Asserting Land, Estranging Kin:
On Competing Relations of Dependence in Vanuatu

Tom Bratrud

University of Oslo

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the new material value of land in postcolonial Vanuatu intensifies people's shaping and re-shaping of claims to autonomy and dependence. Ahamb, like many other villages in Melanesia, originated as a mission community with people moving in from various original homelands. The mix of people from different places facilitated new kinship bonds and senses of community. However, it has also sparked disputes over land rights and leadership, fuelled by the postcolonial government's incentives for converting customary land into registered titles and leases for wealthy investors. The possibility of leasing out land, and preventing others from leasing out land, creates a dynamic where groups increasingly define themselves in terms of landowner clans that exclude outsiders rather than the wider kin networks that include them. Redefinitions of social boundaries generate secondary disputes over dependence and autonomy where care of kin, Christian commitment and future aspirations sometimes prove to be incompatible and in need of negotiation.

Keywords: land disputes, dependence, kinship, Vanuatu, Melanesia.

INTRODUCTION

It was February 2014 and a hot afternoon on Ahamb, an island of about 650 inhabitants just South of Vanuatu's second biggest island, Malekula.[1] To get away from the blazing sun, I had found a place in the shade of a roofed picnic table with Axel, Ethan, and Jason, all local men in their 30s. While occasionally complaining about the heat, we watched people paddle across the strait towards their gardens on mainland Malekula, where the patrilineal ancestors of half of Ahamb's population migrated from at the turn of the 20th century. The migrants had come to Ahamb in a turbulent time when the Spanish flu and dysentery was raging on the mainland after the arrival of Europeans (de Lannoy 2004). Incidents of sickness and death were attributed to sorcery by locals, and revenge killings (*tot*), intensified by European traders' introduction of alcohol and guns, often followed (Deacon 1934:19–20). Ahamb Island was geographically isolated from these events and had become a Christian mission station in 1899, as one of the first in Malekula (Miller 1989:512). The small Christian island, where sorcery and murder had been banned, was regarded a safe place. Today, Ahamb islanders recall with nostalgia and pride how their ancestors welcomed refugees from the mainland in the name of kinship and Christian hospitality.

Over the past two decades, however, Ahamb's growing population has reached a certain limit. Although it is still geographically large enough to sustain the population, the island has become too small to accommodate the occasionally incompatible aspirations of different community leaders. Especially the attempts of some leaders to lease out customary land around Ahamb to foreign investors for big money, and other leaders' attempts to avoid this, has been subject to heated dispute.

While Axel, Ethan, Jason and I were watching people paddle to the mainland, community leaders on the island were busy preparing a big village court. The case was between two patrilineal clans, related by generations of intermarriage, who live in neighbouring villages on Ahamb. For two decades their leaders had been disputing about the traditional rights to a reef outside their villages. However, the dispute was about more than the reef. It would also establish whether or not one of the clans should be counted as autochthonous to Ahamb—and thus be regarded as 'proper Ahamb people' (*stret man Ahamb*). If the clan was found to be autochthonous, which its leaders strongly claimed and their neighbour strongly opposed, it would give the clan customary right to leadership on Ahamb. It would also give them access to valuable land on the mainland that could be developed for real estate. All this at the expense of their opponent who claimed similar rights.

As scholars of Vanuatu have shown, land rights in the country have traditionally been dynamic, with several 'layers' of rights (see *e.g*. Rodman 1987; van Trease 1987). While disputes over land are nothing new, and village leaders also in the 1800s used 'their power tyrannically to drive away the owners of gardens which they covet' (Codrington [1891] 1972:60), Axel claimed that current land claims had become more aggressive:

> before, you could ask anyone to live on their land and it was ok. But now it is not. If you plant crops on someone's land, the landowner will dig them out and let you know that it is not your land.

Jason continued:

> yes, our ancestors (*ol olfalla bifo*) were good. But the men of today are not good. They get easily angry (*oli kros hariap*) and say "go back to your land!" Before, people's fashion was good, right? They were planting coconuts and whatever everywhere … no one pulled them out'.

Then Axel exclaimed: 'but if you don't have land, you have no life! All the money we earn comes from the ground'. Axel thus brought us right to the core of many Ahamb people's ambivalent relationship with land: 'land is life' is a common catchphrase around Vanuatu because people depend so highly on it for subsistence, especially the 75% of Vanuatu's population who live in rural areas (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009). It is their 'bank account', as people say, which provides food on the table, building materials for houses, cash-crops to pay for education, contributions to church, fundraisings, transportation, and much more. But since a landholder is not alone in exercising rights to a piece of land, and various kin may also depend on the land for their subsistence, claiming land is likely to incite disputes with kin and community members with whom one is otherwise 'joined and interdependent' (Sahlins 2013:21).

Taking current land disputes on Ahamb as the vantage point, this paper examines how the new material value of land in postcolonial Vanuatu intensifies people's shaping and re-shaping of claims to autonomy and interdependence. As many other communities in Melanesia (see *e.g*. Eriksen 2008; Hviding 1996; Scott 2007), Ahamb originated as a mission community with people moving in from various original homelands.[2] While facilitating new bonds of kinship and community, migration has also triggered disputes over leadership and

land rights, fuelled by the postcolonial government's incentives for converting customary land into registered titles and leases for foreign investors. The possibility of leasing out land for substantial amounts of cash, or keeping others from leasing out land to maintain control over the place, creates a dynamic where kin groups increasingly define themselves in terms of landholder clans that exclude outsiders rather than the everyday kin networks that include them (see McDougall 2016:188 for similar dynamics in the Solomon Islands). Although landholder clans follow customary distinctions between groups, I argue that the current articulation of clan boundaries is less a representation of an essential cultural form than it is a product of the expansion of state and capital formations, which is intimately linked to the postcolonial government's dependence on foreign capital. Tensions over the limits of dependence on the level of the village are therefore related to distant but powerful relations of dependence on the level of the postcolonial state.

