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# Ahamb (Malekula, Vanuatu) – Language Contexts

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<b>Language Name:</b>	Ahamb
<b>Language Family:</b>	Oceanic, Austronesian
<b>ISO 639-3 Code:</b>	ahb
<b>Glottolog Code:</b>	axam1237
<b>Population:</b>	~950
<b>Location:</b>	-16.517, 167.652
<b>Vitality rating:</b>	EGIDS 5 ~ 6a

## Abstract

The Ahamb language is spoken by around 950 people, most of whom reside on the small Ahamb Island off the south coast of Malekula, the second largest island in the Republic of Vanuatu in the South Pacific. Ahamb is one of more than 30 languages of Malekula, and little was known about it until 2017 when a major language documentation project was initiated. In this paper we present the linguistic, geographic and social context in which Ahamb is spoken, assess its current vitality status, and consider prospects for its future. It is hoped that outputs of the Ahamb Documentation Project will boost the status of the language and increase literacy levels, counteracting external pressures to shift to the regional lingua franca Bislama.

Keywords: Ahamb language, Malekula, Oceanic, vernacular literacy, language endangerment

## 1. Introduction

Ahamb is an Austronesian language of the Oceanic subgroup, spoken on the small offshore Ahamb Island and the nearby Malekula mainland, in the Republic of Vanuatu, by a population of fewer than 1,000 speakers. The Ahamb people refer to their language as *naujin sdrato* [nau'tʃin s<sup>nd</sup>ra'to] 'our language' or simply *lanwis* 'language' in Bislama, Vanuatu's lingua

franca (and a dialect of Melanesian Pidgin). The terms Ahamb and Axamb have been used in the linguistic literature, however this is the name of the island where most of its speakers live. It is pronounced [a'xa<sup>m</sup>b] in the vernacular, and most commonly as [a'ka<sup>m</sup>b] in Bislama, even by Ahamb speakers. The prenasalised plosive is often reduced to a plain bilabial nasal word-finally. Therefore, the island's name is variously spelled as Ahamb or Axamb, Akhamb, Akamb, Aham, Akham or even Akam.

The language is spoken in a context of rapid environmental, cultural, social and linguistic change. In the domain of religion, the dominant language is Bislama, while in the domain of education, Bislama and English are the dominant languages.

The structure of the Ahamb language is currently being analysed for first author Tihomir Rangelov's doctoral thesis. Preliminary grammatical analysis indicates that the language shares many features with the languages of Malekula, including basic SVO word order. Head-modifier phrasal organisation is reflected in the orders of Noun + Relative clause, Preposition + Noun Phrase, Noun + Determiner, Noun + Number and Noun + Possessor. Verbs carry obligatory subject indexes, and there is a realis (past/present) paradigm and an irrealis (future) paradigm of indexes. Aspectual modifiers and negators are normally prefixed but in some cases also follow the verb. The language employs both nuclear and core serialising structures. Also of interest typologically is the presence of what appear to be contrastive bilabial trills, including the prenasalised /b/ [ʰb] and the plain /p/ [p].

In this paper, a description of the contexts of the Ahamb language is presented. In Section 2, we address the linguistic context in which Ahamb is spoken, covering its broader genetic affiliation and its closest relatives. We briefly summarise in Section 3 previous and current anthropological and linguistic research that has focused on Ahamb, including research by authors Tom Bratrud and Tihomir Rangelov. In Section 4, the physical context of Ahamb is considered, including the geographic locations of speakers, migration patterns, environmental risks in the region, and the communication and transportation networks that connect Ahamb Island to mainland Malekula, and to the wider Vanuatu region. In Section 5 we discuss the social context in which Ahamb Islanders live, covering marriage patterns, religious practices, daily life and employment, and education. An assessment of Ahamb's vitality is presented in Section 6, based around the nine factors proposed in the UNESCO Language Vitality Assessment. The paper ends with a summary of the changing context of the Ahamb language, and a discussion of the challenges and opportunities for the language.

## 2. The linguistic context of Ahamb

### 2.1 Genetic affiliation

Ahamb is a Southern Oceanic language belonging to the Oceanic subgroup of the Austronesian language family. The genetic affiliation for Oceanic is presented by Ross, Pawley & Osmond (2011: 7-8) as:

Austronesian/Malayo-Polynesian/Central/Eastern Malayo-Polynesian/Oceanic/Southern Oceanic Linkage

While there are competing classifications for the Vanuatu languages within the Southern Oceanic linkage (see e.g. Tryon 1976, Clark 2009), most recently, Lynch (2016) has classified Ahamb as belonging to a putative Malekula subgroup of the Central Vanuatu Linkage. Central Vanuatu comprises the languages spoken on Efate, the Shepherd Islands, Epi, Paama, Ambrym, and Malekula, along with most of Pentecost (Lynch, Ross & Crowley 2002: 112-14). Within Central Vanuatu, the languages of Malekula are hypothesised to form a discrete subgroup (Lynch 2016: 399), which further subdivides into northern, western and eastern languages. Ahamb falls into the eastern linkage, and is subgrouped in the Southeastern Malekula branch (Lynch 2016: 418). The genetic affiliation for Ahamb is currently represented by Lynch (2016: 399, 418) as:

Central Vanuatu/Malekula/Eastern Malekula Linkage/Southeastern Malekula

### 2.2 The linguistic neighbourhood of Ahamb

Ahamb is one of seven languages of Southeastern Malekula, along with Bwenelang, Nasvang, Nisvai, Lamap (Port Sandwich), Avok, and Uluveu (Maskelynes) (Lynch 2016: 418). Map 1 shows the positioning of Ahamb's linguistic neighbours around the southeastern coast of Malekula, as well as known villages, landmarks, and historic migration lines. Ahamb-speaking villages on mainland Malekula are marked differently from villages where other languages are spoken. On Ahamb island itself there are 14 separate villages, which have expanded to merge together into one virtually uninterrupted settlement, known locally as *nalur* 'the small island' (as opposed to *ur* 'the Malekula mainland, the big island'). The names of these villages, from east to west, are Meriraw, Labur Bahur, Roponias, Vanruru, Labeniar, Dramiong, Limladr, Lisasa, Laburnaus, Barias (Brisbane), Lijojong, Penbahur, Turak and Meliabor. See Appendixes A and B for more details on the island's geography and demography.



Map 1. Locations of languages in the Southeastern Malekula subgroup

The Bwenelang language was historically located inland of Banam Bay and was identified as moribund in the 1980s by Jean-Michel Charpentier (1982: 42). Nasvang was originally spoken on mainland Malekula, in the valleys inland from Farun village, where its speakers live today. Nisvai was traditionally located inland from Port Sandwich. Speakers reportedly migrated to Vetbong (Leventbao) village on the northern coast of Port Sandwich (Lynch & Crowley 2001: 77), and today a few speakers are also located in Farun village on the south coast. Lamap is spoken in multiple settlements along the southern coast of the Port Sandwich area (Williams 2019). Avok is spoken on Avok Island and the nearby mainland settlements of Okai, Naranieni and Arov. Uluveu is spoken in the Maskelynes Islands (Healey 2013). A few older Ahamb community members have reported passive knowledge of a language they call Mandri, which was originally spoken in inland Malekula, but there are no records of this language or its speakers.

Reports of mutual intelligibility are difficult to interpret in southern Malekula, with regular contact providing opportunities for people to learn

enough of each others' languages to communicate. Ahamb speakers report mutual intelligibility to some degree with Nasvang, Nisvai, and Avok. There are varying degrees of proficiency in Uluveu, where some community members attended secondary school before the local secondary school opened on Ahamb Island in 2002 (see Section 5.4). It is more often the case that speakers of other languages have proficiency in Ahamb; the Ahamb primary school was the only one in the area until the 1980s, at which time many children from mainland villages used to live on Ahamb Island during the school year. Some Ahamb speakers perceive their language to be the dominant vernacular in central South Malekula, although it is unclear whether this view is shared by members of other language communities.

