

What is love? The complex relation between values and practice in Vanuatu

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The past decade has seen a renewed anthropological interest in values, morality, and ethics. This article engages with this field by demonstrating how values can be strategies as well as ideals, prone to destabilize social order and divide people precisely because they are thought to be shared. The concept of 'love', referring to everyday practices of concern and care for others, is a core value for living on Ahamb Island in Vanuatu. However, adherence to the same core value does not necessarily create an ordered social world. Analysing three ethnographic cases, one of them a dispute with fatal consequences, I propose a model for studying values that accommodates ambiguity by uniting the notion of shared social values with individual experience and strategy. A methodological argument is that it is crucial for anthropological studies of values to assess the context for people's shifting interpretations and articulations of value in practice.

'It is a surprising thing, because Ahamb is a place of love, right?' George¹ suddenly exclaimed. It was December 2014 and three weeks since the tragic killing of two men feared to be sorcerers on the small island of Ahamb adjacent to the larger island Malekula in the South Pacific republic of Vanuatu. George, Bruce, and I were sitting on a canoe by the island's community church reflecting on the last months' events that proceeded the fatal act. The killing had taken place eight months into a Christian charismatic revival movement that swept over Malekula in 2014. The revival had gained a massive following in its capacity to morally and spiritually renew Malekula's villages through the supposed presence of the Holy Spirit. On Ahamb, the revival arrived during a time of enduring conflicts and division in the community and was frequently talked about as 'cleaning the island'. The movement gave rise to hope about a new future in which the island was reinstated as a place of concern, care, and unity. On Ahamb, these qualities are summed up as 'love' (*napalagin* in the vernacular, *lav* in the national language Bislama), a core value for islanders' living, solidly rooted in both kinship and Christianity. While the importance of love as an ideal is undisputed on Ahamb, what love entails in practice, however, is anything but fixed, and subject to the continuously shifting vantage point of the person assessing a situation. One example of this ambiguity

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is that sorcerer-killing could be performed in the name of love by people who are convinced that murder is the greatest of sins and normally the antithesis of love.

The aim of this article is to propose a specific model for studying values which draws on the structure-orientated work of Joel Robbins, who sees values as shared cultural ideas (Robbins 2013*b*; 2015*a*; 2017), and the work of Keir Martin and the anthropologists of the Manchester School on conflicting social perspectives (Gluckman 1958 [1940]; Martin 2010; 2013; 2018; Turner 1967; 1996 [1957]). My argument is that even if people agree on a set of core values for living, it is difficult to agree on what social actions are entailed in different contexts. This is because the appropriate social action demonstrating a value always depends on the social and emotional perspective of the person making the judgement in a given situation (cf. Martin 2013: 8). Drawing on Victor Turner's classic point about 'multi-vocal symbols' (1967: 52) and Sherry Ortner's model of 'key symbols' (1973), the same value may be reckoned to have different senses at different times for different people. As we will see for Ahamb, the practical meaning of love is constantly negotiated and reinvented in different contexts as a marker of ever-shifting boundaries of reciprocity, compassion, and respect (see Martin 2013: 154). The interpretations of the value of love may thus easily become 'situationally incompatible' (Turner 1996 [1957]: 300) and divide people rather than unify them – precisely because the meaning of the value is thought to be shared. Following an ethnographic commitment to theory production from the ground of practice, I argue that it is methodologically crucial to analyse values with careful attention to these contextually shifting characterizations of what actions count as good, appropriate, and true. It is also important not to accept values as readily given, but to investigate their meaning as they are formulated by people as practical action (cf. Kapferer & Gold 2018: 8).

The article is based on three periods of ethnographic fieldwork on Ahamb over a total of twenty months from 2010 to 2017 and my electronic communication with people there since then. The original focus of my first two fieldwork trips, in 2010 and 2014, respectively, was Ahamb people's negotiations over ongoing migration to mainland Malekula due to land shortage and environmental risks, including climate change. During my 2014 fieldwork, these negotiations were woven into the Christian charismatic revival movement that became the main focus of my research. Evaluations of one another's morality, often in terms of love, have arisen consistently in many contexts during my fieldwork periods. This article examines the persistent but ambiguous relationship of my informants to love as a value.

The article builds on three cases. The first concerns current disputes over land and authority on Ahamb and actualizes historical events and expectations of reciprocity formulated in terms of love – in different ways, however, by differently positioned parties. The second and third cases are taken from the Christian revival movement that developed in 2014. The second case concerns men who drink the local intoxicant kava and their dilemmas when the Holy Spirit begins formulating love as absence from kava, while male kin formulate love as drinking kava. It is therefore impossible to act according to one interpretation of love without violating another. The final case concerns the killing of two sorcerers in the name of love by a mob fearing for the future safety of the island but whose actions, from the perspective of others, violated their most basic expectation of what love should entail. Before I embark on the ethnographic cases, I will first present Ahamb briefly and clarify what I mean when talking about values and love as a 'core value' in the society.

Values and love on Ahamb

Ahamb is an island of about 650 people just off the central south coast of the much bigger Malekula Island in Northern Vanuatu. The majority of the islanders are subsistence farmers and fishers whose daily lives rely on agricultural garden work on the hilly coastline of mainland Malekula. One half of the islanders regard themselves as descendants of the island's first settlers who arrived twelve to fourteen generations ago while the other half regard themselves as descendants of migrants who arrived following Christianization in the first half of the twentieth century. Everyone on the island today is entangled in criss-crossing kin relations after generations of intermarriage and regards each other as 'nothing but family' (*famele nomo* in Bislama).

