

CHAPTER 2

The Sorcerer as Folk Devil in Contemporary Melanesia

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Introduction

Sorcery or witchcraft is a main fear of people in Melanesia, a region in the South Pacific comprising Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji. If a person unexpectedly dies, falls sick or experiences misfortune, people often become suspicious and ask ‘who is behind this?’ (Onagi 2015, vii). That someone is suspected of maleficence reflects the significance placed on interpersonal relationships for health and well-being in Melanesia (Kolshus 2017; Rio 2019, 334). Indeed, the emphasis on bringing people into relationships and keeping them involved in them has been argued to be the very centre of life in the region (e.g. Strathern 1988; Wagner 1981). However, the focus on keeping healthy relationships is a delicate endeavour: it can give comfort and security if everyone is happy but be dangerous and destructive if they go wrong.

In Melanesia, the sorcerer is regarded a person who is overcome by envy, anger and greed. Sorcerers deliberately manipulate spirits and use poisonous plants and toxics to cause sickness, death and misfortune to those who frustrate them. While the good person typically observes one’s relational duties towards

How to cite this book chapter:

Bratrud, T. 2021. ‘The Sorcerer as Folk Devil in Contemporary Melanesia.’ In *Modern Folk Devils: Contemporary Constructions of Evil*, edited by M. D. Frederiksen and I. Harboe Knudsen, 47–61. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-13-3>.

kin and others, the sorcerer does the opposite: they devalue the social through often unprovoked attacks on others, even their closest kin.

In this chapter, I argue that the contemporary Melanesian sorcerer appears as what Stanley Cohen (2002 [1972]) calls a ‘folk devil’ – a deviant being that is blamed for all kinds of social problems. The sorcerer appears as an unscrupulous monster who can attack anyone, anywhere, and anytime – in the gardens, on the path to the village, at the toilet, and while the victim is sleeping. They even crave to eat their victim’s heart, a diet that proves their morally depraved character (see also Højlund, Chapter 4). These qualities make the sorcerer the perfect deviant – the opposite of the love, care and transparency that commonly characterize the good person in Melanesia (Brison 2007; Hollan and Troop 2001; McDougall 2016).

In line with Cohen’s theorizing of folk devils, the pursuit of sorcerers sometimes intensifies into moral panics where a person, group or episode emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests, and where collective action is taken to counter this threat. In Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, moral panics over sorcerers have recently had horrific consequences where accused persons have been burned, raped and killed (see Bratrud 2021, 2022; Forsyth and Eves 2015; Jorgensen 2014; Rio 2010, 2014a; Urame 2015). At the end of the chapter, I will discuss one such case from my fieldwork in Vanuatu.

In his theorizing, Cohen was mainly interested in how folk devils are constructed as abstract, generalized threats to society by the mass media’s reporting of certain ‘facts’ to the public. These facts are often of a shocking, sensational character that generates concern and anxiety over deviance (Cohen 2002 [1972], 7). In this chapter, I hold that Cohen’s theory of the folk devil is useful for understanding the sorcerer’s position in Melanesia. However, I argue that his approach relies on a certain understanding of society – that is, a (post-) industrial European type of ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 2006 [1983]) with a particular history of Christian demonology and a particular role of the mass media in conveying information to the public. In other contexts, the principles of social organization, the construction of enemies, and the means of distributing knowledge can be different, which further affects people’s perceptions of what constitutes a social threat. In the chapter, I thus revisit Cohen’s own point that one cannot take deviance for granted. Rather, one must ask ‘deviant to whom?’, ‘deviant from what?’ and ‘why is it problematic?’ (2002, 4).

In the following, I will clarify how I find European and Melanesian views of ‘society’ to be different. I go on to discuss how sorcery is commonly understood in Melanesia and the factors that have contributed to shaping these perceptions, particularly the recent growth of Pentecostal Christianity, which emphasizes the identification and healing of persons as sites of evil. I illustrate the latter dynamic with an ethnographic case from my own fieldwork on Ahamb Island in Vanuatu in 2014, when a Pentecostal-style revival emerged to clean the community of all its troubles, in which a fatal hunt for sorcerers ensued. In closing, I discuss the need to locate the specific sources of people’s anxieties

as well as the sociocultural dynamics of particular panics in order to properly understand them.

