

Sorcery and the Moral Economy of Agency: An Ethnographic Account

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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic account of sorcery accusation, violence, and subsequent community discussion provides a basis to explore the ‘moral economy of agency’ that shapes expressions and interpretations of personhood in Vanuatu. Mediated historically by transforming social, political, and economic circumstances, agency is demonstrated to be patterned according to culturally specific ontological and moral schemes. Key local categories of embodied personhood – including man ples (man place), man wan (man one), and jelus (jealousy) – are examined to elucidate two relationally entwined analytic categories, referred to as ‘distributive’ and ‘possessive’ agency. Such categories, it is argued, fundamentally shape expressions and interpretations of moral being and doing, including by providing a basis for identifying morally abject expressions of personhood. Taking seriously the important role of spiritual agency within such moral economies, this paper provides new ethnographically grounded insights into the ways in which communities and individuals negotiate moral being within transforming contexts of economic and sacred power.

Keywords: sorcery, violence, moral economy, agency, affect.

The Australians would say that terrorism is one of the biggest things, because they’ve actually gone through it. It’s one of the things that grabs hold of them, because everywhere they go they have to be very careful. You know? Flying in planes, they’ll be very, very careful seeing who is going on the plane. But then for ni-Vans it will be everyone you sit with on the bus, everyone you walk around with at night, and everyone that you sit with in the *nakamal* sharing kava.¹ And it’s like, people just become more over-protective, and they tend to forget about the freedom that they have (Male Nurse, Luganville).

Nakaemas (sorcery/witchcraft)² reverberates across everyday life in Vanuatu, sometimes with devastating consequences. In times of uncertainty, it attaches itself to ordinary cares, fears, and frustrations. It sits with you on the bus, walks with you at night, shares kava with you at the *nakamal*, and creeps into the intimate spaces of personal relationships. Feeding on inequality, jealousy, and gossip, it spreads an aura of everyday terror. Everyone is a potential suspect and victim. Everyone watches and waits. Then, sometimes, it ‘comes out’, evident in transformed circumstances of wealth or disposition – an abject target to be purged through a potent combination of physical, moral, and sacred force.

Early November, in dense humidity, I began a short stint of fieldwork with urbanites in Vanuatu’s ‘second town’, Luganville.³ Already adopted into networks of kinship, friendship, and mutual obligation from having conducted doctoral research on nearby Pentecost Island (1999–2000), I looked to hit the ground running. Also known as ‘Santo Town’ after the island of Espiritu Santo on which it is situated, Luganville comprises around 15,000 of Vanuatu’s total population of more than 250,000 (Vanuatu Statistics Office 2009). It is also sometimes

called 'Kanal' after the Second Canal, a deep stretch of water that separates the town from several offshore islands and facilitates the export of copra, timber and beef, and the occasional visits of giant P&O cruise ships to its ports.

Rue de Higginson, the impressively wide main street that is part of the legacy of a major World War II allied base, is lined with Chinese stores, a few banks, and several mainly Australian/New Zealander-owned tourism businesses, cafés, and specialist stores. Despite these foreign influences, life on the street, as in the bustling market, municipal buildings and park, is overwhelmingly indigenous ni-Vanuatu. Scattered immediately behind the main street and reflecting an almost universal yet extremely diverse adherence to Christianity stands a neatly manicured collection of churches. These include the long-established Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, Churches of Christ, and Seventh-day Adventists, and an ever diversifying range of Pentecostals, such as those that have also been linked to the growth of 'casino capitalism' (for Vanuatu, see Eriksen 2009). The sprawling suburbs beyond demonstrate a spacious mix of permanent and semi-permanent housing, a visible sign of the expense of building materials relative to per capita income, but also the fact that the majority of ni-Vanuatu identify more strongly with the land, language, and *kastom* of other island places. Settlement patterns also echo these binding linkages of *man ples* (man place), with entire localities and even suburbs being associated with specific islands or inter-regional rivalries, such as 'Mango' with the Banks Islands and Sarakata with long-standing conflicts (and resolutions) between Pentecost and Paama.

Aptly described in tourism literature as a 'lazy, down-at-heel sort of a place' (Harcombe and O'Byrne 1995), for many locals, Luganville has something of a frontier-town reputation for petty crime and violence. In 1980, Papua New Guinean troops were deployed by the inaugural independent government to quell the Francophone-backed 'Santo Rebellion' that was centred there, and since that time the town has seen several state interventions aimed at 'restoring order'. Arriving now, I remembered gruesome stories that circulated during my doctoral fieldwork of *Klinim Not* (officially, Operation Clean-up the North), a terror campaign involving night raids and violent arrests carried out across the entire northern region, but concentrating especially on Luganville. While primarily directed at 'ethnic violence' between rival island groups and the supposed illegal activities of a fast-growing population of 'unemployed' youth (Forsyth 2009:151–2; Rousseau 2004:202), *Klinim Not* also targeted unseen dark forces, including the activities of 'sorcerers' (Rio 2010). For this reason, chiefly authority was mobilised alongside the national paramilitary Mobile Force and Police. So, too, were the sacred powers of Christian leaders who were called upon to enact exorcisms and spiritual clearances, including in one dramatic instance of the entire length of Rue de Higginson.