In addition to the indigenous languages of Malekula, there is universal knowledge of Vanuatu's national language Bislama. English, the language of formal education, is less often used for official purposes, and proficiency levels vary considerably from one individual to the next. French, the other former colonial language, is taught as a subject at secondary school but is not used locally.

### **3. Research on Ahamb Island**

#### **3.1 Anthropological research**

Two significant anthropological projects have been carried out in the Ahamb area. Jean de Lannoy spent some months on Ahamb Island in the period 1997-1999 during his PhD fieldwork on historical depopulation, migration, and religious conversion in South Malekula. His fieldwork resulted in de Lannoy (2004).

Author Tom Bratrud has been working with the Ahamb community since 2010 and conducted a total of 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2010 and 2017. His fieldwork has focussed on the intersection of social, cultural, political and economic life on Ahamb, and has involved participant observations, surveys on kinship and historical movement, collection of local songs and stories, and ethnographic interviews with multiple individuals. Bratrud (2011) discusses the dynamic relationship between notions of community and conflict on Ahamb, particularly in the context of kinship, church, and land disputes. The main focus of his research more recently has been on morality, social change, and Christianity, and Bratrud (2018a) analyses a Christian revival movement that was introduced to Ahamb during his fieldwork in 2014. He is currently writing an anthropological monograph about the cultural life of Ahamb Islanders.

### 3.2 Linguistic research

The earliest accessible published linguistic research on the Ahamb language is Tryon (1976), a comparative study of the languages of Vanuatu.<sup>1</sup> Tryon recorded around 300 vocabulary items for the language he termed *Axamb*. Charpentier (1982) included *Akhamb* in his comparative survey of southern Malekula languages, recording around 1,500 vocabulary items. Shimelman et al. (2019) collected and published around 200 vocabulary items (plus audio recordings) from different language varieties on Malekula, including *Axamb*. To date, there has been no published phonological or morphosyntactic analysis of the language.

The completion of a phonological and morphosyntactic analysis of Ahamb is an important goal of author Tihomir Rangelov's *Ahamb Language Documentation Project*, which began in 2017, and has involved over 8 months of fieldwork on Ahamb Island and the adjacent mainland. Rangelov has recorded around 22 hours of audio and audio-visual material, along with elicitations based on visual and thematic prompts. These data will be used to produce a grammatical description of Ahamb for Rangelov's doctoral thesis, and to compile an Ahamb-Bislama-English word list. Rangelov's project materials are being archived with ELAR at SOAS, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre's National Film and Audio Archive, and with Barbour's Malekula Languages Project Archive at the University of Waikato. Figures 1 and 2 show linguistic field research with community members as they pause during their daily activities, while Figure 3 features three of the oldest male speakers who have gathered to record stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Capell (1957) archived some linguistic data collected by himself and Joyce Trudinger in the 1950s for Ahamb, including a proposed orthography, a list of elicited words and sentences, and a small number of stories (one with glosses). The word list is rather short and the sentence list does not contain translations or annotations. Lynch & Crowley (2001: 75) list two collections of hymns and scripture portions in Ahamb that were published in 1904 and 1932; these have proven difficult to locate.



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*

*Figures 1 and 2. Finding time to do language-related work in between chores.*

Pictured is Kleta Fedrik proofreading an Ahamb story, while her child Bratrud Skepa is taking a nap (Figure 1). Pera Benjman and Jenny Markenly from Renaur village work on an Ahamb story (Figure 2). Images © Tihomir Rangelov.



Figure 3. Storytelling in Ahamb

Pictured from left to right are Morvel Tom Vanbir, James Bhavës and Grem Fred Aimatlew during a storytelling session at the Red Cross house on Ahamb Island. Many community members believe that older men carry the ‘purest’ form of the language. Image © Tihomir Rangelov.

#### 4. The physical context of Ahamb

##### 4.1 Ahamb Island and mainland Malekula

Ahamb Island is located around two kilometres off the southern coast of Malekula. Covering less than 0.5 km<sup>2</sup>, it is densely populated and in the past 20 years, a large number of people have moved permanently to the Malekula mainland, where they have ancestral land (see Section 4.2). Ahamb speakers are now dispersed over a wide area of the southern coastline of Malekula. Families from various clans (*nahmar* in Ahamb, *nasara* in Bislama) have formed the mainland villages of Rebe, Lohorvar, Renaur, Harun, Labursur, Lwoi Malgai, Lasovsa, and Barmar from west to east along the southern coast of Malekula (see Map 1). These villages are positioned near the territory of Nasvang and Nisvai speakers in Farun, and of Avok speakers in Okai,

Naraniem and Arov, bringing Ahamb speakers into close contact with other Southwestern Malekula languages.

Charpentier (1982: 43) recorded speakers of Ahamb living on the small island of Faru, which is located immediately adjacent to the Malekula mainland (see Map 1). Faru appears to have had both Ahamb-speaking and Avok-speaking inhabitants in the past. The island was gradually abandoned because of regular flooding and erosion, and the last family reportedly left Faru in the 1990s to move to Okai on the mainland. The small islands of Lëmanëng and Faro are understood to belong to the Ahamb people. The islands are considered too small to support permanent settlement, but they are home to coconut plantations and are visited regularly for seafood harvesting (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Teman Greken dives for seafood at the reef near Faro island. Image © Tihomir Rangelov.

Charpentier (1982:47) also recorded some second-language Ahamb speakers in the Nasvang-speaking village of Farun on Malekula mainland. This is still the case today, at least among the older generations of Farun residents, who attended primary school on Ahamb island before a primary school opened in Farun in the 1980s. Ahamb speakers maintain close relationships with the inhabitants of Farun. Significantly, Farun is built around an inlet where Ahamb people leave their boats and canoes when they make their daily visits to the mainland.

Changes in 2011 to parish structures saw the mainland Ahamb-speaking villages of Rebe, Lohorvar and Renaur join the Farun parish, thus increasing contact with the Nasvang-speaking community. Three families from Ahamb have recently resettled in Farun, and Ahamb speakers from Rebe village send their children to school in Farun. Ahamb men commonly socialise at the Farun *nakamal* ‘kava bar and socialising venue’. Other Ahamb-speaking villages on the mainland are still administered within the Ahamb parish and retain close ties with the small island.

To the east of the Ahamb mainland territory is the Avok-speaking Okai village. Mainlanders from the Ahamb-speaking Barmar village are connected to Okai by a four wheel drive track, and some of their children attend the Okai school along with Avok-speaking children. Ahamb’s connections to settlements in the southwest of Malekula, such as Falu, Bonvor or Malfakal, are more limited, despite their geographic proximity. These settlements are home to speakers of Western Malekula languages, and cultural connections are tenuous.

## 4.2 Migration patterns

Charpentier (1982: 39-50) reports that before colonial settlement and the arrival of the first missionaries in the 1880s, the inhabitants of Malekula were either seacoast dwellers or inland dwellers. Since the 1880s, most inland dwellers have moved to the coastal areas where missions were established. The first mission station in South Malekula was established on Ahamb Island in 1899, and the Ahamb church was reportedly formed in 1902 (Miller 1989: 2, 512).