Before I continue the chapter, it is important to clarify that sorcery- and witchcraft-related phenomena are diverse across Melanesia. As argued by John Himugu (2015), it is therefore important to have a clear understanding of the particular cultural context of the sorcery notion in question. While the chapter seeks to arrive at some general points about the sorcerer as a folk devil in Melanesia, my accounts and arguments derive mostly from Vanuatu and particularly Ahamb, a small island of about 650 people in South Malekula, where I conducted 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork over three periods between 2010 and 2017.

European and Melanesian ‘Society’

In his seminal book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen speaks of the folk devil as a person or group whose behaviour is labelled ‘by society or certain powerful groups in society’ as deviant or problematic (Cohen 2002 [1972], 1). The type of society Cohen seems to take as his vantage point is the European nation state, which is an imagined community, in Anderson’s sense – too big for people to know every other person and too big for people to know what is going on in all areas and domains. It is a society based on horizontal comradeship, which binds together all members, who are deemed ‘citizens’ regardless of their class, colour or race. To sustain the citizens’ comradeship, there must be some level of common morals, which require a degree of social control. Because citizens are many and spread over a vast area, the mass media is the sole provider of information about what is going on. A lot of what the mass media defines as ‘news’, Cohen argues, are devoted to reports about deviant behaviour and its consequences for society (Cohen 2002 [1972], 7). This is not least because it sells, a relevant point as media-conveyed news is invariably structured by the commercial and political constraints in which they operate (*ibid.*). The news about deviance is often shocking and sensational, which can leave behind a diffuse feeling of anxiety in the public related to questions such as ‘something should be done about it’ and ‘this thing can’t go on for ever’. With the media establishing such feelings of anxiety, collective action is often taken to counter these perceived threats to society.

Jean La Fontaine (1998, 2016) argues that folk devilling bears a resemblance to the European witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries. Here, deviant people who undermined the Christian Church’s pastoral influence could be denounced as devil-worshippers. The aim of the Church, La Fontaine argues, was to extend its influence in the emerging nation states, including taking control over peripheral areas where people were still engaged in traditional beliefs and practices. Witch-hunts therefore represented ideas formulated by the elites of the new nation states, who aimed at disciplining deviant peasants

into their new moral, religious and political society (La Fontaine 1998, 28–30). If La Fontaine is right, we may say that European folk devilling, which Cohen takes as his vantage point, is tied to the particular religio-political history of the European continent.

Melanesian folk devilling appears in a quite different context. First, it is debatable whether we can speak of ‘society’ as a meaningful category at all in this region. With a basis in fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, Roy Wagner (1974) criticizes the urge of social scientists to organize people’s social arrangements into a permanent ‘thing’ like a society. Rather, he emphasizes that people create themselves socially in multiple ways and that the ‘groups’ Western anthropologists have been preoccupied with finding may not correspond very well with the principles by which people themselves organize. Wagner’s work has been important for Melanesian anthropology’s turn to exchange instead of groups and descent as the main principles through which people constitute social relations and personhood. This trend became particularly influential with Marilyn Strathern’s conceptualization of the Melanesian person as ‘dividual’ rather than ‘individual’ in her benchmark book *The Gender of the Gift* (Strathern 1988; see also Gregory 1982; Wagner 1981).

