ON THE VALUE OF THE CHURCH
The gendered dynamics of an inverted hierarchy on North Ambrym, Vanuatu[*]
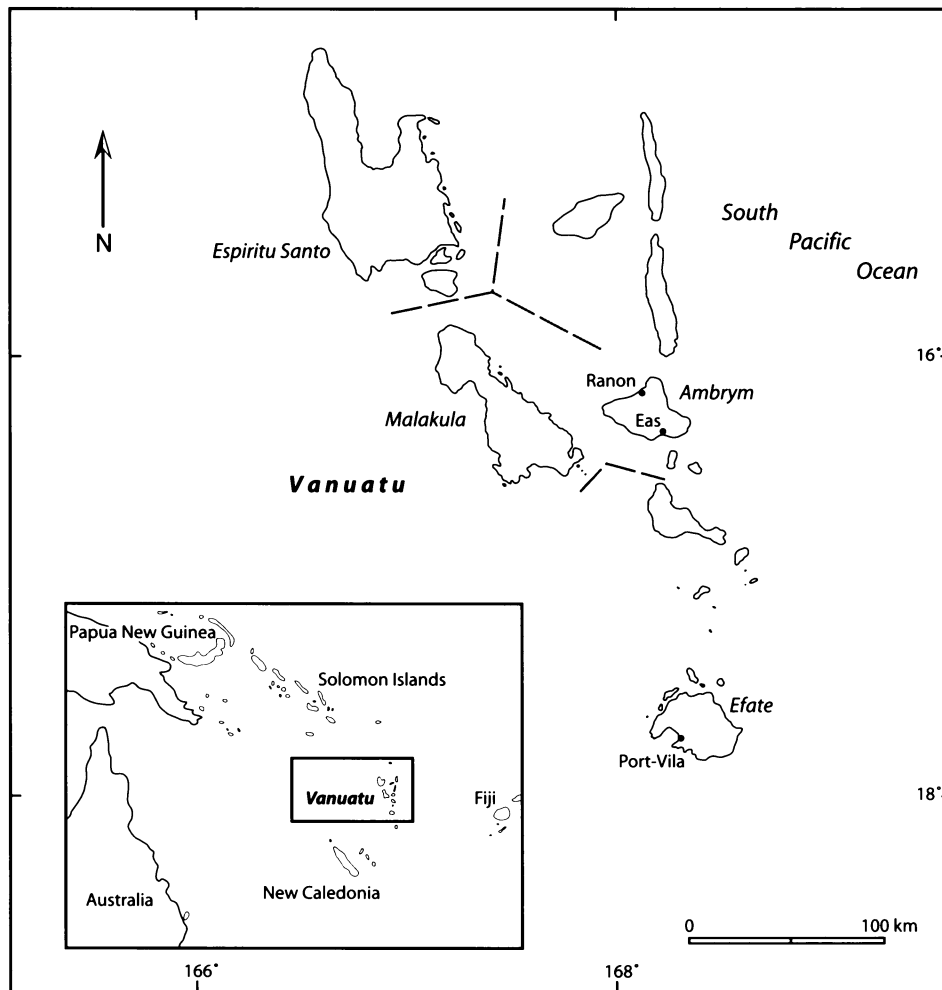
Annelin Eriksen

'WE ARE NOT WOMEN'

In this article, I attempt an analysis of the sociality of Christianity on Ambrym in north-central Vanuatu. I claim that the social dynamics of Christianity can best be comprehended by relating it to a contrasting form of sociality tied to the male graded society – and compare the two social forms as competing value regimes that are expressed in terms of gender. An incident that took place in the village of Ranon in North Ambrym in 1999 made quite explicit the gender values which I attempt to analyse here. People in the village had been disturbed by a great increase in sorcery, and a village court was organized in order to try and resolve matters. When the whole village and people from neighbouring villages had gathered and the chief had held his opening speech, one of the men, a member of a relatively new Church, known as the 'Holiness', asked everyone present to swear on the bible that they would only tell the truth. During this court case a number of charges were raised against different men who were believed to have resorted to sorcery as means of controlling other people. Serious murder claims were going to be made. Before starting on the actual accusations and witness proofs, the ground rules had to be established, and I read the mention of the bible by the Holiness man as an effort to make the Church the framework for the event. However, this was not an easy matter for him. A man with a reputation for knowledge of *kastom* rose and replied aggressively: 'We are not women. We can make no use of the bible here'.