The island of Ahamb was settled well before the arrival of missionaries, but following Christianisation there were several waves of migration from mainland Malekula (both the inland and coastal areas) to Ahamb Island during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These were partly motivated by the belief that the small island was safer from violence, including sorcery (de Lannoy 2004). The migrations also brought some Nasvang speakers to Ahamb. At the same time, inland dwellers started forming larger

settlements on the mainland coast. Farun was one such settlement, established in the 1940s by speakers of Nasvang and Nisvai.

The area's linguistic ecology became more complex when Ahamb speakers started migrating from Ahamb Island to the mainland. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century virtually all Ahamb speakers in South Malekula lived on Ahamb Island and travelled daily to tend to their gardens on the mainland. Around that time, Ahamb Islanders started to feel the effects of overpopulation and various environmental hazards. High birth rates have led to a rapid increase of population. Currently the island has a population density of over 1,100 per square kilometre (572 inhabitants on 0.5 square kilometre), which is around 50 times higher than the 23 inhabitants per square kilometre which is estimated for Vanuatu as a whole (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2017: 17). Many islanders agree that their small island cannot support further population growth, especially in the face of environmental risks (see Section 4.3).

The first Ahamb Islander reportedly settled on mainland Malekula at the beginning of the 1990s. Around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more families joined him to form the village of Renaur, while others formed the village of Rebe (Aromai). Migration to the mainland increased rapidly in the 2000s and now there are at least eight Ahamb-speaking settlements (see Map 1), each normally comprising families belonging to one of the Ahamb *nahmar* 'clans'. The most remote settlement, Barmar, is the only one that is not located on the coast. Its inhabitants have adopted a lifestyle centred around breeding cattle, as well as horses that are used for transportation. Currently around 270 Ahamb speakers live on the mainland (see Appendix A). Connections between Ahamb mainlanders and islanders remain very strong; however, most mainland residents also have daily interactions with speakers of other languages, when they work, socialise, and go to school (see Section 4.1).

### 4.3 Environmental risks

Vanuatu is very vulnerable to natural disasters. In 2016, it was ranked the most at risk country in terms of natural disasters, according to the World Risk Index (Comes et al. 2016: 11). Ahamb Island's highest point is no more than 20 meters above sea level and parts of it are eroding rapidly. Around half of the island is densely covered by houses. The other half is used for *naliur* 'gardens'. Much of the island is very low-lying and at risk of flooding during tropical storms and cyclones (see Appendix B). The Ahamb people rely on rain for drinking water, and during the dry season and in El Niño years (most recently in 2015 after Cyclone Pam), the island can experience between three and twelve months of drought. During times

of drought, drinking water has to be brought from the mainland. Since tsunami warning systems were put in place, there have been a number of warnings that saw the entire population evacuate to the mainland. After one such warning in 2009, the Government of Vanuatu decided to permanently relocate the local secondary school to the mainland.

The community perceives coastal erosion to be the most imminent risk for its wellbeing. The series of images in Figure 5a-5c illustrate the rapid changes that are being caused by erosion on the island. The community's performance stage outside the church is pictured in use beside the sea in 5a, taken in 2010. By 2014 in 5b the beach had crept up to the edge of the stage. Cyclone Pam in 2015 saw much of the stage washed out to sea and the partial remains of the base are visible in 5c, taken in 2017. The community is now worried that coastal erosion will damage the church itself, the corner of which is visible in 5a.



*Figure 5a. Ahamb community stage in 2010. Photo © Tom Bratrud.*



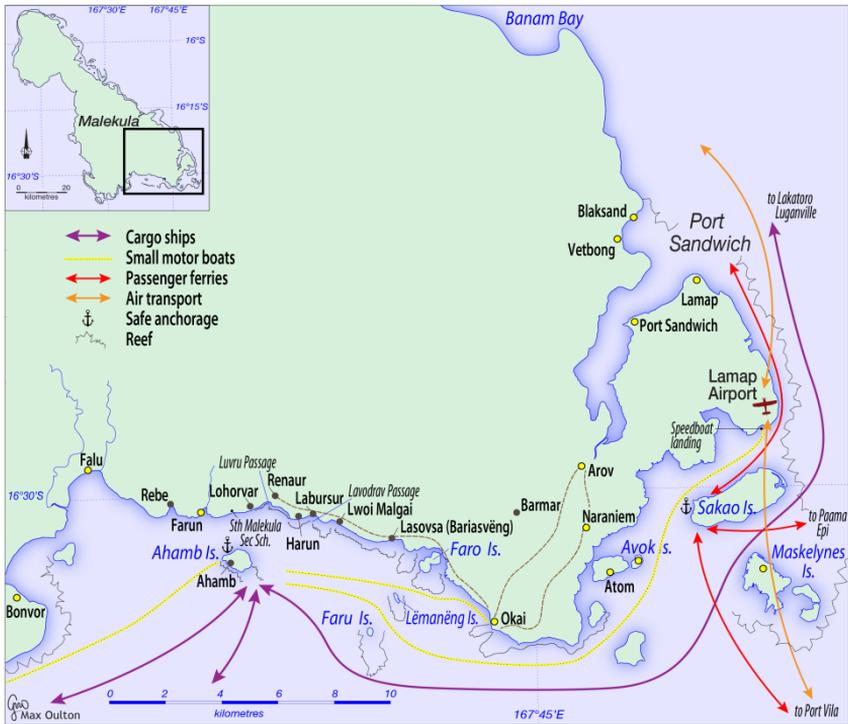
*Figure 5b. Ahamb community stage in 2014. Photo © Tom Bratrud.*



*Figure 5c. Ahamb community stage in 2017. Photo © Tom Bratrud.*

Environmental risks present on Ahamb Island, together with the necessity of traveling to the mainland to tend to gardens, hunt, and fetch water, mean that people often keep a second house on the mainland, and as noted in Section 4.2, a number of families have relocated there permanently. The main disadvantages of living on the mainland are the perceived lack of security due to more widespread and powerful sorcery practices there, as well as the abundance of mosquitoes.

#### 4.4 Local communication and transportation connections



Map 2. Transportation connections between Ahamb, mainland Malekula, and the commercial centres of Vanuatu (Port Vila and Luganville).

Positioned approximately two kilometres off the south coast of mainland Malekula, Ahamb Island is embedded in a complex communication and transportation network, featured in Map 2, that blends traditional and modern technologies. Communication has changed rapidly for Ahamb Islanders. Traditional smoke signals between the island and mainland Malekula, and messages passed from one person to the next, were superseded by shortwave

radio, and then by a public telephone which arrived in 1998. Vanuatu's mobile network first expanded to Ahamb in 2005 when a tower was built near Okai village, allowing phone calls and text messaging. Since late 2017 a second telecommunications provider has extended their network to cover the Ahamb Island area. Functional internet access is now available. Free Facebook data along with free access to a range of informational websites (Digicel Vanuatu 2019) has encouraged internet use and it is increasingly the way that Ahamb Islanders keep in touch with relatives living elsewhere. Bislama is the language of choice for text messages and social media communication, following trends observed throughout Vanuatu (Vandeputte-Tavo 2013).

Transportation has similarly expanded, from traditional canoes and walking tracks, to motorised land, ocean, and air travel. Daily trips are still made in *nwog* 'wooden outrigger canoes', which are sailed or paddled from Ahamb Island to the mainland. Figure 6 shows a traditional outrigger canoe being paddled, while Figure 7 shows a canoe rigged for sailing. People travel to the mainland to tend to gardens, hunt, collect firewood, fetch water in the dry season, and visit relatives. *Nwog* are also used as daily transport to the nearby reefs for fishing, and less frequently to the small islands of Faro and Lëmanëng to tend to coconut plantations and to harvest seafood.



