

The pastor and the prophetess: an analysis of gender and Christianity in Vanuatu

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The focus of this article is the proliferation of new charismatic Pentecostal churches in the South Pacific nation Vanuatu. The established Presbyterian Church on the island of Ambrym is compared to a new Pentecostal church in the capital Port Vila in terms of gender. The idea of a vanishing form of masculinity and the development of a form of 'gender nostalgia' is emphasized in the comparison. By looking at gender relations, new perspectives on the difference between the new churches and more established churches emerge, and these perspectives, I argue, might also give us an understanding of why fission seem to be inevitable for the new Pentecostal churches in Vanuatu.

Christianity has a long history in the South Pacific island nation Vanuatu (Eriksen 2008; Jolly 1995; Philibert 1992) compared to other areas of Melanesia, especially the interior of New Guinea (Robbins 2004). Missionaries from the Presbyterian Mission got a foothold on some of the southern islands of the archipelago, such as Tanna and Aneityum, as early as the 1850s and 1860s (Miller 1981). Presbyterian, Catholic, and Anglican churches have since become the major religious centres, but more recently charismatic churches such as the Renewal Church, the Holiness Church, and the Assembly of God have gained popularity, especially in the urban context (see Eriksen & Andrew 2010). This article is an attempt to understand one aspect of this diversification of Christian forms in Vanuatu, from early Christian movements to the present-day charismatic form of Christianity, namely the relationship between Christianity and gender.

This article thus develops an explicit analytical focus on gender and Christianity. Although gender has been a theme in studies of Christianity in anthropology generally (see, e.g., Cannell 1999; Hodgson 2005; Taylor Huber & Luktehaus 1999), Meyer (2004) has argued that gender remains an understudied aspect of Pentecostal Christianity in Africa, and I will claim the same for the Melanesian context. It is my argument that an understanding of gendered values connected to Christian imagination opens a fresh perspective on the formation of the new Christian movements in Vanuatu and might illuminate the difference between the new churches and more established churches. I develop an analysis of why and how the process of fission

seems to be intrinsic to these new churches (Martin 2002: 176; Meyer 2004: 453), linking this to an analysis of gendered values. I show that by looking at how gendered values are articulated and what they signify, major differences between the new Charismatic form of Christianity and the more established mission churches can be illuminated.

A value is often articulated in tension towards that which is not valued. Sometimes this tension might take a gendered form. The concept 'gendered values' thus refers to processes wherein a value is understood to represent gendered qualities. It is not a radical claim that gender can be expressed in a number of ways; individual bodies being only one dimension. Gender as a process of differentiation is not necessarily linked to individuals at all, but can be an aspect of relations (Strathern 1988). In my use of the concept 'gendered values' I imply the process wherein masculinity and femininity are moral ideals which most women and men seek to achieve. How femininity and masculinity are expressed vary between the two contexts, but I show that gender in both contexts is fundamental to social organization as well as to ideas of moral order.¹

I will begin this paper by outlining my previous study of the Presbyterian Church on one of the north-central islands in Vanuatu, Ambrym (Eriksen 2008). I do this in order to prepare the background against which we can understand the distinct character of the growing, mainly urban-based, Pentecostal churches. Thus I take my study of the Ambrym Presbyterian Church to be to some extent representative for Presbyterianism in Vanuatu generally. Although there might have been local differences in how the mission and the church were received, I think the basic egalitarian structure of the church (compared, for instance, to the Catholic Church) is well recognized (see also Jolly 1989). Then I will present new ethnography from one of the Pentecostal churches I have studied more recently in the capital, the Bible Church. In the second part of the article I compare the two churches, looking particularly at the role of gender.

These are very different churches, and one might ask how and why it is meaningful to compare them. I will suggest that the Presbyterian Church provides an apt point of departure for a comparison firstly because many of the members of the Bible Church previously were Presbyterians and one might therefore ask what their new form of Christianity implies in relation to the older one. Secondly, the new churches become popular partly because of what I call a 'gender nostalgia': a view on the present and recent past as characterized by vanishing gender differences. As I will return to below, the Presbyterian Church to some extent downplayed the relevance of gender differentiation and contributed to the process wherein masculinity became marginalized. I argue that the new churches open a space for a new form of masculinity; a new gender distinction.

The first churches: the Presbyterian Church on Ambrym

Vanuatu, a Y-shaped archipelago with approximately eighty islands and small islets in the South Pacific, became in 1906 a shared British and French colony under the name the New Hebrides. By then most of the islands in the archipelago had white settlers and missionaries. Ambrym Island in the north-central part of the archipelago, for instance, had established a Presbyterian church in 1886, and after a time also a Seventh Day Adventist church and a Catholic church.

The establishment of the church on Ambrym in this period, and in particular the Presbyterian Church, can be understood as the establishment of a social space wherein the dominant values of Ambrym social life were challenged. However, contrary to Robbins's (2004) description of the arrival of Christianity among the Urapmin in the New Guinea highlands, the coming of Christianity to Ambrym did not imply an encounter between a cultural system organized around the value of 'relationships' and one organized around the value of the 'individual'. Although the Presbyterian mission did challenge the existing value system, it did not do so as fundamentally as was done among the Urapmin. In understanding the establishment of mission Christianity on Ambrym, it is more revealing to analyse the issue of gender than the notion of individualism. As I have argued in depth elsewhere (Eriksen 2008), Christianity did not challenge the dominant value of relationships, but challenged a specific form of this value: its male form.

The male form of making relations can very quickly be summarized as 'showing off' the ability to manage relations and become the representation of numerous relationships. Perhaps the classical Melanesian big man is the most typical example. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Eriksen 2005; 2008; 2009a), manhood was achieved on Ambrym through the ability to stand out from the relationships in which one was engaged and to become the representation of them; to achieve the singular form. In the Ambrym context, the single person is a representation of relations and not detached from them. Thus, the single person is *one* expression of the value of relationships.

