

SORCERY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SOUTHEAST AMBRYM, VANUATU

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Introduction

In this paper I examine the nature of sorcery beliefs in the context of social change among the Melanesians of southeast Ambrym, one of the central islands in the Vanuatu chain.¹ The question of whether sorcery was or is actually practised is not pursued, since the social consequences of belief are what mainly concern an outside observer. The various forms of sorcery allegedly practised in Ambrym are very similar to those reported for the rest of Melanesia, and have been described elsewhere (Tonkinson 1968:36-38). Despite some broadly homogeneous elements in the nature and functions of sorcery throughout Melanesia, there is also a remarkable diversity which makes heuristically useful generalizations difficult to abstract from the data. Perhaps it is only by focusing on atypical features in any given case that the task of identifying fundamental shared principles, from which secondary elaborations are generated, can be advanced. Much of this paper focuses on one such feature: the absence in southeast Ambrym of public, face-to-face sorcery accusations, counter-accusations and debate. Attention is concentrated on the potential victims of sorcery attack, and this has important implications for social control and the maintenance of a prevailing ethos of surface calm.

Before presenting data from southeast Ambrym, however, brief mention is made of some of the broader issues that have been raised concerning sorcery in its Melanesian contexts, because these are relevant to an understanding of the southeast Ambrymese situation.

Glick (1973:182-186), in an overview of sorcery and witchcraft in New Guinea, notes that both institutions relate to anxieties and conflicts that emerge "in the context of a particular community's culture, economic conditions and social history". Following Marwick (1972), he suggests that rapid social change produces conflicts similar to those that have always underlain sorcery, which is why in Melanesia and elsewhere both institutions have proved remarkably durable. Historical factors loom large but are a source of difficulty because an accurate knowledge of pre-European contact societies is frequently lacking. In areas where physical aggression and sorcery co-existed, for example, it is difficult to ascertain the nature of their interrelationship. After pacification brought an end to feuding and associated violence, the significance of sorcery undoubtedly altered and the incidence probably increased, but this cannot be verified in the absence of a reliable baseline.

One widespread consequence of colonialism was an intensification in the mobility of Melanesians and an accelerated diffusion of many indigenous cultural elements, including sorcery objects and techniques (cf. Zelenietz, this volume; Tonkinson 1977). This profoundly altered the role of sorcery in many areas, and was frequently a factor in an increased out-migration. The role of sorcery in evening out "demographic bumps" has been noted by Lindenbaum (1975), and its

relationship to group fission and realignment has also been highlighted in connection with African sorcery and witchcraft (Douglas 1963; Mair 1969). Major demographic changes consequent upon contact with Europeans were widespread, but again it is not known whether people blamed the sharp population decline on sorcery. Certainly in more recent times the introduction of more effective health services has contributed to large drops in mortality rates, which in many areas have been linked by the Melanesians to diminution in the activity of sorcerers. Despite the spread of Western medical technology, however, the absence of credible alternative explanations for sudden death remains a potent factor in the retention by Melanesians of sorcery beliefs. As Turner (1964) has pointed out, sorcery is as much a medically related phenomenon as is malaria, so the fewer people who die before their time, the less often people are likely to evoke sorcery in *ex post facto* explanation of such deaths.

The intimate link between sorcery and social tensions, and sorcery's potential for providing avenues for redress, probably relates closely to the absence in much of Melanesia of efficient alternative methods for the settlement of disputes. Lindenbaum (1975) suggests that sorcery accusations may be necessary for the regulation of symbiotic relations in acephalous, competitive societies. If sorcery does have such functions in conflict resolution, and physical redress is no longer feasible, the effectiveness of indigenous or colonially imposed judicial structures could have an important bearing on the incidence and role of sorcery.

It is clear from the Melanesian literature that there are two opposing aspects of the relationship between sorcery and social status, and both tendencies are often present in the same society. Sorcery can function to bolster status or it can be a major factor in status degradation (cf. Lindenbaum 1979; Young 1971; Sansom 1972). A widely reported consequence of this situation reveals the conservative role of sorcery in modernizing societies: the belief that people who achieve success as entrepreneurs, politicians, and so on will invoke sorcery attacks on themselves or their families by envious and jealous others (see the papers by Zelenietz and Lederman in this volume). While it may be true that the force of Christianity may have contributed significantly to sorcery's decline, the strength of certain socioeconomic changes, such as those favouring individual entrepreneurship and capital formation, may ultimately be more powerful reasons for people to devalue or eliminate sorcery. For those who allegedly practise sorcery, however, and exploit their reputation to increase their prestige and wealth, its elimination will be strongly contested unless feasible alternative avenues to the same goals become possible. This kind of resistance to the elimination of sorcery will be most common in areas where sorcerers are self-identifying and their role is ambiguously endowed by others with positive as well as negative aspects. Even where no one admits publicly to the practice of sorcery, certain suspected individuals can manipulate the situation for personal gain, and many are the Melanesian big men who have done so.

