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A Shared Intentional Space of Witch-Hunt and Sacrifice

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ABSTRACT *In this article, the issue is whether witch-hunts can be seen to share certain aspects with the realm of sacrifice. With resource to recent developments in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu, it is argued that witchcraft is 'the other side of sacrifice' in more than one sense: firstly, as the witch is sacrificing its victim and breaking through to the social world from a world beyond and, secondly, as the witch-hunt is a movement with the purpose of sacrificing the accused witch for the healing of the community. The argument hinges on the alignment of the space intended by sacrifice and the space revealed by the appearance of the witch – as both articulating an engagement with 'the very source of life' (Hubert & Mauss 1964: 98).*

KEYWORDS *Witchcraft, divination, sacrifice, Melanesia, Vanuatu*

Introduction

Witch-hunts are still occurring regularly in parts of the world, and we have seen numerous publications on how this relates to changing relations of production, new forms of Christianity and reformulations of the nation-state (Geschiere 1997; Ashforth 2000; Niehaus 2001; Green 2003; Siegel 2006; West 2007; Stroeken 2010). While acknowledging the importance of such contextual understanding and ethnographic specificity, this article will take a slightly different direction. It is inspired by Girard's (1988) idea of sacrifice as scapegoating and comparable ideas about divination and witch-hunt as therapeutic relief (De Boeck 1991; Kapferer 1997; Stephen 1999), and I propose to align the witch-hunts with sacrifice as meaningful acts that reach into a realm of a religiously constituted unknown through the violent attack on the witch as a mediating body.

My particular interest relates to the issue of the often brutal violence against accused witches during my fieldwork in Vanuatu. However, this article is experimental in the sense that I do not primarily propose it as a contribution to Vanuatu, or even Melanesian, ethnography, but instead use this particular ethnographic perspective to highlight some more general problems with anthropology's understanding of witchcraft. As I perceive it, witchcraft or witch-hunt should never be reduced to a mere political situation of strategic manipulation of truth or a misrepresentation of a struggle between interests (see, e.g. Green 2003). Seeing witchcraft accusations as a mystified form of oppression or a magical form of regulation of societies without law, bypasses the fact that witchcraft is most often invoked as a real source of misfortune or death and therefore deserves to be accounted for as a real category of the human world (Kapferer 2002; Siegel 2003; West 2007). Witchcraft, in its very emergence from an ambiguous, uncertain realm, beyond purely human capacities, must be recognized as a moment of intense cosmological potency. By addressing the violent witch-hunt I hope to contribute to an approach that also brings into consideration divination and sacrifice as central to an understanding of this *total phenomenon* and its dynamics.

I, hence, want to experiment with the idea that sacrifice and witch-hunt address a shared space; what Durkheim perhaps delegated to the realm of the 'sacred' (1915: 37). I mean by this that they share intentionality towards a space that is not an immediate presence in social life but that is *conditional* for social life. The phenomenological concept of 'intentionality' will be central to the discussion; in Husserl's understanding of the fundamental way that consciousness is directed towards some object and as actively creating that intended object, so that the quality or content of the object becomes part to the act of intending (McIntyre & Woodruff Smith 1989). I argue that this is of special importance when considering the phenomena of witch-hunt, divination and sacrifice since these practices are essentially and intensely about *intending*, and thus creating, objects of a different, ambiguously uncertain, hidden realm (see also Graw 2006; Mills 2013: 29).

Underlying my argument is the idea that witchcraft and sacrifice are in certain societies of crucial importance due to the transformative function and character of these practices. These are societies that operate with relations between life and death, man and animal, subject and object as more or less continuous, permeable categories of being (see also Luedke & West 2006). In societies that acknowledge witchcraft, the witch emerges as a transgressive force that operates through that continuation itself – by overflowing social

relations with invading agencies. A person becomes a lion and eats people in Mozambique (West 2007), a woman flies in the air and attacks the *kula* canoe in the Trobriand Islands (Munn 1986), a child is penetrated by a bird or an insect and is taught how to be sorcerer in Peru (Santos-Granero 2004) or a man kills his sister, consumes her inner organs and takes on her appearance in Vanuatu (Rio 2010). Categories of the social world and of social ontology are broken down, shifted around or changing place.

Similarly, in societies that place particular value on ritual sacrifices, it is a type of action that merges life and death, which brings aspects of the spirit world in contact with the world of the living, which replaces human life with animal life and which uses this shift of realms for the benefit of transforming identities (Willerslev 2009). Sacrifice is just as much a transgressive practice as witchcraft, and also belonging to ontologies based on the possibility of, and openness towards, continuation between life forms. In the case of buffalo sacrifice in Flores, Indonesia, for instance, Smedal describes how the buffalo is at one and the same time the soul of the deity, the soul of man, and that buffaloes can change into men just as men can grow into buffaloes at old age (2009). The unique position of the buffalo in sacrifice 'rests on its combination of animal, human and divine aspects' (2009: 285), and it is this combinatorial capacity that enables the death of the buffalo to supply growth and regeneration to the social unit.

