# The Severed Snake

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Series Editors

# THE SEVERED SNAKE

*Matrilineages, Making Place, and
a Melanesian Christianity
in Southeast Solomon Islands*

Michael W. Scott

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# Series Editors' Preface

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart*

We are pleased to add Michael Scott's book, *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands*, to those in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series.[1] Dr. Scott's study of the dialectics of continuity and change on Makira in the Solomon Islands makes a series of fundamental contributions to anthropological thinking: in the context of Solomons ethnography, in relation to wider debates about social structures in the South-West Pacific, and in terms of the historical anthropology of Christianity in colonial and postcolonial circumstances. This series of contributions is linked together by a single consistent theme: the transformations of a basic way of conceptualizing and acting in the world which Dr. Scott defines as one of poly-ontology. By this he means that groups among the Arosi people of Makira have an irreducible notion of their separate origins as ancestrally established groups, each with its own story of its beginnings. Such a notion, we may comment, is a concomitant of a widespread principle among Austronesian-language speakers, identified by anthropologists as the principle of precedence: seniority of claims upon land depends on being recognized as the first comers to the land or as autochthonous to it. Dr. Scott recognizes that the idea of autochthony, combined with poly-ontology, may be modified at different times in a people's ethnohistorical views of themselves. It is nevertheless, he argues, deep-seated and tenacious and informs periods of historical change, including for the Arosi the history of colonization, movements of protest, and missionization.

Along with this conceptualization goes another, also found widespread in the Pacific and South-East Asia, that ancestors are as much a part of the group as are its living members. The custom of burying group members inside the houses lived in by their descendants is one testimony to such an idea. Another is to be found in the construction of special tombs that house all the members of a particular group, as described for the Merina of Madagascar by Maurice Bloch (Bloch 1971). The general idea is not, of course, confined to Aus-

tronesian speakers, for it is basically found throughout the central highlands of New Guinea and also in the lineage-based acephalous societies discussed long ago by anthropologists such as Meyer Fortes (Fortes 1969). The corporate group of people includes their ancestors. While the ancestors may in some senses be thought of as different from, or outside of, the daily lives of their descendants, they are still seen as essentially linked to them in terms of influence, and as custodians of a range of social norms and guarantors of privileges. This point, then, is also basic to Dr. Scott's argument, in contrast to those who have argued, or have appeared to argue, that the dead are "outside of society." Of course, these matters are contextual and perspectival; but at the heart of the argument is the observation that ancestors are often seen as continuing "powerful presences" in the land, as Dr. Scott remarks on for the Arosi.

In developing his argument, Dr. Scott is giving an original, and surprising, twist to a long-standing debate in anthropology about the character of social life and social groupings in the South-West Pacific. These debates, starting in the early 1960s, have centered on issues of fluidity and fixity. Are social groups fluid or fixed? By picking on certain aspects, one can argue for both viewpoints in any given case. Arguments for fluidity basically derive from observations of the vicissitudes and contingencies of practice and experience; for fixity, from discourses of continuity and ideological bases which inform the character of groups over longer runs of time. In a variant of this debate arguments for fluidity have also focused on ideology, suggesting that the basic ideology is itself one of fluidity, deriving from an idea of persons as themselves the sites of multiple relationships. While this view has some empirical support, Dr. Scott argues that it ignores the other side of ideology, i.e., the idea of the fixity of origins for groups and their separate existence in the world. At the same time he acknowledges that this ideology of the primordial has to be brought into practical connection with the need for groups to make alliances and come to terms with one another in the social world. Dr. Scott's conceptualization, here, is close to that of many New Guinea groups themselves, for example those in the Hagen and Duna areas of the Highlands (Strauss and Tischner 1962; A. Strathern 1972; Strathern and Stewart 2004), whose origin stories often tell of a unique and special source of their vitality derived from a transcendant world of spirits, coupled with a narrative of how each group has also entered into alliances by marriage with others. The opposite conceptualization, made by some anthropologists, reverses this order of primordialities, seeing groups as only contingently and contextually elicited out of a wider, undifferentiated, mono-ontic universe of "relationships." While this model might appear to draw its persuasiveness from the suggestion that groups can in fact be observed

to emerge in this way over periods of historical time, it remains the case that there is often a more resilient core of continuity that is persistent over time as well as a constant adaptive flux of changes. The wider reality perhaps encompasses both kinds of process, but Dr. Scott's formulation is certainly one that fits most clearly the indigenous or folk-models that we are aware of from our own field areas (Hagen, Pangia, and the Aluni Valley Duna) in the Papua New Guinea Highlands (see, e.g., Strathern and Stewart 2000a, 2004; and A. Strathern 1984). In any case, his argument should serve to revitalize debates on issues of this sort which for some time now have been muted by the dominance of the elicitation model. By re-formulating the discussion at the deep level of poly-ontologies versus mono-ontological models Dr. Scott has brought a fresh and compelling voice into these debates.

Before leaving this aspect of his work, we should note that Dr. Scott makes it clear that he does not wish to resurrect "descent theory" in its entirety. He means that he does not wish to explain his data simply in terms of "descent." Manifestly, this could not be done, because of the immense changes Arosi society has undergone. But the debates, on both New Guinea and Africa, regarding descent as a principle of social structure, were often confused in the past because of a failure to see how notions of descent operate in domains different from those of filiation or of affiliative residence and co-operation. If we see that the Arosi concept of *auhenua* is essentially a concept about ancestrality and therefore descent in a broad sense, we can understand that it operates as a basic philosophy of personal emplacement in the landscape, and therefore as the sheet-anchor of people's senses of embodiment, place, and identity. Because of the immense changes, including dislocations (or "dis-emplacements"), that have occurred, the Arosi at first told Dr. Scott that there were no *auhenua* groups among them, only "incomers" (*sae boboi*). This was partly because of residential shifts that had occurred from bush areas to coastal areas. Yet later, in private, people reversed this narrative and gave multiple and conflicting stories attributing *auhenua* status to their own matrilineal descent categories, in effect granting precedence to themselves in relation to the areas they had lived in. These covert claims were in turn obscured or overlain by statements that in the new Christian world of community relations, everyone was equal and all were joined together in Christian amity: a religious axiom replacing the axioms of kinship, resulting in complex and ambivalent senses of identity, which, via their inscriptions in place, constitute a heterotopia, in the terms of Foucault as Dr. Scott deploys the concept. It may seem surprising to find Foucault's concept, developed by him for a different context, applied here; but Arjun Appadurai's notion of "ethnoscape," which he invented

as a part of his ideas on globalization and transnational flows (Appadurai 1996), can also be applied in micro to the passages of different categories of people through the landscape in New Guinea; so there is no reason why "heterotopia" should not be applied in the case of the Arosi, reminding us that so-called simple contexts may actually be just as complex as any others, with the un-making and re-making of places occurring over time. As with ethnoscapes, so with heterotopias: these notions can be applied comparatively as well as among the Arosi.

Dr. Scott's main focus is on the Arosi themselves, of course. But he briefly notes that aspects of his analysis may apply elsewhere, citing our work among the Duna people. The comparison is a good one, in several ways. It shows that basic ideas may be comparable across different kinds of descent and residence arrangements. The Duna recognize cognatic as well as agnatic descent, and their *rindi*, or traditionally conceived local groups, are seen as linked to their land through an unbroken line of agnatic descent from a founding spirit entity. The representatives of this line of descent, the *anoagaro* or "man-standing" members, are like the *auhenua* members of Arosi groups. The Duna *rindi* had also been severely disrupted and subject to population loss through epidemics of introduced diseases that hit them soon after the arrival of colonial outsiders in their world. Notions of cosmic entropy, or in their terms, "the ground finishing" (*rindi itaraiya*), may have been exacerbated by this experience of illnesses and deaths, although they are in principle focused on myth-narratives of greater antiquity. With the Duna, the epidemics came in the 1960s; with the Arosi they were much earlier, and were followed by massive land alienation in the Solomons generally, a process that did not occur at all with the Duna. However, this loss of people among the Duna may have led to a greater renewed stress on the agnatic genealogies protecting people's ultimate spiritual and practical links to the land. In Hagen, also, among one group, the Kawelka, a massive precolonial migration of the group to a different area, occasioned by a catastrophic defeat in warfare, was followed in early colonial times after initial "pacification," by a return to the previous territory, and this was validated in part with reference to the genealogies of a few men who had clung on to their residence in the territory after others had all left it (see for example Strathern and Stewart 1998 and n.d.). Among the Duna origin stories, or *malu*, recount the pathways from original places traversed by some groups, and in the late 1990s these stories were renewed and brought out more into the public domain when an oil company set up a drilling rig near to the Strickland River which marks the western end of the Duna speaking groups. What was uncovered in this process was like a mild version of het-

erotopia. Conflict was avoided partly by all the groups making potential claims to royalties, and partly by the fact that at this time the drilling for oil was unsuccessful (see Stewart and Strathern 2002 for a full discussion).

Among the Arosi the Administration had ordered the early consolidation of residences into census villages, where people could readily be assessed for head tax purposes. Later, after the aura of further disruptions occasioned by World War II and the impact of American troops in the Solomons, Maasina Rule emerged as a concerted attempt to improve people's perceived economic and political standing. Americans were seen as returning descendants of abducted ancestors, who might also, however, supersede local people's claims to their land. Indigenous practices were revived and codified in a "school of custom," as happened also with the Kwaio and others in the Solomons (Keesing 1992). Rumors spread widely, as they are apt to do in circumstances of uncertainty (see Stewart and Strathern 2004). And "custom" was set up in opposition to "kolonia," British rule. In the midst of this, the Arosi themselves decided to leave their bush territories and colonize the coastal areas. Dr. Scott points out two things here: one is that the move to the coast was a response to the perceived threat of land alienation, and that it paradoxically acted also to cut off the people from their old territories. In this regard, *auhenua* claims were made more problematic, contributing to the later situation of heterotopia. Dilemmas and complexities resulting from this move perhaps included alterations in the meanings of the ritual of cutting the umbilical cord of childhood and planting it along with a coconut palm as a mark of local emplacement and coeval growth. In the old territories this may possibly (although Dr. Scott was not able to establish this point) have marked a direct matrilineal tie to the land; but, if so, in the new ones this meaning could not be sustained. However the act still signifies a link to the land of Makira in general, paralleled by further acts to consolidate that link. Overall, the Maasina Rule movement, Dr. Scott suggests, should be seen partly as a kind of civil rights movement, a formulation that could also be applied comparatively.

When he comes to discuss the influences of Christianity, Dr. Scott weaves together Arosi cosmogonic myth relating to the snake grandmother Hatoibwari and crucial events of change. "Hatoibwari" can stand for a particular lineage or be expanded as a trope to stand for the whole island of Makira (on cross-cultural ideas regarding pythons, see Strathern and Stewart 2000b). In the same way Christianity stands for the whole community, linking the various covertly recognized *auhenua* groups together. Christianity, through the idea of one universal human origin, provides a new mono-ontology which may, incidentally, have contributed to the process of making earlier origin traditions, with their

poly-ontological implications, secret. Individuals struggle with the implications of this new transformation, and tentative "ethno-theologies" are produced. Christianity in some ways implies a rejection of the past. Yet in other ways, it may be used to reaffirm certain values, as in the local idea that God would sympathize with the claims of the *auhenua* groups to their land. Arosi ethno-theologies therefore consist of both "past-renouncing and past-affirming" reflexive elements (see Strathern and Stewart 2004 for comparable discussion of New Guinea highlands cases, including the Pangia case as analyzed by Jeffrey Clark, Clark 2000, and compare also Burt 1994). The emphasis here on the efforts by individuals to think their way through the problems of change as a new kind of "onto-praxis" is valuable, and is mirrored in many ways both by the earlier literature on the phenomena labeled as "cargo cults" (e.g., Burridge 1961; Lawrence 1964; A. Strathern 1979–80; A. Strathern et al. 2002: 66–71), and by more recent studies of turmoils associated with the advent of the millennium (Stewart and Strathern, eds. 1997, 2000; Robbins, Stewart and Strathern, eds. 2001, including the paper by Stritecky 2001) and studies of how people have grappled with Christianity in other parts of the Pacific (e.g., for Papua New Guinea, Barker 1992; Jebens 2005; Robbins 2004). In the Pangia area, already in 1967, less than ten years after effective administration and missionization in one group area, indigenous members of the community would get up in Lutheran church services as semi-formally recognized "committees" of the church, and give their own lengthy and elaborate interpretations of scriptures, weaving mythopoeic ideas around the notion of Christ as "the lamb" (an animal that had never been seen in the area and was therefore a mystery in itself to themselves and their listeners). Throughout New Guinea and the South-West Pacific this mythopoeic faculty has been at work since colonial times (as it undoubtedly was before then), as people have been trying to come to terms with and make use of introduced ideas by "domesticating" them within their own landscapes of cosmological emplacement.

Dr. Scott's book contributes broadly and effectively to these various spheres of the revitalization of anthropological analysis. Like the creators of ethno-theologies, he weaves together old and new strands of analysis into a colorful and rich tapestry, revealing continuity and change, conflict and co-operation, and personal and collective efforts by people to re-shape their senses of being in the world.

# Notes

1. Other titles in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series include: *Fragments from Forests and Libraries* (Valerio Valeri), edited by Janet Hoskins, 2001; *The Third Bagre: A Myth Revisited*, by Jack Goody and Kum Gandah, 2003; *Contesting Rituals: Islam and Practices of Identity-Making*, edited by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, 2005; *Ritual and World Change in a Balinese Princedom*, by Lene Pedersen, 2005; *Xhosa Beer Drinking Rituals: Power, Practice and Performance in the South African Rural Periphery*, by Patrick A. McAllister, 2005; *Asian Ritual Systems: Syncretisms and Ruptures*, edited by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, 2006.