In the discussion that follows, an account is first given of the changing status of sorcery in southeast Ambrym, then the nature of the "communicative work" involved in the institution is outlined, and finally some major demographic and social consequences are presented.

The Changing Status of Sorcery

Today about 1600 ni-Vanuatu live in fifteen villages and a number of small hamlets in the southeast corner of Ambrym Island. At the time of first contact with Europeans, dating from about the 1870s, the population was far more dispersed through this culturally homogeneous area. Most people lived in lineage-based

hamlets and some in large hamlet-clusters, or villages. The patrilineage was the most important corporate group above the level of the family, and the ideal of patrilocal residence was closely approximated in practice, with considerable hamlet-village exogamy. Throughout the area, and to a limited extent beyond it, individuals were interlinked by a multiplicity of ties based on kinship, friendship and attendant reciprocity. Intervillage feuds and warfare sometimes occurred but rarely hardened into permanent states of hostility, and shifted in locale and intensity over time. Attacks were typically carried out by small groups of co-resident kinsmen and involved ambushes and brief skirmishes; there was nothing akin to the pitched battles of the Grand Valley Dani (cf. Heider 1970). Conflicts centered around pigs, women, theft, land boundaries, sorcery suspicions and unfulfilled obligations, and were probably more common between members of contiguous settlements. Conflicts within the local community were constrained by strong values attaching to kin solidarity and by felt needs for cooperation in communal activities, which included defence against external threats.

The introduction of the public graded society (*mangki*), an institution of major importance in central and northern Vanuatu, occurred not long before European contact. The *mangki* then suffered a rapid demise in southeast Ambrym, so little definite is known about the extent to which it had transformed the egalitarian atmosphere of the men's house into a stratified mini-society dominated by men who had attained the highest ritual grades. Little also is known of the effect of the graded society on the institution of chieftainship, which predated the *mangki*. Chiefs (*suv*) had exclusive insignia of rank and special rights and privileges; succession was patrilineal and a chief's installation was an important ceremonial occasion at which chiefs from other, currently friendly, settlements presided. A vital element in the power of chiefs was their monopoly over sorcery, which was allegedly used to maintain the loyalty of their followers (by threatening persistent offenders) and to combat the power of outside enemies, real or imagined.

Sorcery was considered a legitimate institution, which kept people in line in an otherwise somewhat anarchic society marked by a strong ethos of equality among males, whose aggressive individualism suggested a dislike of the exercise of authority over them. The use of sorcery to counter external threats or to even the balance in feuds was considered by in-group members to be a definite good. But chiefs were for the most part indistinguishable from other men in their life-styles and everyday behaviour, so many were probably suspected of succumbing to the temptation to use sorcery for selfish, personal ends. People were no doubt ambivalent about sorcery and feared any use of it motivated by caprice, greed or vindictiveness.

The chiefs are thought to have lost their monopoly over the use of sorcery some time after European contact, possibly following the importation of sorcery from other areas by men returning from plantation work outside Ambrym. Once the belief was established that anyone could obtain and use the necessary sorcery materials, a rapid decline in its legitimacy was inevitable. Many chiefs of course retained strong reputations as sorcerers, but in an area that had become in its entirety nominally Christian by the 1920s, the tides of change were against them and sorcery was condemned as evil and antithetical to a Christian lifestyle. If the diffusion of sorcery had coincided with unprecedented population decline following the introduction of new diseases by Europeans, the Melanesians probably viewed this traumatic development as proof that sorcery was indeed out of control. Another import, in the form of rifles, was responsible for changing the technology of the feud and ambush such that a great many deaths are said to have occurred. The popularity of Christianity after it gained a foothold in southeast Ambrym around the turn of the century was possibly in large part due to its

message of peace, finding ready ears at a time when killing was thought to be getting out of hand.

