

Spiritual War: Revival, Child Prophecies, and a Battle Over Sorcery in Vanuatu

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INTRODUCTION

Sasha Newell (2007) argues that Pentecostal churches in Africa draw a growing popularity largely from their ability to combat witchcraft in society (see also Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1992; Pfeiffer et al. 2007). This argument is also relevant when trying to understand the impact of a powerful Christian charismatic revival that hit the tiny Presbyterian island of Ahamb just off the south coast of Malekula Island in Vanuatu in 2014. The revival was part of a larger movement that swept through many of the Presbyterian churches in Malekula that year. Its aim was to bring spiritual awakening to the people of this district and beyond, and encompass some unwanted structures and tendencies in society. As it proceeded, an important goal of the revival became to eradicate sorcery. Sorcery is regarded as a serious threat to people's well-being all over Vanuatu, first and foremost because it is employed to bring about misfortune, sickness, and death. It is also dangerous because it is believed to employ harmful spirits related to Satan. The revival, and especially its confrontation with sorcery through a "spiritual war", as it was termed, will be the focus of this chapter.

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Christianity has a long history of representing the morally good on Ahamb. The value of “love” is for Ahamb people a most important principle of Christianity and reflects God’s commandment about loving your neighbor (at least) as much as yourself and the idea that all humans have the same value, as children of God. Christianity was introduced to Ahamb in the early 1900s and coincided in part with a period of disease and death attributed to sorcery. Accusations of sorcery gave rise to fights and revenge killings, and large parts of the population in Malekula (and elsewhere, see Rio 2002) were exterminated during this period (Deacon 1934; De Lannoy 2004; Miller 1989: 194). The Ahamb church, among the first in Malekula, became significant as it practiced a zero-tolerance policy toward sorcery and offered spiritual resistance to its destructive powers. The newly converted Ahamb Islanders were also offering refugees from conflict-ridden mainland villages a safe place to stay on the small island. Conversion to the new religion was therefore understood as a matter of survival for many. This period in history is still important in people’s collective memory and influences contemporary relationships between islanders and the church.

Since it was introduced, Christianity has continued to work as a main framework through which Ahamb people have dealt with different challenges of cosmological (harmful spirits, sorcery) and social character (disputes, violence, arrogance, greed). When core values of being and living together are threatened, and the “evil” is on the rise, so to speak, the church is typically mobilized for the “good” to encompass it. Conflict, selfishness, and sorcery thus appear as conceptual oppositions to the Christian ethos on Ahamb, and provide some structuring conditions for the articulation of the religion’s importance.

An argument of this chapter is that when exploring the relationship between sorcery and Christianity generally, and specifically the process of the revival, it appears that the cultivation of “good” and “evil” as opposing forces has an effect where the two forces are mutually vitalized. This can be read in light of Clifford Geertz’ (1993) classic model of cultural patterns and sacred symbols having an intrinsic double aspect as “they give meaning to a social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves” (1993: 93). With the prevailing existence of evil, it becomes even more important that the Christian life of good is strong and present to combat this power. But as the “evil” is also a part of Christian discourse as an opposition to the desired “good”, this threat needs to be addressed and fought,

and the evil is thus constantly reproduced as an idea and phenomenon. Christianity as good and sorcery as evil are in this sense mutually enforcing to one another and can be argued to be reproduced as relevant ideas by the existence and cultivation of the other (see De Boeck 2006; Meyer 1999; Newell 2007; Eriksen and Rio, this volume). We will recognize this in the revival, where a stronger presence of the Holy Spirit resulted in a stronger presence of sorcerers that again demanded an even stronger cultivation of the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note, however, that on Ahamb this mutually reinforcing relationship does not only operate in discourse but is also expressed and experienced quite concretely in peoples' lives. I want to stress that Christianity and sorcery in the Ahamb context should neither be approached merely as a belief or a discourse, nor something that can be easily analyzed as an abstract expression of a sociopolitical condition (see Asad 1982). For these people, sorcery is real and experienced as a concrete threat to their daily lives¹ (see Eriksen and Rio, this volume). Most of their uncertainty is therefore not about whether sorcery exists or not (see Bubandt 2014), but instead who the sorcerers are, how to avoid becoming their victims, if an attack against them may be planned in a given situation, and if so, in what form. This fear affects the structuring of everyday life activities for many (see Rio 2002, 2011; Rodman 1993; Taylor 2015; Tonkinson 1981). This point is important to keep in mind as we will now explore the spiritual war, the revival, and the meaning of sorcery and Christianity for personal lives and society on this island.