I have argued elsewhere (Eriksen 2009a) in more ethnographic depth that the more permanent this singular expression is, the more masculine it becomes. This masculine ideal is not only expressed at the level of social representation, but also at physical level. The ideal of permanence is, for instance, expressed in the nurturing of children. I was told that small boys, in contrast to small girls, would be gendered masculine through a process of 'hardening'. Ideally (although rarely in practice), baby boys should not be given mothers' milk but root crops as jam during the first year. This would make their bodies strong and hard and thus enhance their ability to become masculine (permanent representations).

This masculine ideal of a form of self-enhancement in social relations is hard to achieve in daily life, characterized by a large degree of collective work and egalitarian relations. However, it could be achieved in ritualized performances. In Ambrym, as in several other north-central islands in Vanuatu, there was in pre-colonial and early colonial times a dominant ceremonial institution called the *Mage* (or *Namange*, in Bislama), which has been referred to as 'the graded society' (see Allen 1981; Guiart 1951; Layard 1942; Patterson 1976; 1981; Rio 2007). This institution was mainly for males and consisted of thirteen to fifteen named grades into which one became initiated after having paid for the rights to these grades and the names that accompanied them (Patterson 1976; Rio 2007; Rubinstein 1981). The graded system was based on competition and hierarchy among the members of the society. Every grade-taking involved two parties: the person who wanted to buy the rights to a grade in the grade hierarchy and the person who already had this right and who would receive payment from the buyer. Through the act of buying the grade, the grade-taker would display his ability to assemble the means to buy, usually pigs, from his relatives, thus representing a number of previous relations to persons contributing pigs. One might say that the male version of expressing the value of relationships in the graded society

implied making oneself the singular representation of relationships through the achievement of grades.

Female qualities on Ambrym were associated with the opposite of hierarchy and competition. Female values were expressed in, for instance, women's co-operative work tasks and roles in connecting kin groups through marriage. Thus, the idea of what a woman should do – namely marry out of her hamlet and create social connections for her brothers – is an expression of what I have called the female value of creating unmediated relationships (Strathern 1988: 190).

One might say that on Ambrym the value of relationships had two different variants, one male-gendered and the other female-gendered, and these were usually expressed in the practices of men and women. Whereas manhood was expressed by making oneself a representation of relationships, the feminine expression of the value of relationships took another form by downplaying the contribution of single persons. Taylor (2008) has described it differently for the neighbouring island Pentecost, however. Here there is in operation a separate system of rank-taking for women, and this system is crucially linked to that of men. In Taylor's analysis, the graded society is therefore not a system wherein a sharp gender differentiation is expressed. Both men and women can achieve individual status and prestige in this hierarchy. Jolly (in press) has also argued that the grade-taking system on Ambrym, and north-central Vanuatu in general, might not be an expression of gender differentiations to the extent that I have argued (Eriksen 2008), because women have also been involved with *kastom* and rank-taking.

I agree with Taylor and Jolly: women also took part in the graded society. Becoming a representation of social relations was not an exclusive male activity. Women, too, could achieve this social form; women could in some cases enter the graded society or they could achieve this in other, often ritual, contexts.² Also in more daily contexts, both men and women could take on representational forms. However, two points are central for my argument about gendered social forms and gendered values. Firstly, I argue that the large-scale ceremony, of which the *mage* ceremony is an example, were most often, although not exclusively, male-dominated. The difference between men of high rank and women and men of lesser rank was the *degree* to which one could become such representations. Secondly, it is central to my argument that it is not a difference between men and women I am pointing to, but a difference between male and female gendered qualities. Thus, the fact that both men and women could achieve prestige in the hierarchy does not make a difference to my argument; it is the male qualities, the singular form, which were expressed in the ritual hierarchy. The Ambrym women who were initiated into the *mage* society were not associated with female values (Eriksen 2009a: 99). They were initiated in old age and took on male qualities, becoming associated with sorcery and unproductivity (not being able to co-operate with other women), and were generally perceived to be dangerous (see Eriksen 2009a: 99–100). Thus women taking on the singular, masculine form became especially powerful, perhaps because the singular form became even more evident when expressed by a woman.

It is important to point out in this context that when I describe the ceremonial institution of the *mage*, I portray it mainly as a background for the present-day understanding of gender on Ambrym. To understand this ritual society as it was is difficult. As Tonkinson has pointed out, '[S]o little definite is known about ... [the] stratified mini-society dominated by men who had attained the highest ritual grades'

(1981: 79). Thus, I do not think my portrayal of the *mage* (Eriksen 2008; 2009a) is a representation of how it was historically, in its entirety. I do not think this is possible, as so few are still active in this 'mini-society', and so few historical sources exist. However, ideas about what the *mage* was, and the effects of this ceremonial institution, are very much alive. *Mage* today is talked about as an institution which created great men. Thus, as a historical practice, accounts about this ritual society reveal present-day perspectives on how masculinity in the past was created. Some of the men of the graded society are described as almost mythological figures. It is this understanding of a form of masculinity which is almost becoming extinct which interests me.

In these accounts, the portrayal of masculinity is central. The different grades expressed different degrees of this masculinity. The creation of permanent expressions, as new names with new grades, signified the degree of importance and the degree of masculine potential. The more successful one was in the hierarchy, the more permanent and purified this masculine form became. To some extent the utmost masculine representations were the material ones: the tree fern figures which accompanied the grade-taking ceremonies (Eriksen 2008; 2009a; Rio 2007). When one reached the highest grades, one also reached the status of *tambufae*³ (taboo fire) and one had to cook and eat by oneself, and could not function as an ordinary member of a household and kin group. This was the utmost representation of manhood, I will claim. One would almost become a human sculpture: sitting in a sacred house outside the village, almost inaccessible to other villagers because of one's dangerous potency.

For the majority of Ambrym women, it was not male values which were sought after, but the opposite: female values. The Ambrym word for 'sister', *metehal*,⁴ is indicative of these female gendered values. The word *-hal* means 'path' and refers to the role of the sister in the kinship and marriage system. When women marry they move out of the village and thus become 'paths' into new places. A married woman creates a literal path by moving between her old home and her new one, but also a metaphorical path by becoming a connection between her brothers and father and her husband and his kin group. Several of the life-cycle ceremonies⁵ in which prestations go from the natal place of a person to the place of the person's mother follow these metaphorical paths. A person has to compensate the place where the mother was born throughout his or her life in order to pay back the debt that was created when the woman left her place of birth to marry. On Ambrym, a person's blood is always regarded as coming from the mother, and one therefore needs to compensate this 'gift of life' throughout one's lifetime. The connection a woman makes by moving out of her natal place and into the place where she marries thus becomes a path through which several prestations will flow, even after her own death.

