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Ambiguity in a Charismatic Revival:

Inverting Gender, Age and Power Relations in Vanuatu

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Abstract

During a Christian revival movement on Ahamb Island in Vanuatu in 2014, gender- and age-based hierarchies were inverted as women and children were given divine authority and men were positioned as threats to sociopolitical renewal. In analysing these events, I develop Kapferer's insights on the inherent openness and unpredictability of ritual dynamics.

However, I argue that such openness and unpredictability can also be tied to external factors including participants' multiple and sometimes incompatible values and interests. Attempts to resolve ambiguities in ritual may eventually feed back into ritual ideology and practice in ways that make participants' experiences disturbing and problematic rather than orderly and supportive.

Keywords: ritual, gender, ambiguity, revival, Christianity, Vanuatu

Introduction

'These children have power! Not everyone has believed their revelations but today we have seen that they are really true!' Paul, a man in his 50s, had come to the front of the Presbyterian community church on the small island of Ahamb in Vanuatu. It was three hours into the night's worship service, the daily ritual locus of a Christian charismatic revival movement that had dominated much of the island's everyday life since it was introduced two months earlier, in March 2014. The revival centred on around 25 children and several youths and women who had been granted powerful spiritual gifts of 'vision' by the Holy Spirit. On a daily basis, these unlikely leaders offered revelations to the community about the imminent Last Days and how we had to live now.

Earlier that day, a group of visionary children had been 'slain in the Spirit' – that is, they had been overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit, fainting and falling to the ground outside the island's community hall. When they woke up, they had said there was a stone infused with malevolent sorcery buried there, right in the middle of the island. The children explained that

the stone had been placed there by evil sorcerers who had been in dispute with men from Ahamb and wanted to create division among their opponents. With the children's help, a group of men had located the stone and dug it up. Visionaries had taken it to the night's revival worship service for spiritual neutralisation. For revival supporters like Paul, the sorcery-finding proved the visionary children's and the revival's exceptional power. For him and many partisans, it also underscored the need to follow the revelations of the children rather than the men who normally hold leadership positions in the community, but who for years had fomented land disputes.

After Paul spoke, Claudia, a woman in her 40s with spiritual gifts, came to the front. Her arms were shaking as a sign that she was possessed by the Spirit. Claudia grabbed the microphone, turned to the congregation, and fired:

I saw Jesus today! He told me about those who have said they want to do work for the church but who have returned to their old life. Why is this so? Now that you see the power of the revival you must come back! I will tell your names because I can see your faces.

She listed the names of five men who had previously offered to work voluntarily for the church but then withdrawn, one of them a chief. Listening to Claudia, I found her determination surprising. As elsewhere in Melanesia, women on Ahamb rarely criticise men in public and do not traditionally have rights to contribute to meetings except through spokesmen (see Brison 1992; Lederman 1980; Lindstrom 1990b). However, Claudia's performance was typical for the revival. Here, women who felt empowered by the Holy Spirit had found a platform from which they openly expressed their opinions to the community concerning everything from male-dominated politics to everyday domestic concerns.

In this article, I describe how the Christian revival movement ritually inverted gender- and age-based hierarchies on Ahamb, and how this inversion created challenging ambiguities that had to be negotiated by the community. I argue that even though ritual may have the power to achieve 'temporary autonomy from its social and political surround' (Handelman 2005: 14) and become a generative centre for creativity and change with relatively open outcomes (Kapferer 2005a: 46-49), rituals' tendencies and effects are also shaped by the multiple and at times incompatible issues participants find to be at stake that are not confined to the ritual. Attempts to resolve these ambiguities will eventually feed back into ritual practice and

ideology and affect forms, meanings, and outcomes in ways that can make participants experience ritual as disturbing and problematic rather than orderly and supportive.

I emphasise the importance of examining ritual in wider social, political, and cosmological contexts. Bruce Kapferer acknowledges the relationship between rituals and wider contexts when he writes that a rite is part of the dynamic of ‘the whole’ which enables ‘various processes to be facilitated within it’ (Kapferer 2005a: 43). However, his main interest has recently been in the disjunction of the rite from its wider context, and he has come to focus on internal ritual dynamics, including composition, music, dance, and symbols (2005a; 2005b). It is by focusing on these inner dynamics, Kapferer argues, that we best can grasp the rite’s openness and potential for creating change, because it generates experiences through which participants can reimagine and reposition themselves in relation to everyday circumstances (Kapferer 2005a: 47; 2005b: 35). In this view, inspired by Victor Turner’s ([1969] 2008) work on liminality and the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, ritual shapes and potentially transforms people’s everyday world instead of simply reproducing or representing it.

I agree with Kapferer’s point that ritual can enable people to break free from constraints of everyday life so they can re-imagine and perhaps transform it. I also support the idea that rites have unintended consequences. However, in examining this open-endedness, Kapferer focuses on the internal dynamics of the ritual, separating them to a significant extent from factors supposedly external to the ritual. In this article, I argue for the importance of also paying close attention to various external factors which can contribute to ritual openness and unpredictability. First, I suggest that people’s pre-existing fears, hopes, and concerns enable the ritual suspension of everyday reality as people consciously or subconsciously *seek* that destabilisation. Consequently, it is important to pay close attention to the wider context of the ritual in which people prime themselves for a ritual break with the ordinary. Second, I suggest that social, political and psychological factors that are not confined to the ritual help shape people’s experience of what is at stake for them during the ritual. These factors will affect how people respond to the ritual, which again can influence the ritual’s dynamics. While Kapferer locates the openness and unpredictability of rituals in the dynamics that are internal to rituals, the aim of this article is thus to show that openness and unpredictability can also be located in factors outside the ritual, and people engaged in ritual action can actively cultivate ambiguity in a way that creates problems.

