, *kastom* was represented as dynamic practices. As with the paths forged by people that socialize or inhabit the landscape, *kastom* was spoken of as “ways” to be followed (*kastom* ‘*umulitaedi*) or respected (‘*uve’abihiyedi*). They were respectful or “proper” ways of living and staying on Nuakata, ways that preceded those currently living and staying there. They were conventional ways or paths, enacted by those that came before and reenacted and transformed by those that follow (see Wagner 1981). Often these ways were specific to men, women, children, members of a *susu* or clan. In respecting them, people evinced sociality. *Kastom* belonged to people, but, more impor-

tant, to “time(s)” embodied and inhabited by people. Like Mari, people described them as belonging to “the time of our ancestors.” As these temporal embodiments passed away, so too the customary practices disappeared, unless, that is, they were reembodied, reenacted, and retemporalized by those that followed. By enacting these ways, continuity between past, present, and future generations was consolidated, if not created. While *kastom* was not spoken of as created or authored by people, these practices are selectively known and enacted by some people. These people were described as the “owners” or, perhaps more accurately, the custodians of this knowledge. Owners of this knowledge are entitled to recompense for enacting customary practices, and they alone choose who, if anyone, may be given this knowledge in subsequent generations. This knowledge is typically, but not exclusively, passed on, through what Lindstrom (1994, 74) describes as a customary apprenticeship relationship, to a worthy junior member of one’s *susu* or clan. Often money, goods, and services are exchanged for knowledge. Like Wycliffe, people may be given certain *kastom* knowledge without receiving either the right or the capacity to enact or practice it.

When I asked Susan and Mari what *kastom* they had, or “did,” in relation to pregnancy, I appealed to a notion of *kastom* and, by implication, culture as discrete practices constituting a corpus of collectively constituted and potentially cohesive, traditional cultural beliefs, possessed by local people. As with my efforts to understand notions of the gendered person on Nuakata, I sought to uncover, penetrate, dissect, and extract the meaning of these customary practices as one might crack a code. I construed them as functional and strategic practices, logical means serving identifiable and purposeful ends. I invested these practices with a meaning and significance that were independent of their enactment.

M. Strathern (1988) claims that assumptions of this kind are peculiarly Western, stemming from the “commodity logic” that pervades Western thought and economic practice. Accordingly, people living in the Western world imagine that there is an overarching system of relationships variously called *culture* or *society* (see also Rosaldo 1989, 32). Imagined as real, as a real source of understanding, practices, and values, this abstract system is believed to impose itself upon people; it does things to people, compelling them to think and act in certain ways.

Western people imagine themselves as double proprietors. On the one hand they naturally own themselves, and their personal attributes,

including their gender. On the other hand, their capacity for communication with one another is based on their common ownership of a culture. But if they own culture, culture also owns them. Proprietorship thus introduces the subject-object relation, in which either may become a thing in the hands of the other. . . . [Culture] stands as a thing over and beyond them. (M. Strathern 1988, 322)

Strathern's analysis of the commodity logic implicit in Western thought, particularly evident in notions of culture, society, the subject, self, or even personality, rings true. Certainly some of my questions about *kastom* manifested this understanding. However, the idea, which is not necessarily Strathern's, that proprietorial notions of society and subject are the only ways Western people understand themselves, others, and their different worlds, is problematic. It takes little or no account of people's differing circumstances and the complex and often contradictory stances they assume in their worlds. In drawing a sharp distinction between Western and Melanesian ways of knowing, between Melanesian sociality and the Western notion of society, Strathern also states that Melanesian communities lack both the language and the concept of culture or society, either their own or others. This proposition is both unsustainable and mystifying in the contemporary Nuakatan context. As illustrated above, *kastom* and the often related term *culture* have multiple meanings on Nuakata, some of which approximate a proprietorial view of culture (see Foster 1995). The term *kastom* was differentially employed on Nuakata, as elsewhere in Melanesia. Sometimes it was used to differentiate between past and present, Christian and pre-Christian, Papuan and *dimdim*, ideas, values, and practices. Other times it was used as a "pan-Melanesian re-presentation of the past . . . —[an] idiom of resistance to colonial and postcolonial domination" (Dureau 1994, 15).

Believing there was more to be told about women's experience of pregnancy on Nuakata, I attempted on many occasions to question Wycliffe's sister Geteli about her five pregnancies. However, unlike discussions of other aspects of her life, she did not, and seemingly would not, elaborate on her pregnancies. My questions about pregnancy always seemed out of context, going against the tide of our conversations and our lives; she was breast-feeding her nine-month-old child at the time and had declared that he was to be her last-born child. Pregnancy was therefore the last thing she wanted to think about, and I had only an intention to become pregnant, but had no lived experience to share. In responding to my persistent

inquiries, she, like so many others, deferred to older women's expertise, changed the subject, or remained silent. She repeatedly insisted that women do not speak (about) their pregnancies with one another, except to comment on their health or perhaps where they intend to birth. Should they wish to talk further, they do this with one of their female kin, particularly their mothers. Ordinarily, then, there is little cause to speak of pregnancy on Nuakata. Pregnancy is simply done, lived. It is not highlighted or reified as a discrete and distinct event in the life cycle of mother and child as my questions inferred. The child within the womb is grown until it is born. The unborn is not imagined as a developing fetus, and the process of growth is not cause for speculation, but is accepted as necessarily concealed and known only by the swollen stomach of the mother and the movements of the unborn child.

Geteli's responses to my questions about pregnancy matched my stymied attempts to go to the garden with either her or Sineliko. Frequent requests were made and countless arrangements forged. Each time, though, I found myself left behind in Gohiya. This became a standing joke between Sineliko and me. She took great delight in "tricking" me. With Geteli it was a slightly different story. Sometimes she claimed that she "forgot," or "saw me working with Wycliffe" and did not want to interrupt. Most times, however, she told me that there was nothing for me to see or do, she was only weeding. But this was clearly not the case. Her baskets were always laden with food. Amused by the image of myself as the witless anthropologist badgering Geteli to show me her gardens, I also despaired of ever going there, of ever learning more about the relationship between gardening, pregnancy, and birth.