It is not only in a symbolic sense that Ambrym women seek to achieve the value of connection-making without becoming singular representations of these connections. In everyday life, women are seen working together and moving around freely to visit friends and kin. Men to a larger degree sit by their houses and work only with brothers in their gardens. Women arrange large fundraising events for church and other communal purposes. To a certain degree, daily life is dominated by the co-operative work tasks involving women in the village. The male graded society existed as a contrast to this form of social life. It existed in many ways outside of ordinary village life and was a realm where individual men could grow and achieve prestige and respect and where

the focus was the value of hierarchy, in the sense that single men could stand out as elevated from ordinary villagers.

The Presbyterian Church challenged this institution by confronting the values on which it was structured. It was in particular the elevation of individual men to an almost superhuman status which was problematic for the Presbyterian mission. In the process of challenging this institution and the masculine value on which it was founded, the mission also emphasized the opposite values: the values of co-operation, of congregationalism and community, thus shedding light on already established female values and practices. In arguing this, I make the point that the idea of the Christian 'community' and 'congregation' was more similar to the female-gendered value of 'unmediated' relations (of 'connection-making') or relations without singular expressions than the male-gendered singular forms were. The very idea of the unmediated exchange is exactly the point that no single person is foregrounded. This, I will claim, is similar to the idea of the 'congregation' and the 'Christian community', which were important for the Presbyterian mission.

The first missionary on Ambrym, a Presbyterian from Scotland, Charles Murray, declared in 1887 that the church was open to everyone: men, women, and children. The church thereby challenged a patriarchal structure and promoted inclusiveness and egalitarian values at the expense of exclusiveness and a focus on the singular persons, which had been so prominent in the graded society. Men associated with the *mage* were therefore not interested in the church as a new religious and ceremonial institution in the early years of its establishment when they realized that it was not based on the concept of exclusive male membership and competition. As a direct response to Murray's effort to recruit women and children to the church, one of the highest graded men in the male graded society, who was also the village chief at the time, declared the church forbidden territory and asked people to stop giving food to the missionary. He wanted Murray off the island, and he succeeded. After some months in solitude, Murray left.⁶ However, after a couple of decades, when the mission schooner again visited Ambrym, some of the village women and some of the uninitiated men had taken over the mission station with the help of a couple of returned labour workers who had learned the Bible while working in the sugar fields in Queensland.⁷

Consequently, those outside the male graded society were the ones to promote the church on Ambrym. Furthermore, women from the coastal areas on Ambrym brought the church with them as they married into villages in the interior of the island. The church thus became associated with women representing female values in several respects: the church was open and inclusive, negating the male values of exclusiveness and hierarchy, and the first Christian women represented important inroads for the church as it became established on Ambrym. As the church grew in the 1900s, several of the ceremonial institutions that previously had been associated with the high-graded men of the *mage* became public and open in the church. One example, the first fruit ceremony, had previously been performed by men only, segregated from women and youngsters. Inside an enclosure the new yam season had been declared open by a yam master after ceremonial dancing and singing. Today, the new yam ceremony is performed by women in the church and involves prayer and thanksgiving (see also Eriksen 2005).

As the church gradually replaced the men's graded society as the most important ceremonial arena, women's values and practices were foregrounded at the expense of

the previously male-dominating values. The roles of pastor and elder did give a certain amount of prestige, but not at all of the same degree and kind as a position in the graded society had done. The church represented first and foremost egalitarian values and social community. Today these values of co-operative and egalitarian social relations are of prime importance for the church on Ambrym, but they are still associated with female qualities. This does not mean that males are uninterested in the church, but it does imply that the church is not the most important arena for the creation of male prestige. To some extent the colonial regime and the colonial churches, like the Presbyterian, marginalized an important arena for creating local men of renown (Weiner 1976). The graded society gradually disappeared and the established colonial churches remained as the most important social institution on a village level.

'Gender nostalgia'

This process has created what I call a 'gender-nostalgia':⁸ a nostalgia for the past wherein masculinity and femininity were more visible and relevant. This is an important background against which we can understand the growth of new kinds of churches and new forms of Christianity which, I argue, reopen to a certain degree a masculine space.

At this stage in my analysis it is relevant to emphasize that the graded society was not found in every part of Vanuatu, but mainly in the north-central region. Thus, when I in the next section of this article move further south in the archipelago to the urban context of Port Vila on the island of Efate, and I analyse a church established by a man (and many of his kin) from the island of Tongoa, I move to a context wherein the graded society was distant. However, I will argue that in the construction of the past as a discourse on the national scene, the ideas of graded society, of the great men of the past, are still relevant. In the urban discourse today, this 'gender nostalgia' surfaces in talk about the importance of chiefs and in the expression of a need to reintroduce (especially for the urban youth) respect towards chiefs. In the present day urban squatter settlements, wherein the new churches grow more quickly than elsewhere (see Eriksen & Andrew 2010), urban problems such as prostitution, alcohol, drug abuse, crime, and so on, are talked about as being caused by the lost position of the chief, and lack of respect. In April 2010 I participated (as an observer) in a community workshop organized by the Port Vila Council of Chiefs wherein these problems were discussed by different community leaders (church leaders, leaders of women's groups, youth groups, etc.). The main theme which was picked up in these discussions was the vanishing role of the chief. Issues such as rape and drug abuse were emphasized as the main problems, and the solution which most participants emphasized was the need to return to a strong chief.

I argue that in this discourse around lack of respect and lack of strong chiefs, there is an important sense of a lost form of masculinity. In the remainder of my article, the idea of the past as a realm wherein gender distinctions were clear and masculinity produced great men is relevant. It is on this form of 'gender nostalgia' that the new churches challenge the more established mission churches such as the Presbyterian Church.