Thus, whereas Hubert and Mauss were particularly interested in the tripartite structure (god/sacrificer/victim) and the clear delineation of ritual roles in Christian and Vedic sacrifice, recent ethnography demonstrates more of a mingling and compression of sacrificial roles and motivations with other spheres of life (see also Valeri 1994; Willerslev 2009; Course 2010; Mayblin 2010; 2013; Mayblin & Course 2013). Therefore, Bloch also writes that 'the word (sacrifice) is nothing more than a pointer to a cluster of phenomena which are contained within a wider family of rituals' (1992: 42; but see Mayblin and Course 2013). In his discussion of the Buid of Borneo, he points out that sacrifice is in the first place a response to 'invasion of hostile invisible forces'. Consequently, what we might class as witchcraft is a first condition, then divination comes in order to figure out what has gone wrong and what type of invasion it is, and then sacrifice often comes as a response or as a conclusion to what divination demonstrates. Such an interpretation is supported by Kapferer's analysis of the Buddhist Suniyama rite in Sri Lanka. This is a process of divination resulting from sorcery, the invasion of the person of certain unfortunate substances or qualities, which culminates with a series of sacrifices that re-institutes the het-

erogeneous order (Kapferer 1997). In a way that is pertinent to the title of this special issue; for Kapferer the sorcery attack is 'the other side of sacrifice' in the sense that the victim of sorcery is already part of a sacrificial dynamic. The divination and healing process is about rewinding the sorcerer's sacrifice of the victim, in order for the victim to reappear as reconstituted by the end of it. In comparison with this Sinhalese context, my Melanesian materials indicate how sorcery and the witch-hunt can also constitute 'the other side of sacrifice' in another sense. In Melanesia, witchcraft is often seen as forces bursting out, invading, merging and overtaking the multiple relations and categories of social life, and sacrifice (i.e. killing of pigs or people) is about violently putting these forces back into place (Fortune 1932; Knauff 1985; Stephen 1987; Rio 2010). While the Sinhalese focus their ritual on treating the victim of sorcery, the Melanesian tendency is to concentrate their attention on finding, addressing and attacking the sorcerer or witch. This articulates a deep cosmological worry and can be seen to be acts intended towards the very constitution of the social. This has therapeutic effects. A second point will be that witch-hunts take on a special character when social ontologies based on transgression and witchcraft become impregnated with the language of a certain type of Christianity and its search for individual responsibility and bodily sacrifice. This seems to be the case now in Melanesia and across Africa.

Approximating the Witch-Hunt to Sacrifice

Theories about witch-hunts have always drawn their main motif from the realm of human sacrifice. This was the case for the witch-hunters themselves in the witch crazes of the early modern period in Europe (see, e.g. *The Hammer of Witches* written in 1486), where witches were burnt for the purpose of religious purification of townships. In a way, our western thinking about sacrifice seems to some degree to feed on the popular vision of these medieval and early modern witch-killings. As pointed out by Strenski and others (see Strenski 2002; Introduction to this volume), there has definitively been a Christian flavour to grand theories of sacrifice, not only modelling it on the sacrifices of the bible, but also modelling human sacrifice on those events where the church, its bishops, priests and executioners staged the witch-killing as a rite of consecration and expiation. Reformatory acts of punishment and self-punishment are thus very quickly implied in general theories of sacrifice. This was also implicit in Hubert and Mauss' theory of sacrifice (1964). In their very definition, they make note of the similarity between sacrifice and what they call 'religious punishment':

As society is contaminated by the crime, the punishment is at the same time a means for it to rid itself of the contamination with which it is sullied. Thus, in respect of society, the guilty one fulfils the part of an expiatory (redeeming) victim. It may be said that there is punishment and sacrifice at one and the same time. (1964: n30, 109)

As I have experienced witch-hunts in Vanuatu, in a context of emerging Pentecostal Christianity (Rio 2011), this alignment between the witch-hunt and sacrifice has become more and more apparent. I think Hubert and Mauss's perspective opens new horizons for the understanding of witch-hunts generally in this type of context. In turn, this also has implications for a theory of sacrifice that goes beyond the confines of ritual practice.

Hubert and Mauss' general definition of sacrificial practice is a 'communication between the sacred and profane worlds through the mediation of a victim' (1964: 97). In their view, sacrifice is creating a space for mediation between two worlds, the sacred and the profane, and as a practice it shifts around, transforms or purifies the elements of profane and sacred character interchangeably. The way they see it sacrifice is a stage where the profane seeks, reaches into, drawing closer to it, 'the very source of life' as a particular intentional space (1964: 98). Here, at the core of this theory is a sense of 'the very source of life' as a hidden space, a dangerous space, a space for purification – for the destruction of things impure by purity – but also destruction of purity by the impure. Destruction itself is only a result of the clash between the sacred and the profane – for the profane object or person cannot be consecrated without being destroyed simultaneously. Therefore, the victim 'redeems' the sacrificer by being destroyed (1964: 98). In summary, the two core elements of sacrificial practice seem to be the ritualized taking of life or 'giving up' of crucial objects and the effect of changing or furthering the life of the sacrificing person or community (see also Valeri 1994: 104–5).