Blocking Pregnancy

One day, six months into my fieldwork, while walking over to the school with my neighbors Malida (a woman in her early fifties) and her younger sister Rosemary (a woman in her early forties), Malida pointed out several plants known and used by women to prevent pregnancy. I was stunned. I knew women used local plants and roots for this purpose, but my efforts to discover what they were and how they were used had, until then, gone unrewarded. While some younger women, both married and unmarried, reluctantly confessed that they used plants to prevent pregnancies, my attempts to question them further met with embarrassed silences or evasive asides.

No doubt they were concerned that in revealing their contraceptive practices I and— perhaps more significantly—Wycliffe (and through him other people on the island) would become privy to their ordinarily unspoken decisions about these matters. Perhaps women’s reticence to speak on these issues was also born of historical resistance to colonial and particularly Methodist missionary intervention in maternal practices, including indigenous fertility control (Ram and Jolly 1998; Reed 1998; Eves 1996a). Colonial opposition to indigenous fertility control was widespread across Melanesia. Jolly (1998b) and Dureau (1998) indicate that in Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Solomons, for example, indigenous forms of fertility control were vigorously opposed by Methodist missionaries and colonial administrators concerned with depopulation. Dureau (1998, 253) notes that in the Solomon Islands Methodist missionaries disavowed these practices, as they were “immoral, promoted promiscuity, . . . involved pagan invocations” and diminished men’s marital authority. Women on Nuakata may also have assumed that my beliefs about indigenous fertility control coincided with the views espoused by my white forebears in Milne Bay and contemporary community health workers, such as Moses. At a time when overpopulation is of vital concern to the national government, indigenous fertility control has been targeted in family planning programs. Maternal and child health workers consider these practices unreliable at best; at worst they pose a serious risk to women’s health.

But Malida, finding herself alone with me that day (save for her sister) and seeing the plants growing along the path we were taking together, took the opportunity to describe and explain their use. Standing with these women, plants in hand, I sensed that these explanations of *‘ai’auhi* (contraception) were offered as a gift, as an expression of gratitude for things I had given to her and her family. It was an understanding implied by Rosemary when she commented that Malida’s extensive knowledge of contraceptive plants is locally recognized, sought, and valued by other women. It was further reinforced by Malida herself who, when Roger and I were finally leaving the island, thanked me profusely for the *mula-mula dimdim* (Western medicine) that I had given her family. Only then did I fully appreciate that on that particular day Malida had offered me a gift in kind: a gift that acknowledged and deepened our neighborly relationship, one that, to my mind, far exceeded my own, thereby creating anew my own sense of indebtedness.

Totally unexpected, this gift was immensely satisfying. Months of frustration and impatience dissipated in a moment. I understood then that in asking younger women, not only was I asking them to reveal pri-

vate decisions pertinent to them at the time but, more important, I was seeking explanations from those with limited experience. For them to discuss these issues with me was to show disrespect to their elders, such as Malida, who had greater knowledge and experience. Moreover, I realized I had sought explanations from people prematurely, before mutual trust had been established. Like knowledge of magic and other forms of medicine, knowledge of *'ai'auhi* (contraception) primarily belongs to those women who have inherited it from one of their kin.

The word *'ai'auhi* is a composite of the two words *'ai* and *'auhi*. *Auhi* means to block or cover by oral means. *Ai*, however, has several associated meanings. It may be used as a verbal prefix meaning “in the process of doing something—a state of becoming which implies transformation.” *Ai* is also an exclusive form of the absolute or free collective pronoun meaning “us, we,” as in *'ai Nua'ata 'ainaiena, tenem 'awalo* (us, from Nuakata, we say that). *Ai* is also the verb “to eat.” When it is reduplicated, *'ai'ai* means eating or food. Eating or ingestion is believed to transform food into blood. Collectively, the meanings associated with the word *'ai'auhi* (contraception) and, indeed, the word *yaiipoine* (sterility) suggest that the ingestion of particular food blocks the blood, thereby inhibiting the growth essential to pregnancy. Understood in this way, contraception is not necessarily believed to prevent conception, but it does block pregnancy.

Buoyed by Malida's gesture, I was unable to recall all that she told me at the time. The next day I visited her hamlet, where, among other things, she detailed how these plants are used. Rosemary also contributed to this conversation, but often deferred to Malida's knowledge and experience. In the course of this conversation they described three forms of contraception: one a temporary contraceptive and two others that cause permanent sterility.

The leaves of one plant known as *edewa salana* (dog's teeth) are cooked in water. When their cooking is finished we drink two cups of the “water” in the morning and two again at night. Because this plant's “power” is so strong, women will become permanently sterile (*yaiipoine*) [from *poi* meaning to pluck or rip off flowers, to tear open] after drinking it. (Malida)

Another plant with thorny leaves and flat leaves [is used as a temporary contraceptive for both men and women]. The flat leaves are female leaves and the thorny leaves are male leaves. If women drink the [soup

made from boiling the] flat leaves, then they will “find” a child. If they drink [the soup made from boiling] the thorny male leaves, then they will not “find” a child. In the same way if men drink [the soup made from] the flat leaves, then they will not “find” a child. If they drink [the soup made from] the male leaves, then they will find a child. We [make this soup by] putting either flat or thorny leaves together with a small section of the stem into a pot and cooking it with food. (Malida)

One plant called *manihubu gigini* (sea eagle, handle) grows upward like a vine and has sharp leaves which can spear us and draw blood. When the moon goes down, when it sets, then we get some betel nut and we chew it together with a small section of the root of this plant. We are chewing, we are chewing and the moon rises again until it is a full moon. We stop chewing and we eat fish. The full moon is finished and it sets and we chew again, but we fast from eating fish. Then the moon rises and we eat fish and the full moon finishes, and then we will not “find” any children. We chew that thing it runs through the blood to the womb and we cannot “find” children. If she chews and then eats fish, then the blood will go to all of the body and affect the power of the plant. (Rosemary)