In matters such as sorcery, as generally in matters that demand authority, men in particular feel that the Church lacks the appropriate social form (see below). I argue that there are two main social forms that relationships may take, both being gendered. As a result of certain historical circumstances, the Presbyterian Church on Ambrym has come to take on a female gendered form.[1] This form creates lateral relations rather than hierarchical ones and does not give room for any particular person to make a name or

Ranon, Ambrym, Vanuatu (Map: G. Hampel).

a reputation of greatness. In order to understand the social dynamics of the Church on Ambrym, this gendered contrast between a male hierarchical form and a female lateral social form needs to be considered. By this I mean that moving, making connections with new places and representing alternative 'roads' is regarded as a female capacity on Ambrym, whereas being rooted, standing for places and seeking representations of oneself a male capacity, these representations competing with one another within a ritual hierarchy. Since this gender contrast can be seen as having been in operation throughout

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that, for instance, the new form of Pentecostal Christianity, on North Ambrym mainly represented by the Church of Holiness, also has great similarities. This, however, remains to be analysed.

Ambrym history, it must be taken into account in any attempt to understand historical events and present-day social change. I shall try to show that today, rather than making Big Men, the Church creates 'social wholes'. The dynamics of this process is tied to 'connecting women' and their effort to create an alternative movement in relation to the male ritual hierarchy. Moreover, the social form the Church has adopted as an alternative to the established male hierarchical form has had consequences for the ability to develop its authority, as court proceedings in the above case revealed.

In this article, I aim to arrive at an understanding of the relationship between the Church, the male cults and the gendered social form. The analysis will entail the following steps. First I outline the dynamics of North Ambrym social organization based on kinship structures. The kinship system entails a patrilineal principle, as well as a lateral principle which counteracts it. These modes of creating relationships are gendered. Although the male form is hierarchical, the female lateral, they might still be seen as variations on a theme, namely the value of the relationship. Based on Marilyn Strathern's (1988) theoretical outline of Melanesian relationships, it is argued that the male hierarchical form is realised in gift exchanges, creating what Strathern refers to as 'personifications'. In contrast to this we find on Ambrym what I call the female social form. This is also a modality of the relational value, but without the personification or hierarchy. Rather, as I shall show, the female mode of creating a relationship implies a focus on the product, or outcome, of the relationship, not on the particular persons involved as giver or receiver in the relationship. The female social form creates connections and communities rather than personifications and hierarchies. I argue that, when the Church was established on Ambrym in the twentieth century, the egalitarian Christian ethos made it hard for men to develop the male hierarchical form within the Christian framework. Rather, the Christian ethos resonated more with the female social form, and women thus became central agents in the Church. As the Church became more dominant as a social institution than the declining male ritual cults, the female mode of creating relationships also became more dominant, replacing the male mode. In the final part of the article, this analysis is compared to Joel Robbins' (2002, 2004) analysis of Urapmin Christianity in Papua New Guinea. Whereas Urapmin Christianity involved changing the dominant value of the culture from relational to individual, the North Ambrym case involves change at another level. The dominant value of relationship persists, but it is re-gendered. The hierarchy is inverted, as the church becomes the relational arena.

FEMALE LATERAL CONNECTIONS

In order to make the argument that the Church has taken on a female lateral social form, I will take a short detour through some of the basic principles governing Ambrym social organization. The workings of the kinship system on Ambrym, described in the

literature as the six class system,[2] can best be understood if it is seen as operating on two levels simultaneously. On the first level, the kinship system can be analysed as a structure dividing the patrilineages into three main groups (*buluim*). These groups are organized by the principles of patrilineal descent and virilocal residence. Each of these groups is divided into two moieties based on alternations of generations, so that a man and his father's father and his son's son are brothers and thus belong to the same moiety, whereas his father and his fathers' father's father and son's son's son belong to the opposite moiety. These moieties are important when it comes to marriage because a man marries the same women as his father' father, who is also called his brother. In other words, when a man is looking for a wife, he must look for a sister of his father's father's wife. When each of the three *buluim* is divided into two (generational) groups, this results in a system based on six groups, hence the six class system.