Translated into the realm of the witch-hunt, I will attempt to demonstrate that the same type of transformation takes place here. The killing of the witch becomes a negative image of the type of communication we see in sacrifice, as the beating or killing of the accused witch closes off communication. Where the community of the witch is intimidated by danger, death and anxiety of a moral failure, the witch becomes a medium through which one can reach into this other space of potent forces, out of which death and illness arise, that is, 'the very source of life'. By attacking the witch one closes that channel and takes back control over the circumstances of life.

This view of witch-hunt as sacrifice may be problematic to a certain extent since it is central in the above definitions of sacrifice that sacrifices are gifts to gods and thus constitute reciprocal relations between men and gods. This understanding has, however, been deconstructed by Valeri (1994: 107). He argues that sacrifice is just as clearly a *renunciation* of the victim as it is a gift of the victim. This was also of key importance to Girard's 'scapegoat' theory (1988). Girard asserts that violence is led into sacrifice to redirect it from other outlets and by rerouting the destruction of the self to another body or object. There is less attention here to sacrifice as gift and Girard is more interested in the intentionality of violence. In a critique of reciprocity-thinking and gift theory, he also makes the important point that sacrifice is a form of violence that is protected from vengeance as a reciprocal act. The violence that is exercised on victims in ritual sacrifice, be it animals or humans, is not taken to be an attack on someone or something, and the violence is *creating* identities instead of destroying them. The sacrifice of a pig or a bull can actually be used to stop vengeance outbursts (Girard 1988: 18). Hence, the sacrifice does not return in some other form as a return gift, nor does one risk the violence to be returned. This is important as it changes the focus of sacrifice from being an act of giving something to someone with the expectation of a return, to the view that sacrifice casts something out, by killing it or destroying it, and that the renunciation or severing is productive without being interactive with godly beings or other reciprocal relationships. In terms of the attack on an accused witch, this also becomes significant as this act also signals the end of spirals of violence and further speculations of political, strategic motivations.

Hence, the focus of these theories of sacrifice is on sacrificial *intentionality* – that is, *where* the destruction or killing is taking the sacrificer and the sacrificed – rather than merely on the exchange with the divine. Thus, a crucial issue is what sort of realm the sacrifice is creating with the violence it is exercising. This point moves us away from the economic vs. aneconomic paradox that has dominated most discussions of sacrifice in continental philosophy (see Introduction, this volume). These points also relate very much to the realm of the witch-hunt. The witch-hunt is creating its own space of violence, directed at the accused witch but at the same time constructing and mapping together the uncertain circumstances of the *event* of witchcraft as a total event. The witchcraft event represents an increment to the normal social circumstances: since illness has been introduced and a person has taken on the *extra* character of being a witch. People wonder what sort of an augmentation this is and where it came from. The witch event represents a bursting out of energies that are

normally hidden from view, and it becomes the main occupation of the witch-hunt to search into this dangerous field of enigmatic extension of the normal social circumstances.

Witchcraft, Death, Fear and Uncertainty

In the following, I will outline some events that took place during my latest fieldwork in the town of Port Vila in Vanuatu in 2006 and 2010. Generally, we can maybe state that witches in Melanesia are creatures that are reported to appear in transformative shape. They are supposedly normal people who have, consciously or unconsciously, been transformed into transgressive beings that overturn most physical and moral boundaries: they eat human flesh and drink blood, they fly in the air, they take the shape of animals, they become invisible and they can be in several locations at the same time (Stephen et al. 1987). Furthermore, witchcraft indicates a presence that overturns the individual person and makes him or her into something else, an ambiguous being. Thus, Reay writes from the Kuma of the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea:

Kuma contrast 'witches' (*agamp kum*) with 'real people' (*agamp wei*). No one is born with a *kum* inside him, but anyone may discover at any age that one has entered his body by jumping from that of a host who has proved unsatisfactory or from a convicted witch at the moment of death. Thus the witch is seen as a humanoid, once fully human, creature, who has lost cortical control and been taken over by a sub-human drive located in his abdomen. (1976: 2)

Reay adds that an identified witch should be killed by a spear on the banks of a river so that the stream could transport him or her away from the territory. Witchcraft is here something that emerges from within the kin group and that threatens to kill and destroy the group and its very solidarity from within.

In previous publications (Rio 2002, 2010, 2011), I have explained how I think witchcraft in Vanuatu articulates itself by directly interfering in close relations between people. Witchcraft fears are underlying all close relations of kinship and friendship, and the paranoia of everyday life is that one's close relations turn out to be potentially lethal. Potentially, feelings of anger or jealousy can come to take the physical form of the witch and attack the relation itself. This is all the time taken into consideration in daily life, and practices such as giving gifts, paying people attention, and acting in kind and affectionate ways work as prophylactics against that potential threat (see also Knauff 1985).