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# Prologue

In early 1993, about midway into a nineteen-month period of doctoral research among the Arosi of Makira in the southeast Solomon Islands, I inadvertently stirred up a latent land dispute. The incident that gave offence was my visit, in the company of two men from the coastal village of Tawatana, to an old pre-Christian ossuary situated on a rocky outcrop above the fringing reef. Our visit to the ossuary was the suggestion of one of my escorts, Andru Baʻewa, whose childhood adventures had included investigating the human skulls and bones still visible at such funerary sites, known in Arosi as *hera*.[1] Andru rightly supposed that, like my anthropological predecessors in the area, Charles Fox, Roger Green, and Daniel Miller, I might be interested in the types of relics he had spied out as a boy. Accordingly, one Sunday afternoon following the regular Anglican church service at Tawatana, Andru and I set off to meet Henry Angisihaka at the gravesite known as Hausiʻesiʻe.

Because the ossuary is situated about six meters above the beach on top of an hourglass-shaped limestone outcrop, we had to construct and scale a rough pole ladder to reach our goal. Henry went up first into the tangle of palm trees and bushes that, from a distance, gives this top-heavy natural monolith the look of a floating desert island run aground. From below, I heard him mutter something I could not fully hear as he pushed into the thicket. "He is asking, getting permission," Andru explained. "He is saying, 'We know you; we don't come to spoil you, just to visit.' No one from the church has gone up there yet to bless the place, so we must still speak like this. You don't just go up without asking permission."

We climbed up behind Henry, and in the dense undergrowth we eventually located four human skulls along with several long bones set inside a low circle of stones. Apparently undisturbed for many years, some of the bones had become entangled in the roots of a tree that had sprung up and destroyed a por-

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1. In order to avoid stirring up this controversy again, I use pseudonyms for all personal names in this account.

tion of the stone enclosure. To my surprise, Andru and Henry gingerly but freely handled these relics, holding them up individually and arranging them together so that I might photograph them at what they considered to be the best advantage. While we were thus engaged, three young boys from the neighboring village passed by and, noticing our ladder, clambered up to see what we were doing. They soon seemed to lose interest, however, and moved off as independently as they had arrived, leaving the three of us to relax in a rock shelter below the ossuary. There it emerged in conversation that, despite having greeted the deceased with the salutation, "We know you!" neither Henry nor Andru had any idea whose bones we had been inspecting, nor did they know any lineage narratives that told who had built the grave in the pre-Christian past. That evening I asked John Duruhoro, another of my closest Arosi consultants, what he knew about the place, and he averred that he had never in all his fifty-some-year life heard anything regarding the identity of the dead at Hausi'esi'e.

The following evening I was sitting with Duruhoro when Shem Maeronga, a son of Duruhoro's father's brother, came to warn me that two men from the neighboring village had been in Tawatana that day grumbling to Robert Gupuna about our excursion to Hausi'esi'e. The boys who had briefly joined us had obviously been talking about what they had seen, and now these two men—Taraiburi and his sister's son, Warakori—were disgruntled that they had not been consulted before we visited the *hera*. They had told Gupuna that we should have asked their permission to go up and they wanted him to convey their complaint to the Chairman of the Tawatana Village Committee.

If Taraiburi and Warakori were indignant at what they interpreted as a disrespectful liberty taken against them, Duruhoro and Shem were indignant at their indignation. This complaint, according to Shem, was tantamount to a land claim. By ascribing to themselves authority to grant access to Hausi'esi'e, Taraiburi and Warakori were insinuating that their matrilineage enjoyed ancestral precedence at Hausi'esi'e as the *auhenua*—the original autochthonous matrilineage—of the coastal land surrounding the *hera*. But Duruhoro and Shem found this suggestion preposterous. They knew, they said, that Taraiburi's grandmother was not even Arosi, but had been brought to Makira from a neighboring island; her matrilineage could not possibly be *auhenua* at Hausi'esi'e. Dismissing their grievance as ridiculous, Shem admonished me: "If those people come and ask you for compensation money, don't give it to them—wait first!"

Although he made no reference to it that evening, I suspected that Shem took this strong position on account of his own interest in the land. Unlike Taraiburi and Warakori, however, who seem to identify their matrilineage as

the *auhenua* of the place, Shem and his siblings argue that the true original landholders at Hausi'esi'e have long been extinct. They say that control of the land was allocated to Shem's paternal grandfather, Paul Korekore, by a non-matrilineal kinsman of the deceased *auhenua*. In the absence of a recognized autochthonous matrilineage in this area, Shem thus understands a putative bequest to his grandfather and the subsequent history of occupation by three generations of Korekore's descendants to be the only valid criteria for determining who has authority in the environs of Hausi'esi'e.

As I reflected on Shem's motives for intervening on my behalf in this light, I also considered that Duruhoro represented yet a third construction of who rightly maintains oversight of this land. Himself a grandson of Korekore on his father's side, Duruhoro had told me on several previous occasions that he gave his general endorsement to Shem's interpretation of the current disposition of the land. But I was also aware that, at the same time, he tacitly understands his own—still very much alive—matrilineage to be the authentic *auhenua* of the land in question. While Duruhoro does not deny that Korekore had been invited to settle on the land, he quietly holds that the man who extended this invitation was not a non-lineage representative of the late *auhenua* but an ancestor from within his own matrilineage. Thus, from Duruhoro's point of view, his matrilineage's interest in the land is prior to and encompasses that of "the children of Korekore."

On the following morning the picture became even more complex.

I went down to the main hamlet of the village to continue work on the construction of a guesthouse that I would soon occupy. As we sat assembling thatch sections out of sago palm leaves, I learned from Andru Ba'ewa, one of my accomplices in alleged trespass, that he had heard directly from Robert Gupuna about the complaint against us. But he seemed unperturbed at the possibility of an escalating dispute. "Let them bring it up," he said, "and we'll have Shem's youngest brother speak about it. He will speak to show that even the young people know that Taraiburi's group came here from elsewhere … but if they want to talk about the *hera*, our fathers will speak."

Like Shem and Duruhoro, Andru inferred that Taraiburi and Warakori brought their complaint on the grounds that they represent the *auhenua* matrilineage of the land at Hausi'esi'e. He was suggesting that even Shem's youngest brother could refute their claim by his knowledge of their alien origins. It was also possible, however, that Taraiburi and Warakori would try to counter this evidence with a narrative of their own that attributed both the construction of the *hera* and the human remains there to their matrilineal ancestors. This was to be expected because, although Arosi no longer openly make sacrifices at *hera* or at the spirit-shark shrines known as *birubiru*, these

**Figure 0.1.** Hausiʻesiʻe: "That is a very old *hera*, so there's a chance that no one knows who was placed in it."

sacred sites, collectively called *dora maea*, remain active as indices of unique *auhenua* identities in the land and as the loci of enduring ancestral powers. Arosi agree that only one matrilineage can be *auhenua* at any place, and members of such a matrilineage should be able to narrate a genealogy that tells how their ancestors alone first occupied their land, made ossuaries, created tabu places, formed shrines to the spirits of their dead, and left personal names associated with areas of habitation. Andru anticipated that, should Taraiburi and Warakori reference Hausiʻesiʻe in this way, he would have to call on village seniors who might know different stories about the *hera* that would challenge such an account. But he also admitted, "That is a very old *hera*, so there's a chance that no one knows who was placed in it."

Then, after a pause, Andru offered an entirely new perspective on the matter—one that involved yet a third possible *auhenua* matrilineage at the site. Perhaps, he volunteered, Hausiʻesiʻe is a *hera* belonging to his father's matrilineage. Before her marriage, his father's maternal grandmother had lived in a hamlet near Hausiʻesiʻe. This fact made it likely, Andru reasoned, that her matrilineage was *auhenua* there. To this speculation he added, almost as an afterthought, "On Sunday night I had a dream after visiting that *hera*. I didn't sleep well. I dreamed that someone was coming toward me with a strong light like a flashlight. Then I woke up."

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At first impression, Arosi—like many people in postcolonial contexts—seem to inhabit what some analysts would characterize as a culturally fragmented, ruptured, heterogeneous, and hybridized world. A recent colonial and postcolonial history of broadening and proliferating interconnection has intensified the normal processes of borrowing and hybridization, travel and exchange, that have always characterized Makira as part of the Oceanic "sea of islands" (Hauʻofa 1994, 2000; cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Thomas 1997). Makira, also known as San Cristoval, first entered European awareness in 1568 with the arrival of the Spanish explorer Álvaro de Mendaña. Following whalers and traders, Anglican missionaries arrived in the mid nineteenth century, regularly taking island youths back to their school in New Zealand. Labor recruitment to Queensland and Fiji between 1870 and 1911 also placed Arosi people in unfamiliar Pacific settings from which they brought back a variety of foreign goods and new ideas about their relationships to other parts of the world. In 1893 Britain declared the Solomon Islands a Protectorate, and colonial administrators, together with Christian missionaries, introduced sweeping changes that included pacification, socio-spatial reorganization, and the appointment of village headmen in lieu of ritually anointed chiefs. These changes helped to localize "the Arosi" as a category of people regulated in a place called Arosi. Today the electoral districts of Arosi I and II at the northwest end of Makira are nested within the larger provincial and central political order of a nation-state independent since 1978 and known simply as Solomon Islands.[2] Virtually every aspect of Arosi life has undergone exceptionally rapid and extensive reconfiguration: Arosi no longer speak, worship, dress, construct houses, cultivate gardens, cook food, or organize communal work in the ways they used to do. Moreover, as reflected in the multiple perspectives elicited by my visit to Hausiʻesiʻe, the changes of the last two centuries have dislocated and transformed a land tenure and village polity system predicated on *auhenua* matrilineages anchored in their ancestral territories.

Three principal historical processes—depopulation, local deterritorialization, and the acceptance of Christianity—have especially problematized the reproduction of coastal *auhenua* identities in Arosi. From the mid nineteenth century, introduced diseases decimated many Arosi villages, and assertions like Shem's that the *auhenua* matrilineage of a given place is extinct are now

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2. Although some readers will find it ungrammatical, I omit the definite article with the proper name of the nation-state of Solomon Islands in accordance with Solomon Islands usage since 1975 (Saemala 1983).

common. Partly in response to the crisis of disease and depopulation, missionaries and Protectorate officials encouraged the resettlement of bush-dwelling Arosi to the coast in the early twentieth century. References to this period of relocation inform a current Arosi discourse through which many people on the coast describe themselves—but more frequently their neighbors—as *sae boboi,* "people who have come from elsewhere." Arosi understandings of Christianity have furthermore rendered attitudes toward the physical markers of matrilineal connection to land highly ambivalent. Most Arosi assume that the spirits of the dead, called *adaro,* are still present and potentially dangerous at several types of sacred sites, regardless of whether Christian exorcisms have been performed at them. Several of my consultants vividly likened the spirits resident at *hera* and other such sites to a radar system: *adaro* observe everyone in the vicinity and protect those whom they recognize as their descendents but punish unknown interlopers. Owing to differing ideas regarding the relationship between the Christian God and the agency of *adaro,* however, the degree and manner in which *adaro* continue to influence events is subject to differing Arosi interpretations. There are even a few people who condemn the reckoning of relationship to land through *dora maea* as "arguing from the time of darkness," the time before Christianity.

These interdependent influences have fostered a general uncertainty among Arosi regarding the history of the coastal land where nearly everyone is now concentrated. Just as Andru and Duruhoro expressed ignorance about Hausi'esi'e, many Arosi similarly lack specific knowledge, or are skeptical of claims they have heard, regarding which matrilineages founded other local *dora maea.* Duruhoro's covert self-understanding as *auhenua* in the environs of Hausi'esi'e shows that it is not impossible to hold an *auhenua* identity at a particular place without such knowledge, but Andru's concern that the *hera* may be too old for anyone to know anything about it reveals how difficult it is for Arosi to enact discursively and experience a connection to a place without a lineage narrative that contextualizes it. Andru's dream is, I suggest, parabolic of the way many Arosi feel about their relationship to certain places. They endow the land on which they live with keen eyes that scrutinize them, as if under an intense beam of light, but they may not know who it is that sees them and whether they have been seen as a relative or as a stranger.

Yet, if the fallout from my visit to Hausi'esi'e seems to demonstrate the ruptured nature of Arosi socio-spatial order, it also reveals that there is simultaneously a more elusive side of Arosi life in which people are striving to reproduce what they regard as their customary land tenure system. This less accessible side of local life is one in which, through a variety of discursive and non-discursive techniques analyzed throughout this book, members of com-

peting matrilineages are quietly emplacing themselves as the *auhenua* of their littoral villages in contradictory ways. For reasons explained in the Introduction, this enterprise is not a cooperative one, however. Rather, as Duruhoro's tacit self-understanding as an *auhenua* person in the environs of Hausiʻesiʻe exemplifies, members of different matrilineages may covertly see themselves as representatives of the true *auhenua* of the coast even while paying lip service to the general consensus that such matrilineages are extinct. This covert but pervasive construction of incompatible *auhenua* identities has produced an intangible and invisible spatial phenomenon that is aptly comprehended by Michel Foucault's (1986: 25) notion of a heterotopia—a physical context "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." Constituted by diverse matrilineal points of view on the same terrain, this heterotopia is the inadvertent result of Arosi attempts to fill a socially and morally depleted landscape through the formation of mutually generative relationships among matrilineages, places, and the ancestral subjectivities said to inhabit them.