In addition to garden work, fishing, and some shell collecting, daily life on the island typically consists of spending time with relatives, planning and carrying out tasks in one's home or for kin, and attending meetings in church and community committees. Since 2000, a number of Ahamb families have migrated to about a dozen new settlements on the Malekula mainland due to lack of space, land disputes, or to escape the environmental vulnerability of the small, flat island. About 100 islanders also live permanently or temporarily in the capital Port Vila.

From being relatively understudied in anthropology, at least as an explicit and focused theme, the anthropology of values, morality, and ethics has recently been rapidly expanding (see, e.g., Fassin 2012; Heintz 2009; Howell 1997; Kapferer & Gold 2018; Keane 2015; Laidlaw 2014; Otto & Willerslev 2013; Robbins 2004; 2013a; Zigon 2008). When I refer to values in this article, I mean the moral or ethical values which represent what people take to be good or desirable in their own right (Robbins 2012: 117; see also Keane 2015: 21). On Ahamb, I argue that there are certain values that tend to work as guiding principles in people's everyday lives. These are values related to kindness, sympathy, compassion, pity, and generosity – what islanders often sum up as 'love'. Such ideas of establishing and maintaining emotionally positive ties to others are widespread throughout the Pacific (see, e.g., Brison 2007; Hollan & Throop 2011; McDougall 2016; Robbins 2004). For Ahamb people, the value of love is grounded in two main domains that shape and inform choice and practice on the island today: kinship, with its duties and obligations of sharing and reciprocity, and Christianity, reflected in Jesus' commandment to humankind that one shall 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' and 'love your neighbour as you love yourself' (Mark 12:30-1; Matthew 22:37, 39). I suggest that there are four main ways in which the concept of love manifests itself as a core value on Ahamb today.

First, as *generosity*. If you possess love (*gat lav*), it means you share with others and appreciate others sharing with you. Generous and unselfish participation in sharing constructs the person as humble, kind, and loving. A person who is 'good' (*ngavuy* in the vernacular, *gud* in Bislama) is someone who acts with love, who is humble, and who *luk save* ('sees and understands') the needs of others. These qualities are at the very core of Ahamb morality, and signal that one takes one's loyalty and obligation towards others seriously.

Second, as *obligation*. Love is expected from others, and people's commitments to relationships make love appear as a prelude to taking decisions and judging others. For instance, a person will often postpone their set plan in order to help someone they see as in need. If they do not, they often feel guilt or shame for potentially evoking embarrassment (*sem*) in the other person, as that person may find them

unworthy of attention, care, and relationships. Evoking such notions in persons can make observers judge one as selfish and without concern for others – in short, as lacking love (*no gat lav*). Being generous, however, brings other persons' support and sympathy (Trompf 1994: 6). The relational responsibility entailed in love resembles the importance of interconnectedness for social life in Melanesia, famously discussed by Marilyn Strathern (1988) in her theorizing of Melanesian personhood as 'dividual' and composed of relations, rather than the bounded individual prominent in much Western social theory.²

Third, as a *Christian value*. On Ahamb, Christianity and the Presbyterian community church serve as the ideological, social, and physical locus through which love as value is mediated. This is rooted in the Christian ethos of loving one's neighbour as oneself and the church's emphasis on a collective social form over the individual.³ In the Ahamb moral world, because God is loving and has created every human equally in his image, to love God also means to love every human being. Love thus unites a person's vertical relationship with God with one's horizontal relationships with other people (Chua 2015). As Ruta, a woman in her fifties, summarized it: 'Those who only want their family and help only them are "half-half"⁴ or half-Christian. But those who accept Christ in their life want everyone'. We can say that on Ahamb the values of fellowship and unity are most durably produced in the community-based ritual context provided by the church (cf. Eriksen 2008; McDougall 2016).

Fourth, as *identity*. Love is important for Ahamb people's notion of who they are. Ahamb people's commitment to love is often identified by themselves as a key element that separates their island from other places. This notion is importantly connected to Ahamb's involvement in the Christianization process of South Malekula in the early 1900s, which demonstrates how current notions of love are historically constituted rather than being timeless ideas of the past (Hermann 2011: 26). Ahamb was host for one of the first mission stations in South Malekula, established in 1899, and provided the Mission with indigenous teachers who, in local narratives, were pivotal in bringing peace and 'light' (*laet*) to the 'dark' (*tudak*) Malekula (Miller 1989: 2, 512). 'Darkness', a Mission term used all over Melanesia to refer to practices of the heathen past (Lindstrom 2008), points here to Malekula being particularly rife with traditional spirit worship, sorcery, and cannibalism. The notion of Malekula's 'darkness' was reinforced in the turbulent context in which Christianity settled at the turn of the twentieth century. The island was at this time ridden with sickness and death linked to the introduction of measles and influenza with European vessels but attributed to sorcery by locals (de Lannoy 2004; Deacon 1934: 19–20). Sorcery accusations led to revenge killings, and European traders' sale of alcohol and guns in exchange for plantation land made indigenous conflicts a much deadlier occupation than they were originally. During this period, the Christianized Ahamb people welcomed migrants from all over South Malekula to stay with them in a safe Christian environment with zero tolerance of sorcery and killing (cf. Rio 2003: 131). In local narratives, this act is indicative of the love that Christianization brought to the island. However, as we will see in the first case, disputes over land rights and authority currently complicate the relationship between autochthonous islanders and descendants of refugees and have spurred conflicts over what love entails in practice.

