FIRE ON THE ISLAND
# ASAO Studies in Pacific Anthropology

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‘What’s that?’, Jelen suddenly exclaimed. She froze and a worried look appeared on her face. Then I heard it too: the loud noise of crying, howling and screaming. The overwhelming sound was accompanied by a choir of voices intensely singing a prayer, as if trying to repel the distress that was causing the crying:

Hiling han blong Jisas hemi tambu tumas!  
Sapos yu nidim bae i save hilim yu!  
Han blong hem i fulap long ol meresin  
Hiling han blong Jisas hemi tambu tumas!

The healing hand of Jesus is very Holy!  
If you need it He can heal you!  
His hand is filled with medicine  
The healing hand of Jesus is very Holy indeed!

The scene took place one afternoon in late May 2014 on the small island of Ahabm, just off the south coast of Malekula in the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu. It was five months into my second fieldwork on the island, and I was sitting outside the house of my Ahabm adoptive parents, Jelen and Herold, with a group of neighbours. As we often had done over the past few months, we had taken a break from our daily routines to chat about recent happenings that seemed to be turning life on the island upside down: little children had become trusted religious leaders and focal points of the community; inveterate land claimers were voluntarily giving away land to political opponents in public ceremonies; women, who normally have no position from which they can address men in public, were reprimanding male community leaders on a daily basis; and sorcerers, who normally operate in secret, were handing over their remedies to the community. These happenings were all part of a startling Christian revival movement that had dominated much of island life over the past two months.

A main characteristic of the revival was that it was led by about thirty children with spiritual gifts who, for a total of nine months, were offering daily messages from the Holy Spirit to the community about who was blessed, who was cursed and what evil needed to be defeated so that people could receive salvation as the Last Days were drawing near. The revival was frequently talked about as ‘cleaning the island’ (klinim aelen), as it developed in the wake of enduring political disputes and division in the community. The visionary children proclaimed that if people opened their hearts to the Holy Spirit, its presence would be able to change the very fabric of life on the island, including the
pressing disputes, the division they caused and the sorcery attacks that often follow on from such disputes.

The crying we heard from the village made us uneasy for a specific reason. Emily, a visionary girl of eight years old, had suddenly fallen sick and fainted in church the night before. While sitting seemingly unconscious on the lap of her worried father, she had been shaking and turning restlessly around. Her sudden and inexplicable condition was attributed to sorcery, which was believed to have had a dramatic upsurge in the past week. The upturn of sorcery had begun when a group of visionary children found a stone they claimed was infused with sorcery \((baho\ or\ posen)\) outside the island’s community hall. The children stated that the stone was placed there by ill-meaning sorcerers, who were normally political opponents to some Ahamb leaders, in order to create division in the community. Sorcery is a highly concealed endeavour in Vanuatu and is perhaps what Ahamb people fear most in their everyday lives as it is used to secretly injure and kill. The finding of the stone marked the beginning of an intense period where the community, after instructions from the visionaries, started removing supposed sorcery objects meant to hurt the islanders. In response, the visionaries conveyed that a grand network of furious sorcerers mobilised to attack people on Ahamb, particularly the children who were responsible for taking away the sorcerers’ powers. The fear of the sorcerers mobilised the community in a range of activities to protect the children and one another. As I will discuss in this book, people’s fear of sorcery, alongside their hopes of making an end to the insecurity it was causing, became a potent driving force of the revival movement for several months. It also led to the tragic murder of two men believed to be sorcerers and responsible for many of the island community’s problems.

At Jelen and Herold’s, my relatives and I feared that the sudden crying, screaming and praying meant we had lost Emily to her condition, whatever its cause. We agreed that I should go and find out what was going on. Following the enduring sounds, I ended up in the yard of Sebastian and Lena, a couple in their late thirties. The yard was packed with people. Behind their house was a busy and lively scene with rows of onlookers standing around a big tree. The tree had been climbed by two men who held torches in their mouths and looked restlessly around. On the ground were around fifteen visionary children who were crying, shaking and conveying visions and messages – supposedly from the Holy Spirit – to the crowd and the men in the tree. Occasionally, some of the children fainted and fell to the ground, indicating that they were ‘slain in the Spirit’, meaning to be struck and overcome by the powers of the Holy Spirit. In several places in this book, I refer to Vanuatu people’s own verb to \(slen\) to describe this reaction. In Chapter 1, I also describe how I came to \(slen\) myself during a ceremony, which shows how my own psyche as an ethnographer was not left untouched by taking part in the startling revival events.
While watching the scene unfold in Sebastian and Lena’s yard, fellow onlookers explained to me that the visionary children had seen, through their spiritual vision, four men in the yard who wanted to kill Sebastian. The men were using sorcery and had taken the form of a cat in order to enter the yard without raising neighbours’ suspicions. However, at the moment, the men seemed to have made themselves invisible, which is yet another ability ascribed to sorcerers. People speculated if the men wanted to kill Sebastian because of his prominent position as a councillor in the provincial government, to which he had been appointed a few months earlier. Holding a prestigious position is often found risky in Vanuatu because it can be weaved into previous status rivalries and political conflicts. It can also cause resentment in kin and others to whom one engages in reciprocal commitments if they feel overlooked in allocations of resources and opportunity. Sorcery can then be used to bring down an opponent and level out difference. During the revival, the visionaries were attacking sorcery as a destructive symptom of such rivalry and inequality, but also the principles on which such rivalry and inequality rested, mainly disputes over land rights and leadership, which I will discuss in Chapter 2.