Why and how do Arosi negotiate "the special problems that beset the production of locality" (Appadurai 1996: 188) in postcolonial contexts in ways that produce heterotopia? It is the integrating thesis of this book that anthropological understanding of Arosi heterotopia depends on analysis of Arosi ideas about ontology and cosmology. More precisely, such understanding requires recognition and theorization of the largely overlooked model of being and relatedness I term poly-ontology and its practical manifestations. Not unique to Arosi, this model of ontology—as an ethnographically precipitated datum rather than an anthropologically applied philosophical premise—is here formulated and contrasted with mono-ontology as an important category for the comparative study of ontologies and their embeddedness in the social and spatial organization of experience and practice. Both in and beyond Solomon Islands, moreover, such comparative study of ontologies and their materialization in local modes of making place is increasingly relevant to state and international projects of political, legal, and developmental engagement with a variety of lived heterotopias as sites of actual and potential conflict.

For a period beginning in the late 1990s, Solomon Islands as a nation-state became administratively disabled and socially fractured by internal strife, peaking between 2000–03 in incidents of murder and civil combat between armed factions, primarily on Guadalcanal, the seat of national government. Multiple problems and grievances contributed to this situation, including loss of export revenue owing to the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s, mismanagement of natural resource extraction and foreign investment, lack of employment opportunities coupled with increased fee-based education, and the

widespread perception of government as compromised by corruption. Among these causes of tension, disputes between those who understand themselves to be customary land owners on Guadalcanal and those they see as usurpers—economic migrants from other islands; purchasers of improperly alienated land; and the government itself—have been especially volatile and intractable (Dinnen 2002; Fraenkel 2004; Moore 2004).

Accordingly, in late July 2003, when the deployment of over 2000 military personnel as part of the Australia-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) occasioned a rush of communication on ASAOnet, an email list-serve for Oceanist studies hosted by the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, one issue immediately surfaced by this intervention was the question of whether it is possible or desirable to implement customary land registration in Solomon Islands as a preventative against future outbreaks of violence over land. In West Kwara'ae (Malaita), it emerged, a successful initiative to write down genealogies and sort out customary land tenure had been cut short by the coup that ended the government of Bartholomew Ulufa'alu in 2000. But the suggestion that this program ought to be resuscitated with the aid of RAMSI and generalized in some form throughout Solomons Islands prompted a number of skeptical responses. People familiar with a variety of Solomon Islands and other Melanesian contexts were quick to point out that land tenure custom exhibits enormous local variation; there could be no one-size-fits-all system of government-implemented land registration. Moreover, the example of West Kwara'ae notwithstanding, several contributors expressed doubt whether the requisite consensus on matters such as genealogies and territorial boundaries could ever be achieved in the regions they knew. Even highly devolved local projects of land registration, they suggested, might therefore prove impractical in some places.

This book does not pretend to offer a solution to the vexing and, for the citizens of Pacific nation-states, vitally pressing dilemmas of land tenure. Rather, what it contributes is a detailed explanation of one among many specific Solomon Islands land tenure systems that seeks to lay bare—to its ontological foundations—the dynamic workings of that system: its fundamental assumptions about the nature of being, the practical consequences of those assumptions, and what ultimately is at stake for Arosi, existentially and materially, in the current possibilities for postcolonial and Christian transformations of those assumptions.

# Abbreviations

Note: Most abbreviations pertain to the description of items in the records of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Others refer to institutions and archival collections listed in the bibliography.

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| ABM | Australian Board of Missions |
| ADO | Acting District Officer |
| AR | Eastern District Annual Report (and successor titles) |
| ARC | Acting Resident Commissioner |
| ATR | Arosi Sub-District Tour Report (title varies) |
| BC | British Consul |
| BSIP | British Solomon Islands Protectorate |
| DCCS | District Commissioner, Central Solomons |
| DO | District Officer |
| DOSD | District Officer, Southern Division |
| IMA | Inspection of Mining Area |
| MM | Melanesian Mission |
| MR | Eastern District Monthly Report (and successor titles) |
| *PIM* | *Pacific Islands Monthly* |
| PMB | Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Microfilms, Australian National University and subscription libraries |
| QR | Eastern District Quarterly Report (and successor titles) |
| RC | Resident Commissioner |
| RCCNSI | Roman Catholic Church, North Solomon Islands |
| SG | Secretary of Government |
| SSEM | South Sea Evangelical Mission |
| TBCP | Tahiti British Consulate Papers |
| WPHC | Western Pacific High Commission |

# The Severed Snake

# Comparative Ontology

## Getting Our Ontological Assumptions Right

Twenty years ago, Fredrik Barth observed that in the anthropological investigation of cultural variation "we must always struggle to *get our ontological assumptions right*: to ascribe to our object of study only those properties and capabilities that we have reasonable ground to believe it to possess" (1987: 8, italics in original). For Barth, this meant grounding structural analyses of ritual in local histories and social processes so that such analyses arise from and reference, not putatively universal logics and their permutations, but empirical events—lived realities, interactions, perceptions, dilemmas, and innovations. In my doctoral dissertation (Scott 2001; cf. 2000), from which the present ethnography evolved, I sought seriously and systematically to apply Barth's injunction and to develop it into a general methodology for the study of the historical transformation and reproduction of cultural processes. In so doing, I interpreted Barth's rejection of ahistorical structuralist comparisons on the grounds that they generalize a particular (implicitly Western) ontological outlook as a call to investigate indigenous ontologies and their relationships to processes of cultural and historical change. Informed also by Gregory Schrempp's (1992) work on comparative cosmology, I argued that such an anthropology of ontology must inquire first and foremost of the historical or social context under study: What are the root assumptions operative here concerning the essential nature of things and their relationships within multiplex, and at times even contradictory, cosmological schemes? By paying primary attention to these ontological questions, anthropological analysis avoids, not only the unmotivated global comparisons of early structuralism that Barth (1987: 8) critiqued, but also the similarly artificial production of rubrics (power, knowledge, identity, hybridity, etc.) or recourse to isolated socio-cultural phenomena (land tenure, land disputes, leadership, violence, etc.) as the

topical foci for local and cross-cultural study. The ontology-centered method I began to formulate asks how these concepts and phenomena manifest contextually specific mappings of the number, nature, and interconnections among fundamental categories of being.

Within the past decade, a number of other anthropologists have independently begun to promote the ethnography and theorization of indigenous ontologies as an intentional focus. With an emphasis on how indigenous people engage with "alien ontologies," especially in Fourth World contexts, John Clammer, Sylvie Poirier, and Eric Schwimmer (2004; cf. Poirier 2005; Povinelli 2002) are demonstrating that it is practically as well as hermeneutically necessary to identify different theories of being and the ways in which they may be implicated in intercultural conflicts. Working in the structuralist tradition, Philippe Descola (2005; cf. 1996; Pedersen 2001) is proposing a comparative typology of ontological schemes based on ethnography from diverse regions and analyzed in terms of abstract logical as well as concrete social relationships. Other ethnographers have pointed to the work of Bruce Kapferer (1988) as a model for an ontology-sensitive approach to thought and practice (e.g., Lattas 1998; Taylor 1999), and still others have noted that the study of what has often been labeled indigenous epistemology is inseparable from questions of ontology (Bird-David 1999: S87; Viveiros de Castro 1999: S79; cf. Poirier 2005: 10). This book represents a contribution, therefore, to a non-unified but growing literature that explores the ways in which human imagination and agency reference and reveal different configurations of the essential nature of things.

As well as picking up a lead from Barth, the particular turn to ontology proposed here also draws on and seeks to elaborate Marshall Sahlins's comparative work on the intersection among ontology, cosmology, and praxis. Sahlins (1985: xv; cf. 1981: 13) points out that cosmology, especially as laid out in cosmogonic myth, often provides the "most abstract representation" of the categories of being posited in a given cultural context. This is because cosmogonic myths not only offer accounts of the origin of all things, they also often explicitly formulate the relations and distinctions thought to exist in the cosmos. These relations and distinctions, in turn, can inform human actions and thus entail historical consequences. In a now classic example, Sahlins (1985: Chapter 1) develops this correlation among cosmogony, ontology, and praxis in the context of his analysis of the "Aphrodisian" pattern of Hawaiian culture. Recounting the primordial unions between male and female principles that characterize both Hawaiian and Maori cosmogonic processes, he elucidates the way in which the Hawaiian ontological system of "commonalities and differentiations of substance" (1985: 14) is generated. The ontological relations and distinctions in Hawaiian culture—between men and women,

chiefs and people, gods and humans, etc.—and "the paradigms of their historical actions" (1985: 14) are, Sahlins argues, represented in their cosmogonic mythology. Thus, every Hawaiian sexual union is part of "a total cosmological project of sexual reproduction" that "recapitulates the original congress of male heavens and female earth …" (1985: 13, 14).[1]

In the study of Arosi, however, the analytical turn to ontology cannot begin with recourse to an ancient corpus of cosmogonic myth. Like many Melanesians, Arosi do not tell all-encompassing cosmogonic myths that condense the relations among the categories of being they recognize. Consequently, there is no single shared narrative that lays out the ontological premises of Arosi cosmology. Rather, Arosi hold a number of unintegrated and often closely guarded lineage narratives, each of which describes the formation of a single discrete ontological category.

Oceanists, responding to similarly non-totalizing narrative traditions elsewhere in Melanesia, have frequently sought to elucidate cosmologies through the examination of ritual symbolism (e.g., Barth 1975; Gell 1975; Schieffelin 1976). Today, however, Arosi no longer perform any large-scale rituals that might provide a means of access to the dynamics of their cosmology. But the absence of comprehensive myths and rituals does not mean that Arosi cosmology and ontology are inaccessible or unintelligible. As Christopher Healey notes, "cosmologies are not figured exclusively in the religious or ritual domain" (1988: 106). Rather, cosmologies "emerge contextually and partially" in actual social situations (Healey 1988: 107; cf. Mimica 1981, 1988; Silverman 1996). For the Maring of Papua New Guinea among whom Healey studied, such situations include warfare, witchcraft accusations, and encounters with wild animals. Similarly, while Arosi generally do not discuss their ideas about the nature of being in a direct and systematic fashion, one can come to understand Arosi ontology and cosmology through the close observation and analysis of everyday problems and practices. Arosi ontological assumptions become apparent when one explores such varied and frequently mundane fieldwork data as marriage, childbirth, planting an infant's umbilical cord, dream reports, illness, gardening practices, treatment of ancestral shrines, and village meetings. These and other aspects of Arosi thought and practice furthermore suggest that Arosi cosmology and ontology are most fully condensed in the multivalent conjuncture of discourse and practice to which Arosi, from one direction or another, regularly return: the way of being and becoming they call *auhenua*.

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1. For a critical response to the claim that such appeals to cosmology in the anthropological analysis of practice imply cultural determinism, see Scott 2005a: especially 190–197.

# "There Are Many Thoughts in the Idea of *Auhenua*"

The word *auhenua* is a compound of *au*, meaning "person" or "thing," and *henua*, which, along with its local variant *hanua*, is the Arosi exemplar of a widespread group of Austronesian cognates for "land" (e.g., de Coppet 1985; Davenport 1986: 104; Fox 1978; Hviding 1996: 137–141; Keesing 1993: 94; Ravuvu 1983: 70–84; Saura 2002; Williksen-Bakker 1990). Although Arosi offered me the definitions "village," "area of land," or "island" when I queried them about the term *henua*, I never heard people use this word to indicate these referents in everyday speech. In fact, Arosi today do not commonly use the word *henua* on its own. Instead, they generally use this word only in a few compounds and names, as in the words *auhenua* and *hoahenua* (a village divided by disputes), or in the names Henuaasi (the name of a matrilineage and of a submerged island) and Hanuato'o, the Arosi name for Makira that means "The Strong Island."[2]

Over time, I learned to appreciate the truth of one man's observation that "there are many thoughts in the idea of *auhenua*." Arosi use the compound *auhenua* to refer to any living thing, object, or any intrinsic quality of the island of Makira. Rocks, birds, mythical beings, spirits, ethical norms, and human matrilineages can all be said to be *auhenua*. To be *auhenua* is to be essentially and irrevocably autochthonous to the island. The Arosi men and women to whom I was initially directed on the grounds that they were people well versed in Arosi custom (Arosi: *ringeringe*; Solomon Islands Pijin: *kastom*) all agreed in presenting proper Arosi socio-spatial order as constituted by exogamous landholding matrilineages.[3] They frequently employed the lo-

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2. This name for Makira is also used on the neighboring islands of Ulawa and Small Malaita (Fox 1978: 197; Ivens 1929: 90) and by the Church of Melanesia, which has designated Makira, Ulawa, and their smaller neighboring islands as the Diocese of Hanuato'o since 1991. In the sixteenth century, Spanish explorers named the island San Cristoval (also written San Cristobal, San Christoval, St. Christoval), and this label endures in Euro-American cartography and anthropological literature. In conversation today, however, Arosi typically refer to their island as Makira, an indigenous name originally pertaining to a locale along the shore of what is now known as Makira Harbour (Verguet 1854: 113–115).

3. There has been much scholarly debate concerning the objectification, politicization, and emotional force of custom in Melanesia, especially with reference to Melanesian discourses that deploy the Pijin forms *kastom*, *kastomu*, or *kastam* (e.g., Akin 2004; Foster 1995; Keesing 1982b, 1992; Thomas 1997: Chapter 8; J. Turner 1997; White 1993). Because most of my consultants communicated with me in the Arosi language, however, I have chosen to use the English word "custom" in most instances throughout this book, both in my own voice and to represent my consultants' use of the Arosi term *ringeringe*. By this usage

cution *burunga i auhenua* to designate an Arosi matrilineage that is said to be autochthonous to the island of Makira and that, furthermore, resides in a substantial lineage territory over which it exercises control by virtue of a long history of ancestral habitation.

Thus, in addition to signifying a given condition of simply being of the island, the term *auhenua* also refers to an achieved condition of connection between a particular matrilineage and its territory established in the past through the deeds and deaths of ancestors. Lineage narratives recount how autochthonous ancestors were the first to enter an open uninhabited area of land. By planting trees, building shrines, and entombing their dead, they gave the land form and character and anchored their matrilineages in terrain. Arosi state that the spirits of their deceased ancestors continue to reside in the territory they first inhabited and to hold it through their protective power for their descendants.