THE PROBLEM OF SORCERY

What I refer to as sorcery in this chapter is a general and embracing concept covering all spells and conscious and deliberate manipulation of objects to achieve the desired outcome (see Evans-Pritchard 1937; Eves 2013; Forsyth and Eves 2015: 4).² In the Vanuatu context it is sometimes useful to divide sorcery into two categories: evil or "black" sorcery, where magical powers are used to cause harm to someone, and good sorcery, where magical powers are used for positive purposes, such as healing, weather control, and finding lost items (Forsyth 2006: 1). Sorcery is today generally regarded as dangerous and unwanted, however, for a few main reasons. Because all forms of sorcery employ traditional spirits, engaging with it is seen as defying God's commandment that one

shall have no other gods than the Christian God. This point is particularly important for those who argue that these spirits are simply Satan in disguise (see Meyer 1999, 2004). In addition, sorcery is by many regarded as unnecessary today because prayers to God do the same job. Good sorcery is therefore largely replaced by Christian prayer on Ahamb. Moreover, the sorcery that was initially good, such as flying (*sum*) and making oneself invisible (*banban*), is now talked about as being used mainly for bad purposes such as transport and disguise during killing operations. The emic terms that describe sorcery, *baxo* in the Ahamb vernacular and *posen*, *nakaemas*, and *blak magic* in Vanuatu's national language Bislama therefore all carry negative connotations today. The term *posen* is perhaps the most frequently used on Ahamb, and I will refer to this term several times in the chapter.

The cultural values of love and care are important on Ahamb, as they are throughout the Pacific (see Hollan and Throop 2011). While the highly valued practices related to love presuppose relationships and devalue what we may call the “possessive individual” (MacPherson 1962; Martin 2013; Sykes 2007), the sorcerer devalues the social through often unprovoked attacks on other members of the social body. The sorcerer is typically a person who is overcome by envy, anger, and greed, and who might turn against even his own close kin. The sorcerer does not “come out in clear places” (*kam aot long klea ples* in Bislama) but is “hiding himself” (*baedem hem*) from the comings and goings of everyday sociality. While a normal person with nothing to hide takes care to be transparent about his activities, the sorcerer moves silently to conceal his movements. Sorcery is “selfishness carried to its most profane result” (LiPuma 2000: 145).

HOPE IN REVIVAL

When I returned to Ahamb to do my second fieldwork in early 2014³ I arrived at a time of much tension in the community. Some serious land disputes had been stirred up, chiefs and other community leaders had meager support, church attendance was low among men and youth, and sorcery was seen as on the rise nationwide. The society was thus considered challenged by a range of moral ruptures. At the same time rumors had started to arrive about a “revival” going on in the Presbyterian churches of South West Bay, a 3 hours' boat ride east of Ahamb. A revival of this kind refers to a spiritual reawakening in people emerging

from a strong and direct presence of the Holy Spirit. In a revival, believers are typically confronted with miracles and personal experiences with the divine. This often brings a new and convincing awareness of sin and a desire for repentance and humility. Such processes of individual transformation are believed to be able to change the very fabric of life in society and even change the environment as it may lift curses from the land (Blacket 1997; Griffiths 1977; Robbins 2004; Strachan 1984; Tuzin 1997). Seeing that the revival was having a significant impact in South West Bay, the administrative offices of the Presbyterian Church in Malekula declared that a group of their revivalists should tour to all the 18 church parishes in Malekula to spread the movement. Ahamb church leaders were among the first to request the group hoping that they could help improving the moral tone of their community.

A striking feature of the revival in South West Bay, which was now spreading to Ahamb and other places in Malekula, was that the Holy Spirit was granting powerful spiritual gifts of vision and prophecy to predominantly children and youth. Through their vision, they could “see” what was going on in the spiritual world, and they would on a daily basis receive messages from the Holy Spirit to pass on to their community. The messages usually came as the children were struck with the power of the Holy Spirit and fell down; or were “slain in the spirit”; and in a physically unconscious state were approached by the Holy Spirit itself, Jesus, or angels. The visionaries were also taken on spiritual travels to the Heavens or places in South Malekula if the Spirit had something particular to show them. During the revival, people used the active Bislama verb “to *slen*” to describe being struck by—and slain in the spirit. This term appears in several cases in this chapter, and I use this emic term to describe the incidents rather than the passive English term “to be slain.”

In the revival, the children were chosen by the Holy Spirit because they had “soft” hearts that enabled them to more easily “open up” and submit themselves fully to the guidance of the Spirit. Their special role was also founded in Biblical prophecies talking about how the Holy Spirit will appear in the last days of time to pour out its spirit on all people, especially the young, by making them see visions and prophecy (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). The message that no one will be able to enter the kingdom of God without making oneself humble like a little child (see Mark 10:15, Matthew 18:3) was also central here and worked as a criticism of the adult men who engaged themselves in politics and disputes rather

than the church. The explanation for the children's role was communicated by church leaders as well as the visionaries themselves.