According to the visionaries, two of the four sorcerers who planned to kill Sebastian were now up in the tree, but had taken the form of lizards. That is why the two men with torches had climbed the tree – they were looking for the sorcerers in lizard form. The crying and shaking children on the ground were occasionally conveying visions about the whereabouts of the sorcerers to the men in the tree and people on the ground shining their torches frantically around in response. Suddenly, a big lizard fell down from the tree. People jumped to all sides and the lizard ran and disappeared into a bush. Men and boys ran after with machetes, cutting the plants around them in the direction it had run. An intense hunt for the lizard ensued, supported by loud and energetic prayers from the crowd to make the Holy Spirit’s powers stop it from getting away. After some intense minutes, a group of men eventually managed to kill the lizard. The killing brought a sigh of relief after what had, for most participants, been a quite obscure situation forced upon them that afternoon.

However, after a few minutes’ break, the visionaries were again crying desperately, screaming and shaking. They were pointing towards something that was seemingly moving quickly on the ground towards Sebastian and Lena’s house. Amanda, a visionary girl aged thirteen, suddenly jumped in the air while wriggling and shouting that her body was itching. The itching, we had learned, was a reaction of the visionaries after coming into contact with a sorcerer, a sorcery object or a spirit used for sorcery. The visionary children shouted and pointed to the ground, indicating that the sorcerer who had struck Amanda was about to escape. The men with machetes immediately started pulling up plants by their roots, cutting them down and digging into the ground after directions from the visionaries, but without any luck. Following the unsuccessful
search for this sorcerer, some men suddenly started cutting down a big tree in Sebastian and Lena’s yard. The children had stated that it was used as a landing place for sorcerers coming to the island by *su*, the sorcery of flying, commonly used by sorcerer assassins. The tree had to be removed in order to reduce the risk of future sorcery attacks on the island.

After a few hours in Sebastian and Lena’s yard, most of us continued to Ahamb’s Presbyterian community church for the evening’s revival worship service. The revival services were a nightly event held to nurture the presence of the Holy Spirit and get the latest updates from the visionaries. After prayers and singing of worship songs, a number of visionary children conveyed messages and visions from the Holy Spirit about the events in the yard. John, one of my good friends and interlocutors – and Sebastian and Lena’s neighbour – also rose to explain how it all started when some visionary girls had seen a cat by Sebastian and Lena’s house, claiming that it contained one or more sorcerers in disguise. John had grabbed his Bible and joined the visionaries in praying to neutralise the sorcerers’ powers and chase them away, upon which the cat had disappeared, but all of a sudden, in invisible form, he claimed, jumped on his chest. He had felt the weight of it. Other onlookers then shared their experiences. Many reported that the revival was making them simultaneously cheerful, amazed and afraid. It showed them things, and brought them into situations, that they had never experienced before.

After the worship service, a thirteen-year-old visionary girl I call Sophie became distracted and suddenly started to scream and cry out loud. Her father came to hold her and calm her down. Other people were also gathering around her to see what was wrong. While crying and turning to her father’s chest, Sophie explained that one of the sorcerers preying upon the children was standing outside the church, waving his hand to call for her because he wanted to kill her. We who were present turned our heads to see what was outside. There stood Ahamb’s long-time sorcery suspect, a man in his sixties I call Orwell. During the revival, the visionaries pointed him out as responsible for many of the district’s unexplainable deaths and troubles over the past two decades. Visionaries also conveyed that he was a leading figure in the sorcerers’ raids to kill the island’s children during the revival. In Chapter 1, I will show how Orwell was eventually targeted and killed by a furious mob for allegedly having caused more than thirty deaths and numerous instances of sickness and misfortune on Ahamb and elsewhere in South Malekula over the past few decades. Since Orwell appeared to be pivotal to the community’s crisis, something about his critical behaviour had to be changed in order to improve the community’s situation.