However, elsewhere I have (Eriksen 2004) argued that, in order to understand the social working out of this system, this structural perspective needs to be supplemented by an analysis of how people actually marry and relate to each other. I found that on Ambrym people generally marry whom they want and that they also experience a great deal of freedom with regard to where they live. What immediately seems to be a discrepancy between what people say and what they do can be seen in terms of the relationship between real and ideal kinship. One might think about the six class system as a recipe but with many different 'on the ground' practices. The six class system gives the basic principles, which might, however, develop several different relationships, those that are actually realized not necessarily being the only ones that might be realized. It is important on North Ambrym to make actual practice correspond and be 'right' according to the basic kinship principles. People are therefore creative and find different ways of making relationship take on a 'correct' form. Sometimes this implies a shifting of perspective. This might involve someone following a different line of relationship so that, for instance, a potential spouse becomes marriageable according to the six class system. I have elsewhere (Eriksen 2004) outlined different cases where a marriage required the 'blocking' of previous relationships and the creation of new ones so that the marriage could be deemed 'correct'. For instance, a man wanting to marry the daughter of his classificatory brother, has to pay compensation to the classificatory brother for blocking the previous relationship, and then find a 'road' through which he can call the man 'father-in-law'. When people try to make marriages correct according to the kinship ideal and seek alternative 'roads' for tracing relationships, this is often realised through matrilateral links. Instead of applying a relational map based on the perspective provided by the father's place (the father's *buluim*), one resorts to the relational map of the mother's *buluim*.[3]

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2   Deacon (1927), Patterson (1976), Rio (2002), Eriksen (2004)

3   This does not imply that one becomes adopted into the mother's brothers *buluim*. One would still think of the mother's brother as an uncle, but because the history of alternative navigations in the kinship

Following kinship ties through the mother instead of the father offers a lateral alternative. I argue that one of the basic mechanisms at work in Ambrym kinship, or Ambrym social organization in general, is lateral connections made by women. It is not only analyses of marriage practices that reveal this, but also the circumstances of movement in general, and of movements of settlement in particular. On Ambrym sisters are called *metehal*. Through referential expansion, *hal* has become a complex cultural category. In its most literal sense it refers to paths between hamlets and villages, as well as between the hamlet and the garden. In referring to daughters and sisters, *metehal* uses the term *hal* in a metaphorical sense to mean 'the end of the road', or, as one informant explained it to me, the end that makes the road, like the tip of an arrow, also called *mete*. Women are like paths between the hamlets because it is through them that social linkages are made. For instance, while doing a survey of village relocations, it became apparent to me that movements from old settlements into new ones are usually done through connecting women. Women who marry into new places remain essential connecting points for their relatives who might need a refuge in later times. Also, on a more general level women are regarded as those who make connections and inclusions. This gendered way of dealing with others has also been described by Debra McDougall (2003), who shows how women in Ranongga in the Solomon Islands are responsible for caring for outsiders and incorporating those who arrive from elsewhere into the group. Lissant Bolton (1999) has also argued of Ambae in northern Vanuatu that since women move when marrying, their relationship to place is a matter of affiliation, not of birth. Bolton also argues (1999:49) that a woman is usually regarded as someone who has to 'go before you and open the way there for you'. In other words, movement into new places is a gendered practise.

MALE HIERARCHICAL RELATIONS

Another important mechanism of Ambrym social organization is what I call the male social form: the hierarchy. This is played out in its purest version in the men's graded society (*mage*). This social institution is now to a large degree historical: only a very few men are still active and take grades in this ritual society today. Its ideology, however, is still very much alive.

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system has created a system which is not homogenous, in the sense that the ego's relational map looks the same from mother's *buluim* and father's *buluim*, there might be alternative roads to follow here. For instance, if ego's father was the brother of ego' s desired spouse, ego's mother's brother should, according to the six class system, be the in-law of this man as well. However, this might not actually be the case. The mother's brother might have chosen another 'road' to this particular man for some reason, perhaps another marriage, and ego might then adopt this perspective in respect of the relational universe.

The male graded society was the most important social institution for creating men of great reputation and deserving of respect. Through climbing the hierarchy of the *mage*, men achieved personal glory. The *mage* consisted of thirteen (Rio 2002) to fifteen (Patterson 1981) individually named grades, each involving payment in the form of pigs, dead or alive.[4] For the highest grade, of which there were three variants, all called *mal*, forty pigs were required. Carved tree-fern images were carved for each grade, and roofs were erected above the statues. When the candidate climbed up on to the roof, he was literally climbing the *mage*. It was generally known on Ambrym that as a ritual concept the *mage* had been introduced relatively recently. Mary Patterson (2002) estimates the time of its arrival as between the seventeenth and eighteenth century, even in the early twentieth century men from Ambrym still travelled to Malekula in order to be initiated into *mage* grades. However, according to Patterson (1981, 2002), before the introduction of the *mage* another type of graded society existed on Ambrym. Pre-*mage* ceremonies, called *berangyanyan* and *fenbi*, were based on the principles of the kinship system to a much greater extent than the mage, in the sense that it was payments between the three basic *buluim* that were the main focus of the ceremonies. According to Patterson, these ceremonies also involved achieving grades, the killing of pigs and the erection of tree-fern statues. This last aspect of the pre-mage ceremonial complex leads Patterson to argue (2002:128) that '[f]ar from secular, these rites in North Ambrym were the creative basis of ontological and cosmological ideas as well as the means of status differentiation between individuals and group'. The competitive aspect of these ceremonies was then replaced by the *mage*.