On Ahamb, ideas of love unite value spheres related to Christianity with those of kinship. Given how kinship constitutes the Ahamb social world, and the Christian worldview constitutes, for most islanders, the limits of the world and what comes next,

we may say that love appears as a 'supervalue' (Robbins 2013*b*: 100) for many Ahamb people. When arguing for core values, and certainly 'supervalues', the work of Louis Dumont (1980 [1966]; 1986) is central and has gained new attention in anthropology in recent years (see Eriksen 2008; Haynes & Hicckel 2016; Howell 2016; Iteanu 2013; Kapferer 2010; Otto & Willerslev 2013; Rio 2014; Rio & Smedal 2009; Robbins 2004; 2013*b*; 2015*b*). Dumont argues that all social formations get their direction from paramount values. In every cultural system, he proposes, there is one ultimate value which is the organizational locus of society and which 'encompasses' its counterparts. This 'encompassment' happens because each subordinated value gains its own value by contributing to the realization of the paramount value (Dumont 1980 [1966]: 240).

Although I am arguing for love's prominence as a value on Ahamb, Dumont's argument that *one* dominant value encompasses all others is potentially misleading. This is why I am using the term 'core value' instead of 'encompassing value'. As both Robbins (2013*b*) and Christina Toren (1999*b*) show, multiple equally important and antithetical values are often at play in social situations. Toren is especially sceptical of notions of value derived from culture or ideology as such. Dumont's relating of values to ideology, she argues, is ahistorical because it assumes that a system of hierarchically ranked values is already given, immanent in language, and thus received 'readymade' (Toren 1999*b*: 180-1). She advocates instead seeing a given person as the locus of constituting his or her ideas of the world, with these ideas constantly formed in the person's engagement with others. Given each person's different life history, everyone will therefore have different understandings of core values such as love.

I find it useful to speak of values as structurally contingent, as Robbins does. For example, 'piety' is normally a central value of Christian and Islamic doctrine (Mahmood 2012; Robbins 2004). Logically, Muslims' and Christians' valuing of piety in their lives has some relation to their religious conviction. However, as Toren emphasizes, such values are never external to persons. They are always produced, negotiated, and altered interactively. As Chris Gregory puts it, '[H]uman valuers are the means by which values exist' (1997: 13). I thus draw on both Robbins's and Toren's insights when arguing that while producers of value may agree on some core overarching principles, such as love on Ahamb, their meaning and significance is never fully stable in practice. A person's social vantage point will always affect his or her expectation of what social action should be derived from these principles in any particular context.

As Max Gluckman pointed out some eighty years ago, conflict effectively clarifies people's different interests and ongoing construction of values and their meaning (Gluckman 1958 [1940]). I will now turn to our first case, which examines the difficulties of agreeing on love's meaning in a conflict where actors experience different things to be at stake.

The right to rule, the right to stay

In Vanuatu, all land is traditionally owned by the kin groups of the place (Lindstrom 1990; Rodman 1987; van Trease 1987). In Malekula, this kin group is the patrilineage known as the *nasara*. Land is economically and politically important because the customary landowner has the right to control the activities of the place. However, for the 75 per cent of Vanuatu's population who live in rural areas, land is perhaps above all important for subsistence. Everyone on Ahamb, except for two or three families, falls into this category. Today, most Ahamb islanders experience pressure on their land due to population rise and various forms of land-grabbing, which makes it important

to lay claims on land for one's own and one's kin's present and future subsistence (see McDonnell 2017 and Smith 2017 for other examples from Vanuatu). Yet, few are comfortable about voicing land claims, because they are likely to cause dispute and violate relationships with one's kin and neighbours. As we will see, when land disputes emerge, they are not only conflicts about land and authority. They are also questions of where to draw the boundaries of reciprocal engagement, compassion, and respect: that is, the boundaries of expressing love for others.

One of the most serious land disputes I have encountered during my fieldwork concerned the lease⁵ of the small island Lonour, a kilometre west of Ahamb, in 2010. The island was leased to an Australian buyer by a man born on Ahamb but of a migrant *nasara*. The lessor had organized the lease from the capital Port Vila, where he now resided, and the sum was high. One problem with the lease was that at least ten other families claimed land rights on Lonour. Another problem was that the lessor had received support from the Ahamb Council of Chiefs, which at this time consisted of elected Ahamb men of migrant *nasara*. The chiefs' support was particularly problematic because they had accepted the lease based on customary principles for land ownership hailing from a neighbouring district. These principles would favour the lessor and the migrant *nasara* and were strongly biased against the autochthonous Ahamb lineages. An implementation of the foreign principles for landownership would imply a total redrawing of traditional boundaries in the area, not least on Ahamb itself, which would deprive many autochthonous Ahamb families of rights to land.

The lease of Lonour outraged several autochthonous Ahamb men. As a response, they formed a political coalition based on autochthony to Ahamb.⁶ The coalition accused the non-autochthonous chiefs of working against the interest of the autochthonous, who were, after all, their 'hosts' on Ahamb. The autochthonous coalition used their traditional rights as landowners to call for a grand community meeting. In the meeting, they staked the claim that as landowners they were the main holders of authority on Ahamb and could expel non-autochthonous islanders at any time if they wanted to. They also declared a dismissal of the sitting chiefs, demanding that from now on the island should only have community chiefs from the autochthonous Ahamb lineages. This declaration was against the democratic principles in force where chiefs were elected for a period of four years. However, as the island 'truly belonged' to the autochthonous lineages, the coalition claimed, they saw it as their unreserved right (*raet*) to reduce this period if they were not happy.