In Strathern’s Melanesian ideal type, the internal composition of the person depends on one’s relations with others. These relations that are condensed into physical substances or objects that circulate between people as gifts. By dealing with others through gift exchange, people give a part of themselves and receive a part of others. This makes the person multiply authored, as it were, because the Melanesian dividual person is a composite site of the substances and actions of others (Strathern 1988, 13). Persons, relationships and collectives are in this sense created through the concrete exchange of gifts rather than membership of an abstract ‘imagined community’, as in Cohen’s model. To set up another ideal type, we may say that, if it is the undermining of the nation’s morals that constitutes the social threat that produces folk devils in Cohen’s Europe, it is the failure to participate sufficiently in a reciprocal engagement that constitutes the social threat that produces folk devils in Melanesia (see e.g. Martin 2013; Munn 1986). However, deviance in terms of selfishness is not enough for the Melanesian sorcerer to emerge. Similar to the witch-hunts in early modern Europe, he must also be suspected of having a secret pact with devil-like forces.

From Respected High Man to Inhuman Outsider

Much has been written about sorcery and witchcraft in Melanesia. Bronislaw Malinowski’s accounts from the Trobriand Islands (1992 [1948], 2010 [1922]) have perhaps been particularly significant in highlighting the importance of magic, sorcery and witchcraft in all domains of social life in the region – from gardening, healing and weather magic to the exercise of social control. In pre- and early colonial times, sorcery was usually the domain of the high-ranking men

of the secret graded societies (Dalton 2007; Rio 2014b; Stephen 1987). Here, men acquired titles by paying off titleholders above them with sacrificed pigs, mats and food. The higher the rank, the higher the knowledge of the cosmological realm, and the higher the prestige (Eriksen 2008, 85). Although people were also ambivalent about sorcery in pre-colonial times, because it could be used for selfish, personal ends, it was generally a 'legitimate institution ... which kept people in line in an otherwise somewhat anarchic society' (Tonkinson 1981, 79).

Throughout the 20th century, sorcery underwent a change of status with the increasing influence of colonialism, education and particularly Christianity, which condemned sorcery as devilish, evil and antithetical to a Christian lifestyle (Keesing 1992; Knauff 2002; Tonkinson 1981). In Vanuatu, the support of Christianity and declining legitimacy of sorcery was partly attributed to new diseases introduced by Europeans in the late 1800s and early 1900s (see Deacon 1934). Disease and deaths in massive numbers were blamed by locals on sorcery being out of control. Suspected sorcerers were killed in revenge, which contributed to even higher death tolls. In my own field site of Ahamb and other places in Vanuatu, Christianity won terrain during this time by practising zero tolerance of sorcery and violent attacks. The new religion thus became a positive antidote to the chaos and destruction people now associated with sorcery (Bratrud 2018; de Lannoy 2004; Rio 2003).

Today, 82 per cent of Vanuatu's population, 92 per cent of Solomon Islanders and 96 per cent of Papua New Guineans state that they are Christian.¹ If Christianity is an antidote to sorcery, these high numbers should indicate that sorcery and other practices related to traditional spirit worlds are marginalized. However, many Melanesians have the impression that sorcery is increasing rather than declining. The main reason for the new rise in sorcery is perceived to be envy, jealousy, disputes over land rights, and increasing poverty. The feeling of being left out of progress is believed to make people prone to do sorcery, either to hurt someone, to level out difference or to achieve wealth for oneself. As scholars of the region have been careful to point out, current sorcery accusations and violence are thus not so much grounded in the traditional culture of Melanesia. Rather, it is first and foremost the product of new forms of discontent with social changes that bring insecurity, uncertainty and declining solidarity (e.g. Cox and Phillips 2015; Eves 2000; Jorgensen 2014; Kolshus 2017; Rio 2011; Taylor 2015; see also Khalvashi and Manning, Chapter 3, on Georgian goblins).

Sorcery is an ambiguous phenomenon in Melanesia. Sharing, redistribution and interpersonal commitment are values that define social life in Melanesian collectives. A failure to live up to these expectations can breed resentment, envy, jealousy and anger, and make people prone to use sorcery to punish or hinder what they see as unwanted outcomes. However, even though sorcery brings destruction, it can also be understood as a protest and a reinforcement of 'the communal moral of giving and sharing as against the modern tendency to claim rights and keep to oneself' (Rio 2003, 132). Sorcery can thus be

interpreted as a double-edged blade: it clarifies the moral importance of collectivity and social bonds, but at the same time it demonstrates a harmful individualism when letting personal envy override relational compassion in bringing horror, death and pain to others. In Melanesia, where social worlds are to such an extent centred on the flow of objects, knowledge and people, we may say that the sorcerer is a symptom of tensions over the appropriate limits of reciprocal engagement in contexts of social uncertainty.