There seems to be little left of the *berangyanyan* and *fenbi* part of the ritual, because the *mage* today is not tied to the structure of the kinship system, nor is it centred on repaying maternal relatives. The *mage* existed to a certain degree outside of the wider community. The hierarchal and competitive logic on which it was based contrasted with the logic of the everyday social life, which was based to a much greater extent on an egalitarian ethos and conjugal work relations. This can be compared to what Simon Harrison (1985) has argued about the male hierarchical cult among the Avatip (East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea), which operated according to a different cultural logic than the secular society. Harrison argued for the existence of two different socio-cultural domains, one ritual and the other non-ritual, or everyday and secular. In non-ritual contexts, in matters of kinship for instance, the fundamental ideology was one of equality. The male ritual worked as its antithesis. Instead of talking about different domains, such as the political domain of the male cult and the domestic domain of gender relations, for instance, Harrison argues that these are different forms of social action.

In the same way, the male hierarchical social form on Ambrym existed as an alternative to a more common and noticeable lateral social form in which to a very large degree competition is sanctioned through sorcery. Making too much of oneself and

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See Rio (2002) for a detailed account of each grade.

claiming too much influence often leads to what people call *toktok* in Bislama (Vanuatu pidgin). This expression connotes 'too much talk' and 'gossip', which is closely related to the fear of sorcery. When there is *toktok*, people say, there is also sorcery. Practices that make distinctions and that make certain people stand out are sanctioned through sorcery. When, for instance, the cook at the Ranon Secondary School became ill and had to stop working, her job suddenly became available in the village. This was certainly a scarce resource because there were not many paid jobs in Ranon. Beside the positions of the teachers in the primary and secondary schools and the priest, no one else was paid. A number of people in the village wanted the job. It would ease the burden of having to rely on cash crops to pay for things like school fees and water fees. What was surprising, however, was that the woman who got the job remained in the position only a week, and then moved to Port Vila. She told me that there had been too much *toktok* in the village, and too many people had pointed to the fact that her father was on the board of the secondary school and also a member of the Development Council, and that he had tried to control the process. The woman felt so threatened by this because, as she explained, this sort of *toktok* always leads to sorcery. The communal social form, in which separation and personification are sanctioned, is the primary value in everyday interaction. Being in a privileged position and thus getting the job implied emphasizing the relationship between herself and her father, and her father became a personification of her own achievement. This was felt to be unacceptable, and people in the village were annoyed by it. The values of everyday life are, in other words, a reversed version of the values of the *mage* and imply a complete negation of any sort of personification.

MALE AND FEMALE VALUES CREATING DIFFERENT SOCIAL FORMS

Two differently gendered value regimes seem to operate on Ambrym. Following Louis Dumont (1980), values are always organised hierarchically, in the sense that one value is always primary and orders other values. For India, Dumont has argued that the idea of the pure is an encompassing value that includes politics, economics and the juridical within it. Pureness is an absolute value. Building on Strathern's (1988) model and the tradition of Marcel Mauss in anthropology, one can argue that on Ambrym to create relationship is an absolute value.[5] The female and male variants are unequally positioned in this respect because, as I have shown, the gendered 'codes' for being able to create relationships are different. It has been claimed that gender is fundamental to social relations in the region. Strathern (1988) has argued that an understanding of the dynamics of social life in Melanesia is not fundamentally premised on an understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, as in western social thought. Rather, it

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5   See also Robbins (2002).