However, no matter how much people display fear, generosity or communal responsibility they still witness death and illness in their close relations. In the language of people from the island of Ambrym, where I did fieldwork in 1996–1997 and 1999–2000, the word *abiou* is used for both poisonous magic, that is, what we would translate as ‘sorcery’, and the figure or agent of transgressive power, that is, what we would call a ‘witch’. The *abiou* can take on the appearance of other people or animals, they can fly and they can even kill people from a distance just by their mental power. They are hungry for the victim’s inner organs, and they have clever ways of concealing their identity and presence at the scene of the crime. They are no one in particular, yet in principle anyone and everyone can become an *abiou*, even without knowing it. I, therefore, understand this type of existence of the witch to be on a different plane of reality than the everyday activities that people engage in. *Abiou* do not have a stable existence in the realm of the living, but they rather emerge and take personalized shape when called into being by feelings of jealousy and anger in close relations. In this way, the witch cannot initially be pinned down to being defined and recognized as an individual agent, but holds an intermediary position, by wedging into relationships that have gone wrong, as what I have described as ‘Thirdness’ – as a form of agency that is at the same time outside of dual relations and having an absolute presence right at their centre. I believe this type of destructive mediation is a version of what Battaglia has called ‘invisible foregrounding’ (1995); as a crucial sort of absent presence in the social fabric. In the very constitution of the relationship lies the ontological premise that a third, mostly invisible, party is always there in the middle of the relation – seeing it, defining it and possibly interfering in it. Therefore, in every social situation where relations appear to be limited to the visible relations between relatives in the village, an implicit count is also made of the invisibly foregrounded perspective on the situation. What is of interest here is that when illness, misfortune or death emerges, this signals a moment of total uncertainty, of failure and moral scrutiny. In this moment, it is as if the absent presence of the third party is transformed into an absolute presence, eclipsing the status of dual relations and foregrounding the witch instead. The relation between two relatives and the whole community now appears to be completely overruled by the perspective of the witch. The weaknesses and cracks in someone’s relations are thus perceived to take a personalized destructive form. I invoke Hubert and Mauss’ concept of ‘The very source of life’ here, since the witch emerges out of the constitution of the relations between kin. The witch bursts out of the relationship itself, and thus out of the very space that breeds life.

At the level of people's lives this moment calls for speculation, rumours and searches into the circumstances of the death or illness. One starts to consult various people who can divine the reasons for the misfortune, and one traces backwards into the latest events in the life of the victim of the attack: where did he go, who did he meet, what sort of activities of economic or political nature was he participating in. Was he withholding money from his family, was he cheating on his wife, who had reason to be angry at him, etc. One is caught in a hectic moment of uncertainty, anger, anguish and remorse. But in my view, this intense activity following illness or death is itself a way of diverting the attention away from the real reason for the misfortune, and we should pause for a moment in our analysis when considering what the witch *is* in this moment (see also Mills 2013). At this stage, around the moment when he strikes, the *abiou* is not exactly an identifiable person. He has no stable identity, he is transgressing time and space, he is anyone and everyone, that is, he is placed beyond the bounded reachable identity of the person. People will say that if they sit in their kitchen house by the fire and think bad thoughts, concealing heated anger or withholding grudges or jealousy, this can be picked up by the *abiou* and might lead to the killing of the object of these heated emotions. Given any slippage in the moral constitution of the relationship, the *abiou* will break through and enter into its mediating function of killing or inflicting illness on the parties in the relation. Although the *abiou* is now a personification of social forces, I understand the *abiou* to be less an intentional agent than revealing an *opening* into a potent and dangerous realm that underlies all relations of the social world. The opening is caused by the moral failure of the relation to work properly, so to speak. But the events and activities that follow right after this lethal opening take the form of a manic effort to change this situation and to re-define it. Here, we need to pay attention to social process and how personification is now given priority over constitutional crisis.

In his account of the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea, Knauff builds up his analysis around a parallel process (1985). In the case of sickness or death, the Gebusi engage in rich spirit séances where mediums give public performances and engage in joking and sexual relations with a spirit woman. It is in this mode of teasing and flirtation with a world beyond the social world that the messages of sorcery accusations are brought forth, in a highly metaphoric language that parallels events in a spirit world with the here-and-now world. The séances are cast in a tone of heated emotions, in direct erotic confrontation with the spirit woman as 'the very source of life'; a source of reproduction, life and vitality. Still,

in the next moment this perspective is closed off and the ceremonies often lead the attention towards the accused sorcerer (1985: 310). Among the Gebusi the ceremonial process of divination is turning the attention from the ruptures in internal solidarity towards external enmity. What follows is an outburst of anger and violence, seemingly as a remedy for the potentially dangerous situation of engaging with the spirit woman and one's own reproductive constitution for too long.