I begin by describing an important aspect of the revival's appeal on Ahamb, namely division and unrest caused by land disputes and conflicts over authority. I relate these problems to the postcolonial political economic situation in Vanuatu and discuss how disputes on Ahamb have increasingly become gendered as male. I draw on Annelin Eriksen's (2009) point that the rapid growth of charismatic or Pentecostal Christianity in Vanuatu should be seen as a critique of new kinds of leaders who are perceived in this context as having emerged as threats to society. This backdrop is relevant for my discussion of how the revival came to address the life and attitudes of men in particular. In the following section, I examine how the revival caused an inversion of gender- and age-based hierarchies. This was part of the revival's radical suspension of everyday realities, illustrating the potential for change but also the opening up of ambiguity as different people tried to combine their different interests in new ways. In the final part of the article, I discuss how the revival's ambiguity, rooted in its inversion of power and authority relations, led to negotiations over its form and effects rather than predictable reproduction of established relations.

Ahamb Island and the maleness of disputes

Ahamb is an island of about 600 people just off the central south coast of Malekula, the second-largest island in 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. Ahamb society is comprised of 15 patrilineal clans (*nasara*), of which half regard themselves as descendants of the island's first settlers and thus autochthonous to the island. The other half migrated to the island from mainland Malekula following Christianisation in the first half of the 20th century. Clan membership is mostly visible in marriage and residence patterns as villages are typically composed of single clans. In everyday life, however, people are usually much more concerned with the fact that everyone on the island is interwoven in close kin relations with one another and all share membership in the Ahamb Presbyterian Church, established in 1902.

Over the past two decades, however, the Ahamb community has suffered from several serious disputes over land rights and authority. It was largely in this context that the revival was seen to be such an important opportunity for people to reconfigure themselves as 'good Christians' and bring spiritual, social and ethical renewal to the island. To understand Ahamb's disputes,

and thus the relevance of the revival, it is necessary to say something about Vanuatu's postcolonial politics of land and neoliberal economic policies.

Vanuatu, formerly known as the New Hebrides, was a French-British Condominium until independence in 1980. During the condominium period, land in Vanuatu was alienated from indigenous landowners and bought or occupied by traders mainly to be used for copra plantations. The repatriation of land to indigenous owners was a key political driver of Vanuatu's independence, and the country's first Constitution stated that all lost or alienated land, which then made up 36% of Vanuatu's land mass, was to be returned to the indigenous customary owners and their descendants (Rawlings 1999: 76).

In the post-colonial context, however, land reforms, no-taxation policies, and minimal state regulation were introduced to attract foreign investors who could develop the country economically. A notably investor-friendly lease system was introduced allowing Vanuatu custom landowners to lease land to foreigners for 75 years for a single payment. Today, having land to offer for lease means having the potential to earn enormous sums of money, at least by local standards (Eriksen 2009: 183; McDonnell 2017: 285). Since the early 2000s, two men have given leases to small islands near Ahamb to Western lessors for private holiday use. To say that the leases were controversial is an understatement. One of the islands, leased during my first fieldworkⁱ in 2010, had 11 local claimants to the land and the contract was signed without a formal agreement about who was the legitimate customary landowner. The lease generated a serious dispute on Ahamb which led to, among other things, a coup of the island's council of chiefs. The hope for economic development, seen in land leasing, is a main reason for disputes over land and authority on Ahamb, as many other places in Vanuatu (see McDonnell 2017; Smith 2017).

Another reason for the disputes is that the island is already too small to sustain its growing population. This has made it more important than before to claim land rights on Ahamb if one wants to stay. Since 2000, around 20 Ahamb households have moved to mainland Malekula. However, settling in new places has also generated new questions over land ownership. Land on the mainland has recently earned new value as frequent tsunami warnings, cyclones, and coastal erosion seem to threaten small, flat Ahamb's future. Indeed, future evacuation of Ahamb seems likely to many people. A tsunami warning in 2009, which led the Government to demand the island's secondary school be moved to the mainland, as well as current discourses on climate change, has fortified this idea. The growing desire to secure a land plot

close to the water where cargo ships dock, and where there is easy access to schools, churches, and health services, has caused disputes among Ahamb people as well as people already living on the mainland.

The focus on claiming land has over the past 20 years spurred a process of excluding kin and neighbours from land – what Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch and Tania M. Li have called ‘intimate exclusion’ (2011: 145-166). The logic here is that when some clans start asserting exclusive land ownership, other clans feel they need to assert their individualised property rights where they claim to have land (see McDougall 2016: 163). As a result, people on Ahamb have increasingly started to define themselves in terms of genealogically-bounded clan groups that exclude outsiders, rather than the extended kin and community-based collectives that include them (see also McDougall 2016: 188). This process of ‘intimate exclusion’ has for the past decade caused increasing resentment among many Ahamb islanders.