In order to illustrate how the sorcerer emerges as a threat in contexts of uncertainty, I will give the example of a senior man on Ahamb, whom I call Orwell. Orwell had been suspected of sorcery for two decades until he was eventually killed for such allegations in 2014, an event I discuss later in the chapter. Orwell was a deviant in several ways on Ahamb. He was a man with keen interest in traditional knowledge (*kastom*), he rarely went to church, and he lived alone in a house next to his clan's traditional cemetery. Most Ahamb people are uncomfortable around these cemeteries because they are believed to house active ancestral spirits. These spirits may be used for sorcery. Orwell's choice of placement for his house, combined with his interest in *kastom* over church, caused suspicion. Moreover, Orwell was an active land claimant involved in several land disputes against his own kin. Kin are generally expected to be generous and respectful to one another. When Orwell disputed his kin for land, a resource everyone depends on for subsistence, he represented for many islanders a different moral world altogether. Orwell was also known for asking local trade store owners, kava bar holders and boat operators for credit and not paying back. When he was confronted over his debt, or refused further service, he could get furious. As a result, islanders sometimes complained that Orwell did not understand that business owners too needed money to feed their families. He was gossiped about as *jalus* (envious or jealous) and lacking empathy (*no save luk save wori blong narafala man*) – characteristics typical of the sorcerer, who lets his negative personal emotions override his compassion for others.

I knew Orwell relatively well and would like to present his behaviour from another perspective. Although he rarely showed up in church, Orwell was keen to state that he was Christian. The few times he did go to church, he met the gazes of everyone who were suspicious of him. When I observed him after service, a time important for mingling, many were uncomfortable of having him around and tried to avoid him. As a result, Orwell was typically walking restlessly around, trying to get into conversations with others without much luck. When I met Orwell, our conversations often turned to traditional living, which he claimed was getting lost. He spoke enthusiastically about how to make *nwog*, outrigger canoes of local wood – knowledge that nobody seemed to care about these days as they preferred fibreglass boats with outboard motors, he spoke about crops that could survive hurricanes that others had forgotten about in their quest for tinned fish and rice from the store, and he talked about how people did not share fish as much as they used to but instead asked money for it or sold it to the markets in Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila. Orwell

thus represented, in several ways, a different way of being in Ahamb's current social world.

Many islanders were afraid of having direct contact with Orwell. As a result, stories about him were often passed on through gossip. In the South Pacific, it is generally regarded as difficult to know exactly what other people think and feel (Robbins and Rumsey 2008). This is related to the idea that there is a distinction between the social person that others observe and the more individual private self. In Vanuatu, this distinction is reflected in the concepts *man*, referring to the public person, and *hem wan*, referring to the more intimate private self. This distinction, I suggest, is an expression of the person being so strongly integrated in one's relationships with others that there are normally few possibilities for individual self-expression. Because of the 'opacity of other minds', as Joel Robbins and Alan Rumsey call it, people in Melanesia generally put little trust in the veracity of what people say about their thoughts and intentions. Speculation and gossip thus become main channels through which information is caught about one another and reality is constructed (Besnier 2009; Brisson 1992). If it is the mass media that carries information about the unknown corners of the social in Cohen's society, gossip plays a similar role in Melanesian relationships and communities.

