CHAPTER 5

Two Baskets Worn At Once: Christianity, Sorcery, and Sacred Power in Vanuatu

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They talk about the second coming—Jesus will come, yes, and all of this kind of thing, and we have to be ready—but they never say you must prepare by discarding any black magic or power that you have. This has not come out clearly. It’s like they say, “you wear two baskets: one basket for your bible, and one basket for all your stones.”

Municipal Health Officer

INTERVIEW RECORDED LUGANVILLE, 2007, TRANSLATED FROM BISLAMA BY THE AUTHOR

Since the emergence of proto-nationalism in post World War II Vanuatu, elements of practice and knowledge galvanizing around the concept of kastom (loosely, indigenous knowledge and practice) have grown in popularity and practical legitimacy. However, this resurgence has not come without opposition. As was often the case in the past, expressions of kastom are today coming under fire from Christian standpoints, but most vehemently from Seventh Day Adventists and emerging evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches. Such opposition to kastom is rhetorically bolstered through the association of kastom with activities and powers known as nakaemas in Bislama, or sometimes blak majik (“black magic”), and relatedly, posen (“poison”). This is typically called “sorcery” in academic literature, as here. In recent years, in the

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1 This paper was first presented and discussed in 2012 at the University of Sydney Anthropology Research Seminar Series, and later that year in the reading and writing group of the ARC Laureate Project Engendering Persons, Transforming Things: Christianities, Commodities and Individualism in Oceania (ANU, CHL, College of Asia and the Pacific). I am especially grateful to insightful criticisms and suggestions arising from those discussions, and from Margaret Jolly, Michael Allen, Benedicta Rousseau, Yasmine Musharbash, Nicholas Herriman and Alan Rumsey. Research for this project was supported by the ARC Discovery Project Oceanic Encounters: colonial and contemporary transformations of gender and sexuality in the Pacific (ANU), and completed as a part of the ARC Discovery Project Sorcery and Human Security in Vanuatu (DP140104244)

2 Blending learned and inherited powers, nakaemas blurs the classic anthropological distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, but corresponds to the broadly agreed upon definition of both, referring to “the belief, and those practices associated with the belief, that one
main towns of Port Vila and Luganville especially, townsfolk have rallied behind Christian leaders in mounting periodic crusades against such malevolent “dark powers” associated with the “heathen” past in which kastom is seen to be based. The vehemence of kastom detractors, in this context, is unsurprising, however, especially when we consider the link that is made between kastom and nakaemas, and the violence that has stemmed from nakaemas-related activity and accusations in recent years (Mitchell 2011; Rio 2010). In the face of threats of evil and death, there is a constant search on the part of many Christians living in Vanuatu for Christian “renewal” and “eternal life.”

In Vanuatu, social anxiety and turmoil around the workings of nakaemas is clearly structured around volatile relations of inequality emergent within post-independence modernity (Mitchell 2011; Rio 2010, 182). Thus the idea of jelus—or “jealousy,” whether it is in affairs of love or personal wealth—is a frequently stated motivating factor in sorcery-related violence. As this chapter explores, however, the ontological structuring of such concerns is far from new, but resonates with themes derived from early missionization and before. Today, as in the colonial past, evaluations of sorcery and kastom are often framed around the familiar idea of a moral and temporal rupture between (the possibility of) an enlightened Christian present and a heathen “darkness” that continually threatens to return and envelope it. At the same time, such frameworks articulate a crossing of indigenous and Christian conceptions.3 Providing what is I hope a useful complement to other recent analyses (Eriksen 2008; Forsyth 2006; Mitchell 2011; Rio 2002, 2010, 2011), this chapter explores the ambivalent immanence of miraculous and sacred power in Vanuatu. I argue that apprehending the ontology of miraculous and sacred power is crucial to understanding the apparent and dangerously antagonistic divide between Christian beliefs and belief in “sorcery” in Vanuatu. Most importantly, I argue that the powers of Christianity and sorcery, while often appearing in discourse as

human being is capable of harming another by magical or supernatural means” (Patterson 1974, 132). Thus, Crowley’s definition in A New Bislama Dictionary reads as follows, “nakaemas (n) sorcery, witchcraft, evil force directed by humans that can be used to harm and kill people” (1995, 155).

3 My use of the term “crossing” deliberately draws on Christian imagery, but is also meant to suggest Greg Dening’s conceptualization of “the beach” (1980), a metaphor for colonial encounters that he envisaged as a space of violence and mistrust, but also of productive exchange and mutual engagement. The term may also be taken to suggest Epeli Hau’ofa’s (1994) realization of the Pacific as a dynamically interlinked and traversed “sea of islands,” as against historically prevailing European notions of far-flung “islands in the sea.” Taken together, “crossing” implies the dynamic convergences and conflicts of colonial and post-colonial religiosity (see for an extended discussion, Taylor 2010a), as explored throughout this volume.