I begin by presenting the island Ahamb and the significance of the patrilineal clans, the *nasara*, through which land is usually claimed. I go on to describe the islanders' everyday social values and principles which often appear antithetical to the values and principles underpinning land claims. Further, I discuss Vanuatu's postcolonial politics of land which serves as a backdrop for the paper's main ethnographic case; a major dispute over the lease of Lonour Island near Ahamb during my fieldwork in 2010. In closing, I discuss how the fear of losing one's security in land, but also hopes of regaining this security, may trigger determined efforts to affirm old and construct new limits of autonomy and dependence that one in other contexts would oppose.

AHAMB ISLAND AND THE *NASARA*

Ahamb is an island of about 0.5 square kilometres with around 650 inhabitants who are subsistence farmers and fishers. The island is located just south of the bigger island Malekula where people have their main gardens. Here they grow various root crops, breadfruit, bananas, fruits and leafy greens, while kava (Latin: *Piper methysticum*), and to some extent coconuts for copra, serve as cash crops used to pay school fees and buy consumer goods like sugar, rice, tinned food, and cargo ship tickets for the occasional trip to the capital Port Vila. While the majority of Ahamb people live on the island itself, a number of families have migrated to about a dozen new settlements on the Malekula mainland due to lack of space, land disputes, and to stay closer to the gardens. About 100 Ahamb people also live in Port Vila where they work, study, or reside short or long-term with town-dwelling kin.

A basic principle of Ahamb social organisation is the patrilineal clan groups known as the *nasara*. *Nasara* is a two-dimensional concept referring to both a person's patrilineage and his or her original place—that is, the geographical location of a person's first *nasara* ancestor is regarded as one's place of origin. While the *nasara* is related to a geographical location, it is first and foremost represented in persons; a person is not only from a place, he or she is the place (Eriksen 2008:31–2). If a person can trace a genealogy to a *nasara*, for example Marvar, he or she is a 'Marvar person' (*hemi wan man Marvar*). The person on Ahamb is thus, as elsewhere in Vanuatu and many other places in Melanesia, a person and place at the same time (Bonnemaison 1994; Jolly 1994; Kraemer 2020; Layard 1942; Rodman 1992; Scott 2007). This connection between person and place is manifested in three main ways: first, each *nasara* has a specific origin myth where the first ancestor emerges, usually in isolation, at the original place; second, the *nasara* has a *narmaj nahmar* (*devel blong nasara* in Vanuatu's *lingua franca* Bislama), a distinct spirit creature living on the *nasara* land who assist members in times of need; and third, the *nasara* has a *haindram*, a

totemic plant, fruit, rock or other object that links each *nasara* to its origin myth and is used in life cycle events including marriage and the circumcision of boys.

On Ahamb, as elsewhere in Vanuatu, the close connection between person and place is most clearly expressed in the Bislama term *manples* which translates to 'person of the place'. Most profoundly, a person is *manples* at his or her original *nasara* territory.[3] To be *manples* implies an authority to control the actions and pace of the place. It also implies having certain inalienable rights over those who are not *manpes* in that place (Curtis 2002:179). To claim that someone is *manples* and others are not can be used as a statement about dependence: those who live on someone else's land do so at the goodwill of the landholder and must obey their host. This is reflected in the phrase 'where is your place?' (*ples blong yu wea?*) sometimes used on Ahamb and other places in Vanuatu to remind others of who is in charge, who are outsiders, and who should go back to where they belong if the landholder deems it fit (Rodman 1987:40).

An argument of the paper is that the distinction of the different *nasara* today is not so much rooted in notions of an initial state of separation, although proposed as such in Ahamb and many other Melanesian cosmologies (see Harrison 2005; Rio 2014; Scott 2007; Stasch 2009). Adoption and change of *nasara* is for instance common on Ahamb and elsewhere in Vanuatu, given that the right ceremonial arrangements are in place (Kolshus 2008). Rather, I argue that much of its current relevance emerges in the context of the new meaning of land in Vanuatu after Independence in 1980. Population rises and a new material value of land, prompted by national land reforms, trigger people to claim land ownership for present and future security in residence, food, and monetary income. Because land is claimed through its associated customary lineage, landowners increasingly define themselves in terms of these lineages. Such strategic use of old culture to meet present and future needs, sometimes framed as 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), is thus necessarily about both continuity and discontinuity (see Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). Similarly, as Margaret Jolly (1996:176) observes with reference to the revival of *kastom* (customary principles and knowledge) in postcolonial Melanesia: rather than evoking the totality of ancestral practices, the statement of something being *kastom* points to a particular selection of such practices for the present. This is often, as Keir Martin (2013) argues, with the purpose of asserting certain primal rights over others or to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate actions to be taken at given moments. Ahamb people sometimes use *kastom* strategically in this sense, as we will see in the paper.