Likewise, in Vanuatu, there is a marked shift in the process going from complete ontological uncertainty and into establishing evidence and order in the divination procedures and finally guilt and blame in the witch-hunt. It is in this process that I believe we can find reason to place the witch-hunt in the realm of sacrifice, as an alternative to explanations that emphasize conflict resolution or negation of deviance. I believe we have underestimated the potency of the mediation that is taking place when the witch shows itself with an anchorage in a world that lies beyond the world of the living, beyond certainty and beyond individual responsibility. The event of the witch shares this uncertainty with the world of sacrifice, and ultimately the violence of the witch-hunt also converges with the violence of sacrifice.

Divination as Reaching into Uncertainty

In my last visits to Vanuatu, I became aware of a new tendency in sorcery accusations in the capital of Port Vila. In the suburbs of the town, people would be dragged into football stadiums and other public places where they would be accused of what we call sorcery or witchcraft – 'poison' in the national pidgin-based language – in improvised trials. They would be severely beaten before and during these interrogations – mostly by gangs of young men, but in the presence of spectators and the committee of chiefs set down to lead the trial. Typically, the accused would be a close relative (a son or a brother) to someone who recently died – and suspicion would have its basis in motifs such as jealousy or anger or just deviant social behaviour such as restlessness or seeing the wrong kind of people.

In one case I learned about a young man who was suspected of having killed his own father in the squatter settlements outside of the centre of Port Vila. In the charges against him, it was stressed that the young man had been in an argument with his father before the killing, and when the father suddenly fell over dead for apparently no reason, the suspicion immediately fell on his son. The accusations were strengthened by the suspected man's wife who witnessed against him and said that she had before the killing found magic

remedies – ashes mixed with human bone – in a plastic bag in his trouser pocket. A crowd of relatives led by his mother's brother had beat the man up and then dragged him into the football field where the trial was held against him – by now covered in his own blood. He did not, however, admit to anything, and a second trial was held against him later, and in this trial, there were accusations that the same man was behind several other deaths in the same settlement. Also this accusation he refused, and after some time he went back to living with his wife and staying on in the same yard as his mother's brother. A year later he could speak freely to me about it as a misunderstanding, and blaming the typical movement of rage – especially among young men – that rushes through the community at critical moments like that.

The way people in Port Vila see it, the whole town is a market for sorcery remedies and magical knowledge – and in everyday life people fear the potentiality of being subject to someone's evil scheme. It is in the context of this type of development that we see how there is an important social space in the modern setting where we find the articulation of particular forms of morality, of good and evil, and especially at certain moments when death and illness break out. When *abiou* or *poison* strikes, let us call it 'witchcraft' in order to import it into the comparative world of anthropology, this causes a moral panic in the social world concerned. People will start to search for a way out of the impasse they are in. It is not the case that they can just go to visit someone whom they know as a witch, as in the western cartoon version of witchcraft, and punish her. What I am trying to argue is that *abiou* is more of a dangerous opening between realms than a real person can be accountable for. In a sense the emergence of the witch opens up its own sacrificial space in that very moment. And following from this logic, what people have to do is to *locate* that opening in the moral membrane that separates the world of social relations and the world of forces that lies beyond them. The community has to enter a sacrificial stage.

In traditional divination, the agents chosen for elicitation of truth were objects. As we know from classical studies across the world, bones thrown up into the air, numbers or markers collected in random patterns or of searching into intestines of slaughtered animals supplied answers to the conditions underlying the pathologies of the social world. The complex patterns that emerged would be given the authority to place the client into a total context of sociality – in which his or her life was reinterpreted and reinvigorated with meaning (see, e.g. Kapferer 1997; Graw 2009; Holbraad 2012). It is in this sense that divination can be seen to be a 'therapeutic ritual' (De Boeck 1991). In order to access the

pattern of that space underlying social reality – and thereby in a sense reaching into that space of forces – the diviner had to have particular powers and to be able to enter another state of mind. The degree to which this space of the unknown is permeable is also a matter of technology of access. In Vanuatu, as in Fiji and Tonga, one used the narcotic kava drink for intoxication to get access to a space beyond, described as reaching into the world of spirits (Lindstrom 1981; Turner 1986). Beginning from random patterns, the diviner amasses a whole system of social meaning for the patient. A concealed space is forced to release meaning and significance, and what was unspoken and incomprehensible can now suddenly explode into a multitude of meaning and signification. In a sense divination reveals to the subject his or her total existence through simple heuristic devices of number or patterns (Ascher 2002). They are constitutional technologies that draw a meaningful universe from an assemblage that emerges out of that very significant sphere that is not-here and not-now.