The new churches

When the New Hebrides became the independent nation of Vanuatu, the established Christian churches were challenged by a wave of spiritual Christianity, often influenced

by missionaries from the United States or Australia. These charismatic Christian movements emphasizing the Holy Spirit and the born-again character of a second conversion became increasingly popular and churches such as the Assembly of God, the Holiness Church, and the Renewal Church were established. This process of 'the globalization of charismatic Christianity' (Coleman 2000) has been described around the world, especially in Latin America (Martin 2002; Stoll 1990) and Africa (see, e.g., Engelke 2010; Meyer 1998; 2004), but also, to some extent, in Oceania and Melanesia (see, e.g., Jebens 2005; Jorgensen 2005; Robbins 1998; 2004; Stewart & Strathern 2000). There is also a growing literature on new, Charismatic forms of Christianity, although the development from 'older' into 'newer' Charismatic forms has been questioned, particularly in relation to independent churches and Pentecostal charismatic churches in Africa (see Engelke 2010).

In Vanuatu as well, the 'transition' from mainline churches to new Pentecostal churches might not be as straightforward. There are examples of independent churches that seem to question this distinction (see Eriksen 2009*b*). These churches emphasize an indigenous form of Christianity where connections to, for instance, past healing practices are emphasized. However, one dimension which seems to be relevant for both the new international Pentecostal churches as well as the local independent churches with Pentecostal characteristics is a reintroduction of gender differentiation. Gender has received very little attention in the literature on these churches (see Meyer 2004). In the last couple of years a few studies have, however, emerged where the focus on gender seems to be highlighted. From the African region, Pfeiffer, Gimbel-Sherr, and Augusto (2007) have, for instance, pointed out that after a period with structural adjustment economic reforms in Mozambique, new forms of inequality affected men and women differently. According to this study, the teachings of Pentecostal Christianity 'appear to be almost perfectly tailored to the spiritual and material vulnerability experienced within poor households' (2007: 697), where women are the ones with least access to money. Pentecostal churches appeal not only to women of the poor and marginalized groups, however, but also to aspiring middle-class women. As Mate (2002) has pointed out, Pentecostal churches offer norms of domestic behaviour, modern and decent clothing, interior decorations, and proper living conditions. Pentecostal churches and especially their women's organizations focus on domesticity as a way of 'setting born again women apart from other women' (Mate 2002: 549).

These studies focus mainly on the sociological dimension of Pentecostal Christianity and its effect on men and women. This has also been the tendency in studies from Latin America. Stoll, for instance, has pointed out that women's conversion to Pentecostal Christianity often is a way of coping with male addiction to alcohol, where church authorities become 'an appeal court for aggrieved women' (1990: 12).

The literature on gender in relation to Pentecostal churches thus seems to be dominated by a focus on what one might call sociological dimensions. There is less literature on more symbolic dimensions of gender and what I have called gendered values. The rest of this article is therefore a comparison of the gender dimension in the new Pentecostal-inspired churches in Port Vila and my outline of gendered values connected to the establishment of the Presbyterian Church on Ambrym.

The new churches emphasize the importance of individual conversion and a personal encounter with God. Egalitarian and relational values which have been prominent in the Presbyterian Church become more marginal. An Ambrym member of

one of the new revival churches in the capital phrased it like this: 'Our old churches [such as the Presbyterian] were not really Christian churches'. He emphasized that the new churches demand a greater sincerity in the relationship to God and a break with the old life (see also Engelke 2004; Meyer 1998; Robbins 2004; 2007). Thus the new churches emphasize the role of every single individual to a much greater extent than the Presbyterian Church did. As I will show, this has reopened a space for individual men to gain fame and glory and thus also reopened a space for male leadership that had been lost in some of the colonial churches. As will become evident, the church leaders and ministers of the new churches have a much more important role than the pastors and elders in the Presbyterian Church. The new churches open a space for men to become representations of social relations once more.

One might argue that this new form of individualism has differently gendered variants. The emphasis on leaders creates a masculine individualism, both in relation to God (as a one-to-one relationship) and in relation to a social organization wherein the leader, often the pastor, has an elevated status. However, this masculine individualism is, as I will show, challenged by a collective charismatic force. One might say that, on the one hand, these churches create a new form of relationships expressed through a new form of spirituality (collective spirituality), but, on the other hand, these churches also emphasize a new form of individual authority, priestly authority, empowered by God. As I will show, the ecstatic religious experience in the encounter with the Holy Spirit creates an inter-subjective space that challenges the prominent position of single individuals, such as the prominent pastors, in these churches. Thus the new social space these churches open is structured on a dual value system. It is precisely the un-established character of this value system, the oscillation from the authoritarian to the egalitarian, from a sensational mass movement to the fixed rules of the congregation, from visions and prophecy to the authority of the pastors, and so on, which makes a gender-based analysis illuminating. If the first churches to become established in the colonial period in Vanuatu were founded on what I have called female-gendered values, then the new churches in the postcolonial period challenge these values in a complex way.

I will illustrate my argument by describing the social organization and conflicting values in one of the new churches in Vanuatu, a Pentecostal church called the Bible Church. I show how the emphasis on an individual encounter with God and the role of the chosen leader and his authority is counteracted by the easy availability of the spiritual power of the Holy Spirit, and I analyse in particular the role of the prophetesses and their collective charismatic influence.

The Bible Church

The Bible Church is one of the many new Pentecostal churches that have been established over the last ten years. The main church in the capital Port Vila has several hundred members with daughter branches on other islands: Tongoa, Tongariki, Santo, and Epi. The church in Port Vila has a women's ministry, a youth ministry, and a secondary school for children. The man who founded the church, Pastor Ishmael, is himself from Tongoa, but is the senior pastor of Port Vila's main church. The congregation in Port Vila has, through fundraisers and hard work, managed to build a new, large church building. The leaders, as well as the members of the church, are all very eager to point out that they manage their own church, and that there is no overseas funding involved. They are an independent church.

The first time I visited the church was on the occasion of their tenth anniversary in 2006. In the garden outside the new church building, women had prepared a large meal, with traditional food, puddings, and vegetables, and a large cake. On the lawn there were *pandanus* mats spread out and women with children were sitting in groups. Men stood by themselves at the outskirts of the lawn, but in the middle, the pastor and his wife occupied the only two chairs present. A crowd of women were queuing up to hang flowers around their necks and to give them plates of food and presents. They were honouring the founders of the Bible Church on the day of celebration.