At this point, it is worth remembering that the Malekula revival happened in Presbyterian communities that identify as such, and are thus not Pentecostal in the denominational sense. If we define Pentecostalism as Hefner (2013: 2) as “an affectively expressive, effervescent Christianity that takes literally the wondrous miracles described in the new testament’s Acts of the Apostles (2:1–3), and proclaims their availability and importance for believers today,” however, we can say that the revival was a Pentecostal movement that “Pentecostalized” (Gooren 2010) many Presbyterian churches this year.

Before I continue to the Ahamb revival and the spiritual war, I will take some space to present the story about the revival’s beginning in South West Bay as it was told to me by local church leader Elder Dan who himself participated in these first events.

THE REVIVAL OUTBREAKS IN SOUTH WEST BAY

The outbreak of the Malekula revival took place in the village of Lawa in South West Bay in November 2013. The Lawa Sunday School was closing for the semester and about eighty children and some adults, including Elder Dan, were gathered in a small village outside of Lawa to prepare a show for the community. During a service in this village, a child suddenly fell to the ground and started rolling around seemingly unconscious. This happened at the same time as Elder Edward, a local church elder known for his spiritual gifts, called Elder Dan on his mobile phone to tell him that “anointing was about to overflow” and that they had to take the children down to Lawa immediately. In the revival context, anointing referred to a powerful blessing, protection, and empowerment from God. Elder Edward was in Vanuatu’s capital of Port Vila when he received his vision about the events at home. He explained it to me later as a video playing before his eyes showing “the Heavens opening up and hundreds of angels traveling up and down between South West Bay and the Heavens.”

After the first child in South West Bay had *slen*, more followed as the group now started walking toward Lawa village. When the group reached the church they walked around the church house seven times.⁴ During the seventh round, lightning struck. In the words of Elder Dan:

When the lightning struck the sky opened. The children saw it (through spiritual vision). They all fell down. All the children. They were tossed to the ground because they saw directly into the glory of God. While walking the seventh round they opened the door to the church and ... anointing struck (*jokem* in Bislama) everyone. The anointing flowed inside and many cried and many *slen*. This was the first time people had seen anyone *slen* in the power of the Holy Spirit. They might have seen it in other churches but this was the first time in the Presbyterian Church. This was the first time the Lawa parish experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. Many *slen*. Many cried. People who had cameras took photos and you could see *smok* (fog or smoke) inside the church. Flames of fire⁵ too.

Over the next days and weeks, more children and youth in Lawa and all over South West Bay started to *slen* in church, during school, and at home. When waking up they would talk about visions and messages given them by the Holy Spirit. Prior to these events in South West Bay, a group of Presbyterian Church leaders had been praying for a decade for a revival to come to Malekula. Malekula was one of the last areas in Vanuatu to be Christianized, and even though Christianity now held a strong position most places, the island was still feared for its sorcery and worship of traditional spirits. A revival would provide a deep spiritual cleansing of Malekula and complete the Christianization process that had begun more than a century ago.

In response to the events that were now taking place, a special revival program was started up in the Presbyterian Churches of South West Bay with Elder Edward as the leader. It was Elder Edward and 52 youths engaged in the revival who in March 2014 arrived on Ahamb to make the power of the Holy Spirit be felt also there.

ANointing AHAMB ISLAND

On the day of the revivalists' arrival, I was helping to prepare their welcome meal in the community hall. As we were more than enough people for the task, I took a break with Arthur, a senior man who was both a custom expert and retired deacon in the church. Arthur told me he was looking forward to the arrival of the visitors. The young people from South West Bay were not, as those in the older generation, afraid to spell it out if they knew anyone was practicing *posen*, he claimed. He continued:

Nobody will be able to keep it (your *posen* acts) secret anymore. Some people are nervous (*shek* in Bislama) now, when they hear that the group is coming. It is because they are hiding something. The group from South West Bay has come to help us. Because when we die, we must enter the kingdom of God. That is why those who have *posen* must let go of it. The life of *posen* has become too strong. This means that the life of church must become equally strong to meet that challenge.

Ben, a man in his forties, joined our company and added that we were lucky to have such a group in Malekula who could pinpoint bad things that people were hiding:

If you go to worship with them and you feel that you cannot breathe or that your body is “not right”, it is because you are hiding something that is “not good”. It is the Holy Spirit that works in you. You cannot hide anything that is “not good” anymore, whether it is fighting with your wife, having cross with your children, practicing *posen* or something else.

Elder Edward and his revival group stayed for two days and ran two services in a crammed church before their main program on the last night. This was held outside the church and the area was packed with just about everyone in the community and many Ahamb islanders living on mainland Malekula. At the center of the area was an impressive tent-like construction of white and red textiles. It was a ‘Tabernacle,’ known from the Bible’s Old Testament as a portable dwelling place for God. The original Tabernacle was built to specifications revealed by God to Moses on the Mount Sinai, and similarly, the specifications of this Tabernacle had been revealed by God to some of the visionary children from South West Bay prior to the program. As in the original from the Old Testament, God was present with his full power inside this Tabernacle.