Ni-Vanuatu teacher-catechists who had spearheaded Christianity in southeast Ambrym were soon replaced by local men, none of whom were chiefs. The chiefs and many other adults remained unbaptised and illiterate well into the 1940s. The division of role and interests between chiefs and catechists remained an important one. Tensions existed between the tradition-oriented chiefs, who were thought to be active sorcerers, and the Christian leaders who opposed sorcery on religious grounds. Since pacification, the chiefs had instituted an informal area-wide council whose members met periodically and presided at the installation of new village chiefs, who were required to make a special payment (*ai*) for the right to plant a particular croton that symbolized peace and chiefly authority. This payment was considered by the populace to entitle new chiefs to obtain powerful sorcery and to participate in secret meetings at which the deaths of people who had defied or displeased the chiefs were planned. So secrecy and sorcery continued to be associated in people's minds with many of the older chiefs, and they were no longer willing to believe that such sorcery was justified.

Everyone believed in the reality and efficacy of sorcery powers, and for the committed Christians, its continued presence was a major impediment to the attainment of a truly Christian society.

In the late 1940s, following several years of intensified contact between Melanesians and Europeans during the Allied presence in Vanuatu in World War II, a group of determined teacher-catechists in southeast Ambrym decided to issue an open challenge to the conservative chiefs whose tacit resistance to Christianity and alleged sorcery activities were anathema to them. They attempted to impose a Christian dominated political structure on southeast Ambrym, by installing adjunct chiefs (all Christians) in every village and promulgating a large number of new rules. Faced with the possible loss of what authority remained to them, the tradition-oriented chiefs retaliated initially with veiled sorcery threats against the Christians. When even this extreme measure failed to dampen the resolve and enthusiasm of the catechists, the chiefs successfully allied with a couple of local white traders (whose liquor sales were threatened by the new rules) and secured the intervention of the French District Agent. The leading Christians were depicted as anticolonial cargo-cultists, convicted and removed from the island for several years (Tonkinson 1968:52-56).

The defeat of the reformers was not loudly lamented by the populace, who resented what they considered to be bothersome and unjust rules imposed by the Christian leaders. They were accustomed to a high degree of self-regulation and to little interference in their daily lives by the chiefs, whose assertiveness declined with the realization that many other men probably possessed the ability to work sorcery against them if offended. The people balked at the imposition of so many new constraints on their loosely organized existence. Apart from the dubious possibility that sorcery could be suddenly eradicated by Christian fiat, they saw little in the way of tangible benefits (and much more work; e.g. in the fencing in of their pigs) to be gained from conformity to the new rules. After the Christian leaders had been taken away, further initiatives against the traditionalists ceased and life returned to normal; the rules were abandoned, the adjunct chiefs resigned and the alleged practice of sorcery continued unabated. Southeast Ambrym remained isolated, neglected and developmentally backward compared to many other parts of the country. Basic medical facilities were lacking, mortality rates were high, and virtually all of the many deaths that occurred were attributed to sorcery.

It was not until 1973 that a second direct attack on sorcery was organized. A forceful young Christian leader came to the fore and mounted a spectacularly

successful evangelical campaign aimed at the eradication of magical objects and practices from southeast Ambrym (for details, see Tonkinson 1979a, 1979b, n.d.a). Predictably, no one confessed to the actual performance of sorcery, but a great many magical objects were surrendered and destroyed. Sorcery became a topic for open and uninhibited discussion, and for the first time, men with reputations as sorcerers were confronted and invited to deny accusations under Biblical oath. There was great euphoria, firm conviction that the power of the Holy Spirit had triumphed permanently over evil, and marked changes in behaviour indicative of greatly lessened fear of sorcery attack. A dramatic drop in the number of deaths, which followed the establishment of clinics and improved health care, helped convince most southeast Ambrymese that sorcery had indeed declined drastically.

Although sorcery rumours still sometimes surface, when sudden deaths occur and medical explanations carry little weight, people are now much more likely to dismiss them as unfounded or malicious. To date no area-wide panic has resulted, and the high levels of anxiety generated in several villages where people have died were shortlived. It is significant that a second evangelical campaign, mounted in 1978 with the aim of injecting new life into the religious community, totally ignored the topic of sorcery. This suggests strongly that sorcery no longer occupied a central place in the minds of the southeast Ambrymese.

Sorcery's loss of legitimacy is reflected in the characteristics that people attributed to sorcerers in the early 1970s when its occurrence was allegedly common: sickly looks, poor hygiene, absenteeism from church, night prowling and a propensity for making veiled threats when angered. But in the minds of some of the chiefs, at least, there lingered a strong conviction that sorcery deserved some positive status as an agent of social control in the right hands. In 1975, a few of the older chiefs felt reassured enough by changing valuations in Vanuatu of "traditional" cultural elements (*kastom*, in Pidgin) to make a public plea for reconsideration of sorcery as a legitimate chiefly power. A well educated local man had returned to southeast Ambrym as its Presbyterian pastor and political leader in 1974, at a time of rapidly rising political consciousness among ni-Vanuatu intelligentsia (cf. Tonkinson n.d.b; n.d.c). *Kastom* was assuming a new role in the growing resentment by indigenous people of colonial domination and the massive cultural loss that had resulted. This positive view of *kastom* was seen as essential to the development of a strong local and national identity.²