When I arrived in Ahamb for my second fieldwork in January 2014, three months prior to the revival, many men were preoccupied with discussions about land claims and authority. Many others, however, particularly women, were eager to express their resentment with these men through gossip because they knew these disputes would cause kin relations and community solidarity to fall apart. The men were blamed for two main reasons. First, because land follows the patrilineage, it is generally men who are responsible for managing land and their clan’s interest in land disputes. Consequently, when disputes arise and threaten to tear the community apart, it is often the men who engage in these disputes and come to represent the problems personally. Second, as in many places in Melanesia, maleness and traditional authority have in Ahamb typically been seen as two sides of the same coin. Akin to what Eriksen has shown from nearby Ambrym, men’s social worlds are to a significant extent related to respect, competition, and leadership, and reflect a stronger sense of hierarchy than female social worlds (2012: 105-106). While female social worlds have to a large extent been associated with the opposite of hierarchy and competition, such as cooperative work and the role of connecting kin groups through marriage, the personal prestige found in male social worlds reflects the image of the typical Melanesian ‘big man’ who previously earned his masculinity by climbing the graded male societies, known on Ahamb as the *nakërkrohin* (see Eriksen 2012: 106, cf. Deacon 1934; Jolly 2016; Lindstrom 1990a; Rio 2014). Although the *nakërkrohin* system was abandoned in the first half of the 20th century, we can still recognise the masculine values of respect and leadership in how many Ahamb men are ‘showing off’ their abilities to achieve great things and take the role as ‘managers’ of social worlds

(Burridge 1975). It is important for many men's notions of integrity and self-worth to comply with these values, which easily causes observers to see them as selfish (*prenmbus*) and proud (*haikem*) in disputes where firmness and self-will have compromising effects on others.

At the beginning of my 2014 fieldwork, the island's disputes and the political perseverance of many men also had an effect on community institutions. The health clinic was no longer operating because the male steering committee members were entangled in land disputes with each other; the chiefs who came to position in the 2010 coup had little support, which meant few showed up to community meetings; communal work was more or less absent, and the Men's Fellowship group in church was inactive. In addition, men had been involved in several sexual assaults in recent years and sorcery—believed to be practiced almost exclusively by men—was said to be on the rise, especially for seducing women at night. Many in the community, both women and men, were longing for change, and the lifestyle associated with several men was, in various ways, identified as the problem.

Before turning to the charismatic revival, I must mention Eriksen's (2009) argument that the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in Vanuatu can be seen as a social critique. From the capital Port Vila, Eriksen argues that Pentecostal churches have recently recruited large numbers of members because of their explicit break with established political structures, dominated by male elites. 'Breaking with the past' and turning in a new direction is central to Pentecostal doctrine (see Engelke 2010; Meyer 1995; Robbins 2004). The Pentecostal expectation that the Holy Spirit is available to all believers carries, in this context, a radical potential for change from the current system of governance (Eriksen 2009: 192). In Eriksen's examples from Vila, as well as my own from Ahamb, as we will see, it is women who constitute the majority of followers in Pentecostal movements. I find it useful to note here that the growth of Pentecostalism and the growth of women's rights activism in Vanuatu from the early 2000s to some extent coincides (see Jolly 2000; Taylor 2008). I do not have the space to elaborate more on this connection, but it is worth noting that the mobilisation of women in Pentecostalism and growth of women's rights activism may have a mutually reinforcing effect expressed in renewal movements like the Ahamb revival and women's prayer groups, as described by Eriksen (2009), given a context where male leaders are blamed for society's problems.

The revival as ritual for change

The Christian charismatic revival that arrived on Ahamb in March 2014 first developed in November 2013 in the Presbyterian churches of South West Bay, a three to five hours' boat ride (depending on the weather) west of Ahamb. A revival of this sort refers to a spiritual reawakening emerging from a strong and direct presence of the Holy Spirit. If allowed to take root, a revival is believed to bring new awareness of sin which creates new desire for repentance and humility (see Jorgensen 2002; Tuzin 1997).

Rumour had it that the Holy Spirit was changing the way of life in South West Bay. Notorious troublemakers had surrendered to the Lord, sorcery was declining, and a growing number of children and youth were anointed with the Holy Spirit and granted spiritual gifts of prophecy, vision, and healing. Realising the significance of the events in South West Bay, the administrative offices of the Malekula Presbyterian Church declared that the visionary youth and their leader, Elder Edward, a local church leader in his 40s, should tour all 19 Presbyterian Church parishes in Malekula to spread the revival. A group of church leaders from Ahamb was among the first to request the revival group in hope that it could help solve some problems in the society.