The program involved sing-a-longs and prayers to ask the Holy Spirit to come and take place inside the Tabernacle, as well as on Ahamb itself, and in us who were present. The part of the program perhaps filled with most anticipation was the one dealing with sorcery. It was believed that sorcerers would have no choice but to surrender during the program because the visiting visionaries would be able to point them out at once. After a service of singing, Bible readings, preaching, and prayers, Elder Edward spoke: “If anyone accuses you of doing *posen*, if you are a woman or man who has a bad reputation for these things you must

go inside the Tabernacle now.” The message was clear. If you were a sorcerer this was your chance to get forgiveness and make a pledge to God to quit once and for all. If you went inside but continued practicing *posen* at any time, God would “pay back” and cause you serious sickness or death. If you had a false reputation for sorcery, however, no one would be able to accuse you again as you had made this powerful pledge with God.

There was gravity and anticipation in the air as Elder Edward made the appeal. Two well-known sorcery suspects suddenly came through the crowd and entered the Tabernacle. Then a third man, Kevin, entered. Nobody accused him of sorcery but he was popular for his traditional herbal medicine that is associated with good sorcery. It is believed that if you know the good side of these plants, you are also likely to know the “bad side” that can be used for *posen*. Kevin went inside in order to clear any doubt. Elder Edward then called for others who had done something wrong (*no gud* in Bislama) to come inside. A special appeal went out to those who had stolen the big battery of the community hall’s solar system 3 weeks earlier. If they came, they would receive their forgiveness from God and the community. We waited in silence, looking curiously around to see if anyone moved. No one came. Meanwhile, the reputed sorcerers knelt down inside the Tabernacle. Everyone present was asked to join in prayer for the three men and to ask God to work in their lives.

The concluding part of the program involved a big communal meal that worked as a Holy Communion with food and water prepared inside the Tabernacle. Consuming the Holy meal would wash us with Jesus’ blood and make God forgive our sins. As our bodies were spiritually clean, it would be possible for the Holy Spirit to enter into us. When the Spirit resided in our bodies, God’s work would finally begin and spiritual gifts would be granted to the people on Ahamb as they had been to the people of South West Bay.

It was late night when everyone had finished their meal and the program came to an end. In the calm and quiet air, Elder Edward announced that the island was now clean. He declared that the Holy Spirit was present on the island, that Jesus had arrived, and that there was no one on Ahamb living in darkness anymore. Now it was up to the Ahamb community to make room for the Spirit to prosper by continuing to pray.

“Fresh news from Heaven”

We cannot hide anymore! Where will you hide now? There is no place to hide. If you do anything not good, if you think badly about another man, steal or have posen, the children will tell you right away now. Because they can see it.

Mary and George, middle aged husband and wife on Ahamb

When the South West Bay group had left, Ahamb church leader Elder Cyril took over and started up nightly revival worships in the Presbyterian community church. Elder Cyril was himself oriented toward the spiritual aspects of Christianity, and knew well the work that a revival entailed. It took about a week of worships before the Ahamb children also started to *slen* and convey messages. After a month, the number of children who *slen* was around 10–15, and a total number of about 25 were seeing visions and receiving messages. At the most, around 30 gifted children, youth, and women would *slen* during the revival worships and sometimes in school, in the garden or in their villages. The revival worships did not have a fixed program but were arranged after directions from the Holy Spirit given to the visionaries or to Elder Cyril.

The revival worships were especially popular among women and children, who were present every night. The attendance of men varied, as the services interfered with their popular kava⁶ drinking sessions. Kava was thus often criticized in the messages of the Holy Spirit as it kept the men away from the church. The climax of the worships was when the gifted lined up and told their revelations one by one in the microphone. Some had several messages to share while others had one, and they varied in length and detail. Visions often involved parables, where the simplest ones could be seeing one dark and one light house symbolizing those who had faith and a clean heart and those who lived in sin and disbelief (*tu tingting* in Bislama). Elder Cyril who led most of the revival worships emphasized that the messages were “fresh news from Heaven,” messages given directly from the Holy Spirit to the children. They did not come from any human being, and therefore we had to take them seriously.