*Figure 6. The traditional way of travel between gardens and Ahamb Island is by outrigger canoe. Paddling between Ahamb Island and mainland Malekula can take up to an hour. Pictured is Andrew Perman. Image © Tom Bratrud.*



*Figure 7. When the winds are right, a canoe can be propelled by a sail. In the past, Ahamb people used to make large sailing canoes that could carry up to 20 people at a time. Pictured is Deacon Ian Spoky with his sailing canoe. Image © Tihomir Rangelov.*

The modern equivalent of the *nwog* is the *nabut* ‘open motorboat’, which is a less labour-intensive, but far more costly form of transport. A small number of these motorboats operate daily transportation services between Ahamb Island and the mainland. They also travel a few times a week to Okai village and to the commercial centre at Lamap, where essential services including a bank, airport, health centre, and post office are located. Occasionally, trips are made to Southwest Malekula, to the Maskelynes Islands, and very rarely as far afield as Ambrym and Epi Islands. *Nabut* can be chartered for private use, but the cost is prohibitive for individuals, and chartered trips are usually shared. Figure 8 displays a small *nabut*, which takes 15 minutes to travel between Ahamb Island and the Malekula mainland and can carry heavy loads.



*Figure 8. Motorboat travel.*

Pictured are Tom Ansel Sam, Tom Alik Sam, Steve Sam, Abel Sam, and Kalsley Sam, setting off for Ahamb Island in an open motorboat with garden produce from the Malekula mainland in 2010. Image © Tom Bratrud.

On the Malekula mainland, there are *naser* ‘walking paths’ that connect the Ahamb-speaking villages to each other, and to Okai in the east. There are many walking tracks that go inland from the coast to traditional gardening areas, and it is also possible to follow *naser* by foot into Southwest Malekula. Along the coast, the section of track between Farun and Renaur can now accommodate four-wheel drive vehicles, including one Ahamb-owned vehicle that services the route. There are plans to develop a gravel road from the Ahamb villages to Okai (along a currently existing walking track) to connect to an existing gravel road to Arov and Lamap, providing all-weather access to Lamap’s essential services.

*Lanj* ‘cargo ships’ make unscheduled stops at Ahamb Island as often as twice weekly, although a full week or even a month can pass without any cargo ships travelling through the area. *Lanj* connect Ahamb to Vanuatu’s major commercial centres, i.e. Port Vila on Efate Island to the south, and Luganville on Espiritu Santo Island to the north. These ships are essential for trade, shipping local kava and copra to merchants, and bringing consumer products including dried and canned foods, construction materials, medication and health supplies to Ahamb Island. Cargo ships also take passengers, and allow for the exchange of food and gifts between relatives in other parts of Vanuatu.

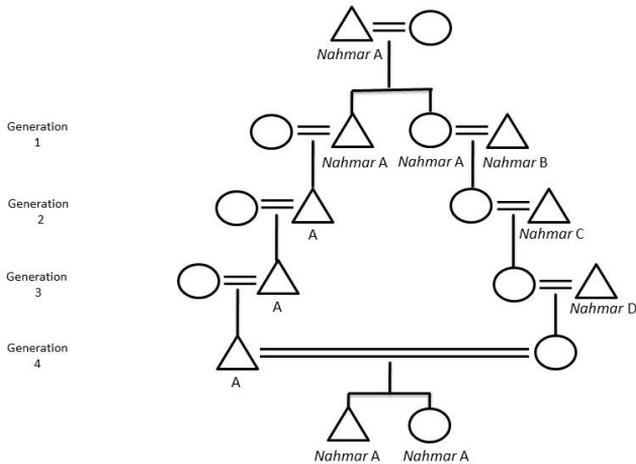
A passenger ferry is scheduled for weekly stops on Sakao Island in the Maskelynes archipelago, travelling east and south to Paama and Epi Islands and on to Port Vila, or north to Litzlitz wharf near Lakatoro, and on to Luganville. This service is reportedly more comfortable and reliable than the unscheduled

cargo ships, but it requires an expensive motorboat charter to Sakao Island. Lamap Airport (IATA code: LPM), with a grass airstrip, is the nearest airport to Ahamb Island. There are two to three scheduled flights each week connecting to Port Vila. There are at least two flights a week to Luganville via Norsup Airport near Lakatoro on Malekula Island. Air travel is less affordable than cargo ship or ferry, and typically involves an expensive motorboat charter from Ahamb Island to Lamap airport. Growing transportation and communication networks support a mobile and connected lifestyle for Ahamb Islanders, extending the people’s historical trade, intermarriage, and migration routes from South Malekula to the wider Vanuatu region.

## 5. Social organisation

### 5.1 Marriage patterns

Ahamb society is predominantly organised around patrilineal *nahmar* ‘clan’ groups (*nasara* in Bislama). Ahamb marriage practices involve patrilineal exogamous marriage maintained for three generations (see Bratrud 2011: 34-51, 2018a: 94-96). As shown in Figure 9, a woman of *nahmar* A can only marry a man in *nahmar* A if she has three generations of female ancestors who have married into other *nahmar*.



Triangles indicate males. Circles indicate females

Figure 9: Traditional marriage patterns through multiple generations in Ahamb.

The traditional structure of marriage can be difficult to comprehend because of the density of relatives on Ahamb. Young people may fall in love with each other even though their marriage would be forbidden by tradition. Families will allow such a marriage, provided compensation is paid. This usually involves a ceremony where the family line is metaphorically ‘cut’ with the couple giving pigs, mats, money, foodstuffs, and kava to their respective parents-in-law and siblings-in-law of the same sex. The groom, for example, pays compensation to the bride’s father and the bride’s father’s brothers (Bratrud 2011: 45-46).

Although the traditional marriage patterns are preferred, many young people now find a spouse outside South Malekula. Marriage is virilocal so women will move to their new husband’s home, while men bring their wives to Ahamb Island (Bratrud 2011: 46). New wives from the South Malekula area learn to speak Ahamb rapidly, but wives from other parts of Vanuatu acquire the language more slowly and rely on Bislama to communicate in the home environment. This is most likely due to linguistic similarity, with Ahamb sharing more features with languages of the Southeastern Malekula Subgroup than with languages from further afield, particularly those from outside Malekula.

## 5.2 Religion

Traditional religious practices were largely oriented around clan spirits, ancestral spirits, and natural spirits, accessible through clan affiliation and particularly through the special knowledge available to men of rank in the *nakëkrohin* ‘male graded society’. The graded society and worship of traditional spirits was officially abandoned when Christianity was adopted. The secret use of *baho* ‘sorcery’, which is conscious and deliberate manipulation of objects through spells, magic plants, and spirits to achieve a desired outcome, is still believed to survive on a small scale. Although Ahamb people continue to be afraid of ‘bad’ sorcery, some elements of ‘good’ sorcery are still practiced (see Bratrud 2017). Particular plants can be used for positive purposes, such as healing, exorcising problematic spirits, controlling the weather, and finding lost items.

Conversion to Christianity coincided with a period of depopulation on Malekula Island (Rivers 1922). During the 50 year period from 1897 when the first missionaries arrived, until 1948, the population in Malekula is estimated to have dropped from 20,000 to around 7,000 (Miller 1989: 188). This depopulation has been linked to the introduction of diseases such as measles and influenza through contact with missionaries and traders (Deacon 1934: 19-20). Local narratives about this period are dominated by escapes from conflicts, violence, and uncontrolled outbursts of illness and death attributed to sorcery (Bratrud 2018a: 64-66, 2018b; de Lannoy 2004). The Christian Church

practiced non-tolerance of sorcery and other killings, and conversion to the new religion became a matter of survival for many (de Lannoy 2004: 167). This period in history is still important in Ahamb people's collective memories, and influences contemporary relationships between families and their church.