The revival work on Ahamb was to be led by the church elder Cyril, the only church leader with some training in a charismatic form of Christianity. When the South West Bay group left Ahamb after a successful introduction programme over a weekend, Elder Cyril and the Ahamb Presbyterian Church started up nightly revival worship services to nurture the presence of the Holy Spirit. It took only a week of these services before the first Ahamb children started to be 'slain' in the Holy Spirit. In this state, the visionaries received spiritual gifts and conveyed revelations from the Spirit to the community. Revelations typically focused on the need to fight 'worldly living' (*laef blong wol ia*) which implied whatever deceptive worldly enjoyments, attitudes, and practices like disputes, stealing, and sorcery that kept people away from living a pure and holy lifestyle. After a month, the number of children with spiritual gifts was between 10 and 15. At the revival's peak, around 30 children, youth, and womenⁱⁱ with particularly strong spiritual gifts would be slain in the Spirit during revival programmes, and occasionally at school, in the village, and in the gardens.ⁱⁱⁱ

The locus of the revival was worship services organised every night at 7 PM and often lasting several hours. Elder Cyril and the visionaries often emphasised that the services did not have

fixed content but were arranged according to directions of the Holy Spirit revealed to the visionaries. This is akin to the Pentecostal insistence on spontaneity and authenticity as opposed to the typical routine and ‘set-apartness’ scholars often associate with ritual (Robbins 2010: 58). I argue, however, that there were several hallmarks of ritual in the revival services and that they constituted the main ritual context of the movement.

First, services had a repetitive character as they were arranged nearly every night. This was to ensure the community’s mutual relationship to the Holy Spirit and make ‘anointing flow’. Second, services had specific rules that were important to observe if the revival was to renew society effectively. For instance, everyone who attended should wear white clothing. This was a symbol of the individual’s and the congregation’s commitment to purity and spiritual re-birth, but it would also draw attention away from the individual to the fact that everyone was equal before God (see also Engelke 2010: 186). Moreover, no participants should be under the influence of intoxicants, such as kava (which I will discuss in the next section) as it obstructed the ability of persons to communicate with the Holy Spirit. Other rules included taking off one’s shoes in church to be united with Christ’s blood ‘flowing’ and the Spirit’s fire ‘burning’ there. Third, the services followed a relatively set sequence. For the service to start, everyone had to bow down to honour the tabernacle, a tent-like construction known from the Bible’s Old Testament symbolising the locus of God’s power. The specifications of the tabernacle had been revealed by the Spirit to several of the visionaries, and revelations said that it was ‘the power of the revival.’

Services continued with prayers, praise, and singing of worship songs directed at the Holy Spirit to make it come to individuals and the island as a whole. If the congregation’s calls were sincere and strong enough, Elder Cyril proclaimed with his soft and gentle voice that ‘there is a white cloud coming’, indicating that the Holy Spirit was on its way and that anointing would fall. In this phase, people often raised their hands to feel and receive the Spirit. Many felt bodily sensations and visionaries fainted and fell to the ground. While the visionaries were slain in the Spirit, people came up quietly to share their experiences and testimonies with the community. All services were concluded in the similar fashion by those who had seen visions or received revelations lining up towards the front of the church to convey them so that they could be put into action in the community. In line with Kapferer emphasis on rituals’ internal dynamics, people’s emotional experiences during the worship

services were important for the extent to which people carried the visionaries' messages into their everyday lives to attempt to change them.

The ritual character of the revival was not only confined to the worship services, however. As Robbins points out (2010: 59), acts of praying together, fasting, visitations and so on, which are central to Pentecostal social life and were important in the revival, are also ritual practices. Moreover, the revival took the form of a particular type of ritual – a *rite de passage* – that can restructure positions, priorities, and ideologies (see van Gennep 1909; Turner ([1969] 2008). We see this perhaps most clearly in the inversion of gender- and age-based hierarchies which constituted the revival's 'radical suspension of ordinary realities' at liminal moments with the potential of altering the organisation of Ahamb everyday life (Kapferer 2005a: 46; Turner ([1969] 2008: 95).

Inverting gender and age hierarchies

In Ahamb everyday life, the formal authority of the home, village, and community is with the adult man. This authority is grounded in traditional gender and age structures and confirmed in biblical gender roles in which men and women are equal in value but where men are leaders within the home and church. With the revival, however, it was suddenly children and women who were telling their fathers and husbands how to live their lives and that what they did was wrong. The young and the women were chosen by the Holy Spirit because they had 'soft' hearts, the visionaries and church leaders claimed. This enabled them to more easily 'open up' and submit themselves to the guidance of the Spirit. The fact that the Holy Spirit chose children primarily, they stated, illustrated the Biblical maxim of humility. The visionaries proclaimed that this was described nowhere clearer than in the texts where Jesus declares that the lowly children are the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven (e.g. Matthew 18: 1-5, Luke 18:15-17; Mark 10: 14-16). On Ahamb, this divine elevation of the seemingly inferior and degradation of the seemingly high worked as a criticism of the men, including the chiefs, who from certain perspectives had engaged themselves in self-serving politics at the expense of others' wellbeing.^{iv} From another perspective, we may say that they had prioritised certain kinds of collectives which included some and excluded others. This will become clearer in the paragraphs to come.

One explicit criticism of the men was found in revelations about their kava drinking that visionaries claimed had to come to an end. Kava is a mildly intoxicating drink made of the

Western Pacific kava plant (Latin *Piper Methysticum*) and is enormously popular in Vanuatu. It is drunk predominantly by men who enjoy it in many social contexts, predominantly in the evenings (Lebot et al. 1997; Taylor 2010). On Ahamb, as elsewhere in Vanuatu, it is safe to say that kava has come to constitute an important context for men in their production and reproduction of social relationships. Men on Ahamb often engage in collaborative work such as house building, canoe maintenance, and helping each other to plant and harvest crops to be sold for cash in Port Vila. If one has received such help, the social protocol is for the host of the work to prepare a bucket of kava and invite his helpers over for chatting and relaxing into the night while feeling the sedative effects of the drink. Because of its social centrality, kava for a man is ‘virtually obligatory’ (as Toren 1988: 704 puts it for Fiji), and the only good excuse to not drink is normally if one has health problems or is a church leader.^v With the revival permeating the society, however, kava had become a menace.