Central to the revival was the need to “prepare one’s life” to meet God in this life and in the afterlife. To be aligned with God, it was important to fight the “life of this world” (*laef blong wol ia* in Bislama); the deceptive worldly enjoyments that kept people away from a holy lifestyle. This included everything “not good” such as stealing, adultery,

unfaithfulness, envy, anger, swearing, fighting, selfishness, being obsessed with money and material things, kava drinking, not going to church, not participating in community work, doubting God, and practicing sorcery. The actions and values that were encouraged as “good” and representing “the life of Heaven” included humility, generosity, kindness, helping people, moderation, faithfulness, going to church, and a full devotion to God. The revival was, in short, recruiting people to a more pious, empathetic, and ascetic lifestyle. It was warning against the corrupting temptations of this world and directing people’s attention to the rewards of the next (Hefner 2013: 20; see also chapters by Blanes and Pype, this volume). The revival was therefore not promoting the form of Pentecostalism known as “prosperity” or “health and wealth” gospel where the message is that it is God’s will for believers to be rich, healthy, and successful (see, for example, Coleman 2000; Haynes 2012). The revival rather had as its aim for individuals to achieve a state of inner purity which would further lead to a restructuring of society. Attention to money and material prosperity was seen as an obstacle to this process.

SPIRITUAL WAR

Happenings two months after the revival was introduced, on an afternoon in late May, reinforced the Ahamb community’s impression that the movement was important. News reached my village around lunch time that a group of visionary children had found an active *posen* stone outside the island’s community hall. My friend John and I were on our way there to find out more when we met two young men who in dramatic terms told us what had happened. The men had been playing soccer at the nearby field when a group of children passing by suddenly *shen* next to the community hall. When the children woke up, they were crying claiming there was a *posen* stone buried in the area that had to be found and removed. The soccer players had collected spades and dug out a stone after directions from the children. The men were still dressed in their football gear and looked distressed as they told us the story. To conclude one of them said, determined: “Tonight, everyone... (pointing towards the church) ...must go to church.”

John and I continued toward the community hall where we met a group of people, including a chief, his son, and some children. The chief told us that the stone had the shape of a human face. It was clear that this was no ordinary stone. The Holy Spirit had revealed to the

visionaries that the stone was placed there by sorcerers who wanted to bring damage to the community. The stone was infused with *bari*, a particular form of sorcery that can cause laziness, sickness, or even death. The chief's son explained that the effect was evident: "You see, the grass keeps growing here (around the community hall) ... and it is only cut on special occasions. The place has become like a ruin ... people are tired of doing (communal) work!" Someone commented that there would be prayers in the church until dusk to fight this evil power and that those who did not believe in the visionary children and the revival would finally see that it was true.

As expected, the church was full that night. When I arrived, seven children had already *slen*. After a few rounds of singing and prayers, Elder Cyril announced that a prayer group would be put together in one of the next days to walk around the island and pray against *posen*. If there was more *posen* lying around, it had to be found before it did more damage than it already had done. The 19-year-old girl Lisa who had a strong gift of vision then suddenly rose and said: "The Holy Spirit just revealed to me that we have to go out and search for *posen* already tonight. If not, it might be too late." Lisa continued: "when the Holy Spirit says something we have to do it. We cannot wait." Elder Cyril agreed and announced that we were organizing a group of 12 visionary children and a group of adult men to go with them. "Tonight we will carry out these things," he confirmed in his distinctive firm but gentle manner. The children had, through their spiritual vision, already identified the sorcerers responsible for the *posen* stone found at the community hall. Now, they saw that the sorcerers were furious at them for removing the stone. A few of the visionaries rose during the worship and revealed what they were seeing: that the furious sorcerers were now planning to come and kill the children who were revealing the secrets of their *posen*.

Around 30 people took part in the mission to locate and remove *posen* that night. Led by the visionaries, the group stopped at places where they saw that old or new *posen* was hidden. They placed Bibles on affected trees, paths, and houses before everyone joined in loud communal prayers to neutralize or chase away the evil powers. Using Bibles and prayer against dangerous spirits was not new on Ahamb, however. The Evangelism group in the church had worked with similar tools for decades in traditional taboo areas and in the houses of suspected sorcery victims. Many of the old evangelists had joined the group that was now pulling out or cutting down plants that the Holy Spirit revealed had evil

spirits in them. The group chased away some traditional spirits, and they found the skeleton of a dead cat buried outside the house of a newly deceased sorcery suspect. The dead cat made sense as a special cat bone is believed to be used for *sumu*, the sorcery of flying. It is also believed that the sorcerer can enter the body of a dead cat and use it to walk around unnoticed. The location of the dead cat consolidated the suspicion that the man had indeed been a sorcerer and that his death was caused by either failed *posen* that had ricocheted or punishment from God for his crimes as a sorcerer.

When walking home from church that night, those who had taken part in the prayer operation talked about their experiences in dramatic terms. “The Holy Spirit came inside the children ... but the dark powers fought with them making the children shake, shout and cry!” one of the men reported in enthusiastic disbelief. The dramatic scenes that took place were a result of fights between the Holy Spirit, who possessed the children, and the evil spirits that the group encountered on their way.