In a meeting of southeast Ambrym's chiefs, one of several at which debate about the nature of local "traditional" culture had taken place, several chiefs broached the topic of sorcery, saying that it had been an important part of chiefs' power before and, as strong *kastom* that had kept people in line, it should not have been wiped out by the Church. It was not clear to these men that, implicit in the notion that *kastom* should be fostered, was an understanding that only those kinds of *kastom* not antithetical to Christianity should be retained. The lay preacher who had led both evangelical campaigns replied to these chiefs, saying that secret activities which cause fear are evil and must not be revived, otherwise the Holy Spirit will turn the power of sorcery objects against their possessors and kill them. Nothing more was said, but later several of the sorcery advocates became ill and blamed their condition on their desire to retain sorcery. They appealed to the lay preacher, who prayed for them, and they later attributed their recovery to the superior power of the Holy Spirit.

Divination and Social Control

In southeast Ambrym the malevolent intervention of spirits of the dead can cause illness or occasionally death in those who have somehow offended them or their living descendants. But until the early 1970s sorcery was considered to be the

major cause of death, and everyone had a fund of stories proving the existence of sorcerers and sorcery among them. Although every adult male had the potential to become a sorcerer, very few were widely suspected of being one. No two people's lists of suspects would be identical, but some men, including certain older *kastom* chiefs (i.e. men who remained "tradition"-oriented rather than "Christian"-oriented), had widespread reputations.

The strong undercurrent of sorcery suggested tensions and hostility that were conspicuously absent from the surface of life in southeast Ambrym. The society that has evolved since the coming of Christianity is notable for its tranquility. There has not been a grievous assault or homicide in decades, despite the fact that no colonial officials or police were ever stationed there, and prior to the 1960s visits by such outsiders were rare. Southeast Ambrymese are neither socially aggressive nor litigious, and very little competitiveness is evident in their society. People consistently try to avoid conflict and confrontation, and overt hostility or outbursts of unbridled anger by adults are rare, except for domestic strife between a small minority of spouses. The characteristically high degree of self-regulation is maintained through the operation of informal sanctions such as gossip, rebuke, shame and embarrassment.

Neither chiefs nor Church elders have played active coercive roles, preferring not to intervene when disputes do arise unless requested or forced to. Prior to the 1970s, much of their reluctance to be forceful stemmed from fears that sorcery would be used against them in reprisal for interference, particularly in cases of domestic strife, which people strongly regard as personal and private. Southeast Ambrymese, like most other Melanesians it seems, share a strong conviction that if you offend someone else and then fail to make amends in some way, they will never forgive you, and could resort to sorcery as a secret way of evening the score. The big problem is that other people's inner reactions and secret motives cannot be known or accurately guessed at, so the risk of unintended offence is always present in social interaction.

Given a prevailing situation of calm and friendly interaction, it is not surprising that people in southeast Ambrym were not given to translating private suspicions about others into public accusations of sorcery. For one thing, it is obviously very difficult, if not impossible, to prove the offence, and for another, it would involve the kind of confrontation that people strenuously attempt to avoid. Instead, much of what has been termed the "communicative work" (cf. Sansom 1972) essential to sorcery's functioning was carried out in southeast Ambrym by diviners (*lele*) who warned men that they were in danger of imminent sorcery attack. The diviners did not, however, identify the putative sorcerer(s) concerned, although they sometimes indicated the direction of origin of the impending attack.

Lele, most of whom are men, have an acquired ability to divine such attacks and to discern whether or not particular illnesses are sorcery-related.³ These individuals became *lele* through successful completion of a secret initiation and practical tests. As children or young adults, they may have asked, or been asked by, established *lele* to be initiated into the art of divination. The location of lost or stolen objects and the foretelling of events and arrivals are other skills simultaneously acquired during the initiation when leaf-medicines are applied to their nose. If at the same instant that they are thinking of a particular person the left side of their nose itches, *lele* divine that this person is in danger. People troubled by illness or by encounters with disturbing omens often visit *lele* to request a divination. Some clients are seeking a second opinion, having already been alerted by a different *lele*. The diviners, who do not request payment for their services but nevertheless expect a small gift from clients other than close kin, usually render an either-or diagnosis: "Your way is clear" or "Take care! Your way is blocked." When

sorcery was allegedly rife, everyone was a potential victim, but significantly *lele* never divined that women were in danger of impending sorcery attack. However, it was generally thought that all family members of a man so divined were also in some danger, and certainly women's deaths were no less often attributed to sorcery than the deaths of men, or of children. This sex differential probably relates to the fact of women's lower socioeconomic status and the unlikelihood that, outside the domestic situation, women become involved as principals in conflicts with men.