The visionaries proclaimed that kava drinking was problematic for four main reasons which made it necessary to come to an end. First, kava sessions went on at the same time as the revival worship services. To choose kava therefore implied prioritising the temptations of ‘this world’ over God. Second, kava made drinkers ‘drunk on a different spirit’ (*drong long difren spirit*)^{vi} that make them feel lazy, sleep late, and get less work done. Third, men who came home drunk every night were bad role models for their children and younger siblings. Fourth, kava drinking blocked a person’s capacities for communicating with the Holy Spirit. This required a clear mind and alert perception that was the direct opposite of what intoxication from kava could offer. Consequently, less influence from the Holy Spirit implied less divine power and possibility for change on the island.

The kava issue was one way in which the way the visionary children challenged the men as holders of previous privileged positions and constituted the revival as a suspension of normal everyday life. This dynamic can be illustrated by how my adoptive brothers Edison, Harry and Clinton were physically blocked on the path by their classificatory daughters one evening when they were going to drink kava. Walking to a neighbouring village to drink, the three young men were stopped by their fathers’ brother’s son’s daughter Ashley on the road. Ashley blocked the young men’s path, refusing to let them through. ‘Today I want to see you guys in church!’ she commanded. Ashley should normally respect the men as classificatory fathers (*ita*) and ‘do as they say’ (*mekem olsem oli talem*). However, roles had changed now that she had become a visionary. Tua, another visionary girl with the same *ita* relationship to

the men also appeared to confront them: 'You should not drink kava!' To this Edison replied: 'But girls, we pray for the kava before we drink it!' 'It is not enough that you only pray for it' Tua argued. She reminded the young men that visionaries had conveyed messages from the Spirit saying how the three of them had been granted special gifts of leadership to be used in church. Edison objected: 'But Tua, everything has its time. There will be a time when I stand up on the pulpit to speak God's word...' 'But if you die tomorrow, what will you say then?' Tua interrupted. She was referring to the Holy Spirit's messages that it was sin to prioritise kava over God, and that the wrong choice could leave the men with a place in Hell rather than Heaven. 'Then we had nothing more to say (*faea i ded*)', Edison laughed as he told me the story when we met later that night. All three of them had ended up in church instead of at the kava.

The revival thus functioned as a liminal moment in a *rite de passage* where every community member was stripped of previous role and status in order to be reincorporated with a new identity (Turner [1969] 2008: 108). None, or few, of the previous markers that distinguished people from one another were relevant. What mattered was that one became pure and humble like a little child in order to align with the Holy Spirit. As the revival continued and people followed the visionaries' revelations, their doctrine got an increasing foothold in the community. To borrow Kapferer's phrase, the revival was its own 'force in its making' (2015: 2), shaping everyday life in unpredictable ways instead of merely representing or reproducing it.

Children and women seemed to adjust well to living with the revival as they, in contrast to the men, had 'soft hearts' that enabled them to subordinate to the Spirit in full (see Eriksen 2012: 114-115). Many men, however, needed to change their ways to an extent that was difficult or even undesirable. A main problem for the men was that those who did not succumb to the revival's moral order were portrayed as morally dubious and even threats to their society. This was in stark contrast to how most men want to be seen – as trustworthy and respected 'managers' of their social worlds. In theory, men, women, and children had equal access to the authority found in the spiritual gifts. However, as Elizabeth Brusco (2010) argues, the 'playing ground' for the genders in charismatic Christian contexts is not quite level and is skewed in the women's favour. She claims that the receptivity of the diffuse powers represented by the Spirit is uncharacteristic for many males, such as the Colombian men in her studies. Here, 'the image of male converts with their arms and faces upraised, inviting in

the Holy Spirit ... stands in stark contrast to the impenetrable pose of *machismo*' (2010: 81). The same can be said about many Ahamb men whose masculinity is based on being a sturdy and self-controlled head of the family and village. A group of women I talked to complained of the self-assertive attitude of men in these terms:

A man thinks he knows everything. That he is the boss. They do not necessarily listen so much to what is being said in church. They do not want anyone to come before them or be better than them. They are putting themselves over everyone else (*puttum olgeta antap*).

My friend Riley, a man in his 30s, told me that the revival in fact made men afraid (*fraet*). He elaborated:

They are afraid to fall down in public and of what others might think of them. It is easier for young people who do not yet have that kind of stubborn thinking (*strong tingting*). But for the adult man... it is hard! It is because the man is afraid... it is the anxiety... because he is afraid to "step down," right? One does not want to step down to the rank of the children. Men do not know how to "go down." But if you want to go to Heaven you must make yourself like a child. Because the children's attitude is "down." Women's attitude is also "down." A man does not want another man to see that he is "down." For example, if you are a pastor, an elder, or a father and you see your child praying and then falling down... What can he say?! A man does not want to see himself as on the same level (*stret mo semak*) as his wife and children.