When describing to me the relationship between *auhenua* matrilineages and their lands, Peter Itamwaeraha of Hagaura village resorted to graphic representation. He picked up a stick and drew a row of contiguous rectangles in the sand. Each rectangle, he explained, depicted a matrilineage in its land as a spatially discrete unit. This diagram nicely concretizes what I found to be the prevalent conceptualization of an *auhenua* matrilineage: it is the unique combination of a matrilineage in its ancestral territory such that no other matrilineage can be the *auhenua* in that space.

Applied in this way to matrilineages, it becomes apparent that the concept *auhenua* does not exist in isolation; rather, its semantic value is defined by its semiotic relations with the Arosi concepts *'awataa*, *mahuara*, and *boboi*. The *'awataa* are those who are not *auhenua* where they live but reside as guests on the land of the *auhenua*. These guests include people (usually but not exclusively women) who have married a member of the *auhenua* lineage and live with their in-laws on the latter's land, and other people whom the *auhenua* have allowed to settle in their land. As one man explained to me by answering his own rhetorical question: "Am I *'awataa* [here] because I only stay here due to a woman, [and because] I live with my in-laws here? That's *'awataa*! I

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I do not intend either to accept Arosi representations of indigenous traditions uncritically at face value or to imply that *ringeringe* cannot entail the types of self-conscious objectifications of tradition associated with the Pijin word *kastom*. Rather, my aims are, first, to avoid creating the impression that Arosi consistently use the word *kastom* when speaking of their ancestral ways and thus, second, to avoid reifying *kastom* more than they do (cf. Akin 2004: 302). Accordingly, I use the word *kastom* only with respect to contexts in which my interlocutors made use of this term.

just stay here, I don't have betel nut trees, I don't have coconut palms, [and] I don't have nut trees. [The *'awataa*] only has a woman here with those people of her lineage. I live as an *'awataa*." Because the *'awataa* do not come from the land on which they live, people state that the *'awataa* and their descendants will someday return to the places where their own lineages are *auhenua*. In contrast both to the lineage of the land and to their long-term guests, *mahuara* are strangers who are traveling through the land. *Mahuara* include doctors, nurses, priests, education officials, government employees, and anthropologists who briefly visit a village before continuing on their journey. Finally, the word *boboi* might be glossed as "from elsewhere" or "foreign to the land." Collapsing the distinction between the categories *'awataa* and *mahuara*, *boboi* is the generic term for any non-*auhenua* person or lineage. The term *boboi*, which is used more frequently than either *'awataa* or *mahuara*, has the net effect of reducing these categories to a fundamental opposition between *auhenua* and non-*auhenua*. According to this opposition a person and his or her lineage either is or is not *auhenua* in any particular area.

For Arosi, the term *auhenua* also connotes a set of social and moral practices, or a mode of conduct that a lineage or person ideally ought to embody.[4] People often refer to these practices as constituting the *ringeringe auhenua*, an expression they occasionally translate into the Pijin locution *kastom lo*, or even the equivalent English phrase "custom law." This *ringeringe* includes prohibitions such as: "don't chase people away [from your place]," "don't be selfish," "don't cause fights," "don't gossip," "don't be jealous," "don't steal," and "young men! don't play around [with girls]." These prohibitions tend to take the formal structure of the biblical Ten Commandments, and some people make the parallel quite explicit, stating that the "*ringeringe auhenua* follows the commandments." Many Arosi echoed, in their own terms, one man's formulation: "The Church (*haisoi*) came, but it was not at cross purposes with the *auhenua*; things that *kastom* forbids, the Church also forbids."[5]

The *ringeringe auhenua* also includes positive exhortations. People should "show love," "share with others," have "good thoughts," demonstrate "perseverance," "be gentle," and always "truthful." Once again, Arosi explicitly relate

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4. Some of the Austronesian cognates of *auhenua* also refer to particular cultural values and social practices (e.g., Ravuvu 1983: 76–84; Williksen-Bakker 1990).

5. The Ten Commandments appear to have been published in the Arosi language for the first time in 1886 and remain a central part of Arosi catechism today (Church of Melanesia 1982: 229–230; MM 1886: 19–20). More or less explicit adaptations of the Ten Commandments as representing pre-Christian practices are also evident elsewhere in Solomon Islands (e.g., Burt and Kwa'ioloa 2001: 15; de Coppet 1985: 81).

these truly Makiran exhortations to Christianity: "The Church's way (*ringeringe haisoi*) of goodness hasn't just newly come … it was already here in the island." Arosi usually stress the continuities—not a contrast—between the pre-Christian *ringeringe auhenua* and ideals of Christian morality. Casper Kaukeni, for example, without any hint of irony, could explain to me in English that "*auhenua* means righteous living pleasing to the devils [i.e., the ancestral spirits] and now [pleasing] to God."[6]

Arosi use the locution *ringeringe auhenua* to refer both to the ways of Makirans in general and to those of their own matrilineages in particular. Adults admonish their children: "Don't follow the ways of people who have merely come [to Makira, because theirs is a] way belonging to a different island." They instruct their children to act, instead, in accordance with "our *ringeringe* belonging to our island." At the same time, Arosi use the expression *ringeringe auhenua* to refer to the customary ways of the original matrilineage of a particular area. These are, they say, "the ways of the lineage of the land." As discussed in chapter 2, when pertaining to the ethical precepts thought to be upheld by an *auhenua* matrilineage in its land, the *ringeringe auhenua* can play a subtle but important role in inhibiting Arosi from engaging openly in land disputes. This is because judgments regarding a person's behavior can be used to question or confirm whether that person is genuinely *auhenua* where he or she resides. It is widely held that people who are truly *auhenua* in a given area of land should not embarrass those who are *sae boboi* (people from elsewhere) in their midst by reminding them of their dependent position in the land. Anxious to avoid displaying delegitimating un-*auhenua*-like qualities, Arosi are careful not to offend others by openly and directly voicing claims to *auhenua* identity. The aftermath of my visit to Hausi'esi'e offers a case in point. Rather than approach the Village Committee directly, Taraiburi and Warakori complained informally to Robert Gupuna, a neutral party known by all to originate from the other end of the island, who could mediate their claim and enable them to avoid the unbecoming act of voicing it themselves. It was due, ultimately, to this general desire to escape criticism for behavior unworthy of the *auhenua* that none of the parties to the conflict surfaced by my visit to the *hera* chose to pursue the matter. As for *sae boboi*, Arosi also expect them to maintain a certain mode of correct conduct. Ideally, they should live quietly on the land of the *auhenua* and follow the latter's lead in all things without provoking them to unseemly assertions of authority.

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6. The accent on continuities between pre-Christian and Christian morality reflects an important difference between Arosi Anglicanism and Anglicanism on Santa Isabel where, according to White (1991: 127), Cheke Holo speakers emphasize "contrasts with the past."

A central aim of this book is to elucidate how, as well as being the basic units of the present widely-shared Arosi model of customary socio-spatial order, *auhenua* matrilineages are lived and imagined as the bearers of a plurality of originally disjunctive categories of being that remain the presumptive underpinnings of the present postcolonial situation of heterotopia (see Prologue). As described in chapter 4, Arosi represent these elementary categories of being in terms of autonomously arising primordial proto-human beings who became the progenitors of fully human matrilineages through connections that prefigured lineage exogamy. Despite the ongoing processes of lineage exogamy that necessarily enmesh Arosi persons in broad kin networks, the antecedent ontological independence of these categories endures in the unique matrilineal identities of the *auhenua*, who understand themselves to be permanently anchored in their exclusive ancestral territories. The original plurality of these most elementary ontological categories may be described in two ways. First, original plurality implies that the processes of Arosi cosmogony are necessarily poly-genetic; that is, they are processes of aggregation through which an original multiplicity becomes a constructed totality. Second, original plurality implies that Arosi cosmology is fundamentally poly-ontological; that is, it posits a cosmos in which the parts precede the whole. Below, I define these terms more fully and develop a model of Arosi poly-ontology by situating it comparatively vis-à-vis the more familiar cosmogonic and ontological models of mono-genesis and mono-ontology. Having identified the distinguishing features of poly- and mono-ontology, I suggest ways in which an ontology-centered analysis, cognizant of these distinguishing features, can be employed productively alongside the so-called "Melanesian model of sociality."

# Accessing Ontologies through Cosmology and Praxis

## *Mono-ontology*

Considerable research has explored the mythologies of mono-genetic cosmologies and their attendant natural philosophies (e.g., Eliade 1965; Fienup-Riordan 1994; Lincoln 1986; B. Smith 1989; Traube 1986; Valeri 1995). Mono-genetic cosmologies assume the consubstantiality of all things as a result of their common origin. Myths of mono-genesis represent processes of internal differentiation and separation within an original unity. These processes can be modeled through a variety of narrative starting points, including sexual

generation following the separation of an androgynous monad, self-sacrificial dismemberment, auto-eroticism, or emanation. Regardless of the particular model of original unity employed, or the degree of differentiation imagined, the definitive feature of a mono-genetic cosmology is its underlying monism, or mono-ontology.

Although most familiar from the contexts of religions such as Hinduism or Daoism, or in the form of Neoplatonic philosophical and mystical systems, mono-ontological cosmologies have also been documented in the anthropological study of Melanesia. Among the Iqwaye (Yagwoia) of Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea, Jadran Mimica (1981, 1988) deduces a mono-ontology from a combination of esoteric cosmogonic myth and the indigenous number system. According to Mimica, the Iqwaye inhabit a cosmos that originated from the substance of the primordial anthropomorphic being, Omalyce. Owing to their common source in the body of Omalyce, all the diverse components of the universe share in a single unity of being. "The unity of the primary elements of the cosmos can be understood as meaning that the primordial world, the totality, is a homogeneous extension. Every region of the cosmic being is the same. There is, thus, sameness throughout the primordial whole. All its parts evince a single self-identity" (Mimica 1988: 78). As an original totality, Omalyce comprised all that was to come into being, "but as yet only as the non-differentiated possibilities" (1988: 78, italics omitted). Separation arises from a self-induced cut that bifurcates Omalyce into the binary principles of sky and earth, male and female, sun and moon, day and night. This initial bifurcation, in turn, establishes "the relationship between the one and the two, the basic numerals operative in the Iqwaye counting system whereby all other numbers are generated" (1988: 79).

Without appealing to an all-encompassing cosmogonic myth, James Weiner (1988) ascribes to the Foi of the southern edge of the New Guinea Highlands what may be characterized as a deep mono-ontology. Distilling this outlook from a variety of social practices and myth-based metaphoric relations, Weiner asserts that "[t]he Foi live in … a world of immanent continuity.… The resemblances between—indeed, the essential unity of—all the different human, animal, vegetable, meteorological, and other vitalities is for them 'given' or part of the innate nature of things" (J. Weiner 1988: 9). Again, as in any originally "undifferentiated cosmos" (1988: 14), distinctions are secondary and must be continually reintroduced in order to be maintained. For the Foi the agent of separation is the human actor; thus, "[t]he moral foundation of human action, that contrastive realm that they view in opposition to this given cosmic flow, is to halt, channel, or make distinctions in it for socially impor-

tant purposes" (1988: 9). Respecting their neighbors, the Daribi, Roy Wagner (1967) argues similarly that the premise of society is a system of given interconnections. Daribi social groups must therefore be formed in opposition to an underlying unity that continually threatens to dissolve the differences and boundaries between these groups. Likewise, each person must "defend and define himself" against the diffuse but dangerous forces in the world in order "to keep the freedom and mobility of his soul" and ultimately his distinct "identity" (1967: 62). In such an apparently mono-ontological universe "man's obligation and moral duty is to differentiate, and differentiate properly" (Wagner 1977: 623).

## Arosi Poly-ontology and Totemism

Other than Valerio Valeri (1995; 2001: Chapter 11), few anthropologists or historians of religions have begun explicitly to isolate examples of, and to theorize the nature of poly-genetic cosmologies.[7] Briefly defined, a poly-ontology is any cosmology that posits two or more fundamental and independently arising categories of being. Thus, theoretically, the simplest form that such a cosmology could take is that of a dualism that envisions all things in the universe as belonging to one of two ontological elements. Other poly-ontologies, such as that of Arosi, may understand the universe as the sum of multiple spontaneously generated and essentially different categories of being.

In Arosi, poly-ontology is most unambiguously expressed in narratives of independent autochthonous origins and in spatial representations of the theoretically unique territorial situations of each matrilineage. Made up of multiple matrilineages, understood as carrying forward separate ontological categories, Arosi society depends on forces that construct productive inter-lineage relations through practices that include exogamous marriages, the sharing of access to land, and mutual hospitality. These practices constitute Arosi cosmogony. In such a poly-ontological condition, the achievement of a social polity is the achievement of cosmic order as poly-genesis: the coming together of the many to construct the one.

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7. Tony Swain's (1993: Chapter 1) reconstruction of precolonial Australian Aboriginal ontology exhibits features of what I am terming a poly-ontology. I approach with caution, however, his claim that the whole of precolonial Australia fits this paradigm. He includes, for example, data pertaining to Yarralin (Northern Territory) in support of his thesis, but Deborah Bird Rose (1986; 1992: 209, 224) gives a Yarralin cosmogonic myth that could be read as indicative of a mono-ontology.