Upon receiving an adverse divination, men's responses varied. Some locked themselves in their houses and restricted the movements of other members of their families until later divinations revealed that the danger had passed. Those who diagnosed their peril as stemming from some offence or unfulfilled obligation took steps to compensate and thus pacify the putative sorcerer. Many men would pay a small sum of money to their village chief, for passing on to his colleagues in other villages until the money was claimed by whoever was angry. The non-return of the money was interpreted by the donor as a sign that the offended party was satisfied and would refrain from resort to sorcery. Another possible response, one that was very common in the period since World War II, was for men, often with their families, to flee from the homeland.

Almost all such emigrants headed for the two main towns, Vila and Santo, where employment and other facilities were generally available. They remained away until they, or relatives in Ambrym, considered it safe for them to return. In 1967, some 40% of the total southeast Ambrymese population was absent from the homeland. Some were in towns for medical or educational reasons, and some because of insufficient land or coconuts in Ambrym, but the majority had fled out of fear of sorcery attack. Their absences ranged from a few months to many years, and some who left Ambrym in the 1950s and 1960s have not yet returned. Until the early 1970s, fear of sorcery provided an acceptable excuse for their failure to return home, but events since then have radically altered the situation in southeast Ambrym, so a large return migration could occur, especially of those whose economic and social stake in the urban milieu is not great (cf. Tonkinson 1979a).

The link between sorcery and social control in southeast Ambrym was clear in the data I gathered at a time when people believed that sorcery was endemic in their society. Although some sorcery deaths were widely held to be "accidental", as in the case of mistaken identity or poor aim, resulting in the wrong person being "hit" or an innocent person being used callously for target practice by sorcerers testing their powers, most serious illness and death attributed to sorcery was connected in people's minds to some antecedent disturbance of the status quo. Most sorcery scares were attributed to sources outside the village (except in the case of the largest villages, in several of which there are longstanding tensions among certain of the residential sub-groupings, or "small-names") but within southeast Ambrym, and rarely would fellow lineage members become prime suspects after disputes within this group or within an extended family. Those who had reason to believe that they were under threat (as a result of *lele* divination, rumour, omens or believed "near misses") often reported being puzzled at the reason, if they could not recall any wrong-doing and felt reasonably sure that they had not offended anyone in the recent past.

Of 45 men interviewed in 1973, 36 reported at least one sorcery scare involving themselves as potential victims, and three quarters of these men attributed the imminent attack to some remembered disturbance, such as a dispute over women, land boundaries or coconuts, or the belief that they had offended *kastom*-oriented chiefs. About two thirds of those imperilled were alerted by *lele*, eleven were warned by kin or friends who had heard rumours, and three recognized omens, such as the sudden death of a prized pig. Several informants had paid money directly to certain

kastom chiefs, two of whom were revealed to have received countless gifts of money and liquor when they were put on trial before a District Agent in 1973. Both these men were widely feared, and although only one was a *lele*, both had issued innumerable warnings to men throughout southeast Ambrym, to intimidate them and thus induce gift-giving. In retrospect, it was generally agreed that the chief who had *lele* powers was using them falsely, but no one ever openly challenged him; and since he most often chose people who were known to have been in some kind of trouble, it was inevitable that they would accept his divinations at face value.

Whether men reacted by restricting their movements or by fleeing the island, their cessation of normal interaction had important implications for social control. Using intermediaries, they generally sought to placate the person they suspected of wanting to harm them; this was done through gift-giving. But they would not resort to open confrontation. Patterson (1974) has argued that sorcery fears are inspired by contemplation of the consequences if the putative sorcerer is not made to desist, and that the deterrent function of sorcery is much less significant. But in southeast Ambrym an element of social control is clearly involved and informants state that they have at times refrained from certain actions because they did not want to invite sorcery attack.

As an idiom for the expression of interpersonal tensions and as a facilitator of compensatory gestures in advance of an expected attack, sorcery in southeast Ambrym had its eufunctional aspects, particular with respect to the discouragement of deviant behaviour and the encouragement of balance in reciprocity. There were obvious advantages for everyday life in having the focus for reaction rest heavily on the side of the impending victim rather than the putative attacker. Individuals were frightened into line or out of southeast Ambrym, and many took steps to rectify imbalances that they or their close kin decided were the root cause of their predicament. In a sense, many battles were won without a shot being fired or any ruffle appearing in the pervasive surface calm of the society. Seen in this light, a strong case could be made for sorcery as a legitimate force in the society — a sophisticated homeostat that promotes equilibrium without having the social fabric torn asunder by open accusations and hostile confrontations.