Pentecostalism and New Forms of Devilling

Before we move on, it is important to make one more point about the 'opacity of other minds'. If a person cannot expect that others express what they really feel and think at all times, it means that other versions of the world exist, apart from the one perceived (see also Rio 2019, 338). This idea of multiple coexisting worlds is common in Melanesia and is reflected in the proximity of life and death worlds, human, spirit and animal worlds, and the ever-present anxiety that persons and relations might be something other than they seem (Munn 1986; Rio 2019). The figure of the sorcerer is a boundless being that transgresses these worlds. They are supposedly normal persons but can transform into beings that overturn most physical and moral boundaries: they may kill their own kin, engage with spirits, fly in the air, take the shape of animals, and be in several places at the same time (Rio 2014a, 326). They are figures who emerge when it is difficult to grasp what is going on. They open the channel between hidden moral and spiritual worlds and cause unknown forces to flow and cause destruction.

For many Melanesians who fear this potential of the hidden, in both social and cosmological terms, Christianity's emphasis on the importance of sincerity and personal transparency seems to have played a therapeutic role (Robbins and Rumsey 2008, 411). In my own fieldsite of Ahamb, for instance, being Christian is seen as the closest one can get to a guarantee that a person is trustworthy and has good intentions (see Bratrud 2021). For Melanesia in general,

the emphasis on sincerity and transparency has been nowhere clearer than in Charismatic–Pentecostal forms of Christianity, which have gained an increasingly strong position in the region since the late 1970s (see Eriksen 2009b; Robbins 2004). As we will see in the following, Pentecostal tools for discerning the dangers of the hidden have been important for many Melanesians’ quest for safety and security. However, it has also intensified the identification of sorcerers, which has brought new notions of fear and panic.

Pentecostalism is a Christian movement that emphasizes direct personal experience with God and the availability of spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit, including prophesy, healing and the ability to speak in tongues (Robbins 2004, 117). Moreover, many Pentecostal churches in Melanesia, Africa and elsewhere have become popular for offering therapeutic cleansing of persons and societies through investigating, examining and healing individuals, relations and places as sites for evil (see Rio, MacCarthy, and Blanes 2017, 8). The evil may be sorcery, ancestral spirits or demons – all manifestations of the devil in Pentecostal worldviews. Many Pentecostal churches in Melanesia offer relief from these threats by mapping the spiritual and moral deficiencies that are causing the invasion of such forces, and further provide the necessary cleansing and safeguarding from their powers.

Part of Pentecostalism’s popularity, according to Knut Rio, Michelle MacCarthy and Ruy Blanes, is that the churches acknowledge the gap between official politics and grass-roots concerns – especially on issues of sorcery and witchcraft. This gap is acknowledged as both an existential problem and a governmental problem, and the churches offer a solution by engaging confrontational attacks on forces they deem responsible for people’s problems, and who operate in the invisible realm as sorcerers, evil spirits or the devil (Rio, MacCarthy, and Blanes 2017, 3). Through spiritual warfare, spiritual mapping and healing, Pentecostal churches:

open the invisible world and take control of it. They describe the different forms of life and creatures that exist in it; they offer techniques for taming them and making the invisible visible. They do not make the mistake that politicians, development agencies, or NGOs make by closing off the invisible or ignoring it; instead, they fully realise the potential for government that lies in the invisible realm itself. (Rio, MacCarthy, and Blanes 2017, 10–11)

In current Vanuatu, many people have a sense that life has become more insecure. There is a perceived increase in illness and killing, economic inequality is growing, there is prevailing distrust in politicians, fear of the police, and threats of climate change (Mitchell 2011; Rio 2011; Taylor 2015). There is a sense that something seriously destructive is going on but it is difficult to know exactly what it is. In this context of uncertainty, Pentecostal movements strike a chord. They identify the ‘real’ sources of evil in people’s lives and put forward a person, group, or set of attitudes, behaviours or circumstances as the reason for

people's problems. By pointing to the hidden sources of people's misfortune, and offering tools to deal with them, Pentecostal churches offer therapeutic relief from the anxiety. However, placing blame on concrete sites of evil may also have the effect that people's anxiety is reinforced and new problems arise (see Bratrud 2019a). I will now provide a case from my fieldwork on Ahamb in 2014 that illustrates how Pentecostal tools may ignite hope for betterment but can also cause new anxieties when making previously diffuse threats terrifyingly concrete.