The fact that during the revival it was the children and women who were telling the men how to live their lives was clearly jeopardising men's experience of respect. However, Anna and Mary, two women in their 40s, argued that the point of the revival was not to undermine men's authority, even though many of them seemed to experience it in that way:

Women are not afraid to be "down," but men are. But the men must remember that the revelations have come to help you. To help you in your life. It is not to take away the fathers' authority (*autoriti blong ol papa*) ... A man does not like that his woman knows more than he does. If this happens, he might be cross and hit his wife. To have peace in the house the woman must "go down" and put the man "on top" again. For this reason, the man's thinking becomes not good (*tingting blong man i no gud nao*) when women and children receive revelations. It makes them stay away from church

and talk negatively about the revival. It is simply because the man must be boss. They have to be “over” us women.

An important issue in the criticism of men was, as we have seen, their kava drinking. Wayne, an outspoken man in his 30s, did not go to revival services but preferred to drink kava with his friends instead. He had an ambiguous relationship with the revival. In addition to its social significance, he reminded me that kava had for years been a cornerstone of the community’s economy:

The tithe and thanksgiving we give to the church and our chance to drink tea with sugar and so on is all thanks to kava. Kava is our main income. When the (visionary) children are talking about kava like that ... they forget that the church house is also built from kava!^{vii} Kava means money and the social life of us men. We have made it to a *kastom* (custom). When we do a ceremony there is also kava. It means that they (the revivalists) are addressing the wrong side of things. This is why men do not want to go to church at night. The children say men have *tu tingting* (swaying, doubting). This is also making men not go to church anymore but are instead *bangem* (pouring down) kava. The revival is good, but it is the kava that separates us.

The criticism of kava reached a point where some men declared they would break away from the community church to start a new church where kava was allowed. In Vanuatu and other parts of Melanesia, the churches are to a significant extent defining a community, and disputes sometimes make groups break away from a social unit and associated church to form their own community with their own church (see Eriksen 2008: 105; Handman 2015; Kolshus 2016).^{viii} Even though no one actually withdrew their membership from the Presbyterian Church during the revival, the kava drinkers’ warning was a clear message about the new movement’s intervention in a valued social domain for the men—but also the single most important source of families’ economy. As we will see, the challenging of the men’s world had consequences for how men responded to the revival which in turn altered its rituals, in part in unexpected ways. I will thus show how also factors outside the ritual, such as everyday values and authority relations, can contribute to its openness and unpredictability, and that such effects are not only confined to its internal dynamics, as discussed by Kapferer.

The power of one’s significant others in ritual

On Ahamb, even though choices of means and ends and social affiliation are being made,

people stress loyalty and obligation as much as personal interest. When outspoken men like Wayne started to criticise the revival openly, it became harder for the men who initially participated in the revival to continue unambiguously. I will attempt to explain this dynamic as it emerged in the revival by pointing to the vernacular concepts *husürmarni* and *paloghusür*.

Husürmarni is an Ahamb concept that means to ‘just follow’ instead of sticking to one’s own thought and plan. This idea is deeply embedded in the Ahamb social ethos of acknowledging and respecting another person, and the opposite may be associated with the immorality of ignoring relationships for one’s own ends (see Strathern 1997: 145). As Toby, an eager revival participant in his mid-30s summed it up to me: ‘you just do the same yourself, because you are afraid that they will be against you. So you just *husürmarni*.’ When a number of men started to protest against the revival and its criticism of kava, other men who initially supported the revival found it hard to express a different opinion. As a result, many men started to stay out of the revival programme. This was evident in how all 20 rows of benches on the women’s side of the church were usually filled during revival services, while the men would often fill no more than two or three. Toby explained the reason to me in the following terms:

Men are ashamed to join the revival programme. They are ashamed to do it in front of the faces of others. Because if someone says “the revival is not true” it is hard to say “yes it is!” If you are with a group of people you are afraid that someone will say “oh, let’s not get close to Toby because he has joined the (revival) group.” These things will destroy my mind now! And I won’t go to church.

This careful watching of other people’s evaluation of oneself was significant for why many men suddenly stopped going to revival programmes after a few months. This was not least the case for male youth. A handful of them had received spiritual gifts of the same kind as the children and were thus ascribed important roles in the movement. However, the everyday social life of young men on Ahamb consists to a significant degree of relaxing with friends around the kava bowl at night—an activity that was incompatible with participation in the revival. My friend Edison, who was in his early 20s, liked participating in the revival but also felt obliged to respect his male friends who frequently invited him for kava. He once summed up his usual response to this dilemma to me: ‘If you stay at your house and a friend comes saying “Let’s go, Frank has prepared a bucket of kava!” It’s hard to say no. You just

paloghusür now because you respect your friend and don't want to offend (*spolem*) him.' *Paloghusür* literally means to 'listen/feel/hear/sense (*palog*) and follow (*husür*)' and is a word used for 'respect' in Ahamb vernacular. A core way of showing respect on Ahamb is to accept another person by accepting what he or she has to offer. To deny an invitation without a good reason may signal *hae tingting* (thinking highly of oneself) and seeing oneself as 'too good' for the other person and for having a relationship with her or him. An invitation to kava is thus a 'value question' (Gregory 1997:7-8) which demands that others respond positively to the invitation, and through their response express the value they ascribe to the relationship.