The question is thus why sorcery came to be regarded as an entirely negative force in southeast Ambrym since its loss of status as a legitimate weapon of chiefs in their roles as defenders of their followers and as enforcers of village law. A major reason is that it has become identified with secrecy, death and evil powers and in the view of the Ambrymese must be condemned because it breeds fear, tension and hostility. Villages are no longer at war, and sorcery no longer has an acceptable place in the prosecution of intervillage quarrels when they occur. The trouble with sorcery is that too many innocent people of all ages are thought to be its victims. There are too many motiveless deaths: accidental, experimental and mistaken-identity killings. This suggests to people an essential lack of control, a disorderliness which convinces beyond a doubt that reckless and inexperienced men are not in full command of the dangerous powers they are manipulating. Alternatively, if they are experienced practitioners, their resort to sorcery stems from essentially antisocial motives: maliciousness, vindictiveness, jealousy and envy. There may also be a motive of personal gain, of the thrill of scaring other people, which is shared with many of the rumour-mongers in the society. The two chiefs who were tried in 1973 had clearly exploited people's fear of sorcery for personal gain without ever admitting to the practice of sorcery themselves. Sorcery attacks a person's reservoir of power (*xeihen*), depleting and sometimes extinguishing it, thus causing death. As such, it stands in direct opposition to the beneficent powers of the Holy Spirit, and so the Christian people of southeast Ambrym had to deny that sorcery has any legitimacy whatsoever in their society. As Lindenbaum (1979:146) notes, sorcery hints at tyranny.

It is nevertheless impossible for adult southeast Ambrymese to expunge sorcery completely from the individual or collective consciousness. A bad omen, a shadowy figure or inexplicable occurrence can still evoke spasms of acute anxiety in most people, and the major problem of explaining satisfactorily unexpected death remains. Several deaths between 1978 and 1980 gave rise to sorcery scares, especially in the case where two local *lele* divined sorcery as the cause of death. Yet the anxiety that arose was localized and short-term in spite of the spread of rumours well beyond the confines of the villages concerned. No one in southeast Ambrym denies the magnitude of sorcery's decline there, or envisages the possibility of a return to the situation prior to 1973.

Conclusion: Sorcery and Social Change

Two events — the loss by chiefs of their traditional monopoly of control over sorcery, and conversion to Christianity — were instrumental in transforming the status of sorcery in southeast Ambrym. Its decline in legitimacy and strongly negative valuation today are explicable primarily in terms of these two post-contact developments. The introduction of cash-cropping (copra) radically altered people's perceptions about land and its value and eventually led to considerable tension and dispute. Such changes do not detract from Marwick's suggestion (see Introduction, above) that the conflicts thus engendered are similar to those that have always underlain sorcery. The major difference is that these conflicts are played out in a greatly transformed social field, and very rarely is there a resort to physical violence. People are now much more mobile than before and have been exposed to a vastly greater diversity of external influences, causing greater individual variation in thought and perception. This increased heterogeneity is reinforced by the increasing presence in southeast Ambrym of ni-Vanuatu from other islands, as wives of local men and as school and clinic employees.

Increased mobility has enabled people to escape, temporarily or permanently, from the networks of obligation and responsibility in which they had been enmeshed on Ambrym, or, in the years prior to the anti-sorcery campaign in 1973, from the threat of impending sorcery attack. Men believed strongly that as long as they remained in the town centres they were reasonably safe from sorcery attack, although visits by suspected sorcerers from southeast Ambrym were closely monitored by men who had felt themselves to be at risk in the homeland.

Two notable aspects of this out-migration deserve comment. The village with the largest population, and the greatest pressure on available land and coconuts, had a disproportionately large number of suspected sorcerers and the biggest absentee population (with the exception of Maat village, an atypical case; cf. Tonkinson 1968). These correlations lend support to the suggestion by Lindenbaum (1979:133) that sorcery appears to contribute to the resolution of particular demographic and productive problems. A second significant aspect is the fact that a high proportion of men who had been frightened off Ambrym were unmarried — though it should be noted that this category is the most mobile and adventurous anyway. Southeast Ambrym has an atypically high naturally occurring excess of males over females, with a consequent shortage of women in the marriageable age-groups. So the absence of young men increases the likelihood that they will befriend and marry women from other islands. This trend is evident and is increasing.