Rosemary’s reference to fish echoes the taboos about eating fish during pregnancy and immediately following birth, upheld by women such as Susan and Emma. In the course of our conversation, Malida explained that fish blood is thin, that it makes human blood run, causing bleeding to continue and the power of Papuan medicines to dissipate throughout the body (cf. Battaglia 1990, 79). Neither Malida nor Rosemary could explain the relationship between the ingestion of these plants and the lunar cycle. They accepted and enacted these practices without questioning them. Malida, Rosemary, Eunice, and several younger women all indicated that many women use plants to prevent pregnancy before marriage, to delay pregnancy after they have weaned a child, and/or to prevent them from having more children. While ‘*ai’auhi* was widely practiced by women, it seemed that they rarely discussed it openly with friends or members of their *susu*. This was especially true of young women with two or three children. Some of these women feared criticism from members of their *susu*, especially their mothers, who may have wished them to strengthen the *susu* by contributing many children. When necessary, young, single women discussed ‘*ai’auhi* with their sisters and

friends, but like their sexual practices they attempted to conceal their use of it from family members.

Apart from these local forms of *'ai'auhi*, three forms of Western-style contraception were also available from the aid post—condoms, the contraceptive pill, and Depo Provera injections. Away from the island for four months during 1993, Moses conducted no family planning health education clinics during our time on Nuakata. He did, however, offer advice to people, especially women, during consultations at the aid post. One family planning clinic was conducted by Moses at the aid post in 1992 and was attended by thirty-six women. Discussion focused on the need to reduce family sizes to ensure the sustainable health of, and sources of nutrition for, themselves and their families. Moses explained how to use the three available forms of contraception, stressing their safety and reliability in contrast to indigenous methods of fertility control. Without knowing exactly what these local forms of contraception were, he claimed that they posed health risks to women. During 1992, eight women requested contraceptive advice and assistance from Moses. Five initially chose to use condoms, one chose Depo Provera injections, and two opted for the pill. Only one married male inquired about contraception, and he asked Moses for condoms. A total of twenty-seven condoms were distributed to people in that year. Of those women who sought contraceptive advice, it seems only one woman—who was using the contraceptive pill—continued to use the contraception provided by Moses. Frustrated by poor responses to his family planning efforts, especially men's refusal to attend family planning clinics, Moses explained that men are reluctant to take responsibility for contraception, believing it to be within the woman's domain. He added that many men and women still wished to have large families, so that children and grandchildren will care for them in their old age. He also indicated that understandably women are very embarrassed to talk with him about family planning issues. Of those that do, some complain that their husbands are resistant to family planning, especially condoms.

Birthing

So we are pregnant. When we start missing our monthly period we already know that we are starting pregnancy at one month. Then we start counting the months until nine months. Our stomachs grow big like balloons and then we know that in two or three weeks' time we'll

give birth. If we are going to hospital, then on the eighth month they'll send us there. If there are no boats, then we'll give birth in the village. At that time our husbands, brothers, or mother's brothers should, or at least they used to, build our small house. In that house they prepare our bed for giving birth. They prepare a fire so that we might sleep by it or warm ourselves. Then when we are ready, when the time comes, we'll call our mothers to come and sleep [in the hamlet] and we'll give birth. We lie down and the baby will be pushing and we will be crying and shouting because it is painful to us, until the membrane ruptures and the baby comes out. Somebody will hold the baby and the baby's cord will be cut. Then we wait for the baby's bag. The baby will be placed on its bed. The baby's bag will come out. Just like we give birth to the baby, so the baby's bag we are borning that one too. They prepare us. They clean away our blood. They change our clothes and then they take us to our sleeping place by the fire. They put us on our bed and they take our rubbish away and throw it. Sometimes they put the baby's bag inside a basket and hang it on a tree, sometimes they dig a hole [and put the bag inside it]. If we hang it on a tree, then that means that the baby, boy or girl's blood will always pump. [He or she] will always think, "I want to climb coconut tree, betel nut or mustard tree." (Excerpt from initial interview conducted in English with Mona, described in Chapter Three)

Hopeful that I might witness a hamlet birth, I asked Mari where she intended to deliver her baby. She was one of five pregnant women from the Yalasi and Bolime sides of the island and one of only three (from these sides of the island) who gave birth while we were living on Nuakata. She told me that her first child was born in her hamlet, her second in the hospital, and this child, her third, would also be born in the hospital. As with her last delivery, she and her mother would go to Alotau during her eighth month of pregnancy, where they would remain with friends or relatives. When the time came for her to deliver she would move to the hospital, where they would stay until five or so days after the baby was born. Much preparation was required to execute this plan, for, like all pregnant women delivering in the hospital, she and her mother needed to carry enough food with them for the duration of their stay in Alotau. She stated that, despite all the preparation and inconvenience, she preferred giving birth in the hospital rather than the hamlet, because

In hospital we get help. They give me medicine and injections, so that after I have given birth I won't be cold. After five or ten days I can leave the hospital and return to the village. But if I give birth in the village, I will have to stay by the fire for one month to warm up.

Mari's expressed beliefs about hospital births and her history of child-bearing were by no means unusual among the young mothers with whom I spoke. Without exception these women had given birth in their matrilineal hamlets, watched over by their respective mothers, maternal uncles, husbands, and often several women with some locally recognized skill in delivering babies. Most of the younger women, though, had also given birth in the hospital. For example, Geteli had her first child in her hamlet, but because she was ill throughout her second pregnancy she delivered this child in the hospital. Her third, fourth, and fifth children were all born in her hamlet. Susan indicated that she intended to give birth to her next baby in the hospital, because she would be given assistance if difficulties arose during her delivery. Like the other women, she had neither asked about birth nor been told what to expect before giving birth to her first child, Rex. When birthing Rex on the ground outside her house, she was greatly shocked by the experience and pain of birth.