Current Ahamb society consists of totally 15 *nasara* of which six regard themselves as autochthonous to Ahamb and nine as migrated from mainland Malekula in the first half of the 20th century.[4] There is a particular hierarchical relation of dependence between the autochthonous and non-autochthonous that rests on two factors. First, the autochthonous holds the status of *manples* which gives them customary right to control the activities of the island, including deciding who may stay there and not. Second, the autochthonous are regarded as having 'saved' the descendants of migrants by welcoming their patrilineal ancestors to stay on Ahamb during the turmoil on the mainland at the turn of the 20th century. This gesture takes the character of a 'gift of life' that is difficult to reciprocate in full and therefore has hierarchical implications (see Mauss [1925] 2016; Rio 2007:219–20). The hierarchical relation between 'host' and 'guest' is only actualised at particular moments, however, and is in everyday life subdued by islanders' emphasis on an egalitarian interdependent social form where all are kin and equal members of the same Christian community. Before examining the disputes where these two models most clearly clash, I will present the egalitarian interdependent principles underpinning Ahamb people's everyday social life.

EVERYDAY RELATIONS OF INTERDEPENDENCE

An important part of how Ahamb people perceive themselves and others is through a moral evaluation of the extent to which a person can be seen as 'good' (*ngavuy*). A good person is someone who acts with love, who is humble, and who *luk save* (sees and understands) the needs of others (*cf.* Rasmussen 2015). For Ahamb people, this value of being good is related to the most prominent principle of Christianity in Ahamb daily living, namely to have unconditional love (*napalongin* in vernacular, *lav* in Bislama) for everyone. All humans have equal value as children of the same God. One is therefore obliged to treat everyone the same, and to provide care and compassion to whoever is in need. The ability to show love is an important feature by which Ahamb people judge a person's character (Bratrud 2021). As Rutha, a woman in her fifties, summed it up to me once: 'Those who only want their family and help only them are *haf-haf* (half mad) or half-Christian. But the one who has accepted Christ in life wants (to engage with) everyone (*evri man*).' Personhood on Ahamb thus resembles the classic model of the Melanesian person as 'dividual', 'composite', 'distributed' or 'partible', as formulated by Marilyn Strathern (1988), Roy Wagner (1991), Alfred Gell (1998), and many others. As Strathern famously sums up the model in her seminal book *The Gender of the Gift*:

> Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as dividually as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalized sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them (1988:13).[5]

The relational dimensions of Ahamb personhood also relates to their idea and practice of 'community'. Ahamb people refer to 'community' (*kommuniti*) as an idea when conceptualising the social fellowship of the island. Community as it is used on Ahamb generally refers to a togetherness in kinship, the Church, and in the discrete island just being big enough, and far enough from surrounding villages, to form a coherent society. As others have emphasised, the term 'community' can be problematic if it evokes functionalist or organic images of a bounded entity (Rapport and Amit 2002:42). Ahamb Island, like every other society, is not a complete social entity, and there are fractures and contradictions among its inhabitants, as I show in this paper. But the term and idea of 'community' is something people themselves are passionately concerned about; it is something they are constantly seeking to achieve. For Ahamb, we can therefore say that community is often the goal, not the ground, of social life (see also Lindstrom 2011; McDougall 2016; Rasmussen 2015). Akin to Hubert and Mauss (1964), to set the foundations for such 'society' one must build and re-build the original link of mutual belonging. On Ahamb, this is one of commitment to kin and Christian fellowship where everyone subscribes to the same values of love and unity (see Bratrud 2019b).

While the good person is one who is humble, generous, and recognises the needs of others, the antithesis to the good person is typically one who is selfish (*prenmbus*) and proud (*haikem*) and who thinks higher of him or herself than others (*hae tingting*). Many Melanesian societies have similar conceptions of selfishness, as a situation in which a person remains unpartible, refusing to give in to the pull of the relations in which one is entangled (see Hoëm on *tu noa* and *fia hili*, this volume; Biersack 1991; LiPuma 2000). These persons, Lamont Lindstrom shows, are not only threats to the social order, but also to the very constitution of persons themselves (2011:258).

The Bislama term *hem wan nomo*, which translates to 'him/her alone', often emerges in disputes over leadership and land rights on Ahamb. A person who acts as *hem wan nomo*

is self-sufficient, seems to be living for him or herself only, does not show interest in participating in activities with others, and does not share or listen to others. *Hem wan nomo* is nearly always used negatively in complaints about someone's pride or selfishness and works as a moral critique against the emergence of the 'possessive individual', a construct introduced by philosopher C.B. Macpherson, that has recently gained interest among Melanesian specialists (see Martin 2013; Martin and Yanagisako 2020; McDougall 2016; Rasmussen 2015; Sykes 2007; Taylor 2015).[6] The possessive individual, Macpherson argues, is 'essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual … is seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself' (Macpherson 1962:3).