This type of cosmology is not unique to Arosi. Valeri too identified an example of what I refer to as a poly-ontological cosmology among the Huaulu of Seram, Indonesia. According to Valeri, the Huaulu cosmogonic myth

> depicts a society formed by the consensual confederation of originally separate and autonomous groups. In contrast to myths which account for the parts by the breaking apart of an originally undifferentiated whole, the origin myth of Huaulu society puts the parts ontologically before the whole and views the latter as a reversible result, not as a primary, and therefore unchallengeable, condition. (Valeri 2001: 293, references omitted)

Valeri recognized that when a society is formed as an aggregate of ontologically prior units, the resulting community is tentative and vulnerable because it is not envisioned as the original and fundamental premise of order. Rather, the primordial condition of originally separate and autonomous groups is understood to be the permanent foundational ontology on which a secondary structure of relations among disparate groups has been socially constructed. This layering of achieved—and therefore reversible—relationships over an a priori—and therefore immutable—disjuncture exemplifies what philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1994) describes as "ontological stratification." Although each level of reality in a stratified ontology entails practical tendencies, these emerge from, and are influenced by, the deepest level of being.

The deepest level of reality in Arosi is one of poly-ontology represented by diverse, not yet fully human, proto-lineages emerging in social and physical isolation as pure ontological types. This poly-ontological condition is discernable in two main media: one narrative and one spatial. First, individual lineage origin stories depict ontological uniqueness by recounting ultimate origins in the island. Some lineages claim that their ancestors were animate rocks formed with the island; others say they originated from snakes that gave birth to human daughters; another narrates its descent from an anomalously-born female whose mother was killed when her daughter was still in her womb; and two lineages trace themselves to different instances of congress between two species of mythological quasi-human island beings. Members of each lineage may know the origin story of their lineage and may have some knowledge of other lineages' origin stories; unlike Huaulu, however, Arosi share no mythological narrative that encompasses the originally separate and autonomous proto-lineages. The lineages neither own parts of a larger mythological cycle that enfolds the entire island, as has been described elsewhere in island Melanesia (Bonnemaison 1994: 114), nor do they perform a collective ritual in which they symbolically represent themselves as a cosmological totality (Harrison 1988: 330).

Second, the diversity of Arosi categories of being is expressed in terms of the pre-existing nature of the boundaries between different matrilineages' territories. All of my consultants pointed to rivers, the water courses of streams, ridges, and stones as demarcating an unchanging or "natural"—as one man said in English—partitioning of the island. These relatively large lineage territories are supposedly permanent and are thought to have been fixed prior to human activities on the land. Thus, one of my interlocutors listed the rivers on the north coast of Arosi that he believes serve as lineage territory boundaries today. A second person, having described similar boundaries, succinctly characterized how the forerunners of each lineage originated in their own already bounded domains on the island: "The spirit of God placed the lineages on the land; it split the land for us. These divisions in the land already existed."

Figured in their original condition as discrete and, as yet, unrelated categories of being, Arosi proto-lineages appear to be a collection of micro mono-ontologies. When viewed from this "close-up" perspective, each ontological category initially lacks any meaningful or enduring internal differentiations. Arosi narratives depict these isolated primordial entities—whether envisioned in terms of a pre-human agent, an ancestral animal, or a group of proto-people—as existing without the separations and distinctions, personal identities and relationships that define the life of a truly human matrilineage. To introduce a key example analyzed in chapter 4, Arosi accounts highlight that some proto-people are unable to separate a newborn from his or her mother: the mother must be killed in order to deliver the baby. This inability to reproduce rather than replace is symptomatic of a primordial predicament in which proto-lineages are cast as homogeneous groups comprising anonymous and interchangeable actors. Moreover, these proto-lineages inhabit contexts that are seen to be spatially and temporally indeterminate. Land is not yet formed and reformed by the activities of successive generations of human inhabitants, and it is not possible to order events chronologically. In all these respects, no principle of relativity is discernible. Analogous to many mono-genetic macrocosms, which are represented as coming into being through processes of internal division, these monadic proto-lineages give rise to human matrilineages through events that fracture their wholeness without negating their unique ontological unities. Emblematic of these paradoxically broken but integral wholes is the recurring image of the severed snake, a common and multi-form Arosi representation of matrilineal continuity that, even when cut in two, spontaneously rejoins its parts together again as one.

Elsewhere, other poly-ontological systems express ontological diversity through markedly different social forms and natural phenomena. Simon Harrison's (1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 2001) analysis of the Manambu living at

Avatip, a Sepik River community in Papua New Guinea, presents an example of a cosmology comprising a large number of ontological categories.[8] The numerous Manambu descent groups are not "simply social categories"; rather, they are "the basic intrinsic categories of the world order" (1989: 3). Each group has "its own distinctive origin-myths, land, totems, techniques of magic and sorcery, special hereditary functions in the male initiatory cult, and initiatory sacra such as flutes and slit-drums" (1989: 2). Furthermore, each group claims control over aspects of the natural environment—"the fertility of land, crops and game, the rise and fall of the rivers, and so on" (1989: 2)—so that "virtually everything in the world" (1990: 2) is encompassed by these claims. Bringing their cosmological powers and attendant ceremonial functions to ritual contexts, these descent groups collaborate "to maintain the total world order" (1990: 3). In so doing, these ontologically diverse groups ("'speciated' ritually," in Harrison's phrasing), collectively "represent themselves in ritual and cosmology as an 'organically' indivisible totality and maximally indispensable to each other" (1988: 330). In the context of the "interlocking of cosmological functions" (1987: 500) within these rituals, each group contributes the resources it claims to control and makes them available "for one another's sustenance" (1988: 330).

Harrison's ethnography also bears out the principle that the several categories of being in a poly-ontological system are, at the same time, small-scale mono-ontologies in need of internal differentiation as a prerequisite for the establishment of socio-cosmic order. Theoretically limitless in their geographical extent, the original heterogeneous Manambu clans must undergo internal segmentation through the introduction of "artfully contrived barriers" (2001: 271). These barriers are indispensable to the formation of village polities, each of which is a nexus of multiple clans and subclans that microcosmically replicates a macrocosmic poly-genetic totality. Village cohesion, which Harrison (1993: 64) characterizes as "inherently uncertain and provisional," is predicated on denial of the consubstantiality that binds fellow clan and subclan members across village boundaries. Thus, the very means to achieving inter-category relationships is the suppression, even to the point of violation, of intra-category relationships (Harrison 2001: 269–270). Yet pre-

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8. Responding to an earlier formulation of this appeal to his ethnography, Simon Harrison (letter to author, March 27, 2002) has registered his general assent that Manambu cosmology is fundamentally poly-ontological. At the same time, he has prompted me to theorize more fully the mono-ontological character of each category of being within a poly-ontology and to take into account the practical consequences that this entails. Without holding him accountable for my use of them, I am grateful for his insights.

cisely because the "categories are immanent in the structure of the world order and cannot be destroyed" (Harrison 1993: 44), these disowned and negated intra-category relationships do not die. At the end of life, the permanent absolute integrity of each category reasserts itself as Manambu anticipate reintegration within their pre-social ontological units in "ghost villages … compartmentalized among the various descent groups" (Harrison 2001: 263–264).

It is likely, I suggest, that it was the poly-ontological and poly-genetic nature of Arosi social order that the Anglican missionary ethnographer Charles E. Fox was observing when he described what he identified as Arosi totemism.[9] Based on his residence on Makira between 1911 and 1924, Fox's writings constitute the only sustained ethnographic discussion of Makira to date.[10] Fox (1919a, 1924) depicted Arosi as a locus of the "true" or classical form of totemism. In making this judgment, he relied on W. H. R. Rivers's definition of totemism, according to which a diagnostic criterion was "[t]he connexion of a species of animal or plant … with a definite social group of the community, and typically an exogamous group or clan" (Fox 1924: 350, paraphrasing Rivers 1914, 2: 75). "[T]he totems are birds;" Fox reported, "the people think the clans are descended from them; the birds must not be killed by their clans, and sacrifices are made to them" (1924: 350). He viewed the totems, however, not as differentiating the various exogamous matrilineages, but rather as serving to unify, through a shared cultural form, what he believed were racially and culturally heterogeneous groups of Islanders. Following Rivers's (1914) theory that the Pacific had been peopled by successive waves of immigrants, Fox used racial and evolutionary classifications to argue that totemism was a recent development on Makira. He concluded that the totemism he discovered in Arosi was not "a primitive institution" but was "an introduced and later state of so-

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9. Colin Allan's (1957: 85, 91) observations that "in Arosi it was stated that lines are completely autonomous" and "older men 'think' of the clans … as 'different people,' " likewise seem to point to the ethnographic situation that constitutes what I term Arosi polyontology.

10. Fox was headmaster (1911–14) of St. Michael's, the Melanesian Mission school at Pamua on Makira, before serving as the "San Cristoval and Ulawa District" missionary from 1915 to 1924. Although the Mission's District Headquarters were at Raubero in Bauro, Fox was often itinerant throughout the island and stayed at Heuru and Wango in Arosi for extended periods—especially between 1920 and 1924 after the district was made into three separate districts with Fox assigned to Arosi and the Melanesian priests Joseph Gilvelte (Bauro) and Martin Marau (Ulawa and Ugi) assigned to the other two districts (Fox 1985: Chapters 7–8; MM *SCL*, November 16, 1911: 254–255; July 1, 1914: 370–372; March 1, 1916: 673; June 1, 1918: 3–4; May 2, 1921: 7–10; September 1, 1922: 5). For an earlier account of Arosi by a Roman Catholic missionary, see Verguet 1854, 1885.

ciety" (Fox 1924: 276) that overlaid and thus obscured the real racial and so-
cial diversity he thought existed on the island.[11]

At first sight, Fox's analysis seems of little relevance to the latent conflict-
ing claims to *auhenua* identities that I found in Arosi, and his work, informed
by long outdated diffusionist theories, might appear to be of interest solely to
an intellectual historian. Nevertheless, a reconsideration of what Fox called
the "fully developed totemism" (1924: 276) of Arosi provides support for an
analysis of Arosi matrilineages as the bearers of distinct categories of being
and, ultimately, for understanding the nature of present-day Arosi heterotopia.
This claim is perhaps surprising given that, even during Fox's (1924: 12) time,
totemistic tabus seemed to be on the wane and today the Arosi—who are all
Christian—no longer sacrifice to bird totems. Yet despite the decline of "gen-
uine" (Fox 1924: 350) totemistic practices, Arosi ontology continues to posit
the independent origins, or poly-genesis, of different matrilineages presup-
posed in the form of totemism that Fox described.

As noted, Fox depicted Arosi totemism as functioning to create a common set
of beliefs and practices that served to conceal the diverse origins of different Maki-
ran peoples. By contrast, Claude Lévi-Strauss, in a generally overlooked passage,
observes that "a totemism in which the clans are considered as originating from
different species must be, by this fact, polygenetic...." (1963: 31). In Lévi-Strauss's
terms, "so-called totemism" is by definition based on the disparate origins of "cat-
egories [i.e., species] which are mutually exclusive" (1963: 30). Based on this
characterization of the nature of totemism, it appears that Fox, unwittingly sen-
sitive to the diversity of Arosi categories of being, transposed this diversity into
a discourse about waves of immigrants as hypothesized by the diffusionist theo-
ries of his time. To borrow Lévi-Strauss's (1963: 15) turn of phrase, Fox "vaguely
perceived that certain phenomena, arbitrarily grouped and ill analyzed though
they may have been, were nevertheless worthy of interest." That is to say, Fox dis-
cerned the characteristics of—but misinterpreted—a poly-genetic logic in Arosi.

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11. Fox and Rivers first met at Norfolk Island and traveled together on board the mis-
sion vessel *Southern Cross* in 1908 while Rivers was conducting the Percy Sladen Trust Ex-
pedition to Melanesia (on which his *History of Melanesian Society* [1914] was based) and
Fox was on his way to Arosi for the first time. An active intellectual dialogue and corre-
spondence followed, which, according to Fox, intensified after he visited Rivers at Cam-
bridge in 1915 (Fox to Smith, in Smith 1924: vi–vii). Although some of this correspon-
dence appears to have been lost (Durrad n.d.: n. 1), I have recently discovered that the
Perry Papers at the University College London (UCL) Library, Department of Special Col-
lections, contain the typescripts of eighteen letters from Fox to Rivers (and two from Fox
to Grafton Elliot Smith) dated 1915–20.

## *Onto-praxis*

The foregoing examples of mono-ontological and poly-ontological cosmologies suggest that a cosmology can be weighted in favor of a primary deep stratum of ontology. Both sets of cosmological assumptions pertain to the ways in which social actors seek to mediate the tension between unity and distinction, and in neither system is one of these conditions valued to the exclusion of the other. Actors informed by the logic of either system attempt to reach what Lévi-Strauss characterizes as "the threshold, undoubtedly the most profitable to human societies, of a just equilibrium between their unity and diversity" (1983: 255; cf. Valeri 1995: 94–95). Yet, as Wagner's characterization of Daribi "moral duty" (1977: 623) suggests, the first-order problematic for actors engaged with mono-ontological assumptions is to separate substances in a universe that is—in Sahlins's (1985: 13) phrase respecting the Hawaiian cosmos— "charged with immense forces of semantic attraction." Because mono-ontological cosmologies posit the primordial oneness of all things, the relationship between oneness and multiplicity is asymmetrically encoded into a cosmos weighted in favor of unity. Therefore, the primary burden on praxis is to achieve and maintain differentiation. A second-order burden, however, becomes the need to establish productive relations between the categories achieved through separation without undoing the processes of differentiation and reverting to primordial unity. In contrast, poly-ontological cosmologies that posit an original state of plurality present an inversely asymmetrical relationship between unity and diversity. As a first-order burden on praxis, actors engaged with poly-ontological assumptions must create unifying relations among multiple pre-existing categories of being. In so doing, as a second-order burden, they must also find ways to preserve their distinctive identities without rupturing the ties they have formed and reverting to primordial disjunction.