is a matter of how relations are gendered and changed. Strathern operates with different prototypical exchanges: 'same-sex' and 'cross-sex' exchanges, 'mediated' and 'unmediated' exchanges. The prime example of this is the Hagen couple who raise pigs that the husband uses in a Moka exchange.[6] Moka exchanges only occur between men. The cross-sex relationship in this case is the relationship between the wife and the husband, which is unmediated because it is contained within itself as a unit. Strathern argues that the products of this union (food, pigs, children) substitute for this relationship. This substitution is itself in a cross-sex state, in other words, is androgynous. The unmediated cross-sex relationship between husband and wife results in a substitution in the form of the androgynous child or the androgynous pig. In a same-sex relationship, where the husband exchanges the pig with a person of the same sex, the pig comes to stand for the previous cross-sex union which caused it. Gendering relationships are primary in Strathern's analyses, all exchanges being modelled on this principle. For Strathern the alternation is not so much between a male and a female state but between a cross-sex/ androgynous state and a same sex/gendered state. The cross-sex/androgynous state is complete and momentarily fulfilled. Only by transforming it into a same-sex/gendered state can new relations be initiated and new growth and social development take place. Strathern (1988) thus argues that a puberty rite, for instance, is not so much a matter of socializing an individual into society, as in the usual anthropological conception but creating a single gender out of the androgynous child.

Comparing Strathern's model to my own material, I argue that just as the same-sex transaction eclipses the cross-sex relation, the male relationship on Ambrym – for instance, during a ceremonial transaction in the male ritual hierarchy – eclipses the lateral, female form. I might, of course, talk about the Ambrym transactions between men – whether during ceremonies of grade incorporation in the *mage* or in exchanges in the general ceremonial economy on Ambrym – as same-sex transactions, and thus only focus on the gendered aspects of these transactions on a general level. However, I find it more apt to call this social form male because, as I have argued, it is generally men who feature in these same-sex transactions. Strathern (1988:185) seems to avoid using the terms 'male' and 'female': 'Hence I have proposed that the Melanesian gender relationship upon which we should concentrate is not between male and female but between same-sex and cross- sex relations'. Gender, Strathern (1988:185) argues, refers to 'the internal relationship between parts of persons, as well to their externalizations as relations between persons'. This 'multiple personhood-model' is in many respects useful because it avoids essentializing 'maleness' and 'femaleness': what is male is only male in relation to something else. When something is termed male, whether it is a person or a practice, it can only be called male because a distinction between a part and the whole is created. On Ambrym, during a ceremonial transaction, this is exactly

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[6]   Strathern builds extensively on her own ethnographic material from Mount Hagen in the Papua New Guinea Highlands.

what takes place. The man who personifies the contributors and hands over a number of pigs and yams is separated from the whole. However, I argue that on Ambrym this separation not only generally genders a person and a practice, but, when it takes place, it is usually male gendered. I am aware that in other parts of Melanesia, and even in the neighbouring regions of Ambrym, women perform ceremonial same-sex transactions. The Ambae women who transact mats (Bolton 2003) and the Trobriand women who exchange banana leaves (Weiner 1976) are cases of female-gendered same-sex transactions. On Ambrym however, these public, ceremonial transactions, which take place in same-sex relations are male-gendered, and it is in these transactions that the gender differences are made apparent.

Applying Strathern's (1988) conceptual apparatus, I argue that, whereas it is a male-gendered practice to seek mediated, and often same-sex relations to achieve the manifestation of relations as persons, it is a female-gendered practice to seek, as persons, to create manifestations of relations. Women stand out as alternative roads of connection making and represent 'relational roads' that their brothers and fathers can follow in order to extract resources for ceremonial prestations. Men in mediated exchanges during ceremonies, on the other hand, seek to create themselves as renowned persons and eclipse the relations that they rely on. Women stand for relationships, whereas men counteract this by seeking to stand out from relationships as individuals.

The gender difference on Ambrym is a difference between an emphasis on persons and an emphasis on relations. As Strathern (1988) has shown, person and relation are both variations of each other, and necessary counterparts, just as pure and impure, or good and evil. Perhaps the most accurate way of describing the dynamics between the two competing value regimes on Ambrym is to say that the male social form expresses the value of mediated exchanges that create personifications, whereas the female social form is based on unmediated exchanges which do not emphasize the personifications of the exchange. This, following Alfred Gell (1992, 1999), can be seen as articulating the difference between gift exchange, or mediated exchanges, and sharing, or unmediated exchanges. Both these social forms are variations of the relational value, but one of them is more incompatible with the social form of the Church and the value of Christianity. I will show that, within the framework of the Church, the personified social form has had few expressions.