Susan, like the other women with whom I spoke, did not seriously consider giving birth at the aid post. Apart from feeling "shy" with Moses, she indicated that the hospital was better supplied with medicines, equipment, and female nursing staff to help her. The help received in the hospital was clearly welcomed by these women, even when it meant that they were forced to birth while lying on their back with their legs in stirrups. While they valued the expertise of the female nursing staff during hospital deliveries, it was the availability of *dindim mullamula* (Western medicine) that they considered most important. Unlike at the aid post, or in their hamlets, an injection would be given immediately following the birth to stop their bleeding.³

Sinetana indicated that there was another important reason why young women often preferred to deliver in the hospital rather than their hamlet. When giving birth in her hamlet, a laboring woman may be assisted by one or more of her mothers. This assistant would stand or sit behind the woman and wrap her arms around the laboring woman's rib cage and sternum, pressing down on her stomach in an attempt to squeeze the baby out. The attendant often ignored the woman's contrac-

tions. An extremely painful practice, it was one that younger women sought to avoid.

Given these experiences and apprehensions, it seemed somewhat surprising that pregnant women did not always choose to deliver in the hospital. However, factors such as money to pay for boat fares to and from the mainland, accommodation on the mainland while they await the birth, sufficient quantities of available garden food to last their month-long stay, and familial circumstances, including the attitude of their husbands, impacted upon their decisions. Also, like Eunice, women thought that, where possible, the newborn should be carried and born into the land of its matrilineal forebears, its mother's and grandmother's place; the land it may claim as shared inheritance; the land that will sustain its living and staying, and where it will be buried together with these same kin when its time is over. However, children born on the mainland, or in places other than their own matrilineal land, were believed to have no lesser claim to that land than those born in matrilineal hamlets. Accordingly, who bears a child is more important than where it is birthed. And as the decisions to deliver in the hospital reveal, people believed that birth on matrilineal land did not always guarantee the health and safety of the mother and unborn child. Like Moses, women recognized that in certain circumstances hamlet births posed a risk to their safety and the safety of their unborn child.

Some women indicated that complications during a prior village delivery (long and difficult labor, retained placenta, excessive bleeding following birth, etc.) prompted them to go to hospital for their next birth. Others indicated they had been advised to deliver in the hospital by Moses or the maternal and child health nurses. All mentioned that they made this decision during their pregnancy because their blood was "small" or "thin" or simply "no good." They were "not strong." Malida commented:

In the village there is no Papuan medicine to stop women from bleeding after birth. All they can do is make a big fire to dry their blood out and drink hot water to stop them from bleeding. They must not eat bloody food, especially fish, until their bleeding has stopped, because their blood might run. For this reason they remain in the house with no windows and only a small amount of air.

References to blood and strength were a recurring theme in all my conversations about pregnancy and birth. It was a theme made more intelligible by knowledge of the etymological associations with the word for

blood in Alina Nu'ata: *wapina*. The stem of this word, *wahi*, also constitutes the stem of *wahiala*, meaning strength, energy, vitality, and *yawahi*, meaning breath or life force. This etymological link between blood, breath, and life force expressed local understanding of the integral, indissociable relationship between these aspects of a living, staying human being. Blood, strength, and breath were thought to diminish with old age and finish at death with the cessation of embodiment. In this sense, blood and breath were understood as temporally constituted. People thought that blood was generally not static. Only in sickness was it thought to settle in a given place in the body. Accordingly, during life, blood travels along paths. Ideally these paths are straight; however, if they should deviate, become narrow or circuitous for any reason (e.g., during pregnancy and birth), then someone's energy, strength, and living will be depleted. Blood, strength, and life force may be depleted or enhanced by many means, as they are contingent upon the actions of the living person and multiple others, both the living and the dead.⁴ Given this understanding of blood, it is not surprising that women show no reluctance to take the blood tablets, in contrast to the malaria prophylaxis, supplied to them by Moses during their pregnancy.

As discussed in chapter 3, blood was considered essential for the arrival and subsequent growth of the child within the womb. Without blood the “en-wombed” child cannot live. This blood, the blood that makes new life possible, that enlivens the child, and from which new blood first springs, was thought to be a combination of female menstrual blood (*waiena bwadana*) and male “semen” blood (*molo*). As the difference in names suggests, *waiena bwadana* (menstrual blood) and *wahina* (blood) were not considered one and the same, although when spoken in English the same word, “blood,” was used, thereby glossing over the difference. Similarly, semen and blood were not thought of as equivalent. Accordingly, when male and female “blood” come together as a result of sexual intercourse, new blood is formed, the child's blood: *wahinana* (its blood), and with it growth of the child. Inalienably possessed by the unborn child, this new blood is subsequently “made” and strengthened by repeated acts of sexual intercourse and the labors of both mother and father to grow the child's blood within and later outside of the womb. Therefore, although possessed by the child, blood was, in the first instance, understood as the consequence of his or her parents' labors and, later, the labors of many other kin—male and female, *susu* and affine—on his or her behalf.

People implied that the child's growth in and outside the womb is

facilitated by the efforts of birth parents and their kin to feed the child. Food is transformed in someone's stomach before passing into the blood and thereby circulating throughout the body (see Macintyre 1988, 55). While the women I asked did not discuss how food enters the placenta (*tamumu*), whether or not it is transported via the mother's blood, they did comment that food consumed by a pregnant woman enters and fills the placenta. As the use of semialienable possessive pronouns implies, both the placenta and the umbilical cord, *'ana pehipehi* (his or her umbilical cord or navel), belong to the child. For example, when talking in English, both Emma and Mona described them as the "child's bag." Mona commented that "just like the baby we borning the baby's bag too." Just as mothers carry and replenish the baby and its bag of food within the womb so, too, they continue to carry, prepare, and cook food for their child once it is beyond the womb.