Important for this paper, Martin (2013:4) notes that the concept of individualism does not need to comprise the individual person only. Social groups can also act like a possessive individual (see Bolton 2003:95; Rodman 1987). In the dispute about the lease of Lonour Island, which I will come to soon, we will see that men from Ahamb's autochthonous *nasara* formed a coalition to define their group as a discrete individual unit, the *Man Ahamb* ('Ahamb person'), to strengthen their position vis-à-vis other groups, summed up as *Man Aur* ('mainland person'). This process resembles what Thomas Ernst (1999) calls 'entification', where distinct entities are made from what have previously been contingent categories to meet political ends. A clear empirical distinction between individuality and relationality, or continuity and change, that we know from the Melanesian literature, can therefore not be assumed in this case. A more fruitful ethnographic question, I argue, is to explore why the autochthonous leaders make the distinction between autonomous and hierarchically ordered *Man Ahamb* and *Man Aur* in some contexts, while insisting on everyone's equality and interdependence in others (*cf.* Martin 2013). Before examining these shifting characterisations as they emerge in disputes over land rights and leadership, I will outline Vanuatu's postcolonial politics of land, which forms an important backdrop for the nature of these disputes.

VANUATU POSTCOLONIAL POLITICS OF LAND

From 1906 until Independence in 1980, Vanuatu was a French-British Condominium known as the New Hebrides. During the condominium, land in the country was alienated from the indigenous landowners and bought or occupied by traders in need of large areas to plant coconut trees for the production of copra (Rodman 1987). The expansion of European planters and subsequent loss of land released the political consciousness that led to the rise of Vanuatu's independence movements and finally independence on 30 July 1980. The constitution created with Independence stated that all lost or alienated land, which made up 36% of Vanuatu's land mass, was to be returned to the indigenous customary owners and their descendants (Rawlings 1999:76). However, independence did not only bring about a turn to indigenous interests in land, but also a series of laws that protected European and foreign interests from the colonial times. Whilst some foreign planters were driven from the land they occupied, the majority were granted long-term leases (Daley 2009).

In post-independence Vanuatu, the political-economic development of land law has thus taken a somewhat ambiguous character (*cf.* McCormack on Māori and New Zealand, this volume). On one side, it favours indigenous landowners through insisting by law that all land in Vanuatu shall belong to customary landowners. However, reforms were also introduced to attract investors who could make Vanuatu develop economically. Even though Independence meant independence from the British and French colony, new relations of dependence were established with expatriate investors and businesses who now lease and

control significant proportions of land in the country. Since the early 2000s, more than 10% of all customary land in Vanuatu has been leased (McDonnell 2017:285). Land grabbing has been particularly strong on the island of Efate, where the capital Port Vila is located. Here, Lara Daley (2009) claims that foreign land developers now control about 90% of all coastal land.

The crux in the postcolonial land laws is the possibility of leasing land for 75 years for a single payment. These leases are easily renewed and if the customary owner wishes to reclaim the land at the end of the lease, they are able to do this, but must compensate the leaseholder for any improvement on the land. The financial cost of this is beyond reach for most ni-Vanuatu. Whilst not technically or legally being synonymous with selling land, leases will thus in practice have the same implications as a sale for the ni-Vanuatu land-owner (Jowitt 2004). On Ahamb and elsewhere in Vanuatu, *salem aot graon* ('selling out land') is also the local term used most frequently about the leases. There is thus a significant gap between the law as it is stated and how it is practically applied in managing land transactions (Haccius 2011:2).

Land developers have also appeared in South Malekula, where Ahamb is located, where they have been involved in both successful and unsuccessful leases of land. The lease of Bagatelle, a small 'tropical paradise island' in eastern South Malekula, is a well-known example locally that spurred confusion and discontent among villagers as the expatriate buyer, who did not spend any time there, still prohibited trespassing on the property. In the early 2000s, an Ahamb man of a migrant *nasara*, residing in Port Vila, succeeded in leasing out the small island of Varo a few kilometres east of Ahamb to a foreigner who wanted to build a holiday home. The lease was completed, I was told, even though a local Lands Tribunal had found that the lessor was not the customary landowner. The proper landowner, they held, was an autochthonous Ahamb family. The lessor of Varo later told me he leased out the island to help kin with school fees and make the Ahamb community 'develop'. However, few saw any fruits of the money, and the lease was a disaster for many Ahamb people and other South Malekulans who used the reef of Varo as a main place for fishing and for gathering mussels, octopus, and firewood. In addition, the small idyllic island was a favourite place to go for picnics in weekends and holidays.

The case of the Varo lease illustrates another problem with Vanuatu's land leases: to formally claim land in Vanuatu has implied going to court in Port Vila to register as customary landowner (see Jowitt 2004). This practice has made it possible to register as landowner and lease out land even though 'everyone' in the village knows one is not the legitimate custom owner. Once the lease is registered, the grounds for challenging the registration are very limited, and prior claims to the land by other groups are in practice excluded (McDonnell 2017:290–1). From the government's perspective, giving such effect to the registration itself ensures a stability in titling processes (*ibid.*:290). But the registration practices have clearly been in favour of town dwellers who have easy access to court and the knowledge to successfully navigate state bureaucracy. Rural islanders, who may not have the resources to go to town and go through land registration, are often excluded from these processes. Rather than helping to develop notions of mutual trust between people and the independent state, land registration has thus instead reinforced the gap many ni-Vanuatu experience between their everyday concerns and state institutions and their leaders (Smith 2017:331; see also Eriksen 2009; Mitchell 2011; Rio 2011). Local references to land registration as *folem loa blong waetman* ('following white man's law') is an indication that people in Vanuatu continue to associate state law with colonial rule, and that there is in fact a strong relation of dependence between the independent State and foreign powers.[7]

WHEN ARE EVERYONE 'MAN AHAMB'? THE CASE OF THE LONOUR LEASE

The most serious land dispute I have encountered during my time on Ahamb concerned the lease of the small island Lonour, just West of Ahamb, during my first fieldwork in 2010. The island was leased to a wealthy expatriate by a man born on Ahamb but of a migrant *nasara*. As was the case of Varo Island, this lessor had organised the lease from Port Vila where he now resided, and the lease sum was high.