However, this special occasion also reflected a more general pattern. The pastor ordinarily has a strong position in the congregation. During church services, even if one of the junior pastors conducts the service, The pastor is seated next to the pulpit facing the audience. He reflects a charismatic kind of authority and is a natural focal point for the congregation. With his wife always by his side, he mirrors the many sub-units that also consist ideally of husband, wife, and children. There is an outspoken hierarchy between the main pastor and congregation, which mirrors the relationship between husband and wife. The Bible Church advocates a very clear set of rules concerning male and female conduct. Women are not allowed to wear trousers and make-up or to style their hair. Not even wedding rings should be worn. Although it was not an official policy, some members of the Bible Church were reluctant to let women possess money, as they associated financial issues with men. Thus, the leadership structure of the church was tightly connected to the seniority of men, allowing no one to dispute the sovereign position of the founder. He was highly respected, but also appreciated, by the congregation.

Becoming the chosen one

The pastor had founded the Bible Church after a very forceful encounter with the Holy Spirit. He had been a member and a junior pastor of one of the first Pentecostal churches to be established in Vanuatu, the Revival Church, when one night before a Sunday service he had a dream in which he saw himself standing on the beach on his home island, Tongoa. He could not see the sea, however, because a wild burning fire fenced him in. At first, he tried to fight his way through the flames, but the fire was strong, and he got nowhere. Suddenly he realized that this was not an ordinary fire. It must be the fire of the Holy Spirit, he thought. He hesitated, wanting to turn away. Then he realized that this was a sign, a message from the Holy Spirit. He was not meant to leave the island. He was not meant to go his own path, but was chosen, by the Holy Spirit, for another task. As he woke from the dream, he realized that this task was a very special one: he was to become the leader of a new church – the Bible Church.⁹

During my stay in Port Vila in 2006, I talked to more than twenty pastors who were head figures of their own newly established charismatic churches. They would talk about the church as ‘this is Pastor Ishmael’s church’ or this is ‘Fred Moses’ church’ (‘hemia jioj blong Fred Moses’). Specific churches were directly connected to specific persons. These were often the founding fathers of the churches and the senior pastors. These church leaders’ stories often underlined a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit and their subsequent decision to establish their own church. For instance, the pastor of the Living Water Ministry, a newly established church and a breakaway faction of a Santo-based church called the Renewal Church, told me that he had experienced a strong vision after an encounter with the Holy Spirit. This vision had come to him one

night after a full day of fasting. He had wanted to come in touch with the Holy Spirit, and he had prepared himself for the encounter by spending several days in solitude in a house he had borrowed from a friend outside the city centre of Port Vila. He had prayed the whole day through his fast, and late in the night, he felt a vision form. He saw a two-storey building in the middle of the city centre, a church, and he saw himself as its pastor. 'How can this be possible?' he had thought to himself. 'I have no funds to build such a church and I have no congregation'. However, his faith was strong, he told me, and he knew he had been selected to become the leader of a new church. When he travelled back into town the next day, he was offered a great sum of money by a Port Vila businessman to fund a new church. 'I knew at once', he told me, 'that this was the work of the Holy Spirit'.

Similarly, the leader of the Upper Room, a relatively new church in Port Vila, told me he had a strong dream one night about a fire. It had been so vivid that he awoke feeling burned. As he rose from his bed, he felt shaky and feverish and had to sit down on the floor, where he remained for the rest of the night and long into the next day until his son found him trembling there. At first, the man thought that he was seriously ill, but then he and his son realized that he was receiving the Holy Spirit. He experienced strong visions, and towards the end of the day, he understood what his mission was: he had been selected to become the leader of a new church in Vanuatu.

The common theme in these dreams is the idea of being 'the chosen one'. When these men receive visions from the Holy Spirit, it always happens in solitude and takes the form of personal messages. Furthermore, the value of being chosen seems to be exclusively connected to the leaders of the church, mostly the male pastors. These dreams and visions, in which the Spirit selects the leader of the church, are often retold, not only by the chosen one himself, but also by other members in the congregation. The encounter between the pastor and the Holy Spirit figures as an important symbol for the church as a whole, and confers spiritual authority on the lead pastor and founder.

In comparing the local Presbyterian Church on Ambrym to the new charismatic churches, such as the Bible Church in Port Vila, the most obvious difference is the role of the pastor. In the local Presbyterian Church, for instance, the pastor is replaceable. In the church I know best, Ranon Presbyterian Church on Ambrym, there have been a number of different pastors in the last few years, some from Ambrym, some from other islands. Sometimes the village is without a pastor, and one of the elders in the village will take responsibility for the Sunday service. The Bible Church, however, would not exist without the founding pastor. He *is* the Bible Church, and he has already set up a line of successors, one of them his son and the other a very close associate since the early days of this church. This difference between the Presbyterian Church and the Bible Church is, of course, related to the fact that the Bible Church is an independent church and not part of a larger structure which would exist independently of whatever different pastor took up the position. This structural difference between the independent church and the Presbyterian Church, however, creates a situation where the local pastor in the Bible Church holds a much stronger position than the pastor in any Presbyterian church. In other words, the theological emphasis on the individual encounter with God and the Holy Spirit, combined with a social structure where the church organization is independent of a larger organization, which would secure the existence of the church independently

of the functioning pastor, has created a situation where the pastors, such as Pastor Ishmael, have developed as strong leaders and gained a new form of spiritual and organizational authority.

However, in spite of the idea of a spiritually chosen leader and the strong male-dominated social structure, there is always something that escapes this structure, a movement away from the authority, a centrifugal movement empowered by another force that in many respects negates the idea of the chosen individual leader.

The female prophets

The first time I visited the Bible Church, I attended the six-hour jubilee service for the tenth anniversary. Women had been working since the early hours to decorate the church with flowers and ribbons. They had cleaned the floors, the windows, swept the courtyard, and prepared the lawn around the church for the meal later in the evening. People arrived in buses from all over Port Vila wearing what they called their 'uniforms'. Women and girls wore green dresses and men wore white shirts and black trousers. At around 10 in the morning the church was full of people, men sitting on the one side and women and children on the other. Some women – about ten of them – sitting in the front row on the female side of the church, were quite distinct, all wearing a differently coloured dress: pink with white ribbons. These women had been selected as prophetesses.