Indissociable from the conditions of its making, blood, on Nuakata, can be understood as representing the life, the strength, the (fluid) unity that arises from difference shared—the difference between a childbearing woman and an adult male, the difference between menstrual blood and sperm, and the difference between *susu* and affine. As Macintyre (1988, 53) suggests for Tubetube, "blood provides the metaphor for socially created relations between people of different *susu*," and food is the means by which these relations are maintained, replenished, and transformed. Here M. Strathern's argument is also compelling in the Nuakatan context. Strathern (1988) suggests that blood is the metaphor for dyadically conceived relationships. The source and outcome of actions, these relationships produce persons who inevitably have dual origins and are thus internally differentiated. The unitary individual is produced when this internal dualistic differentiation is eliminated or, as I would suggest, overlooked. In reproducing yams and children this internal dualistic differentiation must be re-created or, perhaps, recognized. On Nuakata people also used blood as a metaphor for humanity. For example, on several occasions members of Wycliffe's *susu* commented to both Roger and I that "you [exclusive plural absolute pronoun] are whites (*'omiu dimdim*), we [exclusive pronoun] are Papuans (*'ai Papuan*), but we [inclusive plural pronoun] are one blood (*na hesi 'ita'wahina 'ehebo*)." Whereas *susu* (breast-milk) passes down through and across the generations of a given matrilineage, constituting the matrilineage and ensuring its continuity, *'wahina* (blood) passes between male and female of different matrilineages, making new life possible.

Just as pregnancy (alone) did not constitute someone as a woman/female on Nuakata so, too, the act of giving birth or bearing a child did not constitute a woman as a mother (*hina*). For example, people addressed their mother's sister as *hinagu* (my mother) even when she was unable to become pregnant or give birth, as was the case with Wycliffe's mother's sister. Where the conversational context demands, they differentiated between their mothers by adding the adjectives "big" or "little" to denote their birth mother's older or younger sister. They also addressed women of their mothers' generation within their clan as mother. While an expression existed in Alina Nu'ata for birth mother, *hinagu 'agutaulabalaba*, and birth father, *tamagu 'agutaulabalaba*, in practice these were rarely used. Nuakata had such a small population that awareness of any given person's birth mother was generally common knowledge, particularly among the adult members of the population. Apart from this, the distinction between birth and nonbirth mothers was afforded little attention, as both were accorded equal respect.

While rarely used as terms of address, the existence of terms to differentiate between birth and nonbirth parents indicated that the distinction had meaning and significance on Nuakata. Translated, the expression *'agutaulabalaba* means something like "the one who effects my birth." *Agu* is a semialienable possessive pronoun meaning "my." *Tau* is a widely used noun stem, which means both "body" and "one who . . ." (see chap. 6). While both a birth mother and father (*'agutaulabalaba*) were believed to effect the birth of the child, people did not speak of a birth father as literally giving birth to or bearing his child. Three verbs, *'avala* (to bear or to carry), *labahi* (to birth), and *labalaba*⁵ (the transformative time of birthing), were used to refer to the process of giving birth, yet only *'avala* conveyed the pregnant woman's, or birth mother's, sense of pain, struggle, and labor associated with bearing or birthing. Only birth mothers were said to carry or bear their children in this sense.

Unlike *'avala*, which was used to draw attention to the woman's embodied experience of the process of birth, *labahi* and *labalaba* were used to emphasize the temporal process and time period of birth, culminating in the child becoming born (*tubui*). *Labalaba* can denote the mother's time, baby's time, or the shared time of birth. While the pregnant woman was said to enact the process of birth (*'ilabalaba*), it was believed she did this on the child's behalf. As such, the unborn child was believed to initiate the process—it decides when to be born by its mother. In other words, as with the flow of menstrual blood to the womb, people

understood a mother to labor at her unborn child's behest. Used in the context of birth, *tubui* refers exclusively to the liminal state and time of the child immediately prior to, or after, birth. Hence, whether unborn or just born, the child is considered *tubui*—imminent. Similarly someone whose death is imminent is often referred to as dead.

Unlike a birth mother, it was not said of a birth father that he enacts the process of birth (*'ilabalaba*). As stated in chapter 3, his actions to grow the child within the womb are believed to make the birth possible. In this sense he is recognized as *taulabalaba*, one who enables the child to cross the boundary from the inner, concealed, “en-wombed” world to the nurturing containment of the outside world. The actions of both birth mother and birth father to effect the child's birth were represented as semialienable possessions of the child—that is, these actions transform as they are transformed by the child, making the child's temporal embodiment possible. Their actions and/or those of their kin are believed to influence the child's decision to be born. In these contexts personal agency and/or will is contingent on the acts of others. For example, several people commented to me that some children delay their birth until all their living kin, particularly those belonging to their *susu*, have arrived in the hamlet to welcome them. During our initial interview Mona stated:

Sometimes [a] baby likes its father. That's why if they go somewhere and the lady wants to give birth, she will walk around for a day or two days waiting for the baby to come. So then we will call the husband and say, “Come and sit near your wife and she will give birth” and then he will come and she gives birth. Sometimes like that, babies like their father. They stop us from [helping them] to come out because they like their father. Sometimes babies never think anything and we give birth.

Doing Pregnancy and Birth

Throughout June, July, and August a craze swept across Nuakata—or at least that is how I first experienced it—reminding me of the fads of my schooldays, when swap cards would suddenly and inexplicably be replaced by yoyos. Across the island, people could invariably be found sitting together, laughing and joking, with single loops of string in their hands. Adults, and to a lesser extent children, were doing the cat's cradle, or *'ai'abi*, as it was known on Nuakata. *Ai'abi* literally means building,

or making in process. In their hands, between their fingers, string representations of houses, turtles, cats, drums, paddles, bananas, Tanalabwa (the mountain on Nuakata), islands, flowers, chestnuts emerged. Roger joined in on several occasions, offering the only configuration he could remember from childhood: a cup and saucer. This sent people into fits of laughter, partly because it lacked the sophistication of their own designs, partly because of Roger's performance, but also because it seemed such a strange and silly *dimdim* thing to make.

Perplexed by this fad I initially asked Wycliffe and later several older people to explain. These conversations went something like this:

- Shelley:* But why is everyone doing this?
Interviewee: Every year before the harvest we do this to make the yams grow.
Shelley: How does it work?
Interviewee: We don't know, we only do it. Our old people did it and we do it.
Shelley: Do you believe it's true? Do you believe it makes the yams grow?
Interviewee: I don't know, we just do it.
Shelley: Who does it?
Interviewee: Everyone can do it: women, men; some children, they do it too.