One problem with the lease was that at least ten other families claimed land rights on Lonour. Another problem was that the lessor had received support from the Ahamb Council of Chiefs, the formal body of community leaders who are elected every four years, which at this time consisted exclusively of men of migrant *nasara*. The community chiefs' support of the lease was regarded as particularly problematic because they had accepted the lease based on customary principles for land ownership hailing from a neighbouring district in South East Malekula. In South Malekula, landownership is normally based on scattered territories claimed by giving an account of one's *nasara*'s connection to the land.[8] In South East Malekula, however, landownership takes as its starting point the *nasara* as a place located in the interior and assumes its land rights from there to the sea. The latter principle would favour the migrant land lessor, whose *nasara* originated in the interior of the mainland, and was strongly in disfavour of the autochthonous Ahamb *nasara* who reckoned their origin to be by the sea. An implementation of South East Malekulan principles for landownership would imply a total redrawing of boundaries in the area, including on Ahamb itself, which would deprive many autochthonous Ahamb families of rights to land.[9]

The lease of Lonour outraged several autochthonous Ahamb leaders. Some of them expressed their frustration to me, saying that they for many years had been forced to fight against some migrant leaders who claimed and tried to lease out land belonging to autochthonous islanders. This meant the autochthonous had to defend themselves against people who they so generously had invited to stay in a safe environment when struggling to survive on the mainland. Referring to long-time practice of electing the community chiefs of the island, Richard, an elderly autochthonous man, told me: 'we have shared the chiefly positions for 100 years but they are just working against us when they are given these chiefly positions.' The men told me that despite having helped the migrants for decades, there was only gossip and complaints (*toktok*) when the autochthonous went hunting for local delicacies wild pig and wild cattle in the forests of the non-autochthonous on the mainland. The autochthonous coalition's expectations of reciprocity for hosting the descendants of migrants was thus unfulfilled in several ways (see also Martin, this volume, on threats to the authority of village 'Big Men' in Papua New Guinea).

To defend their claims to authority based on being the *stret man Ahamb* ('the proper people of Ahamb'), the autochthonous men started planning a takeover of the Ahamb Council of Chiefs. Because coalition claimed the island was 'truly belonging' to the autochthonous *nasara*, they argued it was their right (*raet*) through *kastom* to dismiss the sitting chiefs if they were not happy. When I asked one of them whether autochthony was enough to give them the right to drive out the sitting community chiefs, he replied: 'Yes! We brought them to the island. If they had been left in the bush, they would have been dead!' Acknowledging neither the customary rights of the autochthonous as landowners, nor the reciprocal duties following the act of 'saving' the migrants in times of crisis, was a clear breach of the duties governing their relationship, as understood by the autochthonous leaders. As a result, the time had come to regain control and re-establish previous roles and positions on the island. This implied that the autochthonous islanders, the *Man Ahamb* ('Ahamb person'), should be respected as the *kastom* 'landowners' (*land ona*) and 'hosts' of

the island, and the non-autochthonous, the *Man Aur* ('mainland person'), should stay with them as 'guests'. This shift implied a greater emphasis on the customary distinctions between the *nasara* and the significance of the migration stories. As a result, it would make the migrant *nasara*'s dependence on the autochthonous, and their hierarchical distinction, clearer.

The host-guest/*Man Ahamb-Man Aur* distinction had also been emphasised in previous disputes between the parties. Ahamb has for about two decades suffered from serious coastal erosion. For the past decade, there has also been a strong discourse that climate change (*klaemet jenis*) is soon going to make the island uninhabitable. After a tsunami warning in September 2009, autochthonous leaders announced that it was time for the Ahamb community to start relocating to the mainland for safety reasons. However, this was a time when disputes between autochthonous and non-autochthonous leaders had been intense, especially following the previously mentioned lease of Varo Island. The autochthonous leaders therefore announced that particularly the descendants of migrants should prepare to move out and 'back to their homelands' (*go bak long hom ples blong olgeta*), as it was phrased. There should be a 'Last Feast' of the Ahamb community on New Year's Eve 2009. After that, descendants of migrants should be ready to move out. Three months after the New Year's feast, and two months before the Lonour dispute, I talked to Robert, one of the leaders of the autochthonous coalition. He claimed that the autochthonous did not want to pressure anyone to move:

> Those who want to stay can stay. The New Year ceremony was just to open up for people to move if they want to. Because all land is given by God, we must make room for everyone. We must not cause problems for (*spolem*) our families (of migrant *nasara*). We are a few native *nasara* on the island but we think of everyone as *Man Ahamb*.

In this conversation, Robert emphasised the ideal Ahamb social form based on kinship and Christian universalism. In the context of the Lonour dispute, however, where Robert and other autochthonous leaders experienced a loss of control over their security in land, the boundaries around who they defined as 'Man Ahamb' became much more exclusive. The definition of 'insider' and 'outsider' was thus for Robert not fixed but subject to what he found to be at stake at given moments (*cf*. Martin 2013). I will come back to Robert and his context dependent evaluations soon.