During the heat of the dispute, some of the autochthonous leaders expressed their frustration to me, saying that for many years they had been forced to fight against some non-autochthonous men who tried to claim and sell land belonging to autochthonous Ahamb islanders. This meant the autochthonous had to defend themselves against people whom they generously had invited to stay in a safe environment when struggling to survive on the mainland at the turn of the twentieth century. These, the autochthonous leaders said, were people who had been allowed to grow food in their Ahamb gardens and who had been given the right to go fishing in their reefs. However, when the autochthonous went hunting for the local delicacies wild pig and wild cattle in the forests of the non-autochthonous on the mainland, they got nothing but gossip and complaints (*toktok*) in return. 'We have shared the chiefly positions', an elderly autochthonous man told me, 'but they are just working against us when they are given these positions.' When I asked the man whether this gave them right to drive out the sitting community chiefs, he replied: 'Yes! We brought them to the island. If

they had been left in the bush, they would have been dead!’ From the perspective of the autochthonous coalition, accommodating the migrants was a ‘gift of life’ (Rio 2007: 176) – a powerful gift of love that demanded recognition of the love that gave rise to it (see Toren 1999a: 131). Acknowledging neither their reciprocal duties nor the rights of the autochthonous as landowners was a clear breach of the coalition’s expectations of what love should entail in this context.

The autochthonous leaders’ coup of the Council of Chiefs received mixed responses in the rest of the community. Most of the people I talked to felt uneasy about the whole dispute and how it divided the community into two categories, *Man Ahamb* (‘Ahamb person’) and *Man Aur* (‘Mainland person’), depending on their patrilineal belonging – an aspect of a person’s identity downplayed in most everyday contexts. Some non-autochthonous islanders were nervous about getting expelled from the island for being a *Man Aur*. After all, the autochthonous leaders had made it clear that they had the right to expel people of the non-autochthonous *nasara* if they wanted to. To evoke this anxiety was heavily criticized in gossip around the island. On Ahamb, everyone is related in criss-crossing kin relations and has clear obligations to acknowledge each other through sharing and compassion: that is, love. From the perspective of most islanders, the autochthonous coalition violated this obligation and were responsible for failing to realize expectations of love in this context. From the perspective of the coalition, however, who feared they would lose their land and livelihood, the most important violation of love in this situation was the migrants’ failure to acknowledge their hospitality and authority. In this particular situation, the same value – love – thus had different and incompatible senses for the parties depending on what they experienced to be at stake for them (cf. Turner 1967: 52).

Most of the islanders I talked to, regardless of their *nasara*, did not oppose the legal right of the autochthonous coalition to affirm their authority. Their concern was rather their moral right to do so. Several raised the question of whether it was right that a few *nasara* should have so much power over others in the Christian community that Ahamb was today, dominated by a view that all people are equal as children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ (cf. McDougall 2016: 31). In a discussion that evolved in a village a few days after the meeting, a man expressed his discontent by exclaiming: ‘All of us on Ahamb are the children of God. We are *semak nomo* [just the same]. All land in the world is created by God to give a helping hand to people. It is not something for us to be selfish about!’ His outburst got much support. The derisive tone of this gossip demonstrated that, from the perspective of the majority, the coalition did not live up to the ideal of good kinsmen, community members, and Christians who act with love, who are humble, and who recognize the needs of others. The dispute was a typical example of how the claiming of authority on Ahamb becomes an ambiguous site for moral evaluation. Both the autochthonous coalition and the indignant community members expected each other to conform to the value of love in their actions. However, precisely because the value of love was thought to be shared, and the kind of action to be derived from it unambiguous, the situation spurred frustration and destabilized their relationship rather than reinforcing it.

Revival and the hope of transgressing division

When I returned to Ahamb for my second period of fieldwork in 2014, the conflict between the parties in the Lonour lease had not only persisted but also escalated due to new political discords and land disputes. The persisting division in the community led

to a breakdown of several community institutions, including the health clinic, where steering committee members were on different sides in the conflicts. The division also kept people from communal work and church activities. In addition, the period between 2010 and 2014 saw several incidents of assaults and there was a perceived rise in sorcery.

The problems of the community made some Ahamb church leaders look to South West Bay, a three- to five-hour boat ride west of the island, where rumours had it that a powerful Christian revival movement was transforming their way of life. In Christian contexts, 'revival' is a term used to refer to spiritual reawakening in people's lives through the supposed presence of the Holy Spirit. During a revival, believers are typically confronted with miracles and personal experiences with the divine, which often brings a new and convincing awareness of sin and desire for repentance and humility (Jorgensen 2005; Robbins 2004). The revival in South West Bay was special because it was led by children and youth who were receiving spiritual visions and revelations about 'all truths' from the Holy Spirit. Some Ahamb church leaders decided to invite the revival group from South West Bay to Ahamb in the hope that it could help solve some problems in the community.

The revival was introduced to Ahamb in March 2014, and drew crowds to church for nightly praise-and-worship services and prayer sessions. It did not take long before children, youth, and some women – around thirty in total – started receiving spiritual gifts and conveying revelations from the Holy Spirit to the community. We learned from the visionaries and church leaders that the children were chosen by the Spirit as its mediums because they had 'soft' hearts that enabled them to more easily 'open up' and submit themselves to its guidance. Foregrounding the children also demonstrated the Christian emphasis on humility illustrated in Bible texts where Jesus proclaims that the lowly children are the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:1-5; Luke 18:15-17; Mark 10:14-16). This was interpreted by revival supporters as criticism of the men who engaged themselves in political disputes at the expense of others' wellbeing (see Bratrud 2019).