Identifying Sorcery through the Holy Spirit

Over the past few decades, Ahamb has suffered from several enduring disputes related to land rights and authority. At the beginning of my second fieldwork on the island, in 2014, many Ahamb people portrayed a society in steady moral decline. The enduring land disputes were dividing families and villages, community organizations and committees had disbanded, and there was a sense of increased sorcery activity in the area. In March 2014, a Christian Charismatic revival arrived on Ahamb after having spread around the district for a few months. A revival of this kind refers to spiritual (re)awakening – a prompting of the Holy Spirit that makes believers experience miracles, a convicting awareness of sin, and strong desire for repentance and humility (Robbins 2004). The revival drew large masses to church for nightly praise-and-worship services and prayer sessions. Around 30 children received spiritual gifts and conveyed revelations from the Holy Spirit to the community. The revelations concerned what was good, what was bad, and how we had to live to receive salvation as the Last Days of Judgement were approaching. The revival quickly gained influence in the community, and both chiefs and other leaders were active in revival programmes and followed the children's revelations (see Bratrud 2019b).

Two months after its inception, the revival increased in seriousness and significance. A group of visionary children found a stone outside the island's community hall that they claimed was placed there by ill-meaning sorcerers who wanted to divide and damage the community. Right after this event, I met Rasmus, the son of a chief, at the community hall. Rasmus saw clear connections between the sorcery stone and the current state of the community. Looking around us, he commented that none of the institutions in the area – the community hall, the school or the medical clinic – were functioning. They were like relics of the past. As Rasmus saw it, it was the power of the sorcery stone that had caused this misfortune to happen. The community's leaders were all kin but were disputing to the extent that they could not even uphold basic community institutions. It was illogical, difficult to comprehend. Something had to be causing it. Placing the explanation on sorcery made the incomprehensible comprehensible (see Siegel 2006). The sorcery finding spurred an intense search for more sorcery and other evil powers deemed at work in the community. Over the

following months, more and more sorcery and evil forces appeared before the visionary children through their 'spiritual X-ray', as it was sometimes called. The evil forces had to be removed to clean the community of its perils.

While the children detected and removed sorcery around the island, they were also, through their spiritual vision, identifying the persons behind the sorcery. They could also see that the sorcerers, who came from the whole district, were furious at them for removing their powers. As a result, the sorcerers were travelling to Ahamb by the magic of flying (*suu*) to kill anyone they could get hold of. According to the visionaries who conveyed the information, a leading figure of the sorcerers' crusade against the island was Ahamb's own Orwell. He appeared before the visionaries in many shapes – half horse, half calf and so on – confirming many islanders' impression of his transgressive character.

Four months after the initial sorcery findings, five men admitted that they had taken part in recent sorcery attacks and killings. During a three week-long village meeting, in which the men were to explain themselves, the men conveyed that Orwell was 'the king of sorcery' in the district and had lured them into his secret brotherhood of sorcerers. They also claimed that Orwell was responsible for more than 30 deaths and numerous instances of disease, bankrupt businesses and general misfortune in the district. The perceived threat from Orwell reinforced a festering moral panic over the attacking invisible sorcerers. A group of men started questioning how they could be safe with a sorcerer of this calibre being around their children and families. The idea of an invisible parallel society that was attacking innocent people, and that continued to attack whenever it suited them, encouraged this sense of crisis. Out of fear and anger, a small mob ended up organizing the murder of Orwell and another senior man I call Han-tor, whom the five suspects claimed was his main associate.