To demonstrate the autochthonous leaders' customary right to control activities on Ahamb, and to take over the Ahamb Council of Chiefs on this basis, the coalition sent out an announcement that a public meeting would be held in the island's community hall on a Monday in May 2010. Most of the people I talked to felt uneasy about the dispute and how it split the community between 'islanders' and 'mainlanders'. From their perspective, it was more important to emphasise that all were kin and equal as Christians. Many were therefore reluctant to go to the public meeting. When I arrived at the community hall at the announced meeting time, only a few men had come inside while some youngsters were hanging around outside. Slowly people started to fill up on benches and the floor along the walls. Some were sitting with their necks bowed, and the atmosphere was quiet and tense. When the meeting began, I estimated there to be 50–70 persons present out of the community's population of about 650. Many more were walking around outside, occasionally looking in through the windows of the community hall of bamboo with thatched roof.

Two elders from the Church, one from an autochthonous *nasara* and another from a non-autochthonous *nasara*, announced that they would lead the meeting from a table up front. The elders presented the autochthonous coalition's matters of concern in the Lonour

case. The first point considered the present Council of Chief's failure to get an Ahamb Lands Tribunal up and working. This, they held, would ease their handling of land ownership cases. Instead, the sitting chiefs had turned to external Land Tribunals and land tenure systems. The second point was phrased 'All strangers (*strenja*) who came to stay on our land do not recognise us, *Man Ahamb*, and they are also criticising us.' The third point concerned people not respecting land ownership settlements already made in court. Instead, parties continued to dispute the land and make counter claims. This made the landowners worry, because court cases cost money and they never felt free of accusations and claims. In addition to these three points, the elders announced that the autochthonous leaders demanded that the present Ahamb Council of Chiefs resign and be replaced by chiefs from solely autochthonous *nasara*.

Most in the audience seemed to agree on the first point concerning the failing of establishing a Lands Tribunal. The second point segregating 'strangers' from *Man Ahamb*, however, generated a series of loud arguments from different corners of the room. A man I call Teo rose up, pointed a finger at the members of the autochthonous coalition and exclaimed: 'Are you calling me a stranger? I'm a part of Rotavu!' Teo belonged to a mainland *nasara* but his mother came from the autochthonous *nasara* Rotavu. This made Teo a so-called *navjon* to Rotavu which means that he in kinship-terms was part of Rotavu through the important mother's brother-nephew (MB-ZS) relation. Moreover, Teo had lived his whole life on the island, as had his patrilineal ancestors for four generations. He knew no other home. In the context of the dispute, however, *nasara*-transgressing kin relations seemed unimportant for the autochthonous coalition. Akin to MacPherson's possessive individual, they acted as proprietors of only their own rights. They owed nothing to others.

Opinions continued to rain down in the community hall. Joses, who was also of a mainland *nasara* but with an autochthonous mother—and who thus also had a *navjun* relation to an autochthonous *nasara*— rose and argued that terming half of Ahamb's population 'strangers' was nothing less than discrimination (*diskriminesen*). One of the elders chairing the meeting commented that he did not support the procedure in which the sitting chiefs were being removed from their positions. He argued that the dismissal of the chiefs had been decided by a small group only. Since Vanuatu is a democratic country and Ahamb a democratic community, the decision had to be approved by a majority. From their perspective, every adult community member had the right to have their say in this decision, not only the autochthonous. It was decided that a vote be held on whether the sitting chiefs should resign. 125 people voted, and the results were 106 for, and 15 against, with four neutral votes. Almost two thirds of the island's adult population did not vote.

The atmosphere of the community hall calmed down during the voting. Many descendants of migrants had been nervous about getting expelled from the island when rumours about the autochthonous leaders' resentment became known. Terming the non-autochthonous 'strangers' at the meeting helped intensify this concern. Someone raised this question at the end of the meeting. The new chairman of the Ahamb Council of Chiefs, Robert, who had been appointed by the autochthonous coalition already before the meeting, apologised for how the term 'stranger' had been used. He assured that no one was a stranger on Ahamb. He said that this term, used by some autochthonous people also in previous disputes, had been declared abandoned years ago and was not supposed to surface again. Today was the last time.

Another autochthonous leader assured that no one would have to leave the island; everyone was allowed to stay for as long as they wanted. Moreover, the new autochthonous chiefs announced that they wanted to have vice chiefs from the non-autochthonous *nasara* to make everyone happy and have proper representation in the community. At this moment,

when control was again in the hands of the coalition, the need to differentiate between groups also lapsed. Building on Martin (2013:61), we can say that, given the nature of their entanglement, the distinction *Man Ahamb* ('Ahamb person') / *Man Aur* ('mainland person') was solely meant to state what the autochthonous thought to be the non-autochthonous' appropriate and inappropriate actions in different contexts.

As the meeting came to an end, the autochthonous coalition was eventually accepted as the new community chiefs. An autochthonous elder from the Church closed the event with a few last words and a common prayer that everyone present joined in. The elder gave a concluding appeal to the new chiefs, saying: 'you, the new Council of Chiefs must show yourselves as good leaders. We will see you in church, at worships, and that you show yourselves as good Christians.' The appeal carried a warning for the chiefs to be pious, humble and fair, and lead the island in a direction that was good for everyone, not only for themselves and their *nasara*.