On the evening of my arrival, I went to catch up on news at the Rainbow Nakamal, a kava bar operated by a Pentecost Islander and long-time Luganville resident, called Isaac. That evening I learned these past troubles were returning. As an off-duty constable explained, due to an increase in muggings and unprovoked attacks, it was no longer safe to walk unaccompanied at night, even along the well-lit Rue de Higginson. There was also a growing threat of *nakaemas*.

According to the analysis of my fellow kava-drinkers, the unsettling backslide into urban disorder was being caused by a combination of three key factors, the particular configuration of which was unique to the contemporary situation: the ethnically mixed nature of life in town, increasingly difficult and competitive economic conditions, and a resulting climate of *jelus* (jealousy). As I was cautioned, I should only visit kava bars patronised by close family members, and I should not roam anywhere unfamiliar, especially at night. The extent of these fears was reinforced to me later that evening as I walked back to my hotel with a heavily muscled stevedore friend. When I suggested we take a well-known but tightly hedged shortcut

between houses, he cautioned that we should stick to the main road, stating flatly, '*mi fraet long nakaemas*' (I'm afraid of *nakaemas*).

The next morning, I returned to the Rainbow to catch up with Isaac's *aloa* (classificatory 'maternal nephew'),⁴ Henry, a friend from Pentecost Island I had noticed working behind the bar the night before. As we chatted I sensed in him an uncharacteristic despondency. As it transpired, Henry had spent the last 3 years in Luganville trying to raise money to pay for his children's school fees. However, having no high school education, no recent work experience, and being of middle age, like many in his position he had struggled to find a steady income. The small amounts he was able to earn he did so informally through utilising his skills as a *kleva* (traditional healer/diviner), a skillset of knowledge and abilities he had acquired from his *kastom*-orientated father.

Even so, as I later learned, Henry largely subsisted on the support of relatives, many of whom agreed he should have returned to his home island, village, and more immediate family long ago. Concern about Henry's financial situation had escalated in recent months as a result of a failed entrepreneurial venture. Around a year ago, Henry had taken up renting a kava bar owned by one of his *tama* (classificatory father), a prominent local *Jif* (chief) and businessman called George. Given the economic downturn, as well as the circulation of rumours that kava and kava bars were being used by well-known *kleva* as a medium of *posen* (poisoning, including by magical means), the venture failed in just a few months. Henry was now struggling to repay to Chief George an accrued back rent of some 80,000 vatu (around \$AU900). This was clearly a source of anxiety both for Henry and his close maternal relatives, such as Isaac, not least due to Chief George's reputation as a man of considerable power and influence.

By contrast to Henry, Isaac's entrepreneurial experience could hardly have been more successful. Operating for several years on a busy street corner, the popular Rainbow Nakamal had generated enough profit for Isaac to purchase a large deep freeze, from which he sold meat and ice blocks. As he told me excitedly, he was also hoping to soon be able to afford to buy a Toyota Hilux 4WD – the ultimate marker of masculinity and upward mobility, and source of further entrepreneurial profit. What is more, as a reward for his economic success and what he described as a generous community-mindedness, he was also now being treated by those living nearby as a North Pentecost Island community leader and representative, and chief. Indeed, his combined leadership and entrepreneurial skills had been demonstrated in his instigation, establishment, and management of a buzzing community produce market on the corner opposite the Rainbow Nakamal, an initiative that he noted had the added value of drawing customers to his kava bar. As Isaac confided to me, however, with this new position of authority came the stress of added responsibilities. Not the least of these included negotiating the terms by which his maternal nephew and now employee, Henry, might repay his debt to Chief George.

By contrast again, two blocks up the road, Henry's *tua* (classificatory brother) and Isaac's *aloa* (maternal nephew), Michael, along with two of Michael's younger brothers by birth, Mark and Peter, had been operating a family business, the Hangea Store, with great success for over a decade, supplying the local area with essential food items and household goods. Over the last several months, however, business had inexplicably dropped away, and the store was in danger of closure. What is more, like Henry, Michael had also fallen into debt to Chief George, having drawn from him a series of loans in an effort to support the failing family business. Despite selling off several vital assets, including his own previously profitable fridge/freezer, Michael now owed George some 100,000 vatu (around \$AU1,100), an amount that usually would have equated to several months' profit.

As I was about to discover, however, in Isaac's remarkable business successes Michael had discerned a possible, if not probable cause of his own comparative misfortune, and with two close brothers, was about to take dramatic steps to restore the family business.