When diviners want to draw out some truth from this hidden reality this can also be achieved through killing some small edible animal, such as a crab, a chicken or a snake. Inside vital organs lie the clues to the interpretation that is the divinatory practice: the truth from beyond life is accessed by attention to essential life substances such as blood, grease or intestines. Although the situation of the young man in Port Vila being beaten up seems to resemble classical aspects of divination, merging the body of the accused witch with the body of the divination oracle, we must also acknowledge how this process takes specific historical forms. In Vanuatu at the moment this whole field of witchcraft, divination and sacrifice is very much informed by a language of Pentecostal Christianity.

Divination and Christianity

In the accounts of ‘traditional Melanesia’, we learn that witchcraft was an underlying structural condition of relations between men and women and an ever-present potential of social relations themselves (Hocart 1925; Malinowski 1926; Layard 1930; Fortune 1932). In many ways, traditional sorcery practices were considered as legitimate and morally ‘good’ (Dalton 2007). There are good reasons for thinking that recent up-scaling of beating, burning or killing of witches in Melanesia can be related to the Pentecostal beliefs that align witchcraft with evil and individual morality, even though this connection has not yet been articulated in academic writing. In Vanuatu today, especially in urban areas, there is a hectic activity of sorting out the problem of sorcery and witch-

craft in the new Pentecostal churches, and people often claim that these churches are designed for exactly the purpose of healing and exorcism. They move into suburbs with what they call 'spiritual warfare' and clean out and exorcise whole neighbourhoods for signs of witchcraft. The great majority of the churches are independent, so-called break away congregations, from the larger, international Pentecostal churches which were established in the 1980s and 1990s. These smaller congregations often have members of only a hundred, some maybe two or three hundred, and they rarely have proper church buildings, often holding services in a backyard, in a tent or in a temporary building with just a roof of corrugated iron and open walls (Eriksen 2008, 2012). They become hotspots for spiritual warfare as they are placed in the middle of the urban neighbourhoods where witchcraft is known to appear most frequently.

Accused witches in these suburbs are held captive in their neighbourhood and the righteous people of the community legitimately beat them up over several days, in order to get them to tell the truth and confess. Here, the apparatuses of the diviner are exchanged for the individual person himself, in imitation of a western court of law, where intent, motif and circumstantial evidence are given importance (Rio 2010). Still, I would claim that the intentionality of the practice is directed at that same ontological space, but becoming adapted to the sacrificial logic of a particular form of Christianity (see also Mayblin and Course 2013).

Participating in these unofficial popular forms of justice and anger, different relatives attack someone who is their son, nephew or cousin. They beat him so severely that he confesses and gives up other accomplices' names. The violence produces its own self-legitimizing evidence. However, the beating is also justified not just as an attack for correcting a wayward son or nephew, but also a cure for removing an evil force that has obstructed and captured his true identity. The violence is not directed towards the individual self, but rather towards a relational field wherein one aspect of a person has to be separated from another. More and more the figure of the witch as an invisibly foregrounded third party is transformed into an image of an *evil* intruder on the person. Accordingly, this is not violence towards the person you knew so well, it is violence that tries to *retrieve* that person you knew so well from the corrupted figure of evil that has captured and hidden away his true identity. If the person dies in the process, you will at least retrieve the authentic body of the person. This is better than living with that other corrupted body, which also represents a threat to other persons.

The direction of the witch-hunt in this Christian context is thus ambiguous. For outsiders it may look like punishment or vengeance, but for relatives of the accused it is about separating the good from the evil so as to restore moral integrity and balance in the person. As such, it is first and foremost an act of order and purity, and in the process the victim of the witch-hunt can be sacrificed for the sake of ending violence and preventing more corruption of the religious ethical order that underpins society. This has much in common with Girard's scapegoat theory (1988) that was also constructed in the context of Christian society – where substitute sacrifice has been a current way of rerouting violence to that which is corrupting moral purity. In the long history of Christianity, I think there is indeed a parallel between the burning of witches and iconoclasts smashing previously holy objects after the reformation in Europe and these born again Christians in Melanesia who now smash their close relative in order to retrieve a true, inner, pure self. But in the latter case, Christianity's language of sacrifice places itself into and transforms a social ontology that holds witchcraft to be a fundamental underlying, constitutional category of social forces. Witchcraft is a negative constitutional power, existing and concealing itself in its own potent space beyond life, and Christian idioms are now used to divine or attack this type of non-being.

The Witch-Hunt as Concealment of Witchcraft

But I also want to draw the attention to another element in this witch-bashing and torture – one that pulls it into relation to the practice of divination above. The problem of the anthropologist is often that she/he enters the scene after the phenomenon has revealed itself – and thereby often describes the gossip and rumours, the accusations, the witch-hunt or the trials following after the event itself. One then falls into the transactionalist trap of perceiving witchcraft itself as the situation of justice, reciprocity of eye for an eye or power politics. In these types of argument, the events of witchcraft and what I see as the social effects and actions coming after the event – of often total social crisis and uncertainty – are merged. We must instead consider, I suggest, that what is going on in the improvised witch-hunts and courts of Vanuatu cannot reveal the nature of witchcraft, but rather the *concealment of its nature*. In the case mentioned; before the event of the father's death there was nothing to hint at the bad relationship between father and son. It was a relation of mutual dependence and agreements over issues such as church belonging and family values. The death, and the part of the son in it, came as a surprise to everyone, and it put into doubt the social relationships surrounding

the father. For a while it represented a total crisis for the community, since every relationship had to be scrutinized. Ultimately, connections had to be made that had hitherto been unpronounced. My first point is, therefore, that we have to ask what a death brought on by witchcraft or sorcery means for the people involved. The answer to this is not as easy as it seems and does not altogether emerge from a realm of conflict, motives or guilt. The death does signal that something is wrong with someone's relations or that someone has corrupted the social order. But it is not so easy to establish what kind of agency is implemented.