Today, the Presbyterian Church is the central social institution on Ahamb Island. It was established in the 1890s, a century before any other denominations apparently arrived. More than 90% of people on Ahamb are members of the Presbyterian Church. Its role as the 'community' church is generally accepted by Ahamb-speaking members of other congregations, which include: the Neil Thomas Ministries, which reportedly arrived in 1997 and is based in the Ahamb-speaking mainland settlement of Harun; the Seventh Day Adventist church, which arrived in 1999; and the Bible Teaching Ministries, which arrived in 2005.

There are regular Church activities on Ahamb Island, including two Sunday services, Sunday school, and weekly meetings of the Men's Fellowship, the Women's Fellowship (Presbyterian Women's Mission Union), and the Youth Fellowship. Figures 10 and 11 feature events at the Presbyterian Church, while Figure 12 presents Ahamb elders and community leaders. The children's Sunday School building is pictured in Figure 13. The Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu is one of the largest organisations in the country. Its central administration makes plans for the annual church calendar. Church leaders and members of the congregation from Ahamb Island regularly attend meetings and synods at regional and national levels. The ideas and programmes disseminated at these events are taken back to Ahamb Island. All of these activities are conducted through the medium of Bislama.



*Figure 10. Christmas Carol night in the Presbyterian Church.*

Pictured are members of the Ahamb congregation with elder Saki Mesah giving a speech at the Christmas Carol Night in 2014. Image © Tom Bratrud.



*Figure 11. New Yam Feast in the Presbyterian Church*

Pictured are Aron Spoky and Bognie Thomas holding decorated yams during the New Yam Feast in April 2014. Image © Tom Bratrud.



*Figure 12. Ahamb elders and community leaders in front of the church.*

Pictured are (from left to right) Elder Willy Frank, Elder Edwin Andrew, Ailin Jon Woka, Elder Haindrivlew Frank, Mark Andri Fred, Morvel Tom Vanbir, Elder Selma Bhavës, James Bhavës, Elder Eddi Bognie, Terry Andrew, Haivuv Salnarmar. Image © Maxi Soknaur.



Figure 13. Ahamb's Sunday school.

Notice the spelling of 'Ahamb' in Figure 12, and 'Akhamb' in Figure 13 (see Section 1). Image © Tihomir Rangelov.

### 5.3 Daily life and employment

Ahamb Islanders are traditionally subsistence farmers and fishermen. In addition to gardening and fishing or shellfish collecting, daily life on Ahamb today entails planning and carrying out projects at home and for one's relatives, and attending meetings in church groups and other community committees. As for other aspects of local life, traditional employment now combines with a variety of income earning activities. Income is needed to support a modern lifestyle filled with the increasingly available and popular mobile phones, solar panels, packaged food, travel, and education.

On the hilly coastline of mainland Malekula, the islanders grow root crops including *dram* 'yam', *nabbiag* 'taro', *kumal* 'sweet potato', and *maniok* 'cassava', along with *nabrav* 'breadfruit', *naviij* 'banana', and *barme* 'leafy greens'. A *nibbiang* 'taro' garden is shown in Figure 14. These crops are predominantly grown for home kitchens or are sent to relatives in urban areas. Any surplus can be traded or sold at markets. Kelen Sammy displays individual portions of *narog* 'laplap/pudding' from her home kitchen in

Figure 15. Seafood remains an important part of the local diet, but orders of fresh *naur* ‘lobster’ and *naih* ‘fish’ are also filled for merchants in the bigger townships and cities of Vanuatu.



Figure 14. Ahamb Islanders travel daily to the Malekula mainland to work in their gardens and harvest produce. Pictured are Kalmase Kalsay and Maryan Kalmase in their taro garden. Image © Tihomir Rangelov.



*Figure 15. Traditional food involves different forms of narog ‘laplap/pudding’ This is grated root crops or banana, wrapped in a banana leaf and cooked using hot stones. Pictured is Kelen Sammy. Image © Tihomir Rangelov.*

*Namelhudr* ‘kava’, and to some extent *nmaru* ‘coconut/copra’, function as cash crops, used to pay school fees and buy consumer goods. Gardening can offer some paid employment to the relatives of garden owners, who need help looking after their gardens, and with their harvest. Garden work is more often unpaid but is incorporated into longer histories of reciprocity between and within families.

The production of *naben* ‘woven pandanus mats’ and *niar* ‘thatch roof panels’ also provides an opportunity to earn an income, with Ahamb people being contracted to produce these goods, both for use locally and in other parts of Vanuatu. A group of men on Ahamb recently purchased a chainsaw together, using funds from their participation in seasonal horticultural work in other parts of the Pacific region.<sup>2</sup> The chainsaw owners take orders for timber from individuals as well as institutions like the church and school. This work may be paid, or enter into the traditional reciprocity system.

Some households have a small store, locally known as *kantin* ‘canteens’, selling basic consumer goods like sugar, salt, rice, matches, biscuits, canned fish, and occasionally mobile phone credit. Most store owners offer generous credit as their customers are relatives with whom they have obligations to share resources. A small number of islanders sell baked goods from their home kitchens. The profit margin for these activities is very small, due to the high cost of the ingredients themselves, as well as their transport to Ahamb Island.

As of 2018, 13 *nabut* ‘motorboats’ were owned and operated by Ahamb Islanders to transport people to and from the mainland gardens for a small fee, and to take occasional chartered trips to Lamap and other nearby destinations (see Section 4.4). There is one local nurse, six primary school teachers, and three kindergarten teachers on Ahamb who receive wages. Several Ahamb people are in full-time or part-time employment at the South Malekula Secondary School on the mainland. Any other paid employment has to be sought in Vanuatu’s urban centres or through seasonal work schemes.

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<sup>2</sup> The Recognised Seasonal Employment scheme (RSE) in New Zealand began in 2007 (Immigration New Zealand 2019). A similar Seasonal Worker Programme operates in Australia (Department of Jobs and Small Business, Australian Government 2019) and locally there are reports of ni-Vanuatu travelling to New Caledonia for work.

## 5.4 Education

Education begins with children attending the sole kindergarten on Ahamb Island. The kindergarten teachers are Ahamb-speaking, and have demonstrated interest in engaging the children in vernacular literacy and numeracy, and are involved in producing literacy materials for that purpose. Some Ahamb preschool children from the mainland attend the kindergarten in Farun, where one of the teachers is an Ahamb speaker.

English-medium education has been available on Ahamb Island since the 1960s. Luwoi Primary School currently offers education for children from year one to six. A total of 121 children attended the school in 2017. All teachers, except one, were native speakers of Ahamb at the time. Current education policy requires Ahamb children to be educated in Bislama, with a transition to English in the second half of year three.<sup>3</sup>

Most Ahamb children who pass their year six examinations go on to attend the South Malekula Secondary School (Figure 16), which is located on mainland Malekula near Lohorvar. The school attracts children from central south Malekula and beyond. It is English-medium, with French taught as a subject. English is promoted outside the classroom; however, in practice the multilingual school environment means that Bislama is the preferred language of communication among students and staff.

Students who pass their Year 10 examinations may be offered places at Rensarie College located north of Lamap on the eastern coast of Malekula, or they may be sent to senior secondary schools elsewhere in the Vanuatu archipelago. Again, the senior secondary school environment is multilingual and the preferred language of communication is Bislama.