One becomes a prophetess because of a special capacity to receive the Holy Spirit, I was told. A prophetess has a 'soft heart', a heart which is open to the Holy Spirit. One of the prophetesses, a newly selected one, told me that before she became her selection she had been troubled for some time with bad dreams and sleeplessness. She had been frustrated because she could not figure out why these dreams kept coming back to her, waking her up in the middle of the night. They were dreams about a wind blowing, about storms coming and about floods during rainy seasons. Sometimes these dreams had been so vivid that she woke up and heard the wind, but as soon as she opened the door to her courtyard she realized that the sound was only in her dream. After telling her friends in the Bible Church about these dreams, it was revealed to her, through one of the older prophetesses, that these were signs from God. They were indications of her capacity to receive the Holy Spirit, and the openness of her heart. She was therefore recruited as a prophetess. Those with this gift are usually women, and they are women capable of receiving the Holy Spirit more easily than others. The Holy Spirit will therefore reveal to them images and visions they must pass on to the congregation. In this sense, these women are mediums for the messages the Holy Spirit sends the congregation.

The church service began as the junior pastor mounted the stage and started singing. The congregation, standing up, joined him in a spirited and joyful manner, clapping hands and waving arms. Thereafter the junior pastor announced the time for individual prayer. Everyone mumbled to themselves, eyes closed and hands folded or raised. Some talked loudly, others were quiet. For several minutes I was the only one in the church with eyes open. The congregation became quiet as the junior pastor once again started a hymn. After this session, the founding pastor mounted the stage. He was a big man, literally, with a voice that filled the room even without a microphone. He said that he wanted to tell the history of the Bible Church since it was the tenth anniversary on this day. He said, in the national variant of pidgin, Bislama: 'Yumi no school olsem waetman, be God i givim save long yumi' (We are not educated, like

the white man, but God has given us knowledge). He started to outline the history of the Bible Church. He talked about his first encounter with the Holy Spirit, about his vision for the church. As he talked, his voice rose and became increasingly agitated. Single voices in the congregation shouted 'Hallelujah' to underscore his punchlines. As his voice was reaching a climax, and more and more people were joining in on the 'Hallelujahs', the whole room suddenly turned quiet. The pastor turned towards the female side of the church, where a thin woman in a pink dress, one of the prophetesses, was standing with her eyes closed. The pastor had stopped talking as he realized that she had risen from her seat. After a few seconds, she started speaking. 'I just had a vision', she said.

I can feel God's presence in the room, and he wants me to reveal something for you. I can see us all walking uphill towards a mountain top. I can see us passing through a creek, but on the path there is a hole. In the hole there is dead man. We all just stand there looking into the hole in the earth and stare at the dead man. Then we decide to move on, uphill.

As she finished her last word, she quietly sat back down. The pastor turned around and faced the congregation. 'What can this vision tell us?', he asked. He started interpreting the dream, identifying the group of people the prophetess had seen in her vision, as the congregation. 'We will on our journey face troubles and difficulties', the pastor said. 'Our road is uphill and difficult'. He started to talk about salvation as an endless process: 'One cannot rest once one has seen the light and become a Christian. To be a Christian is hard work. We must always remind ourselves what the Christian way is'.

There are two elements I will emphasize about this episode. Firstly, since it is usually a female quality to have what they call a 'soft' heart, and thereby be available to receive the Holy Spirit at any time, it is only persons with this female quality, usually women between 30 and 50, who can become prophetesses, and only these can thus interrupt the founding father as he holds his jubilee speech. When the pastor has visions, he has to prepare. He has to fast and to pray and to concentrate in order to receive the Holy Spirit. Or, alternatively, the Holy Spirit can call upon him while he is asleep. Secondly, when the prophetess receives the Holy Spirit, she is only a medium. The pastor, on the other hand, encounters the Holy Spirit in a one-to-one fashion, either in the form of a fire or in the sense that he hears the voice of God talking directly to him. Furthermore, he is very often chosen for a task or a mission. The prophetesses, however, see images that do not necessarily involve themselves, and they seldom envision themselves as 'chosen'. The Holy Spirit reveals images for them to interpret.

Thus, the pastors are not penetrated by the Holy Spirit the way the prophetesses are. The sense of a distinct individual is not disrupted in the pastors' encounter with the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, it is the distinctiveness of the individual which is emphasized and empowered in their encounter, in contrast to the way the prophetesses are possessed. The prophetess, who understood her ability to receive the Spirit after having been troubled with strange dreams for instance, did not encounter the Holy Spirit in the same way as the founding pastor. She did not hear a voice or confront a fire. She did not encounter the Holy Spirit in a one-to-one manner. The Holy Spirit did not have a personal message for her. Rather, she did not really understand what was going on before she was told by other prophetesses. Her dreams were

an indication of a soft heart; of the ability to be a medium. It was not a sign to her personally. This difference between a female way of receiving the Spirit and a male one is perhaps best understood when we look at the way the prophetesses engage in healing.

Prophetesses and healing

After church service every Sunday, there is a queue of people wanting to be healed by these women in the Bible Church. The prophetesses pray and hold their hands on the sick person's body. They cry out for the Holy Spirit to enter them so they can cure these individuals. 'We can cure anything', they say. 'We have even cured cancer'. They emphasize that the healing process is an outcome of their collective effort to receive the Spirit. Thus, the prophetesses do not encounter the Spirit in solitude, but as a group. There are always at least three prophetesses involved in a healing process. When I asked about the necessity of being several, they argued that at least two were necessary. The ideal is three or four. In healing practices, the prophetesses call upon the Holy Spirit in order to work as channels through which the Spirit can cure sickness and misfortune. In most healing sessions I observed, the prophetesses had different tasks: one reading the Bible, one praying intensely, one receiving visions, while the last one lay her hands on the patient. They enter into a trance collectively as they receive the power of the Spirit and seek to cure the sick persons.

