

## From inhabiting the forest to understanding Christianities among Austronesian-speaking people: the long and winding journey of an anthropologist-in-becoming.

Candice Roze | Assistant Professor, Department of French, Tamkang University

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to present my work to the community of《人類學視界》readers. My name is Candice Roze, I am French and currently working as an assistant professor in the Department of French at Tamkang University. I received my PhD degree in Anthropology from the University of Aberdeen in 2015. My road to anthropology was not a straight one. I first came to Taiwan in 1997 with a scholarship to study linguistics at National Tsing Hua University. After obtaining my master's degree in Chinese Language, Literature, and Civilisation in France, I returned to Taiwan and started to teach French. I grew up in a small village near Fontainebleau surrounded by the forest. This familiarity with the forest may have

left its mark on me, and in 2005, at the age of 31, also growing more concerned with environmental issues, I decided to go back to school. I applied to the Department of Forestry at National Taiwan University, with the hope that this would take me to the heart of the forest. During my BSc., I studied the scientific approach to the forest environment, and greatly enjoyed learning about trees, plants, animals, rivers, and soils, as well as the forests of Taiwan. It was fascinating. Yet what felt missing was the long-term relationship people entertain with the forest as they live in and with it. Of this complex relationship, I was finally able to catch a glimpse in a course on Community-Based Conservation where indigenous people were invited

to talk about their understanding of what the forest was and meant for them. In their narratives, the forest was not just an ecosystem to be managed, protected, and/or exploited, but an inhabited place, an entity woven within people's lives, past and present. The fact that people could inhabit, perceive, and know the forest in very different ways, gradually led me to develop an interest in indigenous ecological knowledge, and finally anthropology.

The Perception of the Environment by Tim Ingold, a book that I had inadvertently picked up at NTU library, took me to the University of Aberdeen. Ingold's approach seemed to bring together ecology and anthropology in a manner different from that of the literature on Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), providing a more comprehensive approach to understanding human-environment relationships. At the University of Aberdeen, my supervisor introduced me to the Melanesian world and its rich and thought-provoking ethnography. I chose to conduct fieldwork on the island of Espiritu Santo (Vanuatu). A biodiversity survey led on this island by the National Museum of Natural History in Paris guided my choice.

The expedition had generated some friction with the local population as the scientific crew had overlooked islanders' own understanding and way of inhabiting what had been tagged a 'biodiversity hotspot' worth to be explored. My Ph.D. proposal aimed at re-examining the concept of TEK from a perspective that would attempt to translate people's perception and conception of their lived world more comprehensively.



A banyan, SW Santo 2018

In South-West Santo where I conducted fieldwork, the coastal forest consists mostly of a patchwork of secondary growth, gardens, and plantations. Indeed, for their subsistence, people rely mostly on horticultural gardening and work on coconut plantations which now cover large areas of the coast and slopes leading to inland plateaus. People walk into the bush daily to reach their gardens and plantations. They know each plant they pass by, who planted this or that tree, and when, where old gardens and settlements are, and who lies buried deep under the vegetation. Entering the forest for the first time with my adoptive mother in the field, I was asked to put a leaf of a fern called *twela* in my hair to signal my presence to the ancestors and the spirits inhabiting the forest lest I could fall ill. I learned of the plants that could protect from threatening influences. As months passed by, the forest seemed to get thicker and heavier as if the air had taken on the density of time, as layers of the past became more apparent. Any of our gestures were under the gaze of people long dead who sometimes trespassed in the world of the living, left traces of their presence, played tricks on us, or made us sick. To the people of South-West Santo, the forest then is a complex social ecosystem where the world of the

spirits interpenetrates that of the people. This is not the carefree forest of my childhood, a reservoir of biodiversity, where the air feels transparent and light and where one goes for an idle walk. There, everything talks, everything tells, and anything can potentially be a threat to one's personal integrity.

The first experience of fieldwork can be overwhelming, often reconfiguring many of the things that we expected to do or 'find'. It is a suspended moment where theory seems derisory or breaking into pieces as one must learn everything anew, facing, at the same time, complex social interactions, and the daily routine of life as it goes. With this, comes the awkward feeling of having stepped amid other people's lives, with their joys but also their sorrows, followed by doubts in one's ability to comprehend what is going on. It is only *a posteriori* as we partly disentangle ourselves from the immediate experience, engaging anew with the anthropological literature and confronting it with what we had observed and experienced, that an understanding of the singularity of what we constituted as 'the field' can slowly emerge.

