Chapter 2

THE CONDOMINIUM

From 1906 to 1980, a French Tricolore and a British Union Jack flew at equal height in the capital, Port Vila. Or so both sides claimed. Now there is a single flag, available to much of the world on computer software that will also play a music-box version of the rousing national anthem, "Yumi, Yumi, Yumi." This is not pronounced "yummy, yummy, yummy," as Australian tourists may be told; it is no paean to cannibalism. Rather it is "you-me," an inclusive "we" that has proved elusive in Vanuatu, where colonial divisions exacerbated indigenous ones. Three languages are common in town—English, French, and the pidgin called Bislama. English and French are the languages of education. The national anthem is sung in Bislama. For ni-Vanuatu as well as many other residents, Bislama is the most common language. More than a hundred languages, all Austronesian, are spoken throughout the eighty islands.

When I show slides of Vanuatu, they tend to go something like this: a map of the Pacific, a map of Vanuatu, then a series of slides on the capital, Port Vila. I explain that Port Vila had a population in 1995 of about twenty-five thousand. It has Chinese general stores and a fresh produce market. French wines and fine cheeses are beyond the reach of most ni-Vanuatu, enjoyed only by some expatriates and the ni-Vanuatu elite. The climate is pleasant by many North Americans' standards, although very humid, with an average high of 29° C and a low of 19° C.[1]