The prophetesses heal more than ordinary sickness. In Port Vila there is an inter-church prayer group for women with capacity to receive the Spirit. In their meetings, these women target political issues at the national level. Twenty or thirty women meet regularly once a week in a small room they rent from the city council. During these meetings, they stand or sit in a circle holding hands and praying together. Collectively the women enter into trance, some speaking in tongues, some screaming words like 'Praise the Lord', some crying, and their bodies shake and turn as if in pain. The meetings start and end with a specific target they want the Holy Spirit to attend to. Sometimes this might involve bills coming up in Parliament; sometimes it might be the lack of funds for a hospital ward, or it might be gangs of criminal youth. The collective, ecstatic experience is the focus of the meetings and the means through which the specific target of the meeting is addressed. One of this group, the woman who had founded the group a couple of years ago, told me that it was important that all participants were equally dedicated during these meetings. No one should have her mind elsewhere. The importance of this became clear to me one night when I was seated behind the women watching their prayer meeting. One of them, during prayer, indicated that my presence and my lack of participation in their collective spiritual engagement weakened the whole group. All women present need to focus equally on what is going to happen. Otherwise, the spiritual effect will not be so strong.

The female healers and prophetesses enter into a collective spiritual experience. The prophetesses receive visions, as they are channels for a message that does not directly concern them individually, in contrast to the vision that pastors receive, in which they are selected, becoming the chosen one. This ability to receive the Spirit collectively at any time, and thus to have unlimited access to spiritual power, counteracts the idea of an individual encounter with God and the importance of the 'one-to-one' encounter on which the idea of the chosen founder is based. It also counteracts the idea of a centripetal structure. The power of the Holy Spirit is easily

available to anyone with a 'soft' heart. More than this, it is actually a problem, one of the prophetesses told me, because men have such strong wills and are so hard to convert and they seldom enter into the collective trance the way women do. 'They might say they are Christian, but if they do not feel the Spirit in their hearts, then we cannot know if they are really converted, and are among those who will be chosen on the Last Day', one woman said.

This idea of a female advantage based on the image of a soft, penetrable heart and unlimited access to the Spirit is related to what I have called gendered values. Although men are pictured as the ones who can become chosen, and the ones who can become the leaders, they are also pictured as the ones who are slow in converting, who have 'strong' wills and 'hard' hearts. They are not close to the Spirit the way women are. These qualities, the 'softness' and the 'strength' of the heart, are talked about as male and female qualities. The softness of the female heart gives access to the Spirit, but the strong will of men makes them apt as chosen leaders. This latter value generates an idea about the chosen one who becomes an undisputed leader, creating a hierarchical and centre-orientated structure. However, this value is constantly confronted with its opposite, its negations. The image of female openness generates an idea of the Spirit as an uncontrollable and undirected flow that might turn up in a woman's body at any time. These diverging imaginaries represent more than the idea of what men and women can and cannot do in church. They also reflect different parts of the social grammar based on different gendered values of these new churches in Vanuatu: the egalitarian distribution of a prime asset – spirituality, on the one hand, and the hierarchical structure of the organization, on the other.

Comparing for a moment the Presbyterian Church on Ambrym, the independent, Pentecostal churches such as the Bible Church differ both in terms of leadership structure and the space given to individual male authority, but also with respect to their collective spiritual capacity. The Presbyterian Church has an egalitarian and communal structure, but the new independent churches challenge the Presbyterian Church on its communalism, by emphasizing even more strongly the power of the collective spiritual effort. Furthermore, the new churches also challenge the social structure by emphasizing the chosen leader. The 'gender nostalgia' I emphasized above is given an answer in the new and elevated position of the pastor. Masculine individualism can once more create great men. Thus, whereas the Presbyterian Church has an established female-gendered social structure, the new churches have reopened the space for the 'men of renown' (Weiner 1976), but at the same time the collective dimension has also been revitalized through collective spiritual experiences. Whereas the Presbyterian Church in Vanuatu has remained quite unchanged over the last hundred years in terms of social structure, the landscape of the new churches seems to be in the making. The tension between masculine authority, on the one hand, and collective ecstatic experience, on the other, appears to be the cause of an endless process of segmentation among the new churches.

The segmentary process: churches in the making

Among the new churches in Vanuatu, the Bible Church, recently celebrating its tenth anniversary, is among the oldest. There is a very clear tendency among the new churches to break up and divide. In the context of Vanuatu, I argue that this constant fission takes a particular form and the focus on gendered values reveals this. In the same way as an analysis of gender in the Presbyterian Church could reveal how the

church became attractive on Ambrym (by appealing to congregationalism and community and emphasizing what I have called female values), I will claim that a gender perspective will reveal the pattern of establishing and breaking up in the new Pentecostal churches.

It might seem a paradox that the new churches which have opened a space for male leadership so often break up into sub-units. However, although every church has a very clear leader, there are very often disputes over leadership positions. Younger pastors might have their own visions and might want to have their own church, and therefore very often break away from the established, dominant leader and senior pastor to found a new, independent church. The long genealogy of churches breaking out of established churches and forming new ministries and new independent churches is a clear manifestation of this. The Bible Church was itself founded by a breakout faction from the New Covenant Church. The New Covenant Church again was a breakaway faction from a church called the Revival Church. Another well-established lay church in Port Vila, the Healing Ministry, was also a breakaway church from the Revival Church. Later, fractions from the Healing Ministry established the Glorious Church, and another fraction established the Life Revelation Church. From the New Covenant Church several churches have been established in addition to the Bible Church: Priesthood, Tabernacle Fellowship, Christian Renewal Centre, and so on. Once a church has reached a certain size, with several hundred members, it appears to be inevitable that breakout factions will establish new churches.

The stories of these churches seem to follow a common pattern. The founding pastor of the Bible Church, for instance, told me that there had been disputes in the New Covenant Church among its leaders. Although he was vague about the exact cause of the dispute, he made it clear that it concerned disagreement over leadership. He had been one of the junior leaders of this church during the turbulent times of the early 1990s. At this time, the New Covenant Church, which was then called the Revival Church, had merged with a couple of other new, independent churches. The reason for the merger was a census performed by the Vanuatu Christian Council that specified that only churches with a specific number of members would be registered as official churches in Vanuatu. The merged churches soon broke up into single units again, and from these there also sprung some new churches, one of these the Bible Church.