* * *

It is almost impossible to walk down Rue de Higginson during the day without meeting someone you know. So it was the following day that I bumped into Michael's brothers, Mark and Peter, outside the popular LMS Store. We began with typical banter:

'Where are you going?' I asked.⁵

'Just walking around,' Mark replied, adding a colloquial half-questioning kava connoisseurs' in-joke, 'After?'

'I don't know,' I answered, 'I'm going home now, but I might walk up later on to see Isaac at the Rainbow.'

At the mention of Isaac and his kava bar, Mark unexpectedly appeared uncomfortable and glanced nervously along the street. And after a few seconds, Peter broke the silence:

'But haven't you heard? Isaac is in hospital, and so is his wife Anne. Henry has run away into the bush. They were attacked last night.'

No, I'd not heard.

'Truly?' I asked, 'But who attacked them?'

Mark looked me in the eyes, 'We did.'

Now it was my turn to want to escape. Perhaps I'd not heard correctly? 'Who attacked them? Why?' I asked again.

'We did,' Mark confirmed, laughing nervously but defiantly, and gesturing to his brother beside him. 'Me, Peter' nodding at his brother, 'and Michael. We attacked them because they'd been doing us wrong. They'd been stealing from us – using *nakaemas*. But it's finished now. Isaac is almost dead. You can go and see them if you like.'

And so it was. With nothing further to say we exchanged awkward goodbyes and I headed off up the hill behind town to visit Isaac in the Northern District Hospital. I first met his wife, Anne, sitting on a bench in the sun outside, nursing a swollen cheek, a black eye, and badly bruised arms. When she saw me she started crying, bursting into a vivid description of how the three men – 'Family! Nephews! Brothers!' – had caught herself, Isaac, and Henry by surprise the afternoon before as they prepared the evening's kava, coming from nowhere with lengths of housing timber. Isaac had been bashed so badly, she told me, that his lungs had been ruptured. The attackers had also destroyed the kava bar and stolen their precious freezer. I should go in and see him.

Anne took me by the hand and led me through an echoing hallway to the stuffy humidity of a small hospital ward. Inside, a single clattering fan shot out gusts of hot air towards a group of people seated solemnly around a metal-framed bed. I was glad to see Isaac awake, although lying with a drip in his arm and a respiratory device up his nose, breathing shallowly under a single white sheet. I smiled at him, shook a weakly extended hand, and joined the other visitors.

We sat in silence for what seemed like hours. Then, at last, another visitor arrived. Easily identifiable in his black trousers and white shirt, and by the beautiful wooden cross that hung around his neck, this visitor was clearly expected. After doing the round of greetings, the young Anglican priest gently leaned across to Isaac, placed a hand on his forehead, and began praying in a quiet, low, monotone chant through the noise of the fan, his voice seemingly stretching on forever and filling the room with calm. Waking me from a half-sleep, he rose, and produced a little bottle of water. Removing the tiny cap and resuming his prayer, he gently flicked droplets from his fingers onto the injured man's face and body, calling upon the Holy Ghost for healing, and to cast out the evil spirits that possessed Isaac. Then, finishing his administration, he smilingly requested that we join him in reciting the Lord's Prayer, shook our hands casually in turn, and quietly left the ward.

Shortly thereafter, I also took the opportunity to leave the ward, along with another man I did not know. Stepping outside, I asked him what had just occurred, and received what was

apparently to him a plainly obvious answer: '*Hemi karem aot ol devil long hem,*' – He removed the devils from him.

RELATIONS OF AFFECT AND CATEGORIES OF ABJECTION

In the weeks that followed, the accusation of *nakaemas* and resulting attack became an inevitable focus of community debate. Pursuing these conversations ethnographically revealed that the actions and events described were shaped according to a complex 'moral economy of agency'.⁶ Through this cultural and ontological framework, 'seemingly random coincidences in time and space' were collectively made sensible (Ashforth 2002:127; Evans-Pritchard 1937:69–70), thus prompting interpretations that themselves formed the basis of further interpretable action.

Of course, a great many contrasting expressions of gendered agency (Wardlow 2006) can be and were discerned in the events described above. This includes the 'concealed' and 'indirect' agency of *nakaemas*, such that was allegedly carried out by a known *kleva*, Henry, at Isaac's request. This may be contrasted with the more overtly 'open', publically expressed, and 'direct' agency of Michael and his brothers in carrying out their act of violence, and in similar contrast to the hidden act of *nakaemas*, as witnessed in the performance of miraculous healing by the young priest. It also includes the socially hierarchical agency of Michael and Isaac, as well as the simultaneously more powerful yet less direct, and thereby also relatively 'concealed' influence of Chief George.