The children's revelations concerned what was 'good', what was 'bad', and how we should live our lives to receive salvation as the Last Days of Judgement were approaching. Every night in church, the visionaries conveyed compelling revelations about the need to live a 'good life' (*gudfala laef*), which they proclaimed was synonymous with a 'life of Heaven' (*laef blong Heven*). This was a life focused on humility, generosity, kindness, helping people, moderation, faithfulness, going to church, and a full devotion to God – all manifestations of what Ahamb people sum up as love. Ahamb people's emotional confessions, capitulations to the Spirit, and unlikely reconciliations during the revival's first months fuelled the hope and the demand that the movement would indeed bring change to the community. From the outset, the revival appeared as a ritual context that promised the realization of love in its fullest form, and that also attracted people on that basis (see Robbins 2015a: 21). However, it soon became an ambiguous site for evaluating what love should entail in terms of action. This illustrates how even religious values, which define the highest level of value for Dumont (Robbins 2013b: 112), may become ambiguous in practice.

Parallel to conveying messages about the 'good life', the visionaries conveyed revelations about the 'bad life' (*laef we i no gud*), which referred to the deceptive worldly elements that kept people away from a holy lifestyle. This included stealing, adultery, unfaithfulness, envy, anger, swearing, fighting, selfishness, being obsessed with money and material things, not going to church, not participating in community

work, doubting God, practising sorcery, and drinking kava. While everyone agreed on what constituted the 'good life', it was more problematic to agree on what the 'bad life' entailed, particularly the moral inappropriateness of kava drinking.

Kava is a pepper plant, *Piper methysticum*, which is a celebrated non-alcoholic intoxicant for men in Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and other places in the Pacific (Lebot, Merlin & Lindstrom 1997). Since the 1990s, kava has been the only reliable cash crop in South Malekula. Just as important, however, is its role in ritualized activity through which men meet and invite each other to produce and maintain social bonds (Taylor 2010). Men on Ahamb often engage in collaborative work such as house building, canoe maintenance, or helping each other to plant and harvest crops to be sold for cash. If one has received such help, the social protocol is for the host to prepare a bucket of kava and invite his helpers over to chat and relax into the night while feeling the kava's sedative effects. Kava sessions entail appreciation of relationships, and both giving and receiving form part of an ongoing solidarity between participants. On Ahamb, as scholars working in Fiji have similarly noted, because of its social centrality, to refuse to drink kava is for men 'an act of rudeness, a denial of social relations and a rejection of the status quo' (Toren 1990: 106). In short, it is antisocial not to go to kava sessions (Tomlinson 2009: 113). For a man on Ahamb, the only good excuse to not drink is normally if he has health problems or is a church leader who should not be intoxicated due to his spiritual and moral role.

However, during the revival, the visionaries were conveying daily revelations emphasizing the immorality of the men's kava drinking. We learned that the intoxication of kava blocked a person's capacity for communicating with the Holy Spirit, which required a clear mind and alert perception. Kava thus obstructed the divine work of the Holy Spirit. Importantly, kava sessions also went on in the evenings at the same time as revival worship services. To choose kava therefore implied prioritizing the temptations of 'this world' over God. Most of the women in the community were happy about this confrontational approach to kava. For a few years, they had identified kava as problematic: the intoxication made men lazy, work less, sleep late, and miss morning church services. Neither were husbands and sons who came home drunk every night particularly good role models for their children and younger siblings. Many men, however, responded to the kava critique with resentment and anger. Slowly, they started withdrawing from the revival programmes in protest. A group of men even declared they would break away from the Presbyterian community church to start a new church where kava was allowed. No men actually withdrew their membership from the church, but, given the centrality of the community church for social life on Ahamb, threatening to break away was a clear message about the revival's dangerous provocation for these men.⁷ Instead of following revival programmes, these men scaled up their kava drinking and invited male kin to join.

On Ahamb, to accept another person by accepting what he or she has to offer is a core way of showing love. To deny an invitation without a good reason may signal that one is selfish (*prenmbus*) and proud (*haikem*), and not willing to invite another person to one's social world. Drinking kava together is thus a mutual recognition of personal and social worth: that is, love, which demands that the invitee responds positively to the invitation, and through that response expresses the value one ascribes to the relationship (Gregory 1997: 7-8).

Because many men decided to withdraw from the revival programmes, it became difficult for men who engaged in relationships with them to continue fully in the

revival. Graham, for instance, an eager revival participant in his sixties, had stopped drinking kava because of the children's revelations. As an ageing man, he now wanted to consolidate his Christian life and devote himself to the revelations of the Holy Spirit. One afternoon when I visited Graham, we were paid a visit by Thory, an eager kava drinker, revival sceptic, and Graham's classificatory brother. Thory had come to invite us to drink kava that evening to commemorate Thory's nephew's recent passing. Graham was insecure about how to respond because he initially wanted to participate in the revival service that evening. After a few minutes of making excuses, he ended up accepting Thory's invitation. When Thory had left, I asked Graham about his acceptance of the invitation. He explained: 'When he invited me, it was hard to say no. I respect him, so I accepted. If I did not, Thory would not have felt good. Oh, he would not have felt good, because he is asking me to come drink and I do not want to'.