In those situations what you observe is an effort to reach into the unknown in the moment of death in order to divine the circumstances of death. There is a particularly moral and sociological potency in that moment when the social environment becomes communally directed towards the death of one of its members. It is a space where the known social circumstances become twisted, doubted and perverted, and the event of witchcraft will cause an energy to again bring certainty to this domain.

In the contemporary situation in Vanuatu, the crowd is uncertain about a man's death and they therefore accuse one of his close relatives. But in their act of accusation they are deforming him into a bloody, unrecognizable creature and try to draw out some words of confession from his new state of being. They beat him up in order to break through to a different form of agency – one that lies beyond his conscious person. The deconstruction of his known person into a pure confessional voice constructs him as a mediator of a hidden truth. In these courts in Vanuatu, the accused often do confess to their own great surprise. They then also recognize afterwards that they could have done it without being aware of it.

I have suggested that the anger and desire to establish guilt must represent emotions that cannot find expressions in other ways. I have hinted that the beating and deformation of the young man in Port Vila suggests that the mob seeks beyond his immediate personality or self. The mob looks for answers that he himself cannot express, and in the same instance as they try to beat answers out of him they instead silence him (compare the work on bodily properties and spirit possession in Jacobson-Widding 1985, 1991, 1999). The silencing or even the killing of the accused carries forth its own *imperfect* solution to an unbearable problem: the problem that forces beyond control have turned up in the midst of one's social relations. Guilt has to be established as a closure and silencing of the truth of the underlying social circumstances. This has a sacrificial logic to it, and in these modern articulations of witchcraft,

Christian evil and moral personhood, the event of beating the accused becomes a merging of divination, sacrifice and punishment. Furthermore, what is at the centre of attention, I claim, is that which is being concealed and in a sense kept secret in the communal efforts. The whole performance of beating up the accused witch is curing the community by taking away the attention from the very emergence of witchcraft in a space beyond the living, and thereby efficiently closing that crack in the membrane between worlds that witchcraft articulates.

I believe this was misunderstood by Levi-Strauss (1963) and Evans-Pritchard (1976) in the frameworks they developed. They took divination and the hectic activity of the witch-hunt to indicate that the event of sorcery or witchcraft was non-existing. The assumption of Levi-Strauss, supported by Evans-Pritchard, is that 'witchcraft has no real existence' (1976: 43). We learnt from Evans-Pritchard in the case of the Azande that the phenomenon itself only starts to gain reality when signs start emanating from the mediation of the rubbing-board or poisoned chicken through the acts of the oracle. To them sorcery or witchcraft is rational because it is an effect of language and narration. It attributes meaning and reality to what is unknown in society. I believe these analyses touch on an important point: death and illness bring us into contact with a social realm that is not immediately reachable within our immediate social relations. It represents a challenge from a realm that is not entirely existing, at least un-existing in terms of immediate, visible social relations, and it forces us to question that which does exist. But this does not need to imply that witchcraft has no existence; simply that the existence is of the unknown or a potentiality of the unknown. We are dealing with a domain of social life that is also the foundation of social life – and I believe this is what these people have to account for in their actions in the witch-trials.

Recent approaches to witchcraft take for granted that only the phenomenon that finds its shape in discourse is the real phenomenon – in contrast to that which is before or beyond the reality of discourse and personal agency (Faavret-Saada 1980; Siegel 2003, 2006; West 2007). This still means that reality commences when the rubbing-board speaks. This is in obvious conflict with how people live with sorcery or witchcraft. They clearly perceive death or illness itself as a major and troublesome part of their reality, and when they act on it, this is what they act on and what they start engaging with in discourse. My claim is that they always act in reaction to or even in resistance to what the event itself tells them. Whereas these authors have been caught in the idea that the witch-hunt creates witchcraft as its language, I claim that the

witch expresses a certain form of intentionality from non-being that brings about the witch-hunt as its sacrificial resistance.