While keeping such myriad and mutually constituted expressions of agency in mind, in the following analysis I focus especially on two further conceptualisations of economic agency, referred to here as 'possessive' and 'distributive' agency.⁷ These are identified and analysed within the context of local relational categories of embodied economic personhood. This includes what are referred to in the national lingua franca, Bislama, as *man ples* (man place, or place and language-based group identity) and *man wan* (man one, or possessive individualism). It also includes two similarly interrelated terms in Raga, the indigenous language of North Pentecost, *binihi sage* (ambition/pride) and *hango bahivoi* (humbling). These categories, I argue, are fundamental to local understandings and expressions of moral being and doing. Entwined as affective relations, such terms of relation provide a basis for identifying what Julia Kristeva (1982:93) – drawing on Mary Douglas's (2003 [1966]) discussion of cultural perceptions of metaphorical 'dirt' as 'matter out of place' – has referred to as 'categories of abomination' or 'abjection'. As such, they provide a basis for interpreting and evaluating on moral terms embodied expressions of agency, and formulating morally appropriate responses to these, including as in this case activities associated with *nakaemas*.

One of the first things I learned was that the negative effects of the moral economy examined here are most keenly felt in urban contexts. As a key site of wage labour and business entrepreneurship, town is understood to provide unique opportunities for individuals to 'rise above' others. Even so, the pursuit of financial success or fame is always accompanied by a high degree of risk, particularly as it may attract the jealousy of others. This predicament associated with town life is reflected in the recent emergence of the new Bislama term, *man wan*. The notion of *man wan* explicitly denotes self-seeking, possessive individualism (see Sykes 2007), and as such stands in direct moral contrast to the grounded and collective sense of identity that is expressed in the antecedent, and more positively valued notion of *man ples*. It is also associated with the figure of the ni-Vanuatu migrant, or *man kam* (man come). In town, a heightened sense of dependence on the cash economy coupled with ethnic mixing is understood to give rise to both economic and emotional conflicts, such as those born of the resentments of inequality. As one man from West Coast Santo told me over kava:

In town, all we eat is money. Town isn't safe because it's too mixed. There is too much mixing of people from different places and too much mixing of *kastom*. There is also too much jealousy.

As this statement indicates, town-based inequalities and diversities have given rise to a widely lamented predicament characterised by negative relations of affect, such as are expressed in the frequently used term *jelus* (jealousy, including both envy and desire). Even so, as he explained to me further, protection from the consequences of personal success can often be mitigated through the maintenance of kinship and exchange links to home islands and to fellow *man ples*. In this sense, far from being conceptual opposites, the concepts of *man wan* and *man ples* point to categories of person that are understood to be relationally, even causally entwined. Indeed, it is generally understood that people who *do* succeed in town should visit their relatives often, particularly on their home islands or villages, and equally importantly support them materially, both of which constitute basic expressions of what is here referred to as distributive agency.

Maintaining connections of *man ples* through the moral fulfillment of kinship based obligations goes beyond ensuring the maintenance of an economic safety net. It is also understood to have a much more direct effect on health and wellbeing. Thus, my interlocutor went on to describe the case of a brother-in-law who had amassed a real estate fortune in Luganville, but never visited or sent gifts to his west coast Santo family. Having exposed himself to the jealousy of others, and having neglected his ties of grounded kin-based identity, misfortune became inevitable. As my friend flatly explained, one morning shortly after, the man 'ate salted rice for breakfast, complained to his wife that he couldn't taste the salt, drank tea, and then died'.

Exploring these issues further, I found that such categories are not unique to contemporary urban life. Rather, while no doubt transformed within the context of colonial and post-colonial modernity, they articulate with what are likely much longer-standing indigenous conceptualisations of relational embodied moral personhood, such that entail particular dispositions and modalities of doing.

The following day, as I set out to gain an understanding of what had transpired the night before, a friend explained what he took to be the probable basis of moral reasoning that lay behind the attack on Isaac and Henry. He did so by referring to two Raga terms, *binihi sage* and *hango bahivoi*. '*Binihi sage*', he explained in Bislama, 'means *yu putum yu antap*' (you put yourself at the top), or more specifically, '*yu tingting blong go antap*' (you desire to get to the top). On these terms, *binihi sage* might be translated as the desire for personal advancement, or more simply put, ambition. People who do business in town are often described as having '*binihi sage huri ute lavoa*' (ambitions to rise to a big place, or more specifically, ambitions to achieve high rank). What is more, my friend explained, the term *binihi sage* carries negative affective connotations, of personal arrogance, pride, and conceit.⁸