It seemed yams did not simply grow of their own accord, but were grown by imaginative, laboring hands. Just as Wycliffe and others "did" *'ai'abi* without understanding how it worked, I watched people do it with a sense of perplexed fascination.

One August morning, sitting at the back of Gohiya with six or seven members of Wycliffe's *susu*, Roger and I found ourselves spectators to an uproarious "session" of *'ai'abi*. People seized upon bits of string and quickly wove their designs before challenging us to guess what they had made. In the midst of this commotion Eunice motioned to me and laughingly dared me to watch her, saying *'uita 'waihiu 'ihiuma* (you watch, woman is pregnant). With this she formed an *'ai'abi* sequence that began with the "pregnant woman" and then transformed before us into increasingly complex string configurations representing the woman and baby at *'waiena ehebo* (one month), *'waiena bwau* (two months), and so on, up to and including the ninth month of pregnancy. Then, with a triumphant

flourish, she declared ‘*ivalai* (she gave birth). Releasing the configurations held by her fingers, she revealed a single, whole loop of string, stretched taut over and between her outstretched hands (see figs. 5–14).

As I watched Eunice make pregnancy and birth with her hands, as I delighted in the ever more complex “en-wombed” “baby” unfolding between her fingers and the “woman” or “mother” transformed by this process, I saw in those ephemeral loops of string a shared vision of pregnancy and birth. It was a vision that had stubbornly defied my attempts to elicit it with words and explanations that had unraveled before my best efforts to penetrate or “understand” it. It was a vision Eunice dared me to see.

Excited by this string revelation of pregnancy and birth, I dashed to our house, grabbed the camera, and ran back and made Eunice repeat each stage of the sequence so that I could capture it all on film. When it came to the final shot of “birth,” I ran out of film! My efforts to encapsulate it were thwarted.

Truth is on the margins. It is lost when it is claimed. . . . Can our discourse be likened to these string figures, a game we play with words, the thread of an argument whose connection with reality is always oblique and tenuous, which crosses to and fro, interlacing description with interpretation, instruction with entertainment, but always ambiguously placed between practical and antinomian ends? If so truth is not binding. It is in the interstices as much as it is in the structure, in fiction as much as in fact. (Jackson 1989, 187)

Happy Birthday, Dimdim!

One afternoon as I was passing Mari’s hamlet on my way back to Gohiya I bumped into her on the path, cradling a new baby in her arms. I was most surprised to see her, for I knew she had gone to hospital at Alotau, but had heard no news of the birth or her return to Nuakata. Mari explained that she had only just returned to Nuakata several hours earlier, together with her new baby, a little girl. Delighted to see them both, I fussed and fawned over the baby, straining to catch a glimpse of her face half hidden in the folds of a blanket. Several minutes elapsed before, noting Mari’s marked embarrassment, I toned down my response and made my good-byes. It seemed that my celebratory response to the new baby was exaggerated, foreign to her. Still feeling enthused by my dis-



Fig. 5. Eunice Tau'owa demonstrating Ai'abi (cat's cradle) beginning



Fig. 6. One month gestation



Fig. 7. Two months gestation



Fig. 8. Three months gestation



Fig. 9. Four months gestation



Fig. 10. Five months gestation



Fig. 11. Six months gestation



Fig. 12. Seven months gestation



Fig. 13. Eight months gestation



Fig. 14. Nine months gestation

covery, I walked back to Gohiya to tell Eunice and Geteli the news of Mari's return. While not greeting my news with total indifference, they certainly did not appear to share my sense of celebration and excitement. When asked whether they would visit Mari and the new baby, both indicated they would wait until she returned to the Women's Fellowship meetings or church. Their response was not unusual. In fact, all those with whom I subsequently spoke who were not members of Mari's *susu*, or affinally related, seemed disinclined to visit her in her hamlet. Several weeks elapsed before Mari emerged together with her new baby. During this time, the regular sight of several of Mari's female kin washing diapers in the creek reminded me that although she had delivered in the hospital she and the baby were still considered vulnerable to sickness and in need of care and protection.

When Mari did emerge to attend a Women's Fellowship meeting, the women offered her genuine yet, to my mind, muted congratulations. Like their initial responses to the news of the birth, they showed real, but seemingly restrained, interest in her newborn daughter. As with Emma and her baby Reni earlier in the year, both Mari and her baby were happily yet quietly assimilated back into the group, and from there back into the wider community of people living on Nuakata. In contrast, I had attempted and expected others to herald the birth event, to conspicuously welcome and laud the new life, to celebrate the birth of a new and unique member of the Nuakatan community. But birth does not inspire these responses on Nuakata. Birth is an occasion of great happiness for the birth parents and members of their respective *susu*, but, to my knowledge, is not celebrated by conventional rituals or gift-giving to the newborn, to the newborn's parents, or between members of its *susu* and affinal kin. Birth is cause for greatest celebration among members of the newborn's matrilineage, for the newborn's presence evokes the past (both living and dead) and invokes the future of the *susu*. Living members of the *susu* variously become mother, father, uncle, grandparent, brother or sister, and so forth in the newborn's presence.

My experience with Mari on the path, coupled with people's response to news of the birth, made me recall my earlier birthday celebrations and the ensuing discussions between Geteli, Wycliffe, and me. Learning of my birthday, Geteli had arranged a family party inside our house. Chickens were killed and cooked, vegetables, sweet potato, and tapioca prepared, and the twenty or so members of Wycliffe's family and in-laws gathered inside our house. Clearly unsure of what they should do, or what should

happen on these occasions, all those present followed Geteli's muted orchestrations. After covering our table with a cloth provided by her mother, she carefully laid out all the food in an assortment of well-preserved enamel serving dishes. Each person was given a plate and fork and was instructed to wait for me to serve myself before the children and older people were served. In the crowded room conversation was constant, friendly, yet polite and subdued. Immediately following the communal meal everyone, except Geteli and several of her children, departed to do other things. Deeply touched by Geteli's act of love and friendship, designed to allay any sense of homesickness I might feel on the day, I was also embarrassed by the selective attention the birthday celebrations accorded me.