At dusk, the autochthonous leaders gathered around a big bowl of kava to celebrate the outcome of the meeting and relax. Throughout the evening, male kin from non-autochthonous *nasara* came over to give encouraging speeches and show their support. A man of a migrant *nasara* argued that they should stand together against the implementation of the land tenure system from South East Malekula. He held that if the chiefs started using this system to find custom landowners in South Malekula, it would deprive all of them of rights to land—also the non-autochthonous' rights to their original homelands. The circumstances around the Lonour lease were therefore a threat to them all. Several of the autochthonous men expressed anxiety about how the other non-autochthonous community members would respond to their coup of the Council of Chiefs. One of the non-autochthonous men turned the question: 'What can they do? All us who come from the mainland live on the land [which belongs to] you who are *manples*.' They had no option but to accept if they wanted to stay.

The coup of the Council of Chiefs received mixed responses in the majority of the community, however. Most of the people I talked to, regardless of their *nasara*, felt uneasy about the whole dispute and how it divided the community into two categories, *Man Ahamb* and *Man Aur*, based on their patrilineal belonging. Some of those of a mainland *nasara* were still nervous about getting expelled from the island. Afterall, the autochthonous coalition had made it clear that they had the right to expel people of the non-autochthonous *nasara* if they wanted to. For most Ahamb people, the categories *Man Aur*, 'stranger' and 'migrant' were not meaningful to identify the islanders of mainland descent. They were primarily their sisters, brothers, cousins, mother's brothers, and grandparents—nothing else than family (*famele nomo*).

COMPETING IDEAS OF DEPENDENCE

The dispute about land rights and leadership following the lease of Lonour was a typical example of how the claiming of rights and authority on Ahamb becomes an ambiguous site for moral evaluation. To stake claims appears as a necessity in order to secure one's subsistence. But claims often mean violating reciprocal duties to extended kin and fellow community members. In the Lonour case, both the autochthonous coalition and the indignant community members expected the other party to acknowledge their dependence on the other. However, given that the groups experienced different things to be at stake, they emphasised different and incompatible interpretations of dependence to be right and important (*cf*. Bratrud 2021).

In the weeks after the community meeting, most people on the island kept a low profile and stayed in their own village when not going to the gardens or church on Sundays. On Ahamb, disputes usually lead to embarrassment and shame (*namhanin* in vernacular, *sem* in Bislama), and parties to the dispute and their families stay away from places where they risk meeting their opponents. Because everyone is related on Ahamb, relations are to a large extent premised upon principles of reciprocity. Staking self-righteous claims that jeopardise others' wellbeing then amounts to a theft in line with this sense of reciprocity (Schieffelin 1983:190).

Thory, a man in his 40s with whom I had a close relationship, was central in the autochthonous coalition who took over the Ahamb Council of Chiefs. He was also a dedicated Christian and church-goer. During the most intensive periods of the dispute, however, he did not want to go to church or outside his own village. On the Sunday before the public meeting held on Monday, he therefore stayed at home instead of going to church as usual. Thory explained his reason to me when I visited his family to join them for service that day:

> … (when going to church) you must go with only one thought, right? And that is to praise God. If you go and think "I don't want to see this person now in church" it means you have two thoughts. And you lose focus… If you come to church and sit down in front flashing your long trousers and black shoes … people will *toktok* (gossip) now, if you are in a situation like this. If you go to church without having everything settled (in a dispute) … it is not right (*no stret*). If everything will be all right at the meeting tomorrow, I can go to church. Because then (I) will be free from all these painful unsolved things.

Given that the Church is the main communal arena on the island where one meets almost everyone in the community, it is not surprising that people embroiled in disputes steer clear of church activities. There, one is certain to meet kin and others who rebuke them for their 'unnecessary' dispute and lack of shame (*no gat sem*) for coming to Church, the community's main arena for expressing unity, as if nothing had happened. Avoiding Church means avoiding confrontation. But it also expresses a recognition of one's breach with social conduct and that it is worth feeling shameful about. Expressing shame in this sense appears as one aspect of community members' ongoing ritualised exchange: by humbling or lowering oneself, one simultaneously expresses a dependence on the other (see Stasch, this volume). It lays the foundation for the reciprocal recognition that is the basis for Ahamb kin and community solidarity.

As Martin shows from Papua New Guinea, ambiguity towards one's dependence on kin can intensify under neoliberal conditions as people simultaneously become more attached to the safety net of kin and more aggressively opposed to its 'anti-economic development effects' (2020:722). Finding the appropriate balance between different kinds of relational obligations can thus be a complex affair that is situationally contingent (*ibid*.). For Ahamb people, the negotiations over appropriate limits of autonomy and interdependence discussed in this paper took place at a particular moment in history when the island population is growing, where there are few opportunities for economic development, and the government has made it possible to lease out land to investors for big money. It is also a moment in history when inequality is increasing and islanders feel they must take action to obtain a sense of security for themselves and their families (Bratrud 2019a; Eriksen 2009; Smith, this volume). Land is often referred to as 'the bank account of ni-Vanuatu' as it gives food on the table, building materials for houses, and cash-crops to pay for education, transportation, church contributions, fundraisings, and much more. Securing land is therefore

crucial for many to obtain material security. But to secure land for oneself, one must also claim independence from others who are entangled with the land. These are often kin with whom one in the everyday is engaging in highly interdependent relations. For kin who are left behind, land claims can evoke feelings of betrayal, because they feel it is because of their contributions that the claimant has reached the position from which he now is able to claim independence from them (see Martin 2020:723; Syndicus, this volume). As Tom Powell Davies points out (this volume), it is usually one's relationships with others that forms the grounds of one's autonomy.