A 'personification' implies that an individual contains the society as a whole within himself and stands out as a representation of it. It contrasts strongly with the egalitarian ethos of the Christian social form. Ceremonies in the *mage* as well as kinship-based ceremonies created, and to a certain extent still create, men that had this capacity of containment. However, the social dynamics of the Ambrym ceremonial economy includes an inherent contradiction based on the tension between these two competing value regimes: the relational and the personified. On the one hand, the principles of sharing lie at the root of every ceremony. The prestations in every ceremony are based on generalized exchange. On the other hand, the main persons of the ceremony eclipse

this generalized exchange. The man (it is men in most cases) who gives a ceremonial gift presents the heap of food he has received from a large number of relatives a s i f it were a gift f r o m h i m to the receiver; he thus emerges as an industrious man. This illusion is only momentary, because after the presentation of food to the receiver, the return prestation is shared out among the many relatives who have contributed to the original prestation. This tension between the social whole and the individual who emerges as the Big Man (Sahlins 1963) is present in all Ambrym ceremonies, and, in Dumontian language, one might say that the male personifications in the *mage* ceremonies, and to a certain extent also in the general ceremonial economy, encompass the female values of sharing. It is this encompassment that was inverted when the Church became the new arena for the ceremonial economy.

THE SOCIAL FORM OF THE CHURCH

Before showing how this inversion takes place, I shall first briefly describe the new ceremonial economy that takes place within the framework of the Church.[7]

Fund-raising is an essential part of Christian life. Sometimes small markets are organized, but once in a while larger fund-raising activities take place. These involve a number of people and are something of an event in the village. During my fieldwork in 1999, there was one fund-raising occasion in particular which had been talked about and planned for a long period. It was called 'mate to meat', after an Australian fund-raising concept. The idea was that everyone should bring along a plate with food and then the organizers would read out names of those who were to eat their meals together. Two families would exchange plates, pay for the food they received from the other family, and sit down together and eat. The money would then be contributed to the Church. Every household in Ranon turned up at the event, sitting in groups around an open space where the chief stood as he called out the names of those who were to eat together.

I suggest that these fund-raising events are not primarily about bringing money to the Church. Rather, the social aspect seems to be just as important. The event is talked about and prepared several days in advance. The children grow excited, and the women prepare beautifully decorated festival dishes. The social gathering, the laughing and playing, the men sitting in groups talking, the women admiring each other's dishes, joking, gossiping, all contribute to social inclusion and communality. I suggest that rather than bringing money to the Church, the focus of the ceremony was the sharing of food.

Giving away food and distributing garden produce is highly valued on Ambrym. The woman with whom I stayed and shared a kitchen house always talked about her empty kitchen. 'I prepare food, but only minutes afterwards, it is gone', she said. Or she

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7   For a fuller description, see Eriksen (2005a).

could point out that the day before she had been in her garden and brought heaps of banana and taro, or yam, back, and now it was all gone. Of course, although sometimes expressing this as a complaint, this was also a way of displaying her social capacity: her food was circulating. I have argued elsewhere (Eriksen 2005a) that the social logic of sharing is easily compatible with the logic of fund-raising. The ceremonial economy – for instance, marriage ceremonies, puberty rites and death rituals – was based to a large degree on generalized exchange and was a context in which garden produce circulated. In the past there was a greater repertoire of ceremonies that had this effect. I will not go into details here, but Patterson (1981) has described some rites that were common on North Ambrym before the Church arrived, such as the *serebuan* and the *tobuan*. The *tobuan* is still being performed on Ambrym, although not so frequently. Fund-raising is a new context into which meaningful structures of generalized exchange are integrated.

THE FEMALE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CHURCH

However, significant changes have occurred as the fund-raising activieties took over as the new ceremonial economy. In particular, these changes have affected the organization of the gendered values: the hierarchical and personified form, as well as the lateral and relational social form. I argue that although the Church has taken on an open relational form that includes ceremonies where the sharing of food is central, it has also changed important aspects of the ceremonial economy by re-gendering it, that is, by giving an encompassing role to the female social form. When ceremonies are performed in the Church, or within its framework, there is no room for the glorification of singular industrious men, not only in the ceremonial economy but also, and even more, in the *mage*. I have elsewhere (Eriksen 2005a) compared three different descriptions of a New Yam ceremony: one from 1887, by the first missionary on Ambrym, Charles Murray; one from 1947, by another missionary, W.F. Paton; and finally my own from 1996. I found that there has been a significant shift in how the ceremony is played out. Today women's roles in it have become much more prominent. Not only are they now more visible, but their parts are also far more dominant than the parts the men play. Whereas before men performed the whole ceremony by themselves, behind the large stone walls of the enclosure, today they have lost their prominence in this ceremony altogether. In the 1996 ceremony, which took place first inside the church, almost only women were present. Even afterwards, on the ceremonial ground where the actual redistribution was taking place, men just sat and watched the whole procedure. Only the chief and the women took part in the distribution of the yam. The chief did not have the prominent role he had had in 1943 or 1887. He helped the women allocate the yams, but otherwise his part seemed to be a largely passive one. It is obvious that a different gender emphasis has developed. Why?