When the leadership of single churches is disputed and when new church groups break out of old ones, this is a manifestation of a movement that counters the male imaginary of 'the chosen one'. The social dynamic of the churches – their endless fissions and segmentation, on the one hand, and their centripetal structure and hierarchy, on the other – reveals a binary structure where the one element always is foregrounded at the cost of the other. When breakout groups establish their own ministry, this is achieved by emphasizing what I will call the female imaginary: the centrifugal structure and egalitarian values where access to the Spirit is available and open to anyone. When I asked a member of one of these breakout factions in Port Vila what distinguished the new church from the old, she answered: 'The Spirit is stronger in the new church'. In other words, when male leadership becomes too dominant, this suppresses the 'collective spirit'. Thus when the spirit is no longer strong, the congregation will follow a new pastor (often one who opposed the main pastor on leadership issues).

Over time, there is a tendency for the formal leadership positions and the centripetal structure to become dominant. This is in line with what Weber (1963 [1922]) has pointed out as characteristic of the early Pentecostal movements. He observed that in the early stage of the formation of a religious community of the Pentecostal kind, there is a tendency to allot equality to women (see also Barfoot & Sheppard 1980). Weber argued that the importance of women's charisma and their receptivity to prophecy gradually diminished as the church developed formal leadership structures. The proliferation of new Pentecostal churches in Vanuatu not only confirms Weber's observation, but also allows us to understand this tension between collective charisma and equality, on the one hand, and authority and formal leadership, on the other, as the driving mechanism of church segmentation. When the Spirit ceases to be strong, when a leader becomes disputed (perhaps because the Spirit is no longer so strong), new movements become established in order to retrieve the strong collective spirit. The more established a church becomes, the less powerful and more infrequent the ecstatic collective experience is. When a church is in the process of becoming established, however, it is said the Spirit is miraculously powerful. I was told that it is always in the initial stage of church formation that the true miracles are performed.

Gender, church, and change

Comparing the old and the new churches in Vanuatu through the gender prism can illuminate several differences. Firstly, whereas women in the Presbyterian Church on Ambrym were vital to the establishment of the church, and women could become elders and deacons in the church, the new churches of the charismatic and Pentecostal kind have a stronger hierarchy between the genders. However, in addition to these differences in what men and women can and cannot do in the church, gender also reveals differences at the level of values. Whereas communal and egalitarian values are dominant in the Presbyterian Church on Ambrym, in the new churches, mainly in the capital, the role of the pastor is much more prominent, and an arena for male leadership, or what I call masculine individualism and 'great men', is thus re-emerging in these churches. This, however, has also escalated the degree of segmentation in these churches. In the case of Vanuatu, and perhaps also elsewhere, an analysis of gendered values in this context reveals the dynamic behind this segmentation. The constant process of church segmentation in Vanuatu has to be understood as an outcome of a gendered tension where relational spirituality and individual authority create social structures that negate each other. The prophetesses and the constant fission of the churches show that the individual authority is encountering a form of 'resistance'. The many new churches of the charismatic Pentecostal kind in Port Vila and elsewhere in Vanuatu can be regarded as institutions where male individual authority encounters female spiritual collectivism. It is the oscillation between the female and the male, the relational spirituality and the individual, hierarchy and egalitarianism, that not only marks the difference between the established Presbyterian Church and the new, Pentecostal-inspired independent churches in Vanuatu, but also constitutes the source of tension within the new churches.

NOTES

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¹ There is no necessity to a binary construction of gender, and anthropological and feminist literature have shown the opposite (Butler 1999; Herdt 1994; Nanda 1990), but in this ethnographic context and for the analytical purpose of this article I will employ a binary gender construction. I will show that a binary difference between male and female is fundamental to social practice and ideologies across the two contexts.

² As in the *yengfah* ceremony (see Eriksen 1998).

³ The Bislama word used for this phenomenon and similar throughout the north-central islands.

⁴ The concept *metehal* consists of two words: *mete*, meaning the eye, and *hal*, meaning path. A sister is therefore referred to as the eye of the path, the eye being a metaphor for the creator, or the 'seer' of the path.

⁵ Life-cycle ceremonies refer to ceremonies connected to birth, puberty, marriage, and death.

⁶ See Eriksen (2008: 88–90) for details.

⁷ This is described in Lamb (1905) and Frater (1922), who both make reference to returned migrant workers who set up churches in their villages. Lamb (1905) also refers to the few people still left on the mission station after Murray left. He visited the mission station in Ranon a decade after Murray's departure and wrote: 'Kalsong, the teacher, had beat the school drum; and, in response, some twenty to thirty ill-looking, limping specimens, of all sizes and both sexes, gathered on the veranda' (Lamb 1905: 43). In other words, as a result of the turn away from the church by the high-graded men, the church seems from early on to have been a movement for the outcasts and those who did not succeed in the *mage* society: the men of low esteem and women (Eriksen 2008).

⁸ For a discussion of nostalgia for the past, see, for example, Cunningham Bissel (2005), and for the importance of nostalgia for postcolonial identity, see Battaglia (1995).

⁹ Based on interview with the founding pastor of the Bible Church in July 2006.

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Le pasteur et la prophétesse : une analyse du genre et du christianisme au Vanuatu

Résumé

Le présent article s'intéresse à la prolifération des nouvelles Églises pentecôtistes charismatiques au Vanuatu, une nation du Pacifique Sud. Il propose une comparaison du point de vue des rapports de genre entre l'Église presbytérienne établie dans l'île d'Ambrym et une nouvelle assemblée pentecôtiste de la capitale, Port Vila. Cette comparaison met l'accent sur l'idée d'une forme de masculinité en voie de disparition et sur le développement d'une certaine « nostalgie de genre ». L'examen des rapports sociaux de sexes fait apparaître de nouveaux angles d'approche de la différence entre les nouvelles Églises et les plus établies. L'auteure affirme que ces approches peuvent permettre de comprendre pourquoi le schisme semble inévitable pour les nouvelles Églises pentecôtistes du Vanuatu.

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