Garden house in the bush, SW Santo 2011



As for me, I had never thought that Christianity was to become an important part of my work, thus inscribing it within the anthropology of Christianity, a branch of the discipline which I had never considered until everything in the field pointed to its centrality and which I could no longer ignore. My doctoral dissertation is entitled, *The Banyan Tree: Perception of Place, Kinship and Church in Tasiriki, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu*. The village of Tasiriki was founded as a Presbyterian mission station in 1900, bringing people from different groups originally settled in the surrounding forest into a large coastal settlement that

has since grown around and for the church. The church is therefore at the centre of people's lives and foundational to the place. In South-West Santo, the banyan tree is a marker of place, and people in Tasiriki say that the Word of God is like a standing banyan whose seed was brought and planted there. Banyans grow in a specific way. The seed, after taking root on a host tree, enwraps it as it grows. Later, when the crown has grown bigger, it sends roots downwards, giving its shape to the banyan. Resorting to this metaphor helped me reconsider the dynamic, organic, and entangled interplay between customary practices, also known as *kastom*, and the church as it is played out in Tasiriki. The church then could be compared to a banyan whose crown had come to objectify people's capacity to grow their church, and thus their place, an index of people's relationship to God, considered to be the source of all growth. Yet, the church, to grow, had and still has to root itself in as well as rely on kinship and land, a relational substrate now characterised by a dual nature, customary and Christian. While in other places in Melanesia such duality has sometimes been described as an unresolved and existentially threatening paradox, in Tasiriki, this

duality, complementary and often mutually encompassing, is assumed as necessary to the good workings of social life.

During the two years (2017-2019) I spent at Academia Sinica as a postdoctoral fellow, I've continued working on the dual aspect of place and the relationship between Christian and kastom ways, especially regarding the way people conceive of kinship. Participating in a panel at the 2018 conference organised by the Royal Anthropological Institute on gardens' aesthetics prompted me to reflect further on the relation between gardens and church, aesthetics and rituals. Reviewing works on Melanesian gardens showed that their aesthetics is often tied to growth promoting rituals and magical practices, themselves tied to myths of foundations and the ontological status of the tubers. In a subsequent publication, I developed the hypothesis that, in Tasiriki, while gardens remain central in the role that they play in the customary generation of sociality, the continued importance of garden taboos revealing the substantial

relationship still tying together people and their crops, the absence of ritual and magical practices in gardens and the taking part of garden products in Christian life, may be related to the displacement of the ritual arena in the church where most of the spiritual and material growth of the place is now 'cultivated' and objectified. [1]

In September 2022, I was awarded a NSTC research grant for new research to be conducted in Taiwan among the Amis people and the Catholic clergy in the diocese of Hualian. This research was triggered by an interest in the legacy of the Paris Foreign Missions (MEP) after 70 years of mission work in Hualian County. The MEP congregation founded the Hualian Diocese in the 1950s and has been overseeing it since then. Missionaries from the early period are now few and ageing, as are the nuns trained in the Saint Martha Institute founded in 1960. In a contemporary environment characterised by a double trend of secularisation and multiplication of religious

options, I came to be interested in the social and existential role played by religion as well as the ways in which people sustain and keep their religious institutions alive within the community, a fortiori when the religion was originally brought from the ‘outside’.

An important aspect of my research in Vanuatu revolved around the work people devote to their church. In Tasiriki, if the church is ‘grown’, it means that it requires and mobilises ‘work’, which is people’s constant efforts and investment towards their church, commonly referred as ‘work for God’. Following up on this, I now resort to the concept of ‘work’ as a theoretical and methodological tool in analysis, which, I believe, can help make visible the networks of relations mobilised in the church, while exploring what the concept of ‘work’ can mean in a religious context. For this research, I work on the MEP archives while conducting fieldwork in a Xiuguluan Amis village whose population converted to Catholicism in the early 1950s and is still predominantly Catholic. To comprehend the processes by which the church has been established, built, and is now sustained, I look at the historical development and contemporary situation of the Catholic church by attending to people’s mundane and

spiritual ‘work’ for the church as well as that of the clergy, past and present.

Theoretically, during my doctoral studies, the new theoretical literature on animism, that of the new Melanesian ethnography, as well as the rich ethnographic literature on Vanuatu have been very important to me, and later I also engaged in a dialogue with the anthropology of Christianity, especially that of Melanesia. For my current research project, literature on the history of the mission in the Pacific and the abundant ethnography conducted among the indigenous peoples in Taiwan will also prove



Christian wedding ceremony Pelmolli, SW Santo 2018



Wolwol (customary marriage ceremony) Pelmoli,  
SW Santo 2018

invaluable to understanding the various ways Christianity was adopted and ‘adapted’ among different groups and along different denominations. I am in any case looking forward to discovering new works which will offer me food for thought.

To conclude, I would say that one of the value of anthropology lies in the possibility it gives us to engage in the long-term with people and communities that kindly accept us stepping into their lives and intimacy, so that we can go on with our enquiries into what it means to be human in and with this world. Becoming an anthropologist is not an easy path, yet I’m happy treading it alongside all my peers and the people I work and share with.

---

[1] Candice Roze (2021) Gardens Without Magic: Tending the Church as the Locus of Growth in a Presbyterian Village, Vanuatu, *Anthropological Forum*, 31:4, 396-413, DOI: 10.1080/00664677.2021.2001311