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<sup>3</sup> The enthusiasm of kindergarten teachers to use Ahamb in the classroom and the corresponding lack of interest shown by primary school teachers can be understood better when considering institutional endorsements (or lack thereof) of vernacular education. Vernacular kindergartens have been functioning in different parts of Vanuatu for some years. A recent curriculum document for kindergartens proclaimed that it is ‘imperative that children are educated in their home language through the Kindergarten programme’ (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training 2012b: 9). This instruction removes top-level institutional barriers to using Ahamb, or any other vernacular language, at the kindergarten level. In contrast, individual vernacular languages have been named and selected for use in primary education (Early & Tamtam 2015). Ahamb is not one of these languages. Without the top-level institutional endorsement, and without the accompanying resources, Ahamb teachers are less willing to consider vernacular education in primary school. Further context is provided in Section 6.



*Figure 16. South Malekula Secondary School*

The school campus is on the Malekula mainland with the low-lying Ahamb Island in the background. Pictured is Felix Sam. Image © Tom Bratrud.

## **6. Language vitality assessment**

In order to establish the vulnerability of the Ahamb language, a Language Vitality Assessment was carried out, combining observations of Tihomir Rangelov and Tom Bratrud, and a house-to-house survey by Tihomir Rangelov of the Ahamb speaking community in late 2017. The Language Vitality Assessment follows the nine factors presented in the *UNESCO Language Vitality and Endangerment* document (Brenzinger et al. 2003). Results are summarised in Table 1, followed by a description of the scoring for each factor. Low scores indicate areas for concern, while high scores indicate strengths for the language. The anticipated direction of change is also signalled in Table 1 with arrows, in an attempt to represent the changing context in which Ahamb is spoken.

	Factor	Grade					
		Negative					Positive
		0	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Intergenerational transmission				←		
2.	Absolute number of speakers	~950					
3.	Proportion of speakers within total population				←		
4.	Trends in existing language domains						
5.	Response to new domains and media						
6.	Materials for language education and literacy				→		
7.	Institutional attitudes and policies						
8.	Community members' attitudes						
9.	Amount and quality of documentation			→	→		

*Table 1: Summary of UNESCO Language Vitality Assessment for Ahamb. Green shading indicates current status; arrows indicate anticipated direction of change.*

In brief, the language vitality assessment for Ahamb has produced mixed results. For some criteria, the language scores comparatively well. Intergenerational transmission (Section 6.1) and the proportion of speakers within the population are strong (Section 6.3), although the language may lose ground in these areas within the next generation. The most concerning criterion is the response to new domains and media (Section 6.5), where Ahamb has not successfully transitioned into modern domains that are central

to the lives of young people, including education, religion, and internet communication. The potential exists for the language to be brought into kindergarten and primary education, but until there is formal government direction to take this step, Bislama is likely to be the ‘new’ language of early education (Section 6.7). The second area for concern is the amount and quality of documentation (Section 6.9). Planned outputs of the *Ahamb Documentation Project* should produce a significant improvement for this criterion, with the standardisation of the language, and the production of literacy materials. It is unlikely however, that the Ahamb language will ever possess the quantity of material that is available for larger and better resourced languages like Bislama and English.

### **6.1 Intergenerational language transmission – Grade 4 ‘Unsafe’**

Within the Ahamb speaking area of South Malekula, intergenerational language transmission continues, with most children speaking Ahamb as their first language of the home, and when socialising with their peers. In households where one of the parents is not an Ahamb speaker, Bislama is the dominant language (see Section 5.1). Some parents reportedly speak Bislama to their children to support their educational achievement. In families where Bislama dominates, the children are exposed to Ahamb in their community and become speakers of the language as they communicate with their peers. This gives the language a score of Grade 4 (‘Unsafe’), as most children are still using the language.

In contrast to transmission within the Ahamb community, children born to Ahamb-speaking parents outside South Malekula rarely speak Ahamb, and Ahamb Islanders have observed that these children mostly use Bislama when they visit. Outside South Malekula, the Ahamb language would score Grade 3 (‘Definitively endangered’) for intergenerational language transmission, as parents comprise the youngest generation of speakers.

### **6.2 Absolute number of speakers <1000**

At the time of Vanuatu’s last detailed population census in 2009, Ahamb Island’s population stood at 646 (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009). A 2017 count by Tihomir Rangelov indicates a population just over 950, with 572 living on Ahamb Island itself, 267 living permanently on the Malekula mainland, and 129 living elsewhere in Vanuatu (see Appendix A for the population breakdown by *nahmar*/village).

### **6.3 Proportion of speakers within the total population – Grade 4 ‘Unsafe’**

All individuals who descend from the nine traditional Ahamb *nahmar*, or who have married into the *nahmar*, are identified as belonging to the Ahamb community. This includes all the residents of Ahamb island, as well as family members who have settled in Ahamb villages on mainland Malekula. People who live in Farun and Okai villages are not considered community members unless they belong to an Ahamb *nahmar*. Of the Ahamb population, a small number of women and men who have married into Ahamb *nahmar* are not speakers of the language, and children born to Ahamb parents outside the community have little knowledge of the language. This means that around 90% of the Ahamb population is Ahamb-speaking, giving the language a score of Grade 4 (‘Unsafe’).

### **6.4 Trends in existing (traditional) language domains – Grade 3 ‘Dwindling domains’**

The Ahamb language is spoken in domestic domains, by children when they play, and by men and women when they socialise. It is used during daily activities such as tending gardens, fishing, and working around the house. Bislama intrudes in these domains when a non-Ahamb speaker is present. At traditional events, such as weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies, the presence of a non-Ahamb speaker also triggers the use of Bislama. Here the language scores Grade 3 (‘Dwindling domains’) due to the increased use of Bislama in domestic domains and at traditional events.

### **6.5 Response to new domains and media – Grade 1 ‘Minimal’**

The Ahamb language has not transitioned well into new domains and media. The sparsity of literacy materials and literacy skills in Ahamb has made it difficult for the language to find a place in domains dominated by larger languages with readily accessible print materials. The community converted to Christianity some generations ago, but continues to use Bislama for Church activities. Very occasionally, we find sermons, speeches, and announcements are given in the vernacular, and an Ahamb Bible translation project was recently initiated by the Bible Society of the South Pacific and Ahamb-born leader Jacklyn Reuben. However, it is unclear when and how well Ahamb language religious materials will be received.

Ahamb is not currently used within the formal education system, although there are teachers in place who could support its use from kindergarten through to year ten. The community has demonstrated some interest in introducing it into kindergarten and possibly also primary school (see §5.4).

The Internet has become accessible only very recently. First impressions indicate that Bislama is the language of choice on social media, with only the occasional word or greeting written in Ahamb. This is likely due in part to limited literacy skills in Ahamb, but also because Ahamb speakers are using the Internet to interact with friends and family living elsewhere in Vanuatu who are not necessarily Ahamb speakers. English dominates other online content that is available to Ahamb Islanders.

There are no new media available in the Ahamb language. Ahamb Islanders can access the National Radio of Vanuatu, which broadcasts in Bislama, English and French. A few people have laptops or tablets, and these are used to watch Bislama, and more often, English language films. The language scores a Grade 1 ('Minimal') for its response to new domains and media.

## 6.6 Materials for language education and literacy – Grade 2

There is a small collection of written material in Ahamb, using an *ad hoc* orthography. Materials include a small number of hymns translated by the late Elder Mesak Masinge Simon, and a small collection of texts by Aisen Obet of Rebe village. A collection of stories from Ahamb Island was created during Bratrud's fieldwork, containing four in Ahamb, and six in Bislama, together with five local songs and some Christian hymns in Ahamb (Sam et al. 2014). Copies of the book were returned to the community in 2014. Jacklyn Reuben translated a Bible comic book into Ahamb (Reuben 2012), and around 50 copies were distributed among community members in 2017.