The notion of *binihi sage* is clearly linked to pervasive indigenous metaphors found across northern Vanuatu whereby height is used to describe relations of age, gender, and hierarchies of the 'graded societies' (Jolly 1991; Taylor 2008b:174). It is also a fundamentally relational concept, and like the terms *man wan* and *man ples*, is conceptually linked to a categorical counterpart. As my friend further explained, expressions of *binihi sage* are strategically and morally responded to by others with actions that are described by the term *hango bahivoi*. In contrast to *binihi sage*, *hango bahivoi* refers to downward movement, and more especially to the notion of 'humbling' (see Hardacre *n.d.*). Thus, he explained in Bislama, *hango bahivoi* means to '*putum daon hem*' (to put them down), or to '*humblem hem*' (to humble them). Speaking generally, individuals are ideally expected to 'humble' themselves in an embodied fashion as a part of everyday social aesthetics (in Bislama, '*mi humblem mi*' or

'*hemi humblem hem*', I humbled myself, or he/she humbled his/herself). This includes in the Christian context 'humbling oneself before the Lord', but more generally by being respectful, deferential, and polite, especially in public social contexts. Importantly, especially to the case discussed here, individuals may also be 'humbled' by others, particularly if they do not do so adequately themselves.

As with the affective concept of *jelus*, and the categories *man wan* and *man ples*, taken together, *binihi sage* (ambition/pride) and *hango bahivoi* (humbling) provide powerful relational concepts to describe how the actions of individuals may be interpreted, evaluated, and responded to by others. As my friend went on, this framework was critical to the present case. Isaac, it seems, had extended himself too fast and too conspicuously in both his entrepreneurial and community leadership pursuits, and this had been interpreted by many as a clear expression of *binihi sage*. What is more, despite his best intentions, both he and Henry had failed in the eyes of many in fulfilling their distributive obligations of *man ples*. Isaac had therefore not only exposed himself as a self-seeking *man wan*. He had also laid himself open to paying the inevitable, and perhaps even morally appropriate price of being put back in his place – of being humbled.

Considering the relational, affective logic associated with terms such as *man wan* and *binihi sage*, and the consequences of being identified as such, tall poppies are encouraged to watch their backs. As we have seen, one way in which this may be achieved is by mitigating one's possessive ambitions through the ongoing engagement of distributive agency. Indeed, I would argue, the careful and strategic negotiation of possessive and distributive modalities of economic being is fundamental to everyday social aesthetics in Vanuatu, as elsewhere.

As Isaac had tried to explain to me on the day before the attack, this is precisely the kind of balance that he had been aiming to achieve, both in his chiefly activities and his entrepreneurial ones. What is important to recognise, however, is that, regardless of the intentions that lie behind such acts, and rather than anything necessarily intrinsic to them, it is the socially relational terms of how they appear and are interpreted *by others* that renders them most significant in terms of ongoing action. Indeed, such interpretations shape how individual and collective expressions of agency are responded to. On these terms we can see that, while economic activities such as the setting up of market stalls near his kava bar and the provision of assistance to Henry were intended by Isaac to represent benevolent expressions of community-minded distributive agency, for Michael and his brothers, they had instead demonstrated evidence of *binihi sage*, and thus exposed the rampant personal ambition of *man wan*.

EMBODIED ABJECTION AND RELATIONS OF ENCOMPASSMENT

At this point, we might agree with Claude Levi-Strauss (1963:184) that the allegation of *nakaemas* levelled against Isaac and Henry constituted the response to a situation, 'revealed to the mind through emotional manifestations, but whose essence is intellectual'. As Isaac's wife Anne and many other family members pointed out to me, while considered shocking and unnecessarily brutal by most, the particular social relations that framed the attack made it especially abject. According to north Pentecost kinship principles, the relationship between a man, his siblings, and his sisters' children, is one of shared ancestral substance, and thus ideally of mutual nurturing and support (Taylor 2005). Occurring within the most intimate unit of *man ples*, the idea that a group of men would commit such a violent assault on their own *tua* (brother, in this case Henry) and *tarabe* (mother's brother, Isaac) was almost unthinkable. So, we might ask, what was the moral and ontological reasoning that lay behind the attack?

As was generally considered in conversation with other community members, Michael probably *was* jealous of Isaac's meteoric successes. What is more, the fact that Isaac chose to support Henry in his financial difficulties while neglecting his other maternal nephews, Michael, Mark, and Peter, provided further cause for resentment. Even so, as a respected community member, surely Michael would not have acted so violently on this basis alone. Indeed, beyond being a simple act of jealousy, the violent attack was also considered to have represented a distributive and therefore morally justified act of *hango bahivoi*. The presence of Henry with his powers as a *kleva* was critical in this regard; rather than appearing coincidental, it established a likely causal link between Isaac's successes and the simultaneous reversal of fortunes experienced by Michael and his family.