Graham faced a moral dilemma centred on value expectations: if he drank kava with Thory, he defied the Holy Spirit and his fellow revival supporters who wanted to foster community love by, in part, banning kava. However, if he rejected Thory's invitation, he would let Thory down by not showing love and sympathy for his and his family's loss. Graham was stuck between incompatible ways of showing and acting love – where the right action according to one set of relationships would exclude and violate another.

If sharing and compassion is a necessary means to realize the good person, which is also a good Christian person, it was a paradox for kava-drinking Ahamb men that they had to stop drinking kava. Kava was, after all, perhaps their primary site for expressing positive mutual recognition – that is, love – with other men. This ambiguity suggests that even values related to religious assumptions, such as closeness to God, salvation, piety, and love for your neighbour, have ambiguity built into them, conceptually and practically speaking. As signs, these values may stand for many things in practice, as with Turner's 'multivocal symbols' and Ortner's 'key symbols'. I suggest that it is precisely this ability to achieve a convergence of disparate interests and perspectives contained in one single value that makes core values durably popular ideas. However, people's disparate interpretations, rooted in their differing stakes, experiences, and goals, eventually become apparent in what social action they choose in the name of the value in different contexts. In the shift from ambiguous agreement to its evident opposite, values may thus help destabilize social life and divide people as much as they unite and order them.

A killing

The revival did not only formulate a reconstruction of good moral living through kava bans and reconciliations. An important part of the moral renewal was also to eradicate sorcery and traditional spirits from the island. Sorcery is perhaps what most people on Ahamb, as elsewhere in Vanuatu, fear most in their everyday life as it is believed to be increasingly used to kill, cause sickness, and bring other sorts of damage (see Eriksen & Rio 2017; Kolshus 2017; Rio 2010; Taylor 2015). Moreover, sorcery is regarded as a highly secret practice, which makes it difficult to know exactly how to protect oneself from it. The spiritual gifts of the children, however, made them able to 'see' the otherwise highly secret world of sorcerers. The visionaries conveyed revelations about who in the entire Malekula were sorcerers, what kind of sorcery they possessed, what damage they had previously done, and whom they aimed to attack next. The spiritual gifts of the children enabled them to detect but also neutralize these dangerous powers. While the visionaries conveyed their revelations of the sorcery world, they were simultaneously

seeing, through their spiritual vision, how sorcerers from the whole district were furious at them for their anti-sorcery work. As a result, visionaries reported that sorcerers from the whole district were flying in to Ahamb in invisible form (*suu*) to try to kill anyone they could get hold of.⁸ These revelations of the intense threat from sorcery came every day for about three months, generating a strong moral and existential panic on the island (see Bratrud 2017; 2020). Eventually, however, the strong prayers on the island allegedly led the Holy Spirit to produce a shield of near-complete protection against all ‘evil forces’ (*ol ivil paoa*).

Eight months into the revival, and five months into the anti-sorcery work, five men admitted they had operated as sorcerers and taken part in several killings on Ahamb by using sorcery. The confessions led to a three-week-long village meeting with a fatal ending. The confessors identified two senior men from the island, who were long feared for being sorcerers, as their sorcery group’s leaders. Allegedly, they had caused more than thirty deaths. Fearing for the security and future of the island, a small mob of furious men took it upon themselves to hang these two men in order to protect the community from more deaths and misfortune.⁹ The killing was opposed to repeated messages from the visionaries saying that no violence should be used against the sorcerers. If it was, the Holy Spirit would punish the community in return.¹⁰ However, from the mob’s point of view, the killing was an act of self-defence and love because they thought of it as protecting their kin and neighbours and restoring safety on the island. Similar to the ‘breach’ that induces a social drama for Turner (1974: 38), the killings were performed as altruistic acts, where those involved acted, or believed they acted, on behalf of other parties in addition to themselves. However, not everyone agreed that the killing was an act of good.

The killing gave rise to two new factions on Ahamb: ‘the community’ (*komuniti*), comprising those who did not openly criticize the hangings, and ‘Eneton’, the killed men’s *nasara* and village. After the killing, several Eneton families withdrew from the rest of the community because they felt the latter had accepted the killing of their family. As a result, Eneton members stopped going to church and other community activities. Neither did they visit kin in other villages nor let visitors into their own village. This curfew was declared by indignant Eneton leaders who found it inappropriate to engage with the rest of the community, who, from their perspective, had let the killing happen. Because everyone on Ahamb is kin, the killers and the killed were essentially family (*famele nomo*). For Eneton, this made the killing even harder to accept.

Some of the Eneton men I talked to blamed the community leaders for not intervening more during the sorcery meeting to prevent the killing. ‘We all have sin, but only God can judge people – even those two’, Elijah, a senior Eneton man, told me, clearly frustrated, when I visited a month after the hangings. Eneton had at this point started to prepare materials to build their own church shelter in their village in protest against the rest of the community’s stance in the case. Again, since the Presbyterian community church is the main place through which people meet on the island, building a separate church was a powerful sign that Eneton threatened to break with the rest of the community: that is, their kin of other *nasara*. From Eneton leaders’ perspective, the community’s seeming acceptance of the killing was a clear breach with their understanding of love as it is rooted in both kinship and Christianity.