I argue that the morality of this conformity took a gendered form in the revival, which illustrates the relatively distinct social dynamic of the genders on Ahamb but also, broadly speaking, the different matters that were at stake for gender groups within the revival: A number of men felt they should be supportive of their male kin and friends who could not keep up with the revival's demands. They often expressed their support by drinking kava with them and thus taking part in the most important ritual context for reproducing male solidarity on the island. Women, on the other hand, do not traditionally drink kava on Ahamb. Moreover, their main ritual context for reproducing female solidarity is the church, particularly the weekly programmes of the women's church organisation PWMU.^{ix} During the revival, the women were showing up in church in large numbers every night. They were also expected to do so by other women. The revival worship service was a space for women to bring their children and meet up with other women for praise and worship but it was also a platform for addressing some social and ethical concerns that women experienced more strongly than many men.

If we view 'society' following David Graeber as being the potential audience of your actions, of everyone whose opinion of you matter in one way or another (Graeber 2001: 76-77), and given how gendered many social activities are on Ahamb, it is not difficult to understand how different persons would follow the way of their 'significant others' of the same gender during the revival. A woman who *kept out* of the revival could be accused by other women to be selfish (*prenmbus*), proud (*haikem*), and of thinking more of herself than others. This is because she turned against the dominant sociality of her fellow women which took place *within* the ritual context of the revival. A man, however, could be accused of being selfish and proud by his male peers if he was too occupied *in* the revival. This is because he kept out of kava sessions, which are the dominant ritual context for reproducing relationships among men. These contrasts in what is at stake for a person, socially and emotionally, underscore the

importance of paying close attention to the context in which different actors state their shifting evaluations of a ritual (cf. Martin 2018: 394). What people experience to be at stake might be produced in the ritual itself, but as I have tried to show, is also often carried over from their everyday life outside the ritual.

Conclusion: The multiple reasons for a ritual's openness and unpredictability

Three to four months into the revival, to lighten the conflict between the church and the kava drinking men and to make sure that men would still come to church, Ahamb church leaders started to put less weight on the kava-issue. This was despite the visionaries continuing to convey critical revelations about kava drinking. The need for the revivalists to pull back on the kava issue to avoid further conflict can be exemplified by Wayne, the kava drinker we met earlier. As he told me after a group of revivalists had paid a visit to his kava bar one night:

Someone thought the group came to pray at the kava bar to stop kava. If they did that it would be a fight. It would have created disunity. It would separate us into two groups. The 'good' people who have no objections to the revival and the 'not good' who have *tu tingting* (doubt). The second group would not come to church anymore then. Oh, really, it would not be good. It would have created disunity.

Luckily for all, if we are to believe Wayne, the revival supporters did not come to the bar to hinder anyone in drinking kava, only to pray to safeguard it against sorcerers. As he phrased it:

...but Elder Cyril explained in a good way that they came to pray to protect us against sorcerers. When he explained that to us in a good manner we don't hold grudges against the revival anymore. And neither does the church hold any grudges against kava.

Wayne's final quote is helpful for understanding how the lowering of the revival's demands allowed the movement to continue with support from most community members. It also allowed the movement's anti-sorcery work, in which many men participated actively, to grow so strong that nine months after the revival's inception, two suspected sorcerers from Ahamb were killed by a mob of men who took it upon their responsibility to protect the island against future sorcery attacks (Bratrud 2017).^x This fatal event, which shocked the Ahamb community and all of Vanuatu, is perhaps the most powerful example of the unpredictability and transformative effect of the revival.

Because of many men's resistance towards the revival, it was not only its criticism of kava that was dampened. Ordinary men without spiritual gifts were also offered significant roles in revival programmes, including the nightly worship services.^{xi} They were called specifically upon to support the children in their prayer missions against sorcery, and the church group Men's Fellowship was engaged to do an outreach trip in the district to spread the revival message. The participants in the outreach included men who had been active revival supporters from the beginning as well as others who had not been much involved.

The acceptance of kava and lowering of demands for participation allowed most men to live a normal social life with the revival. As a result, more men slowly started to come back to the revival worship services—most noticeable on Saturdays and Sundays when kava drinking was already prohibited before the revival. Moreover, the revival seemed to resume popularity among men when they could assume significant positions within it and become representatives of it. In this way, men could appropriate the revival and display their capacity to be 'managers' doing great things. One example being to help free the island of terrifying sorcery.

The lowering of demands that conflicted most strongly with the men's identity and everyday life recalls Bernice Martin's concept of the 'Pentecostal gender paradox' (2001; 2013).^{xii} The paradox, Martin explains, derives from her observation that while women come in greatest numbers to Pentecostal churches and are most active in praying, Bible studies, speaking in tongues and so on, the authority of the church still lies with men (2001: 52-66). The aim of greater gender equality does not challenge 'gender integrity'—the possibility of experiencing oneself as a 'good man' or 'good woman' (Cucchiari 1991; Martin 2001: 55). In the Ahamb context, we might say that the revival extended Martin's 'gender paradox' to include age as well as gender. This is because not only women, but most notably children, were set up in contrast to the men as those morally eligible to define some new realities on the island. However, the children and women were able to continue do so relatively freely when also men were embraced as important actors in the process.