I already knew that Henry was a skilled herbalist and diviner (*kleva*). I'd also heard people talk about how he had the ability to transform into a hawk, had used love magic to seduce his wife, and could magically procure money or goods. This reputation stretched back over 20 years to the few years he served as a Melanesian Brother, a monk-like community of the Anglican Church collectively renowned for challenging unseen evil forces (see Taylor 2010b; *n.d.*). On the few occasions I had asked him about these rumours, rather than admitting or denying them, he had always simply laughed. It was now pointed out that, in this way, Henry had deliberately cultivated a mysterious and powerful persona. Indeed, along with his impressively long grey beard, his reputation as a *kastom man* was important to his self-promotion as a *kleva*, an occupation that provided his only regular source of income. What became obvious now, however, was the extent to which cultivating a persona associated with sacred or spiritual forms of power (in Bislama, *poa*), and more especially with *nakaemas*, is fraught with danger.

In a context of constant moral and behavioural scrutiny, *kleva* must be especially careful in managing their reputations, as well as their social and economic relationships. It was now clear that Henry had not done this adequately enough. As I learned, the combination of Isaac's growing success and Henry's mystical reputation – not to mention financial plight – formed a moral and circumstantial evidence base that was strongly suggestive of the following likelihood: that Isaac and Henry were actively ruining Michael's family business, siphoning capital from it by magical means. The fact that a new freezer had appeared at the Rainbow Nakamal shortly after Michael had been forced to sell his family's own made this manifest. So, too, did the dwindling number of items on the shelves of the family Hangea Store, as against the popularity and success of Isaac's kava bar. From Michael and his brothers' perspective it all added up: a hapless Henry, indebted to Chief George, had been enlisted by Isaac to aid in fulfilling his ambitions for chiefly authority and entrepreneurial success. With the purchase of the freezer, a tipping point had been reached, and swift, decisive, moral action was required to curtail such abject forces.

Importantly, the priestly exorcism of Isaac, also later performed on Henry, represented an extension of this intervention. Indeed, it was broadly interpreted as a tacit statement of support from the Church for the accusation of *nakaemas*, if not of the identification of possessive *binihi sage* and the violent response to these. More so, given the ontological entanglement of *nakaemas* with Christian sacred power (see Taylor *n.d.*), it was crucial that the priest intervened 'in such a public manner so as to position himself on the side of the morally 'good'. Considering the the moral economy explored here, it was not only important to exorcise the community of the abject spiritual forces of evil in their midst, but to confirm the status of the Church on the side of a positively valued distributive agency.

So much made sense. Indeed, just when I felt I was beginning to understand the relations of affect and moral agency that lay behind the attack, a further twist emerged. Through this, it became apparent that rather than forming simple dyads, such relations of agency are far more typically strung out across diffuse webs of kinship, friendship, exchange, and hierarchy,

such as characterising the complex structuring of social life everywhere, including capital and sacred power.

As I made my enquiries, I continued to visit Isaac in hospital, who, through a combination of Western, *kastom*, and Christian healing, was recovering from his injuries. On my final visit, Isaac confided that he felt betrayed by the Pentecost community of Luganville, and that he and Anne intended to relocate to Port Vila as soon as he was well enough. His sense of betrayal was especially acute, he lamented, in that despite their deciding to not press charges, no attempt had been made by local chiefs to initiate a process of restorative justice. The reason, he confided, was that the *real* force behind the attack was not Michael after all, but rather a chief of much higher rank and influence than himself. When I asked who this might be, he said he did not wish to say. The answer was, however, obvious, and had already been whispered in kava-time conversation elsewhere. Chief George, it seems, was also *jelus* of Isaac's business success, and had found his own position of chiefly authority threatened by Isaac's growing status. What is more, it was reasoned on George's behalf that if a threat of *nakaemas* had already been levelled at Michael and his family, surely this would soon be the case for Chief George himself, especially considering Henry's indebtedness to him. So it seemed that through combining the moral logic of *hango bahivoi* with a promise of reduced debt, and armed with the compelling suggestion that Isaac and Henry were robbing the Hangea Store by magical means, Chief George had easily managed to coerce Michael and his brothers into moving against Isaac – a task they had carried out to terrible effect.

Despite the local explanations and analyses examined here, the attack left in its wake a community shocked by its own volatility and perplexed by its apparent incapacity to effectively control the spiralling moral forces that circulated within it. Unsurprisingly, when I returned to Vanuatu more than a year later, I learned that Isaac and Anne had left Luganville. Of complete surprise, however, was the discovery that Henry did not resent Michael for his actions. In fact, reflecting their ongoing financial struggles, they had recently been charged by police for collaborating in a robbery. As it turned out, Henry was convicted and received a 2-year term of imprisonment, which he served before returning to his family on Pentecost, much to the relief of his Luganville relatives. By contrast, Michael was handed a comparatively lenient sentence involving community service. As those I spoke to regarding this final twist of fortune reckoned, the severity of these sentences corresponded neatly in their opinions to previous events, and indeed for this reason confirmed their assessment of them. This assessment also entailed the presence of yet another key actor in the moral economy of agency explored here. Rather than simply appearing as a response to their immediate acts of possessive agency – the robbery – the sentences represented an expression of God's will and moral judgement for their previous actions, of Henry's alleged use of *nakaemas* and Michael's violent response. Indeed, providing further evidence of the ultimately decisive yet also entwined role of sacred agency within the moral economy, Chief George had also suffered the misfortune of bankruptcy, and was no longer considered by many to be a true community leader.