Sorcery's decline in southeast Ambrym has not been paralleled by any notable change in the social conditions that give rise to tensions and conflicts. On the contrary, if the trickle of returning absentees should become a flood, trouble over usurped land and coconuts could quickly escalate. In the past, local village and

chiefs' courts have not had great success in resolving serious and chronic conflicts over land ownership and coconuts.⁴ If sorcery is to disappear permanently, the effective operation of judicial structures could be as important as the necessity that people dissociate serious illness and death from sorcery. The only "traditional" alternative was to blame spirits of the dead, but this was uncommon, and in recent times the alleged impingement of such spirits on human affairs has declined considerably. Almost all the special spirit-homes (*votui*), tabooed forest enclaves that once dotted the area, have been desecrated by planting them with gardens and coconuts, in accordance with Christian convictions that such beliefs should not be maintained. Since it was in these secluded spots that sorcerers were alleged to light their special fires and practice their art, sorcerers as well as ancestral spirits lost their havens.

An important carry-over from pre-contact times was the association in people's minds between sorcery and the role of chiefs in social control. Although some of the *kastom* chiefs did not closely approximate the popular stereotype of the sorcerer, their failure to take an active role in Church affairs branded them as suspected sorcerers in the eyes of many people. It was inevitable that people would reject any chiefly pleas for reconsideration of the positive aspects of sorcery in a Christian society committed to a universal sharing of the beneficent powers of the Holy Spirit. The secret manipulation of evil powers, which had been made possible once sorcery became available to all men, prohibited Church leaders from allowing a dichotomization of sorcery into its positive coercive and negative destructive functions.

It is evident that long-standing Melanesian conceptions about power have carried over into the present and have an important bearing on sorcery beliefs. Power is something inherently variable, capable of augmentation or loss as a result of human or spiritual action, either life-sustaining or lethal, manipulable and frequently subject to competing pressures. The attack on sorcery that was mounted during the 1973 evangelical campaign was congruent with this view. At no time did the leaders attempt to deny the reality of sorcery powers; instead, they stressed that the superior power of the Holy Spirit would triumph, turning the evil powers of sorcery objects back upon their possessors to sicken or kill them if they failed to dispose of such objects. Following the campaign, the deaths of two chiefs widely suspected of sorcery were attributed to the power of their unsundered sorcery objects backfiring. The belief that Christian powers can be punitive is privately contested by a few individuals, who deny that the Holy Spirit, as a sign of God's love, can be anything but beneficent. If this "heresy" were to become widespread and was coupled with the notion that the defeat of the evil powers of sorcery was but a temporary setback, the stage would be set for a re-emerging of sorcery fears. In pre-contact times, people gained strength primarily by magical means and the drinking of leaf-medicines or smoking of their bodies over special fires. They protected their strength with different kinds of magic used to envelop their houses, villages and gardens and themselves in a kind of *cordon sanitaire*. Today, leaf-medicines remain important, but the magical shields have been replaced by the power of prayer and of faith in God. If sorcery is to be expunged from the individual and collective consciousness, it will be necessary for people to have internalized a Christian theodicy powerful enough not only to explain satisfactorily serious illness and sudden death, but also to resign people to such misfortunes.

The consumption of alcohol, which occurs irregularly and depends largely on the availability of supplies, is a non-traditional element in the contemporary culture that has an important bearing on conflict and sorcery fears. Drunken comportment is supported by a shared fiction that people affected by alcohol are not fully responsible for their behaviour. This allows men (women do not drink) to say and

do things that would be unthinkable when they are sober, such as engaging in hostile verbal and physical attacks on others, who in many cases are also drunk. Also, until recently at least, some men were prone to voicing suspicions, boasts or veiled threats about sorcery. Drunken fighting generates as much tension as it resolves, but the fact that combatants are frequently closely related suggests that for them alcohol enables the expression of rivalries between siblings and others whose social relationships are ideally highly solidary. Alcohol is used in southeast Ambrym by many people to get privately nurtured hurts or grudges off their chests and to air dissatisfactions in ways too embarrassing to contemplate when sober. As with sober anger, drunken aggression is sometimes turned on themselves and it is common for men to injure themselves by punching walls. The social consequences of drunken talk concerning sorcery depend on the nature and receptivity of the audience, but it appears that alcohol's disinhibiting effect has facilitated some of the "communicative work" involved in sorcery, with effects that are both cathartic and productive of anxiety or conflict.