That my embarrassment was justified was later reinforced when Geteli and Wycliffe commented that until recently birthdays had not been noted, remembered, and certainly not celebrated on Nuakata. In explaining this, they stated in separate conversations that it is highly unusual to draw attention to someone by celebrating his or her living/staying when this living/staying is incomplete or unfinished. They added that people do not like to stand out from others. It is not only considered inappropriate but also dangerous to draw attention to either oneself or another in this way. Such attention distances and distinguishes someone from the rest. Wycliffe concluded, "We only do this when someone dies." On other occasions it may evoke gossip, jealousy, envy, and the illness and/or misfortune that accompanies these responses.

Wycliffe implied that (birthday) celebrations to mark someone's actual birth, the coming into life, "the life," or the time elapsed since the birth were considered premature, presumptuous, and misplaced on Nuakata. People did not speak of their own or others' "life" in such abstract, or static, categorical terms. Instead, they spoke of someone's living or staying. Nor did they speak of life beginning at birth or ending at death, or attempt to celebrate or distinguish that "life" as if it were a possession made and claimed by the living individual. Rather, they spoke of someone's living/staying, his or her ways. Attention was focused on "living" rather than "life," action rather than state, the individualizing activities of someone, rather than the individual person as such. This living/staying was considered contingent upon the actions of others, of those that made one's birth possible, that support one's growth, the affinal kin that one joins with to make new "living" possible by replenishing one's living *susu*, and, for some, the inspirational work of a Chris-

tian God. Only when someone's living was completed, or finished, could his or her "life" be encapsulated and celebrated as it was mourned by all those who expressed or enacted the loss of their particular living relationship with the deceased. In other words, "the life" was understood by diverse expressions of its loss in and by "living" people. Living, therefore, was contingent on relationships with others.

Of course there were more obvious historical reasons why birthdays were not remembered or celebrated on Nuakata. Before colonization, time was not siphoned through a calendar of progressive, numbered days, weeks, months, and years; its inflections were not charted by a clock that rhythmically and relentlessly pursued the infinitesimal moments of its passing. In Alina Nu'ata the word for time, *hauga*, is one and the same as the words for weather and lifetime. To speak of one is to invoke the others. People looked to one another and to the sky, the sea, and the earth for signs of time's presence, its past, and its future. These land-, sea-, and skyscapes enacted time's repetitions—its recursion—with infinite and spectacular variety. Seasons were known and named by the arrival of certain winds, the blossoming of plants, the presence of certain fish in the sea, the proclivity for storms, heat, or rain. The lunar cycle and the yearly arrival of the southeasterly wind further divided time. The transitions between day and night—predawn, dawn, morning, midday, early afternoon, late afternoon, dusk, evening, midnight—were determined by the varying lights cast by the sun's trajectory across the sky.

Alone or in concert, these expressions of both space and place constituted time's scapes, its familiar rhythms. While they continue to do so in the present day, time is now also measured by numbered days, months, and years, all named in English. Some people wore watches for decorative purposes, and the starting time, day, and date of church meetings was recorded in the minutes of these events. Maternal and child health clinics relied on a calendar to organize the timing of events. Birth dates were noted in the Birth Register compiled at the aid post, and parents also generally recorded the dates of their children's births. Given these changes, and given that segments of radio programs on the regional Milne Bay radio station and of the local mainland paper, the *Eastern Star*, were devoted to birthday greetings, it is not inconceivable that the time will come when people's birthdays will be widely acknowledged, if not celebrated, on Nuakata.

Confronted by a persisting notion of time, weather, lifetime, as repetitious or recursive, and with an understanding of death as the moment for

collective reflection on and encapsulation of someone's life and living, I was forced to abandon the notion of life cycle as a guiding point for my research. My experience in the field confirmed what I only suspected prior to fieldwork, namely, that—as the writings of Massim anthropologists attest—death was the most significant prism for understanding one's life and living, if not the gendered person, in Massim communities. Nuakata, I had discovered, was no different in this regard.

The Garden at Last!

This realization coincided with my first trip to the garden with Geteli, which occurred toward the beginning of August. Having long exhausted my petitions to this effect, I was greatly surprised when Geteli arrived at Gohiya one day and volunteered to take me to one of her gardens on the slopes behind her hamlet, Gogobohewa. I resisted the impulse to ask, “Why? Why now?” and seized the opportunity with a sense of genuine enthusiasm and relief, mingled with a stream of silent mutterings about the virtues of patience!

The path to Geteli's garden began at the rear of Gogobohewa and passed by her husband's small tapioca plantation, before rising steeply to a small plateau, where a new yam house had been built by her brothers. Inside the yam house, pumpkins and a small collection of yams from the gardens of Eunice, her older sister Malida, and those of their daughters Jane and Geteli had been arranged in discrete piles by Malida, the most senior woman in the *susu*. These, I was told, were the first produce from the imminent harvest. In the coming weeks and months the yam house would be filled with pumpkins, sweet potatoes, and yams. Some yams would be set aside for future consumption, some for gifts to affinal kin, and others for the church. (Indeed, Wycliffe commented one day that the first yams from the harvest are given to the church in the same way that Abraham offered God his first-born son, Isaac.) When all the yams, pumpkins, and sweet potatoes were harvested, preparations for next year's gardens would begin. After Geteli had selected her garden plots (her own and one for each of her children) in consultation with her mothers and sisters, she would ask her brothers, husband, and fathers to gather at the plots on nominated days to fell trees and saplings. While they axed the trees, she and younger female members of her *susu* would slash away the undergrowth with their bush knives. Later, when the undergrowth had dried out, the plots would be burned, after which she

and her husband would prepare them for planting. A month or so later all this occurred as Geteli had described, although there were many more helpers than I had anticipated. Geteli's sisters-in-law and cousins assisted her brothers, husband, and uncle with the clearing work, which was conducted in a spirit of great reverie. This work done, they all gathered at Gogobohewa to eat a meal prepared by Geteli, her mothers, and her sisters-in-law (see Fortune [1932] 1989, 105).