The case of the Manambu as documented by Harrison offers a particularly fascinating example of how the mono-ontological quality of each of the multiple categories within a poly-ontology can seem to equalize the need to promote intra-category separations with the need to promote local communities as instances of inter-category cohesion. By Harrison's account (1993: 49; cf. 2001), the "conceptual substructure" of Manambu clans is an obstacle to the stability of multi-clan village polities such that, in order to create and maintain the latter, the former must be negated. Ironically, then, in this particular situation of deep poly-ontology, the first-order burden on praxis to construct viable unities yields the practical tendency to carve distinctions. Accordingly—at the microcosmic level of their individual descent groups— Manambu appear amenable to comparison with the Iqwaye, Foi, and Daribi

as analyzed by Mimica, Weiner, and Wagner, respectively: all appear to give primary attention to projects of partitioning. Yet to allow this comparison to assimilate the Manambu to these other Melanesian peoples as inhabiting a cosmos that is—at its most comprehensive level—"a world of immanent continuity" (J. Weiner 1988: 9) would be seriously to misread the nature of the effects achieved through the carving of Manambu intra-clan distinctions.[12] If, for Foi, to "halt" the "cosmic flow" of certain pre-existent relationships is to "precipitate" other similarly pre-existent relationships out from an otherwise "undifferentiated cosmos" (J. Weiner 1988: 9), for Manambu, to resist the pre-existent "underlying clan structure" (Harrison 1993: 49) is to create the conditions of the possibility for the production of otherwise non-existent cross-clan connections. When viewed from the macrocosmic level of a world constituted as a plurality of multi-clan villages, Manambu acts of differentiation become chiefly, if simultaneously, the means to an inverse end: the forging of the cross-clan links that are the *sine qua non* of socio-cosmic order.

My proposal here—that anthropological interpretations must situate praxis relative to the deepest level of ontology operative within a given cosmological framework—builds on Sahlins's identification of a relationship between cosmologically embedded ontology and historical action. In distinguishing Polynesian cosmological systems from Lévi-Strauss's (1963) "so-called totemism," Sahlins (1985: 13–14, 53) suggests that Polynesian mythologies that represent cosmogony as a "total cosmological project of sexual reproduction" encode a "veritable ontology" with a corresponding "mythopraxis."

> Because this [i.e., Polynesian cosmogonic myth] is a system of common descent, the semantic relations between the several planes of cosmos and society are not metaphoric only, or merely metonymic in the sense of a physical contiguity. Descent in Polynesian thought is a logic of formal classes: the ancestor is to his descendants as a general class is to its particular instances. The offspring are tokens of the

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12. In her analytical equation of the suppositions underlying the Iqwaye number system and the Manambu system of personal names, Marilyn Strathern (1999: 241–244) appears to suggest such a problematic assimilation. An essential corrective to this mismatching of ontological strata is to recognize that when Harrison (2001: 270) writes, "[t]o Avatip people what is irreducibly given is … an underlying substructure of relatedness, a sociality of which their [village] society therefore represents the partial negation or curtailment," the substructure of relatedness to which he refers pertains only to each discrete descent group and not to the universe as a whole.

parental type. The system, then, is a veritable ontology, having to do
with commonalities and differentiations of substance. Relations log-
ically constructed from it—e.g., heavens are to earth as chiefs are to
people—are expressions of the essence of things. Hence the relations
and deeds of primordial concepts as represented in myth become, for
the persons descended of such concepts, the paradigms of their own
historical actions. Every Hawaiian union recapitulates the original
congress of male heavens and female earth, and what is born of
chiefly parents is another god. The genealogical scheme thus serves
the *pensée étatique* as "totemism" functions in the *pensée sauvage*.
(Sahlins 1985: 14)

Recognizing that "historical actions" that are "expressions of the essence of
things" also prevail in cultural contexts where no totalizing cosmogonic myths
clearly delineate those essences, Sahlins compares, and at the same time dif-
ferentiates between, his concept of "mythopraxis" and Pierre Bourdieu's
(1977) concept of "habitus." Mythopraxis he defines as the organization of
historical action "as the projection of mythical relations," while habitus is
structure "practiced primarily through the individual subconscious" (Sahlins
1985: 53–54).

   Without necessarily endorsing Sahlins's, arguably reductive, characteriza-
tion of habitus, I suggest that both mythopraxis and habitus, as models of
what mediates between structure and practice, may be refined into a model
of what might be termed onto-praxis: that is, the organization of praxis as the
situational engagement of social agents with ontological categories—even to
the point of sometimes transforming the terms of the deepest stratum of on-
tology. What I mean by onto-praxis is thus at once as broad as habitus but
more specific than either mythopraxis or habitus. It encompasses the mutu-
ally transforming relationships, not only between myth and history, but also
between the received and internalized dispositions, or practice-generative
schemes, of a given socio-cultural context and people's everyday activities
therein. At the same time, however, it specifies that the contextually possible
and selected answers to questions such as, Which came first, the many or the
one? and, Are the categories negotiated in a given situation essentially differ-
ent or the same? are what is most fundamental to the structuring of practices
and their meanings.

   In proposing the model of onto-praxis I acknowledge Mimica's (1981,
1988) parallel project of developing the idea of "mythopoeia." Mimica's proj-
ect seeks to trace the connection between forms of thought and practice and
their underlying ontological assumptions by expanding the concept of myth

to comprehend more than narrative elaborations of those assumptions. Accordingly, myth-making among the Iqwaye comes to include all modes of articulation of "the Iqwaye way of being in the world" (Mimica 1988: 5), especially their system of enumeration. Sahlins too appears to gesture toward a need to destabilize and reappraise the category of myth. In referring to the traditional narratives of Melanesians as "so-called myths," Sahlins (1995: 180) may mean to suggest that myth, like Lévi-Strauss's (1963) "so-called totemism," is an illusion that is better understood as the representation of a particular conceptual tool applied to the general problem of "being and the world." Although sympathetic with these initiatives to rethink the relationship between myth and ontology, I prefer here to offer the idea of onto-praxis as a more immediate way of describing the nexus between agency and models of being that requires no preliminary re-theorizing of myth and focuses analysis instead on seemingly non-cosmological concepts and speculations and concrete quotidian practices as additional and crucial sources that can render ontology accessible.

Moreover, the study of onto-praxis is the attempt to identify the deepest level of ontology operative in a given time and place, and to situate particular ideas, practices, and institutions with respect to the proper strata of ontology to which they give expression and on which they may impinge in transforming ways. The bivalent nature of precolonial Arosi leadership briefly described in chapter 2 provides a case study. Historically, local Arosi chiefs were given authority and responsibility to fulfill a uniting and stabilizing function. But the forces and processes that promoted stable relations could also erode the primary underlying and necessary integrity of matrilineage identities. Whenever the interests of social cohesion were seen to impinge excessively on the prerogatives of the *auhenua* of a particular place, a remedial anti-social and even violent response could erupt in the form of a warrior or defender of the local lineage and its land. The complementary activities of chief and warrior may be analyzed in terms of the first- and second-order burdens that the poly-ontology of Arosi cosmology can be experienced as placing on human social action.

In the *auhenua*-based polities of precolonial Arosi, the cosmologically delineated first-order burden to create and sustain relations among diverse matrilineages rested on an anointed chief. At the same time, although this chief also shouldered the second-order burden to safeguard and renew the unique identity and privileges of the *auhenua* matrilineage on whose land he built his polity, this burden often also rested on a second personal agent, the warrior. Chief and warrior worked in tandem to achieve and maintain cosmos in the form of a social polity comprising representatives of multiple ontologically

distinct matrilineages. Failure to hold these matrilineages together in a balanced compromise between their achieved unity and their a priori diversity could result in two opposing forms of chaos. If a priori diversity gained an excessive upper hand in social relations, the polity could fragment and its lineal constituents scatter back into primordial isolation. Conversely, if achieved unity gained an excessive upper hand, the polity could implode upon itself in a chaos of decentered non-differentiation (cf. Guidieri 1975: 135–136).

Viewed strictly in terms of kinship and social organization, this form of political leadership may appear inevitable and, hence, unremarkable. The descent and land tenure system that Arosi represent as customary—exogamous landholding matrilineages with patri-virilocal residence patterns—resembles several of the social arrangements A. I. Richards (1950) identified as conducive to what she named the "matrilineal puzzle." As in some of the African contexts analyzed by Richards, in Arosi, descent through women provides the primary means of access to land, yet because women usually go to reside where their husbands live, they often reproduce and raise children for their matrilineages away from their own land. Accordingly, the tension between inter-lineage community and matrilineal integrity in any particular place could be analyzed simply as a function of the classic problem of how the matrilineages maintain their numbers and political authority in their territories. When viewed in terms of the ontological stratification implicit in Arosi cosmology, however, this particular chief-warrior paradigm emerges as also a distinctively Arosi articulation of a more fundamental deep ontological problematic (cf. Scott 2007).

Similarly, if regarded strictly as a political phenomenon, the relationship between chief and warrior, especially when instantiated by a set of brothers as it often was, resembles the diarchic kingship shared between sacred seniors and juniors documented for some Polynesian contexts (Valeri 1990; cf. 1982, 1985, 1989). Although beyond the scope of the present analysis, future comparative study of the chief-warrior symbiosis in Arosi and diarchic kingship in precolonial Polynesia may also demonstrate the importance of giving consideration to the influence of deep ontology. *Prima facie*, these two forms of Pacific leadership look deceptively alike. Both map the same polarity of stability and destruction; as in the southeast Solomon Islands, in Polynesia this polarity could be expressed temporally in the life of a chief who moved from violent warrior to sedate leader (Barraud et al. 1994: 44–45; de Coppet 1995: 269; Keesing 1985; Sahlins 1985: Chapter 3; Valeri 1982: 10). If, however, these apparent similarities are contextualized in their respective models of cosmic and social formation, the chief-warrior dyad in Arosi emerges as a systematic inversion of the examples found in Polynesia. Only when the prem-

ises of the deepest level of ontology are taken into account can the differences between such phenomenologically similar patterns of action be perceived and recognized for the differences they make.[13]

In ways especially germane to the present study, the otherwise ethnographically rich and analytically productive Comparative Austronesian Project led by James Fox further illustrates the incompleteness of comparative work conducted without a model of ontological stratification. Although attentive to diverse Austronesian "origin structures," contributions to this project omit to interrogate the ontologies implicit in these structures, focusing instead on identifying regional reflexes of an impressively consistent set of metaphors of ancestry and precedence (J. Fox 1988, 1995, 1996). This method has tended to yield imprecise characterizations of the sometimes diverse models of being and relatedness mapped by these metaphors in a given context. E. Douglas Lewis, for example, describes Ata Tana 'Ai (eastern Flores, Indonesia) conceptualizations of clan origins in a manner that seems, at first glance, to point to an instance of poly-ontology: "at the heart of the domain's constitution is the idea that the domain's clans are fundamentally social entities of independent and diverse origins, even though in contemporary times they are closely bound together by both ritual and affinal relations" (1996: 156; cf. 1988: 32, 48, 118). In a subsequent passage, however, Lewis appears to contextualize this assertion within a larger Ata Tana 'Ai theory of mono-genesis: "In the myths of origin of the Ata Tana 'Ai, the time before the creation of the social order was a time in which the major categories of later creation were monadically whole" (1996: 170; cf. 1988: 51). This ad hoc presentation of different images or stages of origin and their corresponding visions of human relatedness raises many questions relevant to the interpretation of Ata Tana 'Ai socio-spatial order. Is it the case that Ata Tana 'Ai maintain more than one view of human origins and ontology? If so, do they coexist in a tensive relationship with practical consequences, or are they separated through patterns of selective attention? Alternatively, is it the case that Ata Tana 'Ai models of human divergence are encompassed by assertions of human unity? If so, what

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13. As the subtitle to Sahlins's (1985: Chapter 3) essay "The Stranger-King; or, Dumézil Among the Fijians" makes plain, the diarchic patterns here in question are not even confined to the Pacific, but have been discerned in the records of ancient Indo-European societies as well. In his theory of Indo-European tripartite socio-religious ideology, Georges Dumézil argued that the first function, that of sovereignty, comprised two distinct aspects: the *gravitas*, or peaceful modality and the *celeritas*, or violent modality. Such broad attestation of seemingly analogous concepts and practices further reinforces the need to attend to ontological stratification in comparative endeavors.

practical burdens, emerging from which phase of coming into being, do various rituals and everyday activities primarily address?

# Poly-ontology and the Limits of the "Melanesian Model of Sociality"

Contemporary ethnography of Papua New Guinea shares a broad, if not wholly uncritical, commitment to the particular model of Melanesian sociality routinely attributed to Marilyn Strathern (1988), but also largely indebted to the data and insights of Roy Wagner, among others (e.g., Clay 1977, 1986; Mosko 1983, 1985; Munn 1983, 1986; Wagner 1977, 1986; J. Weiner 1988).[14] Historically, this model is traceable to critiques of Africanist descent theory as inadequate to the task of accounting for social formations in the New Guinea Highlands (e.g., Barnes 1962; de Lepervanche 1967–68; Langness 1964; Wagner 1974). Although Strathern and those who find her model analytically productive have not explicitly claimed that it is equally applicable in all Melanesian contexts, the apparent dominance of Papua New Guinea-based anthropological research in defining both what is Melanesia and typically Melanesian (e.g., Sillitoe 1998) and the fact that the model is known as "Melanesian sociality" have combined to privilege this model within anthropological discussions of Melanesia. On the basis of my work in Solomon Islands, however, I find two interrelated problems with this model that, I submit, might be redressed by supplementing the model with attention to the question of deep ontology. First, owing to its intellectual and contextual origins, Strathern's model may be used prescriptively to preclude the possibility of identifying any indigenously recognized singular or stable entities—whether conceptual or empirical—in Melanesian contexts. Second, as a direct consequence of such a prejudicial ban on fixed or given entities—that is to say, on parts in relation to wholes (M. Strathern 1992: Chapter 5)—Strathern's model inevitably constructs the ethnographic situation to which it is applied as the analytical equivalent of a mono-ontology.