From that night on the spiritual war would increase in strength and scope. The scenes witnessed during this first prayer mission would be a regular sight both in the church and around the villages over the next months. The visionary children were finding more and more *posen*, and they would see people and places who were suffering from their effects. The faces and names of sorcerers from the whole district appeared before the children as on a screen, as they described it, and they could see who the sorcerers were planning to attack next. As the visionaries revealed this highly secret information, they could see the sorcerers’ growing anger and how they were now trying to attack anyone on Ahamb.

Every day during the months of June and July, we could hear loud and desperate cries around the island as the visionary children saw sorcerers coming to attack them. Hordes of people would hasten from different corners of the island to help and join in prayers to push the sorcerers back. Men would come with machetes and cut aggressively around the bush or climb tall trees in search of hiding sorcerers who, according to the visionaries, had been able to transform into a lizard, a rat, or a fruit. With the heightened level of risk that the attacking sorcerers represented, and a collective impression that the visionaries’ revelations indeed seemed true, the church became an increasingly important place to seek out for comfort, protection, and fellowship. Men were closing their kava bars (at least temporarily) after orders from the Holy Spirit, a big land dispute that was going to court was postponed indefinitely after an

agreement between the parties and the chiefs, and many were calling on the visionary children to hear their latest revelations and to be prayed for.

After two dramatic months of spiritual war, things eventually calmed down as the community's renewed faith and trust in the Holy Spirit enforced the latter's protection of the island. The visionaries would occasionally receive messages about sorcerers planning new attacks, but the community's prayers and commitment to the church were making it hard for the sorcerers to come through and take any action. After some exhausting months, people were slowly regaining confidence and peace through their strengthened cooperation with the Spirit. The horrifying conclusion of the spiritual war, however, was still yet to come.

THE COMMUNITY MEETING. FEAR, LIFE, DEATH, AND A CLASH BETWEEN WORLD VIEWS

In October, seven months after the Ahamb revival began, a man confessed to having participated in the killing of a four-year-old boy by sorcery. The deceased boy was originally from Ahamb but had moved with his family to a small village on the Malekula mainland. Because the sorcerers had been unsuccessful in targeting anyone on Ahamb itself due to the protection of the Holy Spirit, they had decided to search out an Ahamb-related victim somewhere else. Because the small boy's mainland village was not incorporated in the revival and his family was not very involved in church (and hence did not have God's fullest protection), he had been a relatively easy victim for the sorcerers. The man's confession had come during a revival conference in a mainland village close to Ahamb. Here, he had sought out a prayer group to allegedly ease his growing grief for taking the small boy's life.

A community meeting was set up to hear the man's story. During the meeting, the man put all his cards on the table and revealed horrifying details about his and his friends' lives as sorcerers. Given the severity of the man's confessions, the meeting turned into a public hearing that lasted for almost three weeks. During this time, a total of five men from the district admitted to having been involved in at least four deaths by using sorcery. Two older men, who were long-time sorcery suspects, were by the five men pointed out as leaders of their sorcery group.

During the court hearing, the suspects revealed disturbing stories also about the actions and powers of the two older men. One of them had

allegedly caused more than 30 deaths over the past decades, in addition to numerous cases of sickness, ruined businesses, and other types of misfortune. Various sorcery objects belonging to the suspects, including bottles, bones, and stones were also handed over to the congregation and their purpose and use explained by their owners. As the secrets and actions of the suspects were revealed, some furious young men occasionally entered the court to attack the suspects. The community chiefs found it hard to intervene and find a solution to the case.

The normal way of concluding a sorcery hearing on Ahamb has been to accept the suspects' denials and seal the case by a communal prayer where the suspects promise to God and the community that they will never again touch any form of sorcery item. God is then believed to bring sickness or death as punishment to the suspect if he or she breaks the pledge. This time, however, the confessions and stories of the sorcerers were of such a severe character that a little group of men saw no other option than to make an end to it all. The five admitting sorcerers had already surrendered and handed over their sorcery items while the two older men had not. Fearing the risk of having the two sorcery suspects living around their families and children, especially after the humiliation they had gone through in the hearing, the group took over when the official hearing ended and the chiefs had gone home and arranged for the death of the two by hanging. This event would shake both the people of Ahamb and the nation of Vanuatu.

During the hearing, I was myself in the capital Port Vila and registered mixed responses to the event. While there was much official criticism in the media and from the police, a number of people claimed it was good that someone "finally took action" against sorcerers who kept terrorizing innocent people. The police were contacted after the hangings and arrested 23 people who had been involved in the hearing. Many islanders criticized the arrests and the police for not dealing properly with the sorcery cases themselves as crimes but concentrating on the two offenses that were easy to prove physically: the hangings and the burning of one of the deceased men's house. For the critics, however, these actions were merely responses to the pain the two men had caused through their sorcery and a way to prevent them from killing again.