From the perspective of ‘the community’, however, it was Eneton who were most clearly violating principles of love. Their ‘hearts were strong’, people said, meaning that Eneton members were stubborn and prideful because they would not accept ‘the

community's' plea for forgiveness. On Ahamb, people often talk about the need to forgive the sins of others in order for God to forgive one's own sins. To refuse to forgive the killing was therefore, from the perspective of 'the community', to refuse the Christian value of love to flourish on Ahamb as such, but also among their kin in Eneton. After the killing, people from 'the community' were working actively for Eneton to accept a reconciliation and 'come back to the community' (*kambak long komuniti*), as the appeal was phrased. The new conflict was heavily addressed as a main prayer topic in church, in village meetings, and in many homes. Visionaries, leaders, and ordinary villagers all announced repeatedly that 'we must pray for our kin in Eneton whose hearts are still strong'.

As the weeks passed, there was a growing chorus among 'the community' that Eneton were chiefly responsible for the island's unrest and division. This was not only due to their refusal to forgive but also because an Eneton member had called the police, who arrested twenty-three Ahamb men suspected of being involved in the hanging. Among the arrested were the breadwinners of many families and all the community chiefs. The arrests constituted a major worry for many families, who had no idea when their fathers and brothers would return. The timing was particularly bad because the arrests were made right before Christmas, the most important family time on Ahamb. Taking away the possibility of celebrating Christmas with one's loved ones and instead inducing fear and worry was a clear breach with the love that 'the community' expected from their kin in Eneton.

During a day I spent in Eneton six weeks after the hangings, I talked to Stewart, one of the main opponents of reconciliation. Like Elijah above, Stewart blamed the community chiefs and church leaders for not stopping the killings. He also complained about Dennis, a man who during the sorcery meeting advocated revenge against the sorcerers, who he claimed had killed one of his children and spread terror on the island for many years:

They lost the way of God (*rod blong God*) when they did this [killing]. And when Dennis claimed to have a revelation saying there should be revenge against spilled blood, he takes God's points and twist them. Because God does not want us to kill anyone. I agree with the visionary children who said that we must not kill and that we will face a big punishment if we do. But it is what Dennis said in the meeting that I am against. This was something that came from his own mind, not from God. Because this is not how God is. Therefore, we will not have a reconciliation with the community yet. They must understand that they did something very wrong and feel the power of the Law. It is out of the question that we will have a reconciliation now and forget the case, to say that everything is ok and let those responsible go free. People must know that we live in the 'light' (*yumi stap long laet finis*). The hanging has made people think Ahamb is still in 'darkness' (*stap long tudak yet*). The news has already gone around the world and now people think badly about Ahamb.

In the quote, Stewart refers to the hanging as an action of 'darkness', which we have seen is associated with thinking and behaviour from the heathen past. He emphasized how Ahamb is and should be 'in the light', which is a term for behaviour and a mode of thinking associated with Christianity. On Ahamb, love is the value manifest in all things related to light, not darkness.

Simultaneously as Eneton were criticizing 'the community' using rhetorical statements about lightness and darkness, the same light/dark dichotomy was discussed among their opponents in 'the community' – but here in favour of themselves against Eneton. The different use of the 'light/dark' dichotomy by different parties with different interests to describe the same situation reveals that the terms, and the values they

point to, are not unambiguously defined in every situation. Rather, the diverging interpretations reveal something of the different interests and stakes of people in these situations (cf. Martin 2013: 138).

The light/dark dichotomy also emerged in the visionaries' revelations about Eneton's need to accept a reconciliation. In one revival service I attended after the killing, one of the visionaries conveyed a vision of himself standing by the house of an Eneton leader. On his right-hand side, the visionary said he saw a *dirty* river with *black* ducks swimming on it. On his left-hand side, he saw a *clean* river with *white* ducks. He explained that the vision illustrated the situation on the island: one part of the society was in 'the light' (*stap long laet*) while another part was in 'the dark' (*stap long tudak*). The visionary followed up by explaining that those in 'darkness' were those who were stubborn, who could not forgive, and who would not humble themselves (*no save mekem tingting blong olgeta go daon*). Those in darkness were affected by Satan and had to 'come back' to the 'light' and the Holy Spirit. It was clear to everyone that the vision addressed the Eneton leaders who refused to reconcile. The need for an imminent reconciliation was reinforced in daily revelations conveyed by the visionaries saying how the Holy Spirit wanted forgiveness, peace, and co-operation among its people, and that Ahamb was overdue in coming back to these principles.

However, it was not that the Eneton men did not want peace. In a conversation I had with Elijah, he claimed that Eneton, too, wanted to reconcile with everyone 'to make peace come back'. But before this could happen, he argued, the chiefs and everyone who had been involved in the sorcery meeting had to return from prison in order to find those responsible for the killing and arrange for a proper response. 'We must try to make people live a good life, that's all. A clean (*klin*) life', Elijah claimed. Both sides in the conflict seemed to be striving for the same goal of peace and amenity: that is, love. However, the question of who was to blame for the community's failure in achieving this goal, how the road towards reconciliation should look, and when it could take place were viewed differently by the different parties depending on their social and emotional vantage points. It would take three years before a grand reconciliation ceremony finally took place, in November 2017.¹¹

Conclusion: The necessary ambiguity of core values

Drawing on three ethnographic cases, I have suggested how we may speak of love as a core value in Ahamb society. Love is significant because it unites what islanders take to be the most prominent ideas of kinship and Christianity: the two dominant sources of Ahamb people's evaluations of what is morally good and how one ought to live. When people share values, it suggests that they order the world in similar ways, at least to some extent (Robbins 2015a: 19). This holds true for Ahamb in many social situations. However, based on the three cases, I argue that adherence to the same core value does not necessarily imply an ordered social world. This is because values in practice reveal people's potentially divergent understandings of and interests in the stakes of a given situation. Although driven by the same value, these differences affect what actions people find appropriate and good in the name of the value in that situation. When put to the test of public action, values like love may thus counterintuitively lead to division and violence even though they signify unity and peace.