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14.  Some recent Melanesianist literature that reflects this broad commitment includes: Bamford 1998; Battaglia 1990; Foster 1995; Harrison 1993; Hirsch 2001; Leach 2003; Mallett 2003; Mosko 1992; Reed 2003; J. Weiner 1995. That the model is becoming taken-for-granted orthodoxy by some Melanesianists is evident in general discourse about the Melanesian person as "relational" (e.g., Foster 2002: 75; Robbins 2002) and in corrective appeals to the model as a standard by which to evaluate Melanesianist ethnography (e.g., Mosko 2000; M. Strathern 1992: 115 n. 6).

The presumption against the existence of indigenously naturalized unique constituent categories, persons, or groups in Melanesia has its roots in the deconstruction of Africanist descent theory in the early ethnography of Highland New Guinea. Almost from its inception in the 1950s, the anthropology of the Highlands yielded an ostensible paradox: diverse Highlands peoples represented themselves in ways that anthropologists described as patrilineal, yet in practice these same peoples did not consistently privilege patrilineal descent as a criterion of recruitment to social groups. Despite often strong indigenous discourses of what ethnographers termed patrilineality, a host of potential criteria and contingent variables—including relationship through women, histories of co-residence, adoption into agnatic lines, territorial contiguity, the personalities of individual leaders, population density, and economic conditions—appeared to organize Highlands societies in ways that resisted classification in terms of rules or regular correlations between variables. Faced with this apparent mis-match between indigenous discourse and practice, anthropologists attempted to model Highlands societies as exceptions to the rule of unilineal descent by developing the tropes of structural looseness, fluidity, plasticity, and flexibility to describe a wide variety of extra-descent-based social relationships and collectivities (e.g., Kaberry 1967; Pouwer 1960; Watson 1965). These tropes, although initially designed to extend the capacity of descent theory to explain patterns of social practice, highlighted phenomena that challenged the structural-functionalist teleology of stable solidarity and prompted some anthropologists to ask: "are there social groups in the New Guinea Highlands?" (Wagner 1974).

Moreover, debates regarding the perceived incongruity between indigenous ideology and practice contributed to a pluralization of theoretical approaches in Melanesianist anthropology that has tended to eclipse both the concept of descent and the notion of stable social groups. For influential writers such as Harold Scheffler (1965) and Roger Keesing (1971), the observed fluidity and flexibility of many Melanesian social configurations meant that models of descent—whether indigenous or anthropological—are subordinate to contingency and individual choice in the shaping of social action. In contrast, Wagner (1967, 1974, 1977; cf. Schneider 1965) argued that the same fluidity and flexibility means, not that ideology is secondary or unimportant in social action, but that the notion of descent cannot account for Melanesian social practices because it is exogenous and incommensurable with the "analogic" ideology of relatedness culturally particular to Melanesia (cf. Carrier and Carrier 1991: 18–19). Subsequent Highlands ethnographers concluded that the initial emphasis on patrilineal descent as the core principle of Highlands social organization was exaggerated and turned, along with other Melanesianists, to the

study of exchange and reciprocity for insight into the logic of Melanesian so-
cial forms (e.g., Feil 1984; Forge 1972; Schwimmer 1973; Wagner 1967; A.
Weiner 1976). As indicated below, there have been dissenting voices in these
debates that have called for continued anthropological investigation of indige-
nous idioms of descent and their relationships to practice. Nevertheless, these
broad theoretical and ethnographic developments have combined to deflect in-
terest and analysis away from descent, either as a concept comparable to at least
some Melanesian tropes of relatedness, or as the rationale behind some
Melanesian social formations. This has been especially true in the literature in-
formed by the work of Marilyn Strathern, which largely elides discussion of de-
scent and social formations into analyses of personhood and sociality.

Appropriating McKim Marriott's (1976) idea of the "dividual," Strathern
argues that Melanesians regard a person, not as a unique individual, but as a
composite and partible being produced through a plurality of relationships.
Similarly, a group, in the eyes of Melanesians, is not a given whole but is man-
ifested only when a number of persons elicit one another's potential affinities
and capacities. According to this model, Melanesians see one another as in-
herently replicating the multiple relationships and substances that produced
them. It is taken for granted that a person is thus born fully integrated within
a pre-existing continuum of those social relationships and substances, and no
mode of relationship takes automatic priority over, or is foundational to, the
others in defining who a person is. There is no baseline person; a person is a
wholly relative or "relational" construct.

It is only in the context of particular lived relationships that a person "de-
pluralizes," or selectively activates some relational aspects of his or her per-
sonhood while suppressing others (M. Strathern 1988: 13–14). This process
of de-pluralization can be either the outcome of action initiated by the per-
son or the effect of another person's agency. Furthermore, no person is ever
fully or permanently committed to the activation of only one aspect of per-
sonhood; rather, multiple aspects of personhood may be concurrently acti-
vated in different relational spheres. The person in this conceptual scheme, al-
though not an integer, is nonetheless a microcosm of all relationality—a
synecdochic or fractal ingredient in a boundless, always already realized field
of sociality (M. Strathern 1988: 176). Nowhere is there an identifiable a pri-
ori unit; in every context, human action serves to individuate persons and col-
lectivities by means of processes variously described as "fraction," "partition,"
"de-conception," and "decomposition" (Mosko 1992; M. Strathern 1988; Wag-
ner 1991).

Without seeking to deny that Strathern's model may be descriptively accu-
rate for some Melanesian contexts, I caution that it should not be generalized

as an analytical tool applicable to all parts of Melanesia (and, increasingly, beyond) without serious qualification and counterbalancing attention to indigenous ontologies.[15] It may be said, for example, that Arosi understand themselves to be the sites of multiple relationships. Like the Melanesians of Strathern's model, Arosi too recognize that they are the composite products of the social relationships that went into the processes of their generation and that consequently flow through them in their embodied situations. Certain circumstances and events, such as the arrangement of bride-price payments, or practices, such as midwifery and naming, can activate or construct particular subsets of relationships that define persons socially. At the same time, however, it would be inaccurate to say that Arosi persons and collectivities see themselves as entirely relationally determined. From an Arosi point of view, at the core of each Arosi person stands an unchanging matrilineal essence concretely imaged as an unbroken umbilical cord. Whereas an ethnographer looking at Arosi through the lens of Strathern's model might be inclined to conclude that matrilineal connections are elicited only situationally when issues of landholding emerge (cf. Foster 1995: 67), I hope to show, to the contrary, that Arosi grant priority to a map of social, spatial, and, ultimately, cosmic order made up of ontologically unique categories embodied by matrilineages anchored in their mutually exclusive territories. If my interpretation is correct, it suggests that ethnographers ought not to approach all Melanesian social settings with the assumption that there are no integers to be found there. Such an assumption may function as a blinder inhibiting the ethnographer from perceiving both empirical and conceptual social, and perhaps ontological, indigenous categories that may, after all, be present in some parts of Melanesia. If persuaded that such categories do not exist, the ethnographer may overlook, minimize, exclude, or otherwise struggle to explain away evidence to the contrary.

This problem is particularly evident in attempts to apply the Melanesian model of sociality to contexts where mortuary rituals appear to reference processes of return to primordial or pre-social root categories that are also often correlated with indigenous models of descent. As documented by ethnographers working in diverse areas of Papua New Guinea (e.g., Fortune 1932; Foster 1995; Harrison 2001; Macintyre 1987, 1989; Munn 1986; Thune 1989;

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15. With greater and lesser degrees of attention to indigenous ontologies, anthropologists have begun to apply the model of so-called Melanesian sociality developed by Strathern and others to geographical and conceptual contexts beyond Melanesia, including West Africa (Piot 1999), Native Alaska (Fienup-Riordan 1994), the whole of Austronesia (especially Polynesia, Mosko 1992), and the anthropology of art (Gell 1998).

A. Weiner 1978, 1980, 1988), many Melanesians see death as a process that disarticulates putatively autonomous categories, figured as descent lines, from the network of relationships that make up lived sociality. Strathern (1992: 114–115 n. 4) herself even recognizes that, in what she terms "the so-called lineal systems," it is these categories that are regarded as most "complete" in themselves, such that sociality renders them "incomplete" and death restores them to an original integrity. Yet despite this footnoted awareness of Melanesian models of multiple primary essences, Strathern unaccountably asserts that Melanesians "make an assumption of particularism but not essentialism" (1992: 74); that is, they acknowledge no core essences within persons. What is it, then, that "de-composition" gets back to in this type of mortuary distillation of unilineal entities? The possibility of paring back or sloughing off social relations in this way implies the existence of underlying realities, multiple disparate remainders.

In order to prevent such data from undermining her claim that the Melanesian "vision of the world" has "no problem with how parts fit together" (1992: 114), Strathern pushes them outside the frame of her model. She implies that, because a person cut out from social relations at death is no longer a person (1992: 98, 100), ideas about what a dead person becomes are irrelevant to her model, which seeks to describe only how Melanesians understand living persons and fully constituted human sociality. Melanesian visions of primordial, "pre-procreation" (M. Strathern 1992: 115 n. 4), or postmortem conditions are thus not only pre- or post-social, but anti-social—antithetical to the way things really are and therefore corroborative of, rather than challenging to, her representation of the Melanesian vision of the way the world actually is. But to bracket out what amounts to a large measure of myth and religion in this way is to cast these representations of alternative realities as purely negative and negated by the conditions of lived reality and to deny that such representations may entail indigenous assumptions about the necessary and ongoing premises on which lived reality depends. It is to dismiss from the beginning the possibility that, for some Melanesians, such premises may be more real than the way things appear right now.

Representations of conditions prior, contrary, or ultimate to the present are not semantically empty or without practical consequences, however; a fact that can lead those who attempt to apply Strathern's model to such data into instructive difficulties. Robert Foster, for example, develops a persuasive analysis of how Tangan (New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea) mortuary feasting enables host matrilineages to assert their instantiation of the primordial condition of a mythically imagined autonomous and auto-reproducing matrilineage (Foster 1995: 141–144, 215). But because he accepts that

Strathern's model of integer-less relationality describes what Tangans take to be given and primary, he is compelled to identify a second ancillary form of Tangan sociality, one that "privileges autonomy and self-sufficiency" (1995: 194), in order to account for his own counterindicative findings. This second form of sociality, he argues, is innovated in the rituals themselves when the host matrilineages presume to act autonomously and thereby temporarily eclipse the relational foundations of "conventional" sociality (1995: 218). These latter are never irreversibly negated or totally destroyed, however. The bifurcation of Tangan sociality that mortuary practices induce is a brief rupture in reality, "even a mirage" (1995: 218; cf. 1990: 435, 444), that posits the transient and morally ambiguous possibility of a complementary opposite in which the matrilineages, as "collective individuals," can claim to pre-exist and stand outside their quotidian interdependence (1995: 215–216).

But something is not quite right with this picture if the aim is to apprehend Tangan understandings. The problem is not that Foster interprets Tangan rituals as the sites of symbolic inversions of what Tangans regard as the conditions of normal human sociality. The problem lies rather in the way Foster appears to allow the Melanesian model of sociality to trump Tangan representations of an underlying pre-social condition in his own representations of what Tangans take to be most fundamentally real. This is to invert the import of what Tangans seem to be saying through their myths and mortuary practices: namely, that what Foster subordinates as a secondary form of sociality is what Tangans in fact assume as given, while something resembling the form of sociality described by Strathern's model (but not radically integer-less) is what they see as the constructed outcome of cosmogonic transformations and continuous human strategies for interconnection via exchange. These strategies are required precisely because it is the form of sociality that privileges autonomy and self-sufficiency that Tangans both value and fear as the condition that is never irreversibly negated or totally destroyed. Accordingly, there is a discernible slippage between Foster's (1995: especially 215–216) argument that autonomous matrilineal identities are produced *de novo* in the mortuary context and his acknowledgment that Tangans operate with a general and constant distinction between matrilineal identity as "natural" or "given axiomatically" and paternal relations as "optional," "created" (Foster 1995: 155, 263 n. 20, cf. 68). Furthermore, Foster's own convincing symbolic interpretations of Tangan mortuary practices with reference to Tangan myth suggest that the alternative realities figured in these cultural forms are — not belied by — but

constitutive of what Tangans think they know about the true essential under-pinnings of lived sociality and personhood.[16]

As an abstract semiotic critique of Tangan myth and ritual, Foster's analysis is unassailable. And from a social scientific point of view, fully relationally constituted human beings come first; myth and ritual are epiphenomenal transformations of otherness. Where Foster may be making one consequential misstep, I suggest, is in ascribing a functionally equivalent point of view, under the name of the Melanesian model of sociality, to Tangans themselves as their most comprehensive outlook. This, ironically, may be to mistake a cropped view of their model of lived sociality for the whole of their mythic imagination, the baseline of their understanding of reality relative to which all other configurations are ultimately ephemeral. But if the most comprehensive Tangan vision of the nature of things is one according to which there are no entities-in-themselves, only the fluid shaping and reshaping of completed relationship, why do Tangans periodically tell themselves that their matrilineages comprise and can sometimes perfectly embody such self-defined terms? Their aspirations for permanence and "transcendence" (Foster 1995: 216, 224) might rather be expected to index return, not to multiple matrilineally defined categories, but to the pleroma of relatedness out of which their lived shifting relational alignments have all been equally passingly precipitated.