Many argued that the significance of the police in this case was limited because they can only prosecute according to a state legal system that does not properly acknowledge sorcery. Like most other Pacific

countries, Vanuatu formally prohibits sorcery practice in its Penal Code. Section 151 provides that “No person shall practice witchcraft or sorcery with intent to cause harm or detriment to any other person.” The penalty is imprisonment for two years (Forsyth 2006: 12). Since sorcery operates in the spiritual realm, however, it is impossible to prove that sorcery has taken place before a state court using normal evidentiary principles (see however Rio 2010, where some men from Malekula were sentenced by the magistrates’ court). If a sorcery case is investigated in detail and considered in the context of the state legal system with its rules of procedure and evidence, it is therefore highly unlikely to ever result in a successful prosecution (Forsyth 2006: 13).

During the police investigation, some of my interlocutors expressed that it was problematic that Vanuatu state law, which the police were following, is based on the British common law system, or “white man’s law” (*loa blong waetman*). This law was introduced during the colonial period and has later been revised by foreign law experts engaged by international aid donors. More than reflecting living conditions in Vanuatu, where sorcery is regarded as a living part of the custom, the law was seen as reflecting life in Europe and Australia where sorcery does not exist. Many Ahamb islanders, therefore, saw the involvement of the police and the state law system as an unavoidable clash of world views. In national media, the police criticized the community for taking the case in their own hands instead of letting the police deal with it (*The Vanuatu Times* November 21–27, 2014). But on Ahamb few people found a reason to involve the police, as they had no proper method of dealing with sorcery. The police would, therefore, have had to let the accused go free, and the community would again run the risk of letting the men attack again.

The gap between a people considering sorcery to be a serious crime and a legislation that does not allow convictions to be attained is a problem in many places in Melanesia. This is one of the burning issues discussed in a new book by Miranda Forsyth and Richard Eves entitled *Talking it Through. Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia* (2015). In the book’s introduction, the Papua New Guinea native Gairo Onagi argues that bridging local belief systems with the law is one of the great challenges in addressing sorcery and witchcraft-related issues in the region today (Onagi 2015). Taking the case from Ahamb and the many incidents of sorcery-related attacks and

killings from Papua New Guinea as examples (see Jorgensen 2014), this seems indisputably so.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The 2014 revival left a solid mark in the Ahamb society. The spiritual war, including the court hearing that culminated in the two hangings, was important in that context. For Ahamb people the sorcery in question was indisputably “real” and highly difficult to deal with. After the hangings, relatives in town would report home about ruthless newspaper headlines and Facebook discussions that those who had experienced the spiritual war found unfair. In sorcery cases of this kind, the victims from the perspective of most media, international NGOs and human rights organizations, are those who are accused of being sorcerers and witches and who are subsequently attacked or expelled from their communities. But for Ahamb people in this case, and for the majority of people across Melanesia and other places where sorcery and witchcraft are experienced as real, the problem is first and foremost located in the harm that the sorcerers exercise on persons and their communities (Forsyth and Eves 2015: 2).

When sorcery emerges on Ahamb today, as other places in Melanesia and Africa, it is in relations to conflicts and envy that emerge when someone sees another person having success (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 2002; Eves 2000; MacCarthy, this volume; Moore and Sanders 2001; Rio 2002). Activities that promote individual wealth and prestige challenge expectations of sharing and reciprocity and lead to broken relationships and new inequalities. Self-centered actions, therefore, become a threat to relational harmony as well as the status and well-being of those who feel overshadowed by the advancement of others. Even though sorcery brings destruction, it can at least in discourse be understood also as protests and in a sense a reinforcement of “the communal moral of giving and sharing as against the modern tendency to claim rights and keep to oneself” (Rio 2002: 132). Sorcery can thus be interpreted as a double-edged blade (Newell 2007: 463), in that it clarifies the moral importance of collectivity and social bonds, but at the same time demonstrates a harmful individualism when letting personal envy override relational compassion in bringing horror, death, and pain to others.

The relational responsibility that fear of sorcery in a sense helps to uphold also very clearly reinforced through the church on Ahamb.