From the yam house, the path to Geteli's garden plunged inland through dense, entangled undergrowth. As we slashed our way forward, Geteli's backward glances in my direction alerted me to her concern about my safety. Perhaps this concern had thwarted my earlier attempts to make this journey. As we burrowed further inland Geteli confirmed what was clearly apparent by the nature of our journey. People other than kin are free to walk on this land, owned by members of her matrilineage; however, in practice this rarely occurs. Occasionally Geteli's husband or brothers trekked to these gardens, though she generally worked there alone.

Emerging from the canopy of vines and branches and the thicket of low-lying plants obscuring the path, we came to a semicleared, sun-drenched area: last year's garden, overrun by "weeds," but still dotted with pineapple plants, watermelons, sugarcane, a local leafy green vegetable, and several areca (betel nut) palms. Around the trunks of these palms were large bows made from dried strips of pandanus—a signal to would-be climbers or intruders that the palms and their produce were owned. Seemingly embarrassed by this haphazard assortment of plants and weeds, Geteli continued onward. As we passed through this area she pointed to two gardens on our left—one, her mother's, the other, her sister Jane's—neatly laid out on two adjacent slopes. Jane was living at Bunama at that time, but her mothers, Eunice and Malida, tended her gardens on her behalf. Five minutes later we reached Geteli's garden, also a picture of order. Although encircled by a tall forest of trees, the lush assortment of plants was bathed in morning sun. Like the two gardens we had seen minutes earlier, and others visible from the path encircling Nuakata, Geteli's garden was laid out in the grid pattern previously described by Macintyre for Tubetube (1983, 58–59). Larger felled trees acted as a border or boundary between the encroaching forest and the garden. The trunks of smaller felled trees divided the plot into squares measuring approximately one and a half square meters. The garden was planted with banana, tapioca, pumpkin, sweet potato, snake beans, thorny yams, seed yams, *'aibika*, and peppers. There was not a weed to

be seen. As with all the other gardens I had seen on Nuakata, banana palms, and tapioca were dotted around the periphery of the plot. Although some were planted toward the middle, they were planted on the edge of each square, consistent with an earlier comment made by Wycliffe that these plants “protect” the carefully staked and precious yam vines, generally positioned toward the center of the garden.

Standing, surveying the scene, noting Geteli’s veiled pride in her work, I began to appreciate why this moment—this journey—had taken so long to eventuate. I saw for myself what was meant by her exclamation, “But there is nothing to see!,” made in response to my first request in late February to go with her “to see her garden and understand her work.” At that time her new gardens had been planted for only two or three months. From her point of view, there really was nothing for me to see in her gardens and certainly little I could do there. The effect of her labor to plant and weed the garden—and that of her husband and brothers to initially clear and prepare it for planting—was concealed within the ground, growing. Decimated and depleted by the drought of the previous year (1992), her old gardens, which continued to supply her family with food, had contained little more than tapioca. Although a staple subsistence crop, tapioca is generally regarded as inferior food to the other root crops, especially yams. Therefore, at the time of my earlier requests, there was little growing in her gardens from which she could take pride. My requests had been premature.

But Geteli’s pride in her garden work was not the main issue that seized my imagination at that point. Rather, it was the thought that, from Geteli’s point of view, I could only really understand her garden labor through its visible effects or outcome. Planting and gardening must be understood through harvesting and the harvested produce, just as the concealed work of pregnancy and conception could only finally be understood through its revelation: birth, the newborn. So, too, someone’s life/living is finally understood in and through death. I realized, then, that in relation to gardening, pregnancy, birth, and notions of the person, Geteli and I had been approaching understanding from opposite directions. Impatient, I had sought understanding before rather than after the event. She was inviting me to look backward to understand what had gone before, while I had asked her to look forward to anticipate and imagine an abstracted, nonspecific version of what was yet to come. While skeptical of the notion of life cycle, I had nonetheless clung to some of its progressive, developmental, and categorical, epistemological assumptions.

Having stood there for several minutes, Geteli and I moved into the garden. She recovered a long metal digging rod from the bush and proceeded to demonstrate how to dig for thorny yams. Handing the rod to me, she instructed me to dig in a particular patch of soil. While I did this she inspected her pumpkin plants and yam vines, assessing whether or not it was time to harvest them. After this, she too dug for thorny yams and sweet potatoes, using her bush knife as a digging stick. As we worked she told me that had Roger and I arrived on Nuakata while gardens were being cleared, one would have been prepared and planted for us. After twenty minutes or so we had uncovered enough yams and sweet potatoes to fill two baskets. Only when she began to set aside a sizable portion of the harvest for Roger and me, and when on the return journey she selected a pumpkin for us from the yam house, did I realize that by resisting my earlier requests and taking me to the garden at that time of year Geteli had combined the showing of her garden with a giving of its produce. In doing this, she recognized and affirmed the relationship we shared. I knew, then, that it was no coincidence that she took me to this garden, her garden, rather than her children's gardens or the garden planted and tended by herself and her husband. Closer to us, the latter was located on the mountain path joining her mother's hamlet, Gohiya, to her husband's *susu* hamlet, Le'amatapouwa, on the Bwauli side of the island.

When I had repeatedly asked Geteli and Sineliko to take me to their gardens I had been hoping to learn gardening practices through seeing them. I had also been attempting to confirm the related hypotheses that an analogous relationship exists between pregnancy/birth and planting/harvesting—that knowledge of gardening would beget knowledge of birthing on Nuakata. But there, in the garden with Geteli, I began to realize that although I understood what this might mean in theory I had not known how to negotiate it in practice. If I had, I would have understood my initial presumption in asking Geteli and Sineliko to take me to their gardens, Sineliko's evasive rejection of my requests, and Geteli's deferred response. For this (actual and epistemological) journey to and from Geteli's garden demonstrated to me that, like other *susu*-owned land, gardens were considered places that supported the relational and temporal products they bear—be they children or yams.