In context of the existential panic that arose, his murder took the form of a sacrifice that, in René Girard’s (2013) terms, was necessary to transform people’s dread and to heal the community (see also Rio 2014a).
As I will show in the forthcoming chapters, the revival raised many existen-
tial questions and answers during its course. It took the community to
the point of its collapse, but also to its point of renewal. In the spectacle of
the revival, everything seemed to be at stake. It revealed the whole spectrum
of cosmic forces and all truths. There was no distinction between symbol and
reality, ‘each realising the existential, apocalyptic potency of the other’ (Kap-
ferer 2015b: 94). Trying to understand the revival, including the circumstances
under which it emerged and gained so much impact, raises several intriguing
questions: how can social upheavals like the Ahamb revival emerge? How can
children, who are usually on the lowest level in a social hierarchy, become
a renewal movement’s leaders? How can violence be performed in the name
of love by people who normally insist that violence is the antithesis of love?
How may social movements become a venue in which social problems can
be addressed and possibly resolved, while simultaneously carrying the risk of
exacerbating the same problems they aim to address? These are some of the
questions I will try to answer in this book.
To make this book possible, I have benefited over the years from the help of so many people, many more than I will be able to mention by name. On Ahamb I have met some of the finest human beings I have ever known, and I will begin with them. I want to thank all Ahamb people for inviting me to live with them during my three periods of fieldwork in 2010, 2014 and 2017. It would require several pages to mention all the individuals who helped me in their different ways, so I will only specify those who became my closest families and helpers.


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I am indebted to linguist Tihomir Rangelov who helped me prepare the section on the Ahamb language. Tihomir and I met in Port Vila during my 2014 fieldwork and we quickly started discussing the possibility of him documenting the Ahamb language. Our ideas became a reality, and Tihomir started his fieldwork on Ahamb in 2017. His dissertation on Ahamb grammar was
Acknowledgements

Successfully defended in 2021. He has also provided me with updates from the island and been a helpful discussion partner.

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Language

Ahamb islanders have their own vernacular, referred to by its speakers as nau-jin sdrato (our language) or as ‘the Ahamb language’ in the linguistic literature (Glottolog code: axam1237, ISO 639-3 code: ahb). The language is one of over thirty Malekulan languages spoken today, and one of over 120 vernacular languages spoken in Vanuatu, the most linguistically diverse country in the world in terms of number of languages per capita (Lynch 1994). Ahamb is a member of the Oceanic sub-branch of the Austronesian language family. Oceanic languages are further subdivided into a number of branches, and Ahamb is in one subgroup with most other languages of central Vanuatu.

The Ahamb language has around 950 speakers, most of whom live on Ahamb island (Rangelov, Bratrud and Barbour 2019). Smaller pockets of speakers live on the adjacent mainland of Malekula and in the urban centres, mostly in Port Vila, but also some in Luganville. All members of the Ahamb community also speak Vanuatu’s national language, Bislama, which is widely used, especially among young people, in church, in meetings and in households where one spouse is from another ethnolinguistic group. While Ahamb is the most common language of communication at home, code switching with Bislama is very common. Most Ahamb people today also speak some English, and English is the language of instruction in school from Grade 3 onwards (Bislama is used as the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education). The Ahamb language borrows heavily from both Bislama and English.

My fieldwork was conducted mainly in Bislama, supplemented with words and phrases in the vernacular. I set out to learn the vernacular properly during my second fieldwork, but the revival events compromised my own and my interlocutors’ time and attention to do proper language sessions. In meetings where the vernacular was used, I was for the most part able to follow what was going on, but depended on having the details explained to me afterwards. In the book, terms in Bislama are given in *italics and underlined*, while terms in the Ahamb language are given in plain *italics*.

Ahamb is rarely written; however, work on standardising an orthography for Ahamb has been going on since 2017, when linguist Tihomir Rangelov started a Ph.D. project to document the Ahamb language. Tihomir has since published a comprehensive grammatical description of Ahamb (Rangelov
2020a) based on a corpus of annotated Ahamb speech from different genres and other Ahamb texts. The corpus is openly available through the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) (Rangelov 2020b). A draft Ahamb-Bislama-English dictionary is in development and Tihomir has also been working with the community on creating literacy materials in order to boost the status of the Ahamb language and contribute to its maintenance and revitalisation. Tihomir and I have been communicating closely since we first met in Port Vila during my fieldwork in 2014, and his work has been very helpful in clarifying my own uncertainties regarding the Ahamb language.