I argue that giving men the chance to relocate their positions and integrity as significant actors within the revival has helped make the revival relatively successfully incorporated into the everyday order of the Ahamb Presbyterian community church in the years succeeding its inception in 2014.^{xiii} This does not mean that the revival has simply reproduced pre-revival

Ahamb society, however. Everyone on the island became part of the revival in one way or the other, and everyone came out of it different than when they entered—whether their faith was altered, their interest in some values were solicited, or they were left mourning after the killing of two kinsmen feared to be sorcerers (cf. Handelman 2005: 15). The revival thus cannot be reduced to a ritual reproduction or representation of society. Rather, it became an extended moment of ambiguity, an uneasy negotiation which generated a multiplicity of unexpected outcomes.

I suggest that the revival demonstrates Kapferer's point that ritual can become a generative centre for creativity, unpredictability, and change, and that a ritual's internal dynamics—here, including children's leadership and the structure of services and children's revelations—were key to its effectiveness even as they threatened destabilisation at many points. However, I also argue that the revival demonstrates that the openness and unpredictability of the ritual was affected by factors located outside the ritual. One reason is that people's concerns and desires prior to the ritual allow it to become a suspension of everyday life because enough participants seek such a destabilisation. We recognise this in how many Ahamb people, particularly women, were longing for change in the context of disputes prior to the revival. This longing made them invest emotions and energy into the ritual and be susceptible of it having an effect. Another reason is that factors located outside the ritual, such as notions of power and values, affect people's experience of what is at stake for them at different moments in the ritual. These factors shape people's responses to the ritual and further affect its dynamics. We have seen this in the example of the men who refused to submit to the revival's inversion of previous gender and age hierarchies and their friends who felt obliged to follow them. Therefore, when assessing the openness and unpredictability of ritual, I argue that it is important to pay attention to both the internal dynamics of the ritual, as Kapferer does, but also to the persistent influence of multiple ambiguous factors outside the ritual.

Following Keir Martin (2010, 2018), people's differentiated and shifting response to social situations demands that we pay close attention to the context in which different persons state their evaluations of the situation. Such contextual exploration enables us to see more clearly what is at stake for different actors at different moments in the ritual process and further how these concerns in turn shape its form and effects. Because although I agree with Kapferer that ritual's internal dynamics can mesmerise people into reorienting their experience of everyday reality to some extent, they will also bring in elements from outside the ritual that produce

new social forms that can escape their authors' control.

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ⁱ The research for this article is based on totally 20 months of fieldwork in Vanuatu, in 2010, 2014, and 2017, and my continued contact with the Ahamb community through phone, e-mail, and Facebook.

ⁱⁱ Similarly, Jorgensen (2007) describes from the early 1970s revival in Telefolmin, Papua New Guinea, how all but one spirit medium were female. Robbins (2004: 135-136) also accounts for the centrality of ‘Spirit women’ during the late 1970s revival of the Urapmin, Papua New Guinea.

ⁱⁱⁱ Given the sensitive nature of my ethnography, I will mention that I have been in dialogue with Vanuatu Cultural Council, the national body for administrating research in Vanuatu who has issued research permits for my three fieldworks, about the use of the material. I have also consulted the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees regarding the ethics of disseminating the material. One measure I have taken is to make the visionary children unidentifiable by leaving out or changing details that can identify them. I have also discussed the publication of the ethnography with various research subjects and come to an agreement about the form and degree of anonymisation.

^{iv} The prophecies of Joel (Joel 2: 28; see also Acts 2: 17-21), forecasting the coming of the Holy Spirit in the last days and how the young will then prophecy and see visions, were also central in explaining why the revival had come at this particular moment and why children were having spiritual visions.

^v Because kava is intoxicating and has a side effect of sleepiness, the church has decided that its leaders, who are supposed to be exemplary spiritual and moral leaders, are not allowed to drink it.

^{vi} This ‘spirit’ alluded to either traditional plant spirits or Satan, depending on who I asked. Before the revival, I had never heard people refer to kava as containing any dangerous spirit. Such identification of ‘new’ demonic powers, however, is typical for the spiritual warfare of Christian charismatic movements worldwide as discussed thoroughly in Rio et al. (2017).

^{vii} The current Presbyterian Church house on Ahamb, completed in 1998, was financed through a donation of one bag kava per household to be sold in the capital Port Vila.

^{viii} Two out of currently three small breakaway churches on Ahamb have been formed in this way.

^{ix} PWMU is an abbreviation for Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union, often referred to as *Ol mama* (‘the mothers’ or ‘the adult women’). The Ahamb PWMU was established in 1950, while ‘Men’s fellowship’ was established in 1999.

^x I was myself in Port Vila during this tragic event but returned to Ahamb two weeks later.

^{xi} The men could not drink kava on the same day as the service, however, because their intoxication would interfere negatively with the work of the Spirit who needed participants to be fully alert and receptive.

^{xiii} Eriksen (2016) discusses how Martin’s concept takes a specific concept of gender as the point of departure, which is problematic for Melanesian (and other) contexts. I do not engage further with Eriksen’s arguments here,

however, as I find Martin's points to be useful to illustrate the specific compromises that were made on behalf of the men in the Ahamb revival context.

^{xiii} See also Robbins' (2001) account of how the revival that hit the Urapmin in 1977 was not only an intense movement that had its end, as accounts of such movements often portray them. Rather, the revival has now become their 'church' or 'religion'.