Ahamb people understand a good person to be someone who has love, concern, and sympathy for others. These are the same values that also characterize a good Christian. The antithesis of the good person, however, is one who is selfish and proud. Such a person is typically talked about as “different” (*difren* in Bislama) and doubts are continuously raised about such a person’s Christian moral as he or she seems to acknowledge neither God nor kin in his or her life. Christianity is in this sense taking the role of an all-encompassing system on Ahamb, incorporating the main moral framework for social action as well as the cosmological powers of God that are regarded as stronger than any traditional spirit used in sorcery. Christianity thus acts as an umbrella for the good and what is worth aspiring toward, while sorcery, which brings destruction, is the most potent manifestation of the bad and evil. As with other Pentecostal movements, the revival was particularly clear in marking out this distinction, and brought about a more aggressive confrontation against the evil than had been normal. As I have argued, the opposing role of good and evil seem to some extent to be mutually reinforced and reproduced through the existence and cultivation of the other. For Ahamb people, however, this mutual reinforcement has not merely been discursive but is experienced in social practice: the more of the good (especially success), the greater the chance of an envious person (typically a sorcerer) coming to destroy it. The more evil, the more important it is that the church is strong to encompass it.

This mutual reinforcement resonates with examples from Africa where Pentecostal Christianity has been argued to take on the logic of witchcraft and make the church into part of the witchcraft problem itself, as well as a solution to the problem (De Boeck 2006: 173; Newell 2007). In the Pentecostal churches of the Ivory Coast, for example, Newell reports on the elaborate belief in witchcraft and a simultaneous assertion of the ability of the church to transcend it. But some Ivoirians claim that the church is also a haven for the witches, as it asks people to detach themselves from the “corrupting” influence and obligations of kin and rather focus their attention (and money) on the church (and their leaders). The church is thus promoting activities that resemble the self-centered actions of the witch (Newell 2007: 484; Meyer 1999: 170). Pentecostalism is therefore sometimes equated with witchcraft as it encourages exactly the kind of antisocial behavior that Ivoirians understand as witchcraft. As churches recognize the efficacy and reality

of witchcraft as under the category of the evil Satan, while also being caught up in the same web of power and money addressed in local cosmologies of witchcraft, witchcraft discourse is let into the heart of the Pentecostal ritual.

Ahamb people's interpretation of the church's role in sorcery matters seems less ambiguous, however. Christianity here already encompasses the society's moral structure by representing an ideology that for most is regarded as good and right. Sorcery, on the other hand, is understood and experienced as a real force that attacks this moral structure as much as it causes sickness and death.

As several chapters of this volume show, Pentecostal movements, of which the revival can be seen as an example, tend to discipline people into a new form of governance or social order. In the context of the long-term moral "crisis" on Ahamb, a spiritual renewal and stricter mode of governance, based on a rerealization of a more pious and morally pure way of living, was more than welcome for many. My impression from being on Ahamb during the revival was that the movement enabled its supporters to "pre-experience" new and alternative futures against the troubled realities of the present. This happened through children and youth that are globally being connected to hope and change. The revival, therefore, constituted a "generative moment" (Kapferer 2015) that gave rise to hope of a new time in which the island society is again united and truly safe. On Ahamb, where Christianity is to such an extent connected to the good, this was understood to be best achieved if everyone was first reconfigured as morally good Christians. As I have tried to describe in this chapter, many islanders understood the revival, as well as its spiritual war, as offering a most fitting opportunity for precisely this task.

NOTES

1. As Miranda Forsyth (2006: 1) points out, Melanesians have not traditionally drawn distinctions between the natural and supernatural worlds. Sorcery or witchcraft has therefore not been a separate category of belief, but rather part of a larger whole of beliefs and knowledge about the world.
2. There are many different forms of sorcery, each with its specific technique. They may involve the manipulation of spirits, using plants with magic properties, or adding poisonous plants and toxic substances (such as battery acid) to food or drinks.

3. My research is based on a total of 19 months (7 months in 2010 and 12 months in 2014) of fieldwork in Vanuatu of which most is conducted on Ahamb.
4. The number seven is in Christianity often seen as a foundation of God's word and the number of "completeness" and "divine perfection." The first use of the number in the Bible relates to the creation week in Genesis.
5. During the revival, fire, fog, and clouds often appeared in visions as representations of the Holy Spirit. The Bible has many references to these symbols. Fire appears as a symbol of God's presence in descriptions of God as "a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29), the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1:4) and descriptions of how the people of God were led by a pillar of fire at night during the Exodus (Exodus 13:21). The symbolism of the cloud can be related to the Old Testament, where God leads his people with a cloud or appears to them in a cloud (Exodus 16:10).
6. Kava is an intoxicating drink squeezed from the kava plant (*Piper methysticum*). The drink is enjoyed by men in many social contexts.
7. Vanuatu has two legal systems, the state system and the customary legal system. The Malvatumauri Custom law, administered by chiefs, also acknowledges sorcery (Article 3(4)). It is an ongoing question, however, of how to in practice integrate customary law into the state legal system, and what type of consideration there should be of for example procedural and evidential issues in different cases (see Forsyth 2006: 2–3). The prohibition of sorcery in custom law is therefore not more likely to result in a successful prosecution in a state court.

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