The basic grammatical structure of Ahamb is mostly typical of Oceanic languages (see Lynch et al. 2002). Nouns lack inflection for number or case, but they usually feature a noun marker (historically an article). Possessive constructions are complex and depend on a semantical distinction between inalienable (e.g. body parts or kinship terms) and alienable (all other possessions) nouns. Alienable nouns are further divided into ingestible items (food and drink) and other nouns. This means that the phrases ‘my eye’, ‘my water (for drinking)’ and ‘my water (for bathing)’ are expressed by different constructions. Verbs in Ahamb can take prefixes for person (including inclusive and exclusive first-person nonsingular), number (singular, dual and plural), and a number of tense-aspect-modality markers. As in most other Oceanic languages, adjectives and numerals are structurally the same as verbs. Verb serialisation is common.

What sets Ahamb apart from most other related languages is its relatively large vowels inventory and a set of two phonemic bilabial trill sounds (made with vibrations produced by the upper and lower lip), which are typologically very rare (Rangelov 2019). Another unusual feature of Ahamb is a set of special verbal markers that encode events occurring in sequence (Rangelov and Barbour 2020).

Ethics

This book engages with some sensitive material, and I would like to add these notes on ethics. The aim of the book is to present ethnographic material in a way that is as useful as possible to give insight into social phenomena, but without compromising the security and wellbeing of the participants in the study. To protect my interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms in almost all cases. As the ethnography deals to a significant extent with children, I have taken special care to make the visionary children unidentifiable by leaving out or changing details that could identify them. To give the reader a better impression of the startling revival events, I have included some photos in which visionary children appear. To protect their identities, I have in those cases blurred their
faces and other distinguishing features. While anonymisation makes people unrecognisable for those not familiar with the person and place, some characters may inevitably be identifiable by people who know Ahamb well. However, I believe that it is the events themselves and not the individuals involved in them that will be of most interest for the reader. Since the tragic murder of the two men suspected of being sorcerers, I have discussed with their family members, Ahamb chiefs and other affected islanders to what extent I should include this incident in my writings. They have all encouraged me to write about the case to get their stories out. I thank my Ahamb friends and interlocutors, good colleagues, and representatives of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, the National Committee for Research in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH), and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre for their help with the ethical decisions I have made in producing this book.
The Ahamb revival was a complex process consisting of many events, both small and large. In my attempt to understand the revival process, I include in the book what I consider to be significant happenings occurring during the period from 2009 to 2017. Here I present an overview of these happenings with the intention of making it easier to follow the revival process as I present it in the book:

- June 2009: Lonour Island near Ahamb is leased to an expatriate.
- 31 May 2010: The autochthonous leaders take over the Ahamb Council of Chiefs.
- 30 October 2012: General election, in which the autochthonous leaders’ candidate for Member of Parliament (MP) loses to the nonautochthonous leaders’ candidate.
- 16 June 2013: Father’s Day, when children performed ‘The Unity Song’ and skit.
- November 2013: The revival breaks out in South West Bay, Malekula.
- 5 March 2014: Initiation of the hae jif (high chief) on Ahamb.
- 25 March 2014: Community forum meeting hosted by the Ahamb Council of Chiefs.
- 23 May 2014: The first sorcery findings on Ahamb.
- 5 June 2014: Lincoln gives away his sorcery herbs (lif).
- 24 June 2014: Sorcery trial following the death of Eliot.
- 14–19 September 2014: Revival convention for the Malekula Presbyterian Church in Farun village, during which Levi confesses to have killed Eliot and others by using sorcery.
- 29 October–19 November 2014: Sorcery trial during which five men confess to having killed four people by sorcery. The trial ends with the two suspected sorcerers Orwell and Hantor being hanged.
22 January 2016: General election, during which Ahamb islanders reunite around a common MP.

February 2017: Reconciliation between an Eneton leader and the Ahamb community's diaspora chief in Port Vila.

6–10 November 2017: Community transformation on Ahamb, during which the great community reconciliation takes place on 9 November.
Map 0.1. Vanuatu in the Southwest Pacific. Map produced with the permission of CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.
Map 0.2. Malekula, also spelled Malakula, in Vanuatu. Map produced with the permission of CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.