The Church has changed the social form in which these ceremonies are conducted. The focus is no longer on the individual man encompassing the relational whole becoming the personification of the ceremony. Rather, it is the relational work itself which is the main focus. The Presbyterian Church, as it developed on Ambrym, had no space for the male social form: the hierarchy. Rather, it was another social form that correlated more easily with the established notions of the Church as presented when it was set up on Ambrym by Charles Murray in 1887. The Church was initially controlled by the high-ranking men in the *mage*, who bought rights to the churches and seemed to use the logic of the *mage* within them, for instance by buying rights and preventing female access to the churches. But as the high-ranking men turned away from the Church after endless battles and quarrels with missionaries over how it was to be organized, it was left to women and low-ranking men. The high-ranking men ceased to be interested in the Church when the missionaries prevented them from creating manifestations of greatness and prevented them from turning it into an exclusive and partial movement for men only. The Church was therefore transformed from a movement that initially worked on the logic of the *mage* – where high-ranking men bought 'rights' in the Church, so that it could represent their great names – to a movement which was inclusive and communal. The great men of the graded society during the period of the first missionary would themselves decline to become Christians as soon as the Church was turned into a movement where personal glory was no longer attainable. As the Church developed in the last century into a communal movement, it became a silent and steadily growing movement, without any big names. From the 1920s and onwards the churches on North Ambrym grew from small minority congregations to become the most important communal institutions. As they were transformed from being based on an exclusive relationship between competing Big Men and made open and inclusive, people from villages around the mission station were recruited and built their own churches. I have shown elsewhere (Eriksen 2004, 2005b) how this rapid growth of the Church is closely linked to women from the mission villages who married into 'heathen' villages and brought the Church along.

This insistence on the equality of Church members, the inclusion of both genders and the unhindered movement of the Church into new territories resonated with the female social form: the making of lateral connections. The dynamics of kinship, marriage, place and movement on Ambrym structurally favoured the female-gendered practices in relation to the Church. The Church on Ambrym works horizontally rather than vertically. The vertical organization of the Church, in this case the Presbyterian Church, with deacons, elders and the role of the priests is of course present. However, my argument is that in the Church on North Ambrym, the female form of the social structure, with its emphasis on communality, inclusion and alliance, is more fundamental to the social structure of the Church than the hierarchical relationship between the leaders of the Church. The local women's club and the Presbyterian Women's Mission Union (PWMU) are the most successful organizations to date with regard to communal work.

I was told that, some years ago, the PWMU had raised money to buy a communal truck so that people would no longer need to walk between the churches on the island when they organized combined meetings. The Church is succeeding as a superior movement because it explicitly manifests the 'connecting' form more than the personified one.

CHRISTIANITY AND VALUE TRANSFORMATIONS DISCUSSED

In Dumontian language, I have found a 'reversal' of the value hierarchy. The fact that Christianity fundamentally changes the values of the existing social universe has been described from elsewhere in the Pacific. Joel Robbins (2002, 2004) has discussed the role that Christianity has played in the development of a notion of individualism among the Urapmin in the Sandaun Province of Papua New Guinea. Robbins argues that Christianity has brought about radical cultural change and replaced the value of relations with a growing sense of individualism. This is tied to the two central preoccupations among Urapmin Christians: first, the sinful nature of human beings, and secondly, the need to be prepared for Jesus' return. Urapmin struggle with the idea that it is the individual who is the unit of salvation, not the relationship. One of Robbins' informants, a man called John, expressed his frustration with the fact that '[my] wife can't break off part of her belief and give it to me' (Robbins 2002:193). Robbins (2002:194) continues:

> For John, [...] [this] is about the limits of sharing and the limited value of relations based on it. It asserts that each individual is responsible for his or her belief. If an individual should fall short of belief when Jesus comes, no one, not even those most closely related to him, will be able to lend him or her moral credibility [...] Here surely is Dumont's 'independent, autonomous, and thus essentially non-social being' who as the 'the-individual-in-relation-to-God' is the subject of Christian salvation (Dumont 1986:27, after Troeltsch) (Robbins 2002:194).