THE MORAL ECONOMY OF AGENCY: DISCUSSION

Recognised as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001:112), human agency is everywhere shaped by language ideologies and societal norms. As this article demonstrates, and as implied by terms such as *man wan*, *man ples*, *binihi sage*, and *hango bahivoi*, this includes historically emergent categories and relational modalities of personhood. As we have also seen, just as personal circumstances and strategies are configured within large-scale political-economic shifts, such categories of personhood (and therefore agency) are themselves mediated by transforming political economic circumstances occurring across multiple levels of

scale. Finally, from an anthropological perspective, I have demonstrated that taking spiritual belief seriously means recognising the extent to which agency is ontologically embedded and shaped, and that human agency is articulated and mediated within worlds in which sacred powers and spiritual beings are themselves both sources and bearers of agency.

Bearing in mind the relationally agentive force of spiritual powers, within the context of the particular ‘habitus’ of moral agency explored here (Bourdieu 1977), we can see how relatively powerful individuals – including chiefs, politicians, or prominent business people – might be considered especially vulnerable to *nakaemas* attack. As such, to protect themselves from such forces, many such individuals are understood to recruit and surround themselves with human *sekuriti* (security), a term that not only includes the hired protection of physical muscle, but also *kleva* and other spiritually powerful individuals to protect them from the potential sorcery attacks that through relational logic their positions are seen to intrinsically attract.⁹ By contrast, for the relatively disempowered, often referred to locally by the term ‘grassroots’, the most obvious way to avoid the potentially vicious consequences of success is to simply not engage economically at all, at least insofar as this is possible. Indeed, in the current situation, ‘playing it safe,’ and even ‘opting out’ altogether, is often considered a prudent option for those who wish to avoid repercussions inherent to the moral economy of agency, and thus avoid the attraction *jelus*, *nakaemas*, or *hango bahivoi*.¹⁰ Such strategies, of course, only serve to reinforce existing political and economic inequalities.

One final point to be inferred from the present example is that it is not just *people* that may work to bring down self-seeking ‘tall poppies’ and other high achievers. Rather, just as human agency is mediated by culture and ontology, one begins to discern a sense of agency in the moral economy itself. Extending the metaphor that in town ‘all we eat is money’ (above), a similarly frequent idiom proclaims that ‘money can eat you in return’. This pervasive trope of cash as a dangerous, cannibalistic force suggests that diverse expressions of human agency – ‘possessive’, ‘distributive’, ‘concealed’, ‘open’, or ‘negative’, for example – are always-already relationally encompassed within further agentive spheres. Under the weight of such forces, the relatively disempowered – such as Isaac, Henry, or Michael – are held subordinate to the relatively empowered – such as established chiefs and businessmen like George, members of the clergy, and representatives of state power such as politicians and the police. As the case of George illustrates, however, all such individuals are themselves encompassed within further spheres of power. This includes in an institutional sense the structures, canons, and legal powers of church or state, and at a ‘higher’ level the equally terrifying and generative powers of capital and God’s will.

To summarise, in examining the moral framework by which much human agency is interpreted and expressed in Vanuatu, I have concentrated on two dynamically interlinked forms. Echoing classic distinctions between gift and commodity (Mauss 1990 [1923]), I have argued that ‘possessive agency’, such as is typically seen to generate asymmetrical relations of wealth and power, is locally distinguished from but ambivalently tied to ‘distributive agency’, such as is taken to produce relations of symmetry and solidarity (but see Lepani, this volume). Overall, being mutually productive when appropriately balanced, both forms are usually considered to be socially and morally positive. This reflects the ontological importance of dynamic and productively entangled ‘sides’, such that occur throughout Vanuatu (for a discussion, see Taylor 2008a:96). By contrast, as in the case examined here, where excessive movement towards possessive agency occurs, moral social and sacred energy may be directed towards curtailing such acts, as well as to redressing their social, material, and spiritual effects.

In considering the relational nature of this moral economy, it is clear that what we are dealing with is an *interpretive* framework. This framework is not only important to how one self-manages desires and expectations within the context of capitalism, for example, but also for defining how individual and collective expressions of personhood are accorded moral value *by others*, and in

doing so lends shape to further action. With this in mind, there can be little wonder at those individuals who freely admit guilt as a response to accusations of *nakaemas*. On the terms explored here, and while by no means wholly or in all cases, such admissions may represent the personal acknowledgement of such affective dispositions as ‘selfishness’ or ‘jealousy’, and thus represent socially responsible acts of distributive agency, and of self-administered *hango bahivoi*, or humbling. It is also not surprising that sorcery fears are so often fuelled by priests and other church leaders closely associated with ‘sacred powers’ or spiritual agency. While important to promoting religious doctrine, speaking out bravely against the ‘dark powers’ and activities of sorcerers also represents an act of distributive agency, one that works on relational terms to morally distance such individuals from becoming the target of potential accusations themselves.