This claim depends on the willingness to allow ontological status to the moment of witchcraft itself and to grant reality to something that is not – yet. The intense activity of naming and constructive discourse of guilt and accusation is as I see it exactly the activity of *hiding* the fact that one conceives of this non-being as a being. The crucial moral point about the witchcraft event is that it threatens to bring that which is not into being – as compared with the intimation of the sacred with the profane in Hubert and Mauss' examples. Language domesticates the witchcraft event through divination and by steering the resulting anger into the rush of the witch-hunt and its controlled sacrifice of the accused witch. This process constructs a world around the sorcery victim where the forces affecting the victim can be controlled. It is a virtual world created for the purpose of removing that potentiality of uncertainty or nothingness that the illness has revealed. The ritual proceedings are trying to control that space that is beyond control and hidden from view in normal social life and to purposefully treat the victim and the witch in that space of witchcraft itself. Only in this respect can the beating, the deformation of the witch's face and body into a bloody scene, make sense as a constructive process.

Sacrifice as Closing

According to Hubert and Mauss' definition, a central part of sacrifice is that it 'modifies the moral person who accomplishes it' (1964: 13). What does the witch-bashing accomplish for the persons involved in it? It fits into the scheme of Hubert and Mauss of sacralizing and desacralizing, although in two different ways. First, the beating of the sacrificial victim or witch has a sacralizing effect for the audience at the football field as it reveals the highly potent rupture in the social membrane. The young man bursting forth in a discourse that lies beyond him, underneath his bloody face, becomes the centre of attention as well as a source of danger. At this moment, he is indeed conceived as dangerous and uncontrollable, and the mob can only attack him because they are offered protection with magical remedies. But the beating and treatment that he is given also has a desacralizing effect, so that the moral person can be retrieved through the beating in order to reappear as a sociable being again. After the interrogations and beating, the accused witch will reappear as a relative and will go back to his or her normal desacralized being. It is often surprising that the person who is in one moment the centre of the violence, accusations and victimization in the next moment appears completely

unblemished as a moral person. The desacralization is completed as the sacrifice has managed to successfully close the opening that was produced by insatiable and evil appetites bursting forth from the realm of the constitutional forces. In general, then, where sacrifice is action upon the membrane from the side of being; witchcraft is action upon the membrane from the side of non-being.

This cross-section between sacrifice and the witch-hunt can possibly be further sustained by de Heusch's general point about the grave cosmological worries underlying human sacrifice: 'It is more particularly when the stakes of a sacrifice are of a collective and cosmological nature that the preferential victim is none other than man himself' (1985: 205). A horizon for all cosmological sacrifice in de Heusch's African examples is the killing of the king who embodies the cosmological principles. De Heusch gives us hints about how the killing of Jesus in the Christian tradition is also a version of such a royal killing (1985: 199), in continuation of the story of the Hebrew kingdoms in the Old Testament. However, the killing of Jesus in the New Testament deviates from royal sacrifice as de Heusch finds it in Africa, and how it used to be in the old Hebrew world, by asserting that sin, impurity and abomination is a pollution from within and not from without (1985: 196). This establishes a moral scale between Christ and Satan, and it also delegates cosmological worries to the body of the individual as it holds the principle of Jesus's sacrifice internally. I think this provides an analytical entry into the contemporary killing of witches in the Pentecostal context of Vanuatu. Here, an ontology of an invisibly foregrounded thirdness combines with the Christian axiom that the individual body is the seat of good and bad and that the moral world is contained internally in the person. Whereas the locus of the divination practices in Pre-Christian Melanesia was a realm of forces beyond human control, the modern equivalent ritual is directly attacking the moral person and making that into both an instrument of divination and a sacrificial body analogous to Jesus. In the Vanuatu case, extraction and closing seem to occur simultaneously through the medium of the witch.

Conclusion

Through these examples I have tried to create a way to better understand the realm of non-being by addressing the intentionality of this space, the directionality of actions and prestations, and by allowing the witch-hunt to further our understanding of this space. Like other kinds of desacralizing acts the witch-hunt closes an opening between realms in which too much continuity has occurred. We can say that the witch trial re-establishes the tenuous

separateness of realms, and a point that can be drawn out in relation to the overall thrust of this volume is that sacrifice and witchcraft both apply close attention and regulation to the potent permeability between realms.

At the same time I am struggling to describe a field of social experience that is mostly alien to the western world. As a western person, I have difficulties understanding the violence of the witch-hunt or the real power of sacrifice. To account for this incomprehension, I arrive at a claim that societies where sacrifice and witchcraft are dominant life-principles also have a form of regulated openness to their own constitution that western society does not have. Here, death is merely disappearance; it is not contagious or invading. Instead of sacrifice and witchcraft as life-principles, western society seems to be based on exchange and objectification. Here, destruction is not regenerative, it is instead structured on mechanics and industry, like, for instance, warfare, which is about producing series of dead bodies. But this does not mean that outbursts of re-openings of hidden potent realms are not possible. They lie there, in the very potentiality of our human being. And in relation to the topic of this volume, all of this becomes interesting with regard to the formulation of the concept of the individual and the way that concept is exposed to pressure from other life-principles: as we have seen in my examples of Pentecostal Christians attacking the individual as a source of evil and guilt, through which witchcraft as an underlying potentiality arises.

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