In confessing sins, in prayers, in the Christian rhetoric of salvation in general, it is the individuals' relation to God which is emphasized in both form and content. Even sins that are caused by others, such as anger, are regarded as individual sins and the responsibility of the individual. The Urapmin subject is a 'non social yet still moral individual' (Robbins 2002:196) in relation to Christianity.

Robbins' portrayal of the struggles which Urapmin subjects undergo in transforming their world-view from an ethics of relationalism to an ethics of individualism is convincing. But, there is an obvious contrast here between my own argument about the Church as a 'social whole' and the argument that Christianity fosters individualism. The individualism which Robbins sees as becoming a dominant value among the Urapmin is not compatible with the regime of relational value. Whereas the focus on the individual, the personification, which I identified as a male practice, can be seen as a modality

of the relational value, the individualism represents a fundamental break with it. The
individual (the personification in Strathern's terms) is the momentary expression of a
societal achievement. The relational effort underpins the glorification of the Big Man.
It is only in certain contexts that the greatness of one person is manifested, and in these
contexts the person only represents what a number of persons/relationships has made
possible. The limits of this singular expression are recognized on Ambrym among other
things by the concept of *tambufae*. This is a reference to the fact that the Big Men of the
mage had to eat by themselves, separated from their family and co-villagers, because of
their potency.[8] In other words; the singular expression was not a 'normal' expression:
it was extraordinary and dangerous. This expression could therefore never challenge
the relational value and develop into individualism. The individual among the Urapmin
(as well as the individualism that Dumont discusses) implies a much more fundamental
singularity. As Robbins points out, this is an individualism that is actively sought in order
to be prepared for Jesus' return. It is not a dangerous singularity, but a necessary sin-
gularity desired by the Urapmin in general. Among the Urapmin individualism has to a
certain extent replaced the value of the relational. On Ambrym the relational still seems
to be the dominant value, but the internal hierarchization between the female form and
the male form has changed. The male personification, so dominant in the men's graded
society, has become a less valued social form in the Church. It is the female social form,
the relation-creating substitution rather than personification, which is dominant in the
Church. The Church is actually the substitution, standing for social relations among the
people in the Church. It is in this sense that I call the Church a 'social whole'. There is
thus a fundamental difference here between the two cases: among the Urapmin a radi-
cal transformation from relationalism to individualism has followed Christianity, but on
Ambrym the transformation has taken place within a relational value system.

At this point, however, I would like to point out some differences that may illumi-
nate the apparent contradictions in the two cases. First, my analysis of the social form
of the Church, and the (gendered) values on which it works, is based on an analysis of
the Church as a social institution, rather than of Christianity as an ideational system. I
have mainly analysed the social practice of the Church: its ceremonies, its fund-raising
activities, its exchanges and work relations. I have not focused on people's reasoning,
nor on prayers or confessions. Furthermore, and this might be essential, Robbins has
worked with a revival church movement, whereas I mainly have concentrated on the
Presbyterian Church (although there were churches of the more evangelical kind on
Ambrym as well, like the Holiness Church referred to in the introduction). Confession
is a vital part of revival Christianity and is not dominant among the Presbyterians. The
difference between the two cases might therefore be a difference between rhetoric on
the one hand and the social relations of the Church on the other. Whereas the former,
as Robbins argues, is rationalized around a notion of an individual's relation to God, the

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8   Therefore the term 'taboo fire' or *tambuefae* (Bislama) is used.

latter stresses rather inclusion in the Church itself. Robbins also analyses the relational aspects of the Urapmin Church, arguing that '[a]lthough the Urapmin have a keen grasp of the individualistic nature of Christian salvation, they are also inclined to view their church in relationalist terms' (2002:197). Robbins analyses spirit possessions, which the Urapmin call 'spirit discos', and points out that during these dances the Urapmin hope to reach a state in which the Holy Spirit possesses them and frees them from their sins. This can only be achieved if 'the entire congregation is in a state of relative sinlessness'. This, then, according to Robbins, can be seen as a form of relational salvation. It is notable that this concept is appropriate for the experience of salvation in social practice. In other words, it is a salvation to do with sociality not the individual's relationship with God. Maybe this is also where the difference between the two cases lies: it is in the sociality of Christianity, in the social relations of Christianity, that the value of the relational is observable, and that it still persists. However, as my article shows, what is significant is the transformation that has occurred as the relational value system is re-gendered and the hierarchy inverted. I suggest that, whereas in the contexts of the male ritual hierarchy, male values encompassed female values, in the contexts of the Church, it is female values that have the encompassing agency.

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