In the context of land scarcity, autochthonous Ahamb leaders experience strongly the 'ambivalence of hospitality', as discussed by Rachel Smith (2019:350). Their ancestors welcomed migrants to the island but present leaders feel challenged in terms of leadership and rights when, after a century of co-living, the 'guests' are intimately integrated as their kin and regarded as equal members of the island community. To claim authority in this context of inclusive egalitarianism, the landholders strategically turn to customary ideas to launch a more conditional hospitality where 'the stranger has a right to refuge, but no right to welcome' (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, in McDougall 2016:29). However, as Debra McDougall (2016:31) points out, understandings of 'strangers' in the contemporary South Pacific cannot be understood without taking seriously islanders' commitment to Christian ideas and principles. In this view, the world is ideally a place without strangers, because all are children of the same God. Therefore, one shall not need to distinguish between the self and other. But in times when future security is threatened, boundaries of 'inside' and 'outside' gain new significance, and hospitality can quickly be turned into hostility. In practice, attempts to balance between acknowledging and rejecting dependencies thus become 'a constantly shifting dance of moral evaluation and contestation' (Martin 2020:722).

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the new material value of land in postcolonial Vanuatu intensifies people's shaping and re-shaping of claims to autonomy and dependence. A key dynamic here is that the claiming of land increasingly makes people define themselves in terms of landholder clans that exclude outsiders rather than the everyday kin networks that include them. Disputes over land rights generate secondary disputes where the limits being drawn of autonomy and dependence sometimes prove incompatible and in need of renegotiation.

Martin (2013:232) argues that it is misleading to take the efflorescence of customary practice we see in many places in the contemporary Pacific for an essential cultural continuity. Rather, he argues, a new emphasis on custom might, more than anything, reflect deepened conceptual disputes and dilemmas, such as negotiations over value systems and attempts to regain indigenous control in an increasingly complex life world dominated by foreign influence. I suggest we can see this in how Melanesian states have used *kastom* (traditional practice and knowledge) as a means to promote indigenous social and political forms to achieve autonomy from colonial powers (*e.g.* Hviding and Rio 2011; Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Lindstrom and White 1993). We can also see it in how autochthonous islanders on Ahamb strategically employ traditional categories to legitimise primal rights over others when control over their livelihood is threatened. When control is not threatened, however, an inclusive egalitarianism where 'everyone' are interdependent kin and equal members of the community is again activated as the dominant social form.

Boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are thus highly flexible and situationally defined rather than inherently given. Similarly, ideas and ascriptions of dependence are situationally defined and shaped by what people find to be at stake at given moments. These stakes are

construed by shifting social and political circumstances, reflecting changes occurring within society and related to more distant outside forces. In the paper, I have tried to show how these internal and external factors are conjoined in current Vanuatu, with the postcolonial state's attempts to attract foreign capital by making customary land available for lease being an effective shaping force.

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NOTES

1. The paper is based on, in total, 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Vanuatu, most of it on Ahamb. Fieldwork was conducted over 7 months in 2010, 12 months in 2014–15, and 1 month in 2017. Some of the material is based on my sporadic contact with interlocutors on phone, e-mail and Facebook in between periods of fieldwork.
2. As Eriksen (2008:36) shows, mission stations, the plantation economy, and migrant work were often interlinked and contributed to the formation of new villages.
3. A person can also claim to be *manples* at territories achieved through land inheritance through the female line. This happens when there are no more men in a family line. The land is then passed on to the sons of the women.
4. The autochthonous status of five of the *nasara* is generally undisputed, whereas one is heavily disputed, as indicated in the Introduction.
5. It is important to note that Ahamb people are not tied to just one model of subjectivity, even though we can say that they tend to lean towards one mode of being a person more than another. The model of personhood briefly described here does not mean that people are not also aware of other possibilities. There is often an active assessment of what is appropriate to embrace at different moments, as I show throughout the paper.
6. It is worth mentioning here that the traditional Melanesian big man is seen as walking a tightrope between these positions. He is expected to be a little 'selfish' in the sense that he overrides relational claims to organize collectivity (Sahlins 1963).
7. The political party *Graon mo Jastis Pati* (GJP, or 'The Land and Justice Party' in English*)* formed in 2010 by the MP, anthropologist, lawyer, and former director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, Ralph Regenvau, has been able to change the direction of Vanuatu land politics to some extent. The party has worked for stronger regulations in foreign ownership of land and businesses and supported a wider use of customary judicial systems as opposed to State courts in towns that may, among other things, exclude poor subsistence farmers in the outer islands. Implementation of the land reforms has not received full political and administrative support, and it is yet to be seen how Vanuatu land rules develop in the future.
8. This is done through accounting for one's genealogical connection to the land, the *nasara* spirit of the place (*narmaj nahmar*), the totem of the lineage (*haindram*), the stone for pig killing sacrifices, and the traditional boundaries of the piece of land.
9. Margaret Rodman (1987:3) discusses the challenges of formulating a nation-wide policy for dealing effectively with customary landholders in Vanuatu where customary principles for land tenure vary so greatly from district to district.

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