An important outcome of Rangelov's Documentation Project has been the development of a community-based orthography, and associated materials to facilitate vernacular literacy. Ahamb community members have actively participated in creating these materials. Public meetings were held to discuss orthographic choices and to design literacy outputs. In August 2018, Rangelov presented a selection of draft materials to the community at a public meeting, including:

- an Ahamb-Bislama-English word list;
- literacy materials for the kindergarten developed together with a kindergarten teacher;
- literacy materials for the primary school based on materials developed by the Malekula Languages Project;
- translations of Ministry of Education and Training readers for years 1-3;
- three picture dictionaries with flora, fauna, and items related to community life based on materials developed by the Malekula Languages Project;
- stories told by community members, transcribed from Rangelov's fieldwork in 2017-2018.

The community responded with enthusiasm to the draft literacy materials and gave valuable feedback. Standardised print copies of the outputs listed above will be delivered to the community at the end of the Ahamb Documentation Project. E-book and e-dictionary formats compatible with Android mobile phones are also planned for development. It is hoped that over the next few years there will be a growth in literacy materials within the community, and that interested community members might develop further materials independently of the researchers. At the time of publication however, the language scored Grade 2 for its sparse educational materials, none of which were integrated into the school curriculum.

### **6.7 Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use – Grade 4 ‘Differentiated support’**

Since independence in 1980, the indigenous languages of Vanuatu have been protected by the Constitution of Vanuatu (Republic of Vanuatu 2006 [1980]). Since there are many small language communities in Vanuatu, rather than selecting one, or even several indigenous languages for official purposes, Bislama, English, and French are jointly recognised as the official languages of Vanuatu. Until very recently, English and French were the only designated languages of education. Indigenous languages remained as the medium of communication for domestic purposes but did not enter into official domains. In 2012, the new Vanuatu National Language Policy made provision for formal education through the medium of indigenous languages in a child’s first three years of schooling, with the introduction of French or English during their third year (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 2012a).

The National Language Policy is a significant document in the linguistic ecology of Vanuatu, for the first time providing institutional support for indigenous languages in the educational domain. Logistically however, it is not possible for all of Vanuatu’s indigenous languages to be introduced into formal education simultaneously. Ahamb was excluded from the selection of languages which have been chosen.<sup>4</sup> In years one to three, children are now being educated in Bislama. This gives Ahamb a score of Grade 4 (‘Differential support’), where there is protection for the language by the government, but where Ahamb remains excluded from official domains. This score has the potential to improve if the use of Ahamb in primary school is formally endorsed.

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<sup>4</sup> Only seven of Malekula’s more than 30 indigenous languages were selected for inclusion in the initial implementation programme, as only seven languages met the population threshold of 1000 speakers (Early & Tamtam 2015). This threshold means that even with the most recent population figures for Ahamb (see Section 6.2 and Appendix A), it would not meet the criteria for inclusion in the programme.

## **6.8 Community members' attitudes toward their own language – Grade 3 'Many members support language maintenance'**

Language attitudes within the Ahamb community are complex. There is some enthusiasm for the use of the language in formal education, and a speaker from the mainland offered the following comments to Rangelov in 2017, based on his experiences both in Vanuatu and abroad:

If we want to catch up on education, we need to use the [Ahamb] language. English is difficult and children don't learn it properly because they teach simple English in school. When I went to New Zealand, I thought I spoke English, because I had learned it in school, but it very quickly turned out I did not [know it well]. It is also very important to teach the vernacular in kindergarten. Here in the bush we teach our kids the names of all the plants and animals in [the vernacular] language.

Within the Ahamb community, there is a general agreement that the oldest living generation comprise the 'real' speakers of the language (cf. Figure 3, Section 3.2). Many younger speakers lack confidence in their language skills, and subsequently appear to be less motivated to use, pass on, or identify through their vernacular language. Although this has not had an impact on language transmission yet, it is likely to affect the transmission of Ahamb to new generations of children. This perception also likely impacts on young teachers' confidence and willingness to teach Ahamb in primary school (see Section 5.4).

Ahamb people and church leaders have demonstrated limited enthusiasm towards using the Ahamb language in church, with concerns being expressed about alienating some of the women who do not speak it (see Section 5.1 and Section 6.3), as well as guests from other parishes. Some church leaders have expressed a lack of confidence in using the vernacular for church services. One community member told Rangelov that 'we are used to reading the Bible in English or Bislama so it would be difficult to read the Bible in [the Ahamb] language'. The Ahamb community are aware of, and have a very positive attitude towards, Bible translation projects elsewhere in Malekula, and thus the planned Bible translation project for Ahamb could be positively received, although tensions between Ahamb and Bislama in the domain of religion will likely remain.

Literacy in Bislama (as well as English or French) is viewed as the key to paid employment and career development, especially by the island's 'social elite' (church leaders, chiefs, teachers, businessmen, and the handful of islanders with higher education who work in the government or private sector in Port Vila or Luganville). This viewpoint has been strengthened by the recent introduction of Bislama into the early years of formal education. At the same time, Ahamb Islanders are concerned that the language is losing ground

to Bislama. They are aware of the ongoing social changes in their community, and the need to find a balance between modern life and employment opportunities on the one hand, and their traditions on the other hand. They are very proud of their traditional *kastom* and its expression in language, with a speaker commenting that ‘Bislama represents the foreign part of our life’. Regarding Factor 8 then, Ahamb scores Grade 3, with many speakers in support of language maintenance, while others remain indifferent.

### **6.9 Amount and quality of documentation – Grade 1 ‘Inadequate’ improving to Grade 3 ‘Fair’**

The amount and quality of documentation material for Ahamb has improved significantly with Rangelov’s Documentation Project. Prior to 2017, there was very limited information available about the language. What did exist comprised primarily word lists, and a small number of non-standardised written texts without annotation. Prior to 2017, the language would have scored Grade 1 (‘Inadequate’). As of 2019, Rangelov has developed a corpus comprising 22 hours of high-quality audio and audio-visual material with transcriptions, translations, and linguistic annotation, along with a substantial word list (see Section 3.2 and Section 6.6). This corpus will provide data for a grammatical account of the Ahamb language by Rangelov, due for completion in 2020. As this project progresses, there will be an adequate grammar, a dictionary and texts, but no everyday media in Ahamb, corresponding to Grade 3 (‘Fair’).

## **7. Discussion**

The context in which the Ahamb language is spoken has undergone significant change over the past century. Migration to the coastal regions of Melekula has brought Ahamb Islanders into close contact with speakers of other local languages. More recent natural events associated with climate change have seen further movement of people and services to mainland Malekula. As smaller offshore islands succumb to the sea, it seems inevitable that Ahamb Island’s environment will deteriorate to the point where the entire population must relocate to the mainland.

Conversion to Christianity has produced substantial social change, including the abandonment of many aspects of traditional *kastom*. Colonisation and the subsequent independence and formation of the Republic of Vanuatu has enabled economic development, producing new forms of employment, improved transportation and communication infrastructure, and access to modern commodities. At the same time, the central government of Vanuatu is making decisions that affect all small communities, Ahamb

included. A key decision has been the provision of English medium education (or French in francophone areas), and more recently a transition through Bislama, Vanuatu's *lingua franca*, to English during primary education.