In Ahamb everyday life, the moral framework built on love seems to be elaborated 'with' and 'for' people in a manner from which everyone benefits, at least on some level. People's relation to the value of love is thus not in theory one of negotiation or

resistance. It is rather when the value becomes distant or antithetical to well-being that it becomes obviously problematic (see Heintz 2009: 10). To focus on values as ideas is thus not enough if we want to understand their role in people's practical living. Equally important is understanding how values are interpreted by persons in relation to the totality of their stakes in a situation and what they find the values to entail in practice. In the cases I have examined, long-running disputes over autochthony and land ownership were joined with criticisms of kava drinking, which helped intensify deep-rooted fears of sorcery. The results were deadly: an execution of two men in the name of love, and a community divided by the sense that the other side did not appreciate its true value.

I argue that any study of values must keep in view the contingency of values on structures, for example religious discourse and shared cultural ideas per Dumont and Robbins, and also the significance of individual experience and context-dependent evaluation, per Martin, Toren, and the anthropologists of the Manchester School. This model insists on anthropology's ethnographic commitment to theory construction from the ground of practice while acknowledging that people have certain ideal principles they try to live by. Key to how people connect ideas and practice is the totality of stakes they experience in a given situation. If we are to properly understand not only the place of values in lived social life, but also the relationship between people's ideas and actions, it is therefore crucial to assess the broader contexts in which people's shifting formulations, interpretations, and evaluations of what is good and desirable take shape.

NOTES

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¹ Given the sensitive nature of the article's ethnography, I have changed the names of persons and groups. I have discussed the publication with several of my Ahamb interlocutors, including community leaders, and come to an agreement about the level of detail and anonymization. I have also been in fruitful dialogue with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees regarding the ethics of disseminating the material.

² It is important to note that Strathern's model of the individual person was never meant to act as an empirical description of how all Melanesians think at all times (see Schram 2015: 319). Ahamb people do not embody only one model of subjectivity, although they lean towards a mode of being that emphasizes a person's dependence on a wide range of relations.

³ By collective social forms, I mean an emphasis on a community model which transcends lineage and village identities and instead organizes all islanders into church groups and committees (cf. Eriksen 2008; McDougall 2016). The Ahamb Church also emphasizes a relative egalitarian structure rather than foregrounding particular persons, like a pastor or elder, which one finds in some other churches.

⁴ A Vanuatu expression indicating that someone is half-sane, half-mad.

⁵ Land in Vanuatu can be leased through long-term leases of seventy-five years. Whilst not technically or legally synonymous with 'selling' land, in practice it facilitates the same forms of alienation for the ni-Vanuatu landowner (see Jowitt 2004).

⁶ One autochthonous patrilineage did not join the coalition because of another long-standing dispute with some of the coalition's leaders. This does not affect my argument in the article, however, and I refer to the coalition as 'autochthonous' for the sake of simplicity.

⁷ See Eriksen (2008: 105), Kolshus (2016), and McDougall (2016: 184) for examples of how churches in Melanesia to a significant extent define a community and how disputes sometimes make groups break away from a social unit and its associated church to form their own community with a new church.

⁸ The flying sorcerers of Malekula have previously been described by John Layard (1930).

⁹ I was myself in Port Vila when the hangings took place but returned to the island two weeks after the fatal event for one more month of fieldwork.

¹⁰ All the visionary children lost their spiritual gifts after the hangings. This was said to be a punishment from the Holy Spirit because the community had gone against its commandments that no violence, let alone murder, should be used against the sorcerers.

¹¹ I was able to take part in this reconciliation ceremony as part of postdoctoral fieldwork. I discuss the reconciliation, as well as the process leading up to it and its aftermath, in my monograph on the Ahamb revival, *Fire on the island: fear, hope and a Christian revival in Vanuatu*, which will be published with Berghahn Books in 2022.

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Qu'est-ce que l'amour ? La relation complexe entre valeurs et pratique au Vanuatu

Résumé

Ces dix dernières années, le champ de l'anthropologie des valeurs, de la moralité et de l'éthique a connu un regain d'intérêt. Cet article y contribue en démontrant comment les valeurs peuvent constituer des stratégies autant que des idéals, tendant à déstabiliser l'ordre social et à diviser les personnes précisément parce qu'elles sont supposées être partagées. Le concept d'« amour », entendu comme un ensemble de pratiques quotidiennes d'intérêt et de considération pour autrui, est une valeur fondamentale de la vie sur l'île d'Ahamb, au Vanuatu. Pourtant, l'adhésion des personnes à une même valeur fondamentale ne se traduit pas nécessairement par un monde social où règne l'ordre. En analysant trois cas ethnographiques dont une situation conflictuelle à l'issue fatale, l'auteur propose un modèle d'étude des valeurs qui intègre l'ambiguïté en combinant la notion de valeurs sociales partagées avec l'expérience et la stratégie individuelles. Il avance qu'il est crucial, d'un point de vue méthodologique, que l'étude anthropologique des valeurs évalue le contexte des variations d'interprétation et de signification donnée à ces valeurs dans la pratique.

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