Within this intersubjective context, however, we find considerable room for slippage between the intentionality and interpretation of agency. This point is most explicitly seen in that, from a rationalist perspective, no act of sorcery can be demonstrated to have taken place in the example examined here. Indeed, this was the opinion of several of my interlocutors. Rather, the use of *nakaemas* by Henry at the behest of Isaac was inferred by Michael and his brothers as a reading of the situation at hand. Speaking more generally, given that excessive possessive agency may not only be seen in the material accumulation of wealth, but also in efforts to attain social or cultural capital, what might be intended as a community or development-oriented act of generosity – Isaac’s initiative of setting up community market stalls, for example – may from another perspective be interpreted as a shameless act of self promotion; an expression of possessive *binihi sage* to be morally tempered through the distributive agency of *hango bahivoi*.

The apparent increase in sorcery accusations and related violence are clearly best understood in terms of transforming socio-economic circumstances; following classic anthropological analyses (*e.g.* Lawrence and Meggitt 1965; Marwick 1965), *nakaemas* does indeed appear to represent a kind of ‘strain gauge’ for tensions resulting from an increasing reliance on competitive capitalist strategies and individualised notions of ownership, as against more distributive forms of social and economic activity. As the foregoing ethnographic analysis further suggests, however, rather than simply providing a barometer of such tensions, and far from being a ‘sophisticated homeostat that promotes equilibrium’ (Tonkinson 1981:84) as may have been the case in the past, contemporary *nakaemas* belief and accusations more often contribute to their generation. Occurring within the potentially volatile spaces of a complex moral economy of agency, fear of *nakaemas* exacerbates social and economic inequalities, particularly as it contributes to the discouragement of personal achievement or advancement, especially among those already disempowered. Indeed, the most profound lesson learned by this ethnographer at least concerns the deeply affective nature of *nakaemas*. As the opening quote indicates, for many ni-Vanuatu the feeling of sorcery is of a restless and unpredictable evil that lurks in the shadows of social, economic, and spiritual life. Not simply content to haunt the dangerous inter-ethnic divides of mixed urban communities, the abjection of sorcery and of sorcerers may also be found in the most intimate of relations, including the closest of family, as in the self.

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NOTES

1. The Bislama word *nakamal* refers to buildings associated with male 'graded societies' (also often called 'men's houses' in much anthropological literature), and to commercial 'kava bars', as in this instance.
2. Often blending learned and inherited powers, *nakaemas* blurs classic anthropological definitions of 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery', being 'the belief, and those practices associated with the belief, that one human being is capable of harming another by magical or supernatural means' (Patterson 1974:132; also Crowley 1995:155).
3. In the interest of protecting anonymity, I have avoided precise dates and employ pseudonyms for people and places throughout.
4. For an examination of North Pentecost kinship, see Taylor (2005).
5. In Bislama, 'yu go wea?' is a common form of greeting.
6. Basically put, the notion of a 'moral economy' describes the cultural ascription of a set of moral values to economic activity (after Thompson 1963, 1971; also Mauss 1990 [1923]).
7. Given the inherently intersubjective nature of agency examined here, these terms are preferred over 'individual' and 'dividual'. To act in either a 'possessive' or 'distributive' manner is to engage in thoroughly relational practice, and as such entails interlinked processes of dividualisation and individualisation at all turns.
8. Hardacre's unpublished Raga dictionary of ca.1920 translates *binihi* as 'to think' (4), and *sage* as 'lift up, to be proud' (80).
9. On these same terms, we may consider that the active mobilisation of sacred Christian powers during Police Operation *Klinim Not* (see introduction) not only represented an expression of the capacity of the state to engage Christian powers alongside physical and legal ones (Rio 2011). It also aimed to ensure moral and sacred protection against dangerous powers that continually threaten society at large. Despite damning allegations of undue and illegal brutality (Republic of Vanuatu, Ombudsman's Office 2003a, 2003b), by the time of the ethnographic present, *Klinim Not* was widely considered a morally necessary action, especially for reducing the climate of fear surrounding *nakaemas*, if only for a short while.
10. A conversation recalled from field notes from a later visit, concerning a cultural event I was helping to organise, demonstrates this: 'Just told [name withheld] about the festival plan, and then that it is probably a good idea to keep it a secret. His immediate response was, "Yes, because there is too much black magic around." He said that while people are critical of those who are "all talk, no action," a bigger problem for those who share their plans is that word gets around, and then someone who is jealous will "spoil you". Better still to not have high aspirations, he suggested, but to keep your head down and not present a target'.

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