Our Language Vitality Assessment shows that the language scores poorly in two main areas – response to new domains and media, and the amount and quality of documentation. Rangelov's ongoing Documentation Project is expected to significantly improve the latter, and to promote vernacular literacy by producing materials so that the language can be taught to children in formal educational settings. Very importantly, Vanuatu's National Languages Policy allows for vernacular languages to be used in primary education. The recently started Bible translation project, and the community's support for this kind of work more generally, is seen as another opportunity to raise the status of the language among its speakers. If the Ahamb language is able to find a place in formal education and in the Presbyterian Church, its written form may normalise sufficiently for young people to use the language productively in their online activities, and to generate new literary materials. Such developments may help to secure the future of the Ahamb language.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are forever indebted to the Ahamb community for their hospitality and kindness. Special thanks are due to our adoptive families, including Chief Kalmase Kalsay, Maryan Kalmase, Chief Herold Sam, Jelen Sam, Chief Hedrik Vanbir, Niely Hedrik, Abel Sam, Espel Abel and their extended families. Our work would have been impossible without the support of Hon John Silik Sala and all community leaders, church leaders and chiefs on Ahamb. Virtually every member of the community has contributed directly and/or indirectly to our research. For the research conducted specifically for this paper, special assistance was provided by Ena Mark, Maxi Soknaur, Felix Sam and the Luwoi Primary School team. We are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Our work on Ahamb has been funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, the University of Waikato, the University of Oslo, and the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture.

## Appendix A

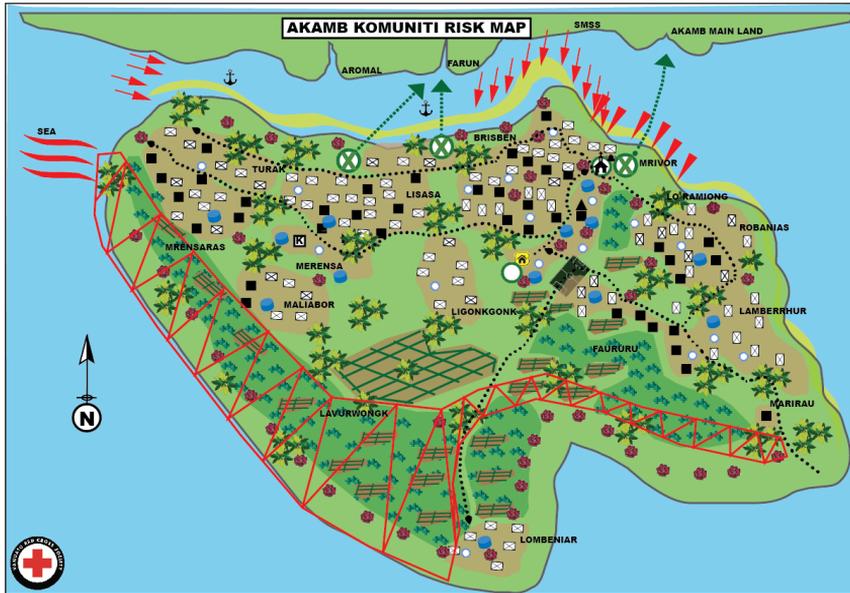
Population survey of the Ahamb community (December 2017). Names in parentheses are alternatives.

<i>Nahmar</i> ‘clan’/ village <sup>a</sup>	total population	adults				children and youth (not married)					community members living elsewhere <sup>b</sup>
		men from Ahamb	men from other language communities	women from Ahamb	women from other language communities	preschool (babies and kindergarten)	primary school	secondary school	college and university	other youth	
<b>on Ahamb island (by <i>nahmar</i> ‘clan’)</b>											
Labur Bahur	39	7		6	1	4	12	4	4	1	12
Lëmav	56	17		7	3	9	7	3		10	13
Lohor	76	15	1	12	5	18	11	4	5	5	7
Maliabor	39	8		6	2	5	7	3		8	8
Malmëj	44	12		3	7	10	6	1		5	5 <sup>c</sup>
Meriraw	27	8		4	1	6	8				5
Mrensa	80	21		10	10	11	12	7		9	12
Ropantias	117	31		13	12	17	22	11	2	9	13
Rotavu (Romladr)	94	23		12	7	16	14	6	3	13	16
<i>Total Ahamb</i>	572										91
<b>on mainland Malekula (by village; the predominant <i>nahmar</i> ‘clan’ in each mainland village is given in square brackets)</b>											
Barmar [Rotavu]	22	7		1	6	5 <sup>d</sup>	3	1			3
Harun [Labur Bahur]	24	6	1	2	5	5	4			1	3
Labursur [Maliabor]	25	5		2	4	2	4	3		5	1
Lasovsa (Bariavëg) [Ropantias]	19	4	1	3	2	4	2			3	2
Lohorvar [Lohor]	31	7		2	3	7	9	1		2	6
Lwoi Malgai [Lëmav]	10	3			3		2 <sup>e</sup>	1	1		
Rebe (Aromai) [Lohor]	55	13		5	8	9 <sup>f</sup>	7	4		9	13
Renaur <sup>g</sup> [Lëmav]	81	19		7	12	10	11	9		13	10
<i>Total mainland</i>	267										38
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>839</b>	206	3	95	91	138	142	58	15	93	<b>129</b>
<b>Total Ahamb speakers</b>	<b>968</b>	(839 on the island and the adjacent mainland + 129 migrated to other places: urban areas and women married to other areas). This figure includes 91 women and 3 men who were married into the Ahamb community.									

## Notes:

- <sup>a</sup> The boundaries between villages on Ahamb Island are not clear-cut (see the description of Map 1 for a list; note that in some cases the name of a village corresponds to the name of the *nahmar* ‘clan’ and in others it does not) and members of one *nahmar* may have their house among the houses of people from another *nahmar* due to space restrictions, significant kin ties, or for political reasons. During the house-to-house survey, community members felt it was most appropriate to report the population on Ahamb Island by *nahmar*. On the other hand, villages on the Malekula mainland are far away from each other. The residents of each mainland village usually all belong to the same *nahmar*, given in square brackets in the table (each village was normally built on its *nahmar*’s ancestral land).
- <sup>b</sup> Children to Ahamb parents who live in Port Vila normally demonstrate only passive knowledge in Ahamb when they come to visit (see Section 6.1).
- <sup>c</sup> There are three households from the Malměj *nahmar* who live in Farun. Their children go to primary school there.
- <sup>d</sup> Two Barmar children attend kindergarten in Okai where they are exposed to a different language.
- <sup>e</sup> The two primary school students from Lwoi Malgai attend the school in Farun.
- <sup>f</sup> Rebe children go to kindergarten in Farun. One primary school teacher in Farun is an Ahamb-speaker from Rebe. She occasionally speaks Ahamb to the schoolchildren.
- <sup>g</sup> The data for Renaur includes the nearby settlement of Barbismur where only two people live.

Appendix B



**KI BLONG MAP**

INFASTRAJA MO RISOSIS		NATUROL RISOSIS		RIS MO DAMEJ	RISPONS PLAN
HOAS	TRANSPOT	WATA		DENJA	EVAKWASEN PLAN
Weak Hoas	Pasis	Tank	Karen	Coastal Erosion	Evacuation road
Jej Hoas	Footpath	Well	Coconut plantation	Saeikon Wind	Tsunami mitim ples
Komuniti hoas	INFOMESEN		Nambanga Tree	Direction blo swell	Saeikon Evacuation
Classroom			Sandbeach	Flooding Zone	<b>RISPONS PLAN</b>
Strong Hoas	CDC Hoas		Dangerouse Trees		Earli wotin sistam
Store	Toloradio		Bush		Ring bell

Ahamb Community Risk Map by the Red Cross showing the main areas of coastal erosion and flood risk on Ahamb Island. Reproduced with the permission of Vanuatu Red Cross. The Vanuatu Red Cross has equipped a house with a radio and posters advising the community of how to prepare and react to different natural disasters and risks, including earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones, droughts, floods and coastal erosion.

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