Put another way, despite Strathern's (1988: 6) disclaimer that her model does not describe indigenous Melanesian ontology, but is rather "a kind of convenient or controlled fiction" for analytical purposes only, the imputation to genericized Melanesians of a perspective that prioritizes relatedness as given—with no preconstituted entities or starting points other than the fullness of sociality itself—effectively inserts a virtual mono-ontology behind the conceptual object termed "Melanesian sociality." This is hardly surprising in light of Marriott's (1976: 109) clear qualification that his concept of the "dividual" derives from and describes a context of "systematic monism," that is to say, Hindu cosmology. Characterized as "the whole cloth of universal

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16. Foster (1990; 1995: 141–142, 215) appears to present the main myth that informs his analysis as though it refers to the origin of death and sociality at a universal scale only, implying a mono-genetic origin for the multiple Tangan matrilineages as the products of an original division within a single primordially self-replicating matrilineage. Thus, Tangan ontology may well be monistic. According to Thune (1989: 156), however, regional variants of this myth on Normanby Island (Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea) also function at a microcosmic scale to account for the transition of multiple primordial categories from parthenogenetic wholeness to endogamously constituted human matrilineages (see chapter 8 below). The ambiguity of scale inherent in these myths leaves the question of Tangan ontology open and illustrates the need for closer attention to ontology in such analyses.

congruence" (Wagner 1991: 166), "an open-ended, infinite world" (M. Strathern 1999: 258), or a condition of "universal states or flows" (Goldman, Duffield, and Ballard 1998: 6), Melanesian sociality is conceptualized as a boundless plane of unified being that must be cut at multiple levels in multiple ways to release recognizable entities: societies, villages, groups, and persons (M. Strathern 1992: 113). What is implied in such language is far more than an indigenous view of empirical human society disassociated from mythic, pre- or post-human alternatives; what is implied is a whole indigenous cosmology and ontology. Myth and the non-human have never really been bracketed out, only barred from contradicting. It may well be that the indigenous ontologies of many of the New Guinea peoples whose practices form the empirical foundation on which the model is based are monisms. But once it is recognized that the model entails and imposes a virtual mono-ontology, one has to ask: Why construct an analytical tool that functions in lieu of an indigenous ontology rather than inquire into the nature of actual indigenous ontologies?

In seeking to temper the nascent orthodoxy of Strathern's model with these observations and the counterexample of Arosi, I connect with that strand of Melanesianist anthropology that has continued to explore what Melanesian idioms of descent mean to the people who hold them and what else, if not the strict principles of recruitment to groups, they might be about (e.g., Lederman 1986; de Lepervanche 1967–68: 173; A. Strathern 1972, 1979). This means resisting the injunction written into the Melanesian model of sociality to place Melanesian representations of unilineal descent under erasure on the grounds that "everywhere in this part of the world the composite person is a cognatic system, to be undone or otherwise depluralised, transformed into a unitary entity at particular moments in time" (M. Strathern 1992: 99). In recent ethnography, for example, Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart's (2004; Stewart and A. Strathern 2002a) studies of the Aluni Valley Duna of Highland Papua New Guinea take seriously Duna prioritizations of their agnatic lines as the emplaced centers of larger cognatic and otherwise compositionally negotiable residential groups, even where agnates constitute a minority of those settled in their ancestral territories. Members of these agnatic lines furthermore represent and ritually coordinate the multiple land areas, spirit beings, and resources that make up the wider social and ecological world the Duna experience as their cosmos. Working with a similar respect for the possible conceptual salience and practical relevance of unilineal descent discourses in Melanesia, I seek to show how the model of descent through women inherent in the Arosi concept of *auhenua* and the diverse practices with which it is dynamically engaged are ultimately about Arosi cosmology and thus about the categories and transformations of Arosi ontology.

It is not my intention, however, on the basis of this conclusion about Arosi descent idioms, to resurrect classic descent theory disguised as a theory, either of ontology in general, or of poly-ontology in particular. The specific integers composing a poly-ontology need not be descent categories. Theoretically, ontological units could be defined by other criteria, including gender; ritual, political, or other social functions; identity with natural phenomena; control over geo-physical regions or territories; and any other form or practice that can represent identities as grounded in deep ontology.

Moreover, although it may often be productive to interrogate descent idioms for what they reveal about ontology, strong unilineal descent categories alone cannot be taken as diagnostic of poly-ontology—even where people envision the dead as organized according to such categories. It is always possible that what appear to be multiple unrelated descent categories in one social context may be represented in another as the results of processes of cosmogonically achieved separations within an original unity. Correspondingly, death may be viewed as a multiphase return to original unity via graduated funerary processes. In such a scheme, an initial funeral that returns the deceased to a pure unilineal category might index de-conception from social relations (understood as an achieved tertiary stratum rather than a given primary one), back to a secondary stratum of achieved differentiation, prior to further decomposition to a primary monistic stratum by means of further specialized mortuary practices. To discern what levels of ontology are indexed by different ancestral categories or postmortem states requires the analytical juxtapositioning of such categories and states with mutually informing representations of ultimate origins and cosmogonic transformations. In all this the ethnographer must be sensitive to the ease with which variant versions or positioned interpretations of origin myths, different scales of origin, or differing claims about an apical originary being that may or may not unite several or even all descent lines, can invert ontological implications or signal the coexistence of competing, or exoteric versus esoteric, ontologies. Rather than formulating strict rules for correlating descent idioms with ontologies, therefore, this ethnography aims to model an anthropology of ontology, ontological stratification, and ontological pluralism that begins to attend more systematically to the possible interrelations among these and other types of potentially repercussive data.

## Constant Cosmogony

In chapters 1–3 I describe and situate historically the current bifurcation of Arosi socio-spatial organization into a surface level based on consensus that

the *auhenua* matrilineages of the coast are dead and a hidden level involving competing *auhenua* identities. Traceable in part to such factors as the demise of ritually anointed chiefs of the *auhenua*, disease-induced depopulation, and colonial regimes of reorganization, the surface level is one at which Arosi understand their social polities to be constituted solely through a recent history of mutually "entangling" inter-lineage connections. These connections include exogamous marriages, namesake relationships, obligations of reciprocity perpetuated through cooperation in amassing bride-price, foodstuffs, or other items of exchange, and the putative history of their ancestors' relocation under the auspices of "the people of old." The Melanesian model of sociality would seem adequate for the analysis of such entanglements were it not for the fact that Arosi themselves act and speak in ways that reveal that they regard sociality in this mode to be deficient. If, as Marilyn Strathern (1992: 115 n. 6, following Chowning 1989: 99) implies, studies of the Massim (Papua New Guinea) have distortively emphasized "unilineal groups as though maintaining them were the central concern of their members," by reflecting precisely such a concern, the hidden level of Arosi socio-spatial organization suggests that such a skeptical reading of Melanesian ethnography may, in some cases, be unwarranted. Nor is there evidence that the Arosi concern to maintain unilineal landholding groups is strictly a product of recent colonial and postcolonial history. Presenting Arosi perspectives on the post-World War II political movement known as Maasina Rule, I explore how fears of land loss inculcated before and during the movement have contributed to the present-day Arosi preoccupation with securing *auhenua* identities in the land. I seek, however, in so doing, to show that Maasina Rule has heightened rather than created this preoccupation. The preoccupation itself inheres in Arosi commitment to a poly-ontological socio-cosmic order as an ideal that requires the presence of *auhenua* matrilineages anchored in their lands as the centers around which inter-lineage entanglements can coalesce into coherent and stable polities. It is the shared, but ironically divisive, aspiration on the part of Arosi to re-emplace foundational *auhenua* identities below the surface of their entanglements that is the primary stimulus to the production of heterotopia.

In chapters 4–6 I analyze the ontological underpinnings and socio-cosmogonic processes that inform the production of Arosi heterotopia. By cross-referencing diverse elements of Arosi life, including metaphors of relatedness, midwifery, child-rearing, lineage narratives, and ancestral sites, I identify practices and imagery through which Arosi represent and effect coming into being as an ongoing transition from one mode of primordiality to another. The first mode, which I term utopic primordiality, is a static mode figured by mythic primordial people and proto-lineages dwelling in

asocial purity in indeterminate pre-social spaces. These mythic images express Arosi deep poly-ontology as a state of primordial chaos characterized by excessive isolation among originally multiple categories of being. The second mode, which I term topogonic primordiality, is a dynamic mode figured by the exogamous generation of truly human ancestors who fuse matrilineages with socialized territories through the production of ancestral spirits in the land. The transition from the first to the second mode is mediated by the establishment of mutually constituting relationships among the diverse categories of being and achieves the construction of a poly-genetic socio-cosmic totality.

If, however, by definition, the "primary characteristic of a cosmos is its claim to wholeness" (de Coppet and Iteanu 1995: 1), how do Arosi hold together this socially achieved condition of productive relationship among inherently distinct categories of being? The formation of the Arosi cosmological whole is to be found, not in a single foundational past event, but in present primordialities: in the everyday practices that continuously revisit the transition from utopic to topogonic primordiality to bring isolated ontological categories into ordered relations. Constant renewal of connections among Arosi matrilineages is imperative because, as Valeri (2001: 293) observes with respect to Huaulu society, the aggregation of constituent components is "a reversible result, not … a primary, and therefore unchallengeable, condition." The possibility of return to the primary condition of asocial isolation is always present. Furthermore, particular circumstances and historical events can promote the course of regression to the given mode of static atomism.

In chapter 7 I suggest that colonial transformations in Arosi have fostered just such a functional return to utopic primordiality, a condition in which land is conceptualized as empty, open, and available for transformation into newly formed lineage territories. In this context of virtual reversion to utopic primordiality, the normally constant cosmogonic processes of transition from utopic to topogonic primordiality have become intensive. Experiencing the postcolonial moral and social vacuity of their coastal land as both an obstacle and an incentive to the reproduction of their locality, Arosi today are creatively engaged in advancing this transition through a variety of neo-topogonic activities. By surreptitiously manipulating pre-existing shrines and burial sites, constructing lineage narratives that incorporate these markers of ancestral presence, and retrieving lineage personal names, Arosi are reframing and revaluing the topogonic activities of their lineage ancestors in order to anchor themselves in the coastal land. At the same time, however, by struggling to establish and preserve their respective matrilineal identities as the necessary precondition for productive and harmonious inter-lineage relations, the diverse Arosi matrilin-

eages are generating a coastal topography comprising overlapping and incompatible configurations formed by multiple lineage points of view.

Beginning in chapter 7 and continuing through chapter 9, I examine evidence that heterotopia is not the only possible outcome of Arosi attempts to achieve order in the face of a colonially induced return to an Arosi form of chaos. While many Arosi are unintentionally producing heterotopia, others are struggling to reconcile Arosi poly-ontology with the fundamentally incompatible ontological premises of Christianity in ways that have the potential to transform Arosi ontology and sociality in the image of one lineage united under God and the Church. In this book as a whole, it is not my aim to provide a comprehensive ethnography of all aspects of Arosi Christianity. Treating Christianity as embedded in virtually every aspect of Arosi people's lives, my analyses engage with Christian discourses and practices where they emerge spontaneously as part of people's understandings of the nature of their matrilineages and their relationship to place. In the final two chapters, in particular, I seek to contribute to the anthropological study of what I term ethno-theologies—the constructive theological speculations of indigenous Christians. Like Arosi techniques of *auhenua* identity reproduction, Arosi ethno-theological projects of rapprochement between custom and Christianity are varied and innovative; some are personal and idiosyncratic. One man tells an anomalous version of the myth of the severed snake, Hatoibwari, that makes this indigenous being into an agent of God who placed an original couple on Makira from whom all people are endogamously descended. As an apparent synthesis of Christian and Arosi models of origins, his account furthermore highlights the capacity of this myth to index more than one scale of origin—universal, insular, matrilineal—either uniquely or simultaneously. Another man wants everyone to acknowledge that the old matrilineal system of landholding is defunct and to adopt father to son inheritance as de facto Arosi custom. This "plan," he says, will overcome the divisiveness of suppressed land disputes and unite all Arosi "in the likeness of God." Still others are quietly thinking through the implications of the common conviction that the rule of God has always worked through the *ringeringe* of the *auhenua* in their land. Like many other gentile Christians, they are working out systematic ethno-theologies that locate them and their past in a universal divine plan.

With these alternatives to heterotopia, the present ontology-based investigation confronts the fact that, in any given social context, more than one cosmological system—and therefore more than one deep ontology—may coexist in tension. In his analysis of Maori cosmogonic myths, Schrempp (1992: 68–70, 90, 96, 137) coins the label "dual formulation" to describe the coexistence of two competing answers to the question: What is the number and na-

ture of the ontologically distinct elements in the universe? The dual formulation evident in Arosi today is one conditioned by the recent history of conjuncture between Arosi cosmology and Anglican Christian models of monotheism and human mono-genesis. It remains to be seen whether Arosi will continue to live indefinitely with the ontological dissonance between these two cosmologies or whether they are in the process of transforming and inverting their model of distinct matrilineally embodied categories of being into a model of radical human unity vis-à-vis the biblical universal creator God.

This open question points, furthermore, to the need to reconcile Barth's injunction to ground structural analyses in empirical events and historical dynamics with an admission of the value of universal abstract logics in the analysis and speculative contemplation of such data. Allowing that contingency and culturally situated innovative human agency will always be the ultimate determinants of how structures transform over time, it is nevertheless possible and useful to see, in broadest terms, what the logically related alternatives are when it comes to the question of deep ontology. Mono-ontology and poly-ontology are, after all, but logical inversions of one another. As such, the possibility that—even the processes whereby—one might be turned over into the other may be imagined apart from history. Such imaginings cannot reconstruct the precolonial history of Arosi ontology or predict its postcolonial future, yet the inherently destabilizing proximity in opposition between these two prioritizations of unity and diversity—not to mention the wealth of comparative data from the wider region of island Melanesia, especially—underscores that we are always *in medias res* in the study of particular historically conditioned ontologies.