If 'witching' and 'folk devilling' has to do with fear and anxiety concerning the uncontrollable agency of the other (Jackson 2011, 45), Orwell turned into the folk devil *par excellence* on Ahamb. He had become the bodily manifestation of many islanders' generalized fear of evil forces at work in the world (see Ashford 2005, 64). If he were eradicated, the source of many risks and problems were believed to be gone and one could start anew. Given the fear Ahamb people have of sorcery, it can be useful to see the killing in light of Stuart Hall et al.'s point that 'signification spirals' often accompany moral panics. As they argue,

In the public signification of troubling events, there seem to be certain thresholds which mark out symbolically the limits of societal tolerance. The higher an event can be placed in the hierarchy of thresholds, the greater is its threat to the social order, and the tougher and more automatic is the coercive response. (Hall et al. 1978, 225–6)

The threat associated with Orwell in particular marked the limits of what Ahamb people could bear. After decades of fear over his deviance, largely shaped by speculation and gossip, the Pentecostal discernment tools available

in the revival confirmed that Orwell was the societal threat people feared him to be. In all its brutality, attacking this folk devil represented a hope of getting back relations in their ordinary and human state and regaining some sense of control (see also Rio 2019, 339). However, the killing also led to new anxieties, notions of guilt, and disputes that I unfortunately do not have the space to discuss here (see, however, Bratrud 2021, 2022).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that the contemporary Melanesian sorcerer appears as a folk devil in Cohen's sense – a deviant other that is to blame for society's problems. However, I have argued that Cohen's theory rests on a particular view of 'society' with a particular history of Christianity and where the mass media plays a crucial role in conveying information to society's members. If we are to identify and analyse folk devils in other social environments, we must examine what the 'social' is in that context, how it is perceived to threaten, and why it demands a critical response – factors that can vary significantly from Cohen's context.

Most studies of folk devils typically define their associated moral panics as exaggerated and misdirected (e.g. Cohen 2002 [1972]; Hall et al. 1978; La Fontaine 1998). Such characterizations might well be true, but they must not lead us to overlook the specific sources of people's anxieties and the sociocultural dynamics of particular panics. Dismissing people's thoughts and actions as unreasonable may risk concealing the real problems people experience in their lives, which are not easy for outside observers to grasp. As Harri Englund points out, mass hysteria or psychosis is not so much at issue in moral panics 'because the subjects of a moral panic are able to analyse the causes of their distress and are adamant about the values they seek to defend' (Englund 2006, 172). This is also the case on Ahamb, where sorcery is experienced as a real and complex threat grounded in anxiety of moral failure and the risks of the relations on which one depends.

This is not to say that folk devilling is not dangerous. Locating the source of one's problems and misfortune in deviant persons or groups, and then thinking that the problems will go away if one eradicates that person or group, is usually all too simple and has had too many fatal outcomes in the history of the world. In most cases, the source of one's anxiety and problems are complex and have their origin far beyond the agency of the imagined other (see also Ivasiuc, Chapter 8). In Melanesia, for instance, suspicion of sorcery is typically a symptom of rising inequalities, poverty, lack of health services, and politicians doing little for the grass roots. In such cases, postcolonial neo-liberal policies and failing services are probably more of an underlying cause of uncertainties than any village individual. A simple blaming of a person or group may thus easily conceal the underlying problems experienced in a collective rather than unveil

them. What we can do as social scientists is to keep a keen eye on the specificities of folk devilling in a given sociocultural and political-historical context. This can help us better understand what is at stake for different people in times of uncertainty, and what factors shape these uncertainties, and ultimately engage a critical perspective on the construction of crises, which the contributors to this book show is an ever-present topic globally.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Martin Demant Frederiksen and Ida Harboe Knudsen for inviting me to be part of this book and for their constructive engagement with the chapter. I thank two anonymous reviewers and HUP editor Hannu Linkola for their feedback, which has improved my arguments significantly. Thank you, Susanne Roald, Vibeke Isachsen and Lars Blikstad Galaaen, for bringing me books to Fagernes from Oslo during the Covid-19 lockdown, and Valdres Folk Museum for the guest office and first-class colleagues in Fagernes.

Notes

- ¹ Numbers for Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea are taken from their most recent censuses (2009 and 2000, respectively; National Statistics... 2000; Vanuatu National... 2009), while Solomon Islands numbers are from the Report on International Religious Freedom conducted by the United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2008).

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