Patterson (1974-5) has hypothesized that in societies similar in social organization to that of southeast Ambrym, almost all death and intractable illness will be attributed to the malevolent supernatural capabilities of human beings, but non-human agencies will be blamed for some illness and death.⁵ This is indeed the case in southeast Ambrym, where it is also true that most serious illnesses or death were attributed to sorcerers outside the village, since intravillage sorcery was allegedly rare in all except the largest multicarpellary villages. But one of the many changes consequent upon European contact has been a decline in the solidarity of the village unit as an in-group. With the cessation of ambushes, raiding and feuds, the village's important role in attack and defence ended. Differences among the "small-names" within the village increased as land and coconuts assumed new and altered significance in the local economy. Furthermore, within the lineage there has been a steady increase in the fragmentation of once communally-held land into family holdings. Today individual ownership of plots of land, coconut plantations and trees predominates. There is still considerable emphasis on communal labour and village solidarity, but the bases for such organization are for the most part of post-contact origin, and the social significance of the household unit is much greater than formerly. Family and lineage brothers are competing for the same land and coconut resources, and the tensions thus generated surface mostly in drunken fights and confrontations. When sorcery was still rife, people asserted that siblings and lineage mates would never resort to practising sorcery on one another, but some suggested that if a man were angry enough he might hire an outside sorcerer to sicken or kill, or at least scare away from the homeland, his brother.

In southeast Ambrym of the early 1970s, then, the lines of trust and solidarity were drawn far closer to the household unit in defining the ingroup beyond which sorcery attack might originate. The larger the village, the more likely it was that sorcery fears could focus on co-members of the village unit who belonged to different "small-names". In smaller villages, where people were generally less preoccupied with conflict over land boundaries and coconuts, and young men tended to find girlfriends outside the village, there was greater confidence that sorcery attacks would not issue from within the village.

If the post-contact changes just cited are ignored, Patterson's hypothesis seems to hold good for southeast Ambrym, but its basis in the sociology of conflict still appears to overlook some major considerations, particularly the dynamics of the communicative work that must occur wherever sorcery beliefs have behavioural consequences. Both realms, belief and action, are equally important, and their differing relationships suggest a utility in distinguishing between sorcery and the sorcerer.⁶ In southeast Ambrym as elsewhere there was considerable interest on the

part of seriously ill or threatened people in identifying their putative attacker(s). Some men had reputations as sorcerers, but they were never openly accused and were most unlikely to identify themselves as sorcerers or claim public credit for deaths that occurred. Speculation and suspicion were voiced privately and then spread via gossip and rumour.

The socially more consequential communicative work focused instead on the alleged or intended victim, who could respond in a variety of ways (excluding public accusation of, or confrontation with, the alleged sorcerer). So the belief system, and within it diviners who pinpointed only imminent victims, set into motion a chain of reactive behaviours that had no overt connection to any specific alleged sorcerer and no public linking of the actor-event-victim triad that would inevitably bring hostilities into the open. Such an eventuality runs counter to the prevailing ethos of harmony and predictability in social interaction and of individual self-control. Hostile confrontations, like sorcery itself, suggest that things are out of control. They hint at tyranny and chaos and are therefore anathema to the southeast Ambrymese.

NOTES

1. Field research was carried out on Efate and Ambrym Islands in 1966-7, 1969, 1973, 1977-8 and 1979. Financial assistance was variously provided by the National Science Foundation, University of Oregon, University of British Columbia, Australian National University and the National Institute of Mental Health.
2. The concept of *kastom*, its inherent ambiguity and its relevance to political action and national identities have been the subjects of recent papers by Lindstrom (n.d.) and Keesing (n.d.).
3. Although for convenience I use the term as a noun, *-lele* is in fact a verb stem.
4. Some of these conflicts may feature angry outbursts and argument between close kin and co-residents. But in many cases when men of different "small-names" or villages are disputing, the proceedings are typically characterized by an absence of face-to-face conflict. Men make use of special taboo-leaves to signal their claims to both ground and trees. If these are ignored, as is often the case, they dismantle fences and uproot newly planted coconuts, but never when members of the opposing side are present. Such disputes may continue for months without ever a word of argument exchanged between the principals.
5. Like Lederman (this volume), I disagree with the characterization of such capabilities as "supernatural", since in southeast Ambrym there appears to be no suggestion that sorcery works through the agency of powers other than those inhering in the natural order of the world.
6. Cf. Zelenietz, this volume. However, I disagree that the idea of sorcery operating independently of sorcerers is somehow a misleading assumption (Zelenietz, n.d.:6). Whether or not any man was performing sorcery in southeast Ambrym prior to 1973 was not the point at issue; what matters is people's belief in the reality and efficacy of sorcery powers.