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**Article (Accepted version)**  
**(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Scott, Michael W. (2007) Neither "new Melanesian history" nor "new Melanesian ethnography": recovering emplaced matrilineages in southeast Solomon Islands. [Oceania](#), 77 (3). pp. 337-354.

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**Neither ‘New Melanesian History’ nor ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’:  
Recovering Emplaced Matrilineages in Southeast Solomon Islands**

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Published in *Oceania* (2007) 77(3): 337-354

**Abstract**

For two decades, Melanesianists have sought to reconcile what Robert Foster (1995) termed the ‘New Melanesian History’ and the ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’. The former describes historically oriented studies that critique representations of Melanesian custom as recent objectifications of strategically positioned discourses and practices. The latter describes culturally oriented, particularist studies that characterize Melanesian sociality as an undifferentiated plane of being without integral a priori units; on every scale, human agency must individuate persons and collectivities by means of ‘fraction’, ‘de-conception’, and ‘decomposition’. In this article I present data from Solomon Islands that resist analysis in terms of an unqualified both/and synthesis of these orientations. Specifically, I argue that articulations of matrilineal connections to land among the Arosi of Makira are neither merely postcolonial reifications of custom nor historically conditioned ‘depluralizations’ from an always pre-constituted social pleroma. Through historically situated case studies, I show how Arosi land disputes both reproduce and revalue matrilineally defined categories, each understood as the humanized continuation of an autonomous primordial essence. Recognition of the continuing importance of these categories among Arosi highlights what the New Melanesian Ethnography has obscured: that some Melanesians confront a historically transforming problem of how pre-existent parts fit together to make up social totalities.

In a series of publications with significant comparative implications for Oceanist anthropology, Edvard Hviding (1993, 1996, 2003) analyzes unilineal representations of social structure in relation to marine and land tenure in Marovo Lagoon (Western Province, Solomon Islands) as instances of ‘indigenous essentialism’ in the face of neocolonial development pressures. Hviding shows how Marovo people truncate the complex, flexible and potentially limitless cognatic and bilateral mode of relatedness they call *butubutu* in order to isolate simple unilineal principles of rights to land when negotiating with global business and development interests. Sometimes, he reports, Marovo people put these attenuated unilineal models into practice in ways that bar whole sets of bilateral kindred from claims to marine and land rights that might otherwise find support in the broader category of *butubutu*. At other times, he argues, they debate competing unilineal constructions of their customary land tenure and strategically play them against one another to frustrate resource extraction they do not want. In both types of situation, interaction with external agents elicits partial essentializations of Marovo thought and practice and precipitates internal disputes (cf. Foale and Macintyre 2000).

In ways that crystallize challenges to any analysis that appears to take indigenous representations of customary land tenure based on unilineal descent at face value, Hviding’s interpretations of such phenomena in Marovo intersect with and reinforce the insights of the two most influential theoretical orientations in current Melanesianist anthropology—namely, those that Robert Foster (1995, drawing on Josephides 1991) has labelled

the ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’ and the ‘New Melanesian History’ (cf. Jorgensen 2001).

The New Melanesian Ethnography refers to the development and application of the so-called Melanesian model of sociality associated with Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner and others. Motivated in part by the inability of classic descent theory to describe sociality in Highland New Guinea, contributors to this model and their forerunners have emphasized that descent in Melanesia is either cognatic or—even where indigenously figured as unilineal—implies recursive relations of male/female complementarity (e.g. Lawrence 1984; Scheffler 1965; Strathern 1988, 1992a: Chapter 5; J. Weiner 1988). Kinship is, accordingly, bilateral and unbounded, situating persons as the partible composites of pre-existing, ongoing relations. Given this immanent and always present sociality (Strathern 1992a: 74, 83), diverse symbolic acts and forms reveal or eclipse selected layers of social relations to precipitate partial, fluid identities at particular moments. These fluid identities are, furthermore, according to some, situated within a larger cosmos of essential unity in which the precipitation of particular implicit social relations and identities is analogous to the precipitation of relations and differences at every level (Wagner 1967, 1977; J. Weiner 1988; cf. Gell 1999, on Mimica 1988; Strathern 1995: 15-22).

Although Hviding (2003) does not analyze Marovo sociality as a Solomon Islands token of this type of Melanesian sociality, the structure and language of his discussion suggest that he recognizes important parallels between the two. In particular, Hviding rehearses the same history of the

deconstruction of anthropological descent theory that informs the New Melanesian Ethnography to make the point that Marovo sociality is, if not part of a total cosmic flow, at least a local flow in which people say that ‘everyone is related to everyone’. Thus, as modelled by Strathern for Melanesia in general, for Marovo people there are no absolute and fixed social identities but a plenitude of relations within which ‘complex polysemous categories’ are needed in order to ‘identify, establish, activate and de-activate relations among people’ (Hviding 2003: 93; cf. 1996: 131). Taken together, then, both the situation in Marovo and the New Melanesian Ethnography promote a presumption that indigenous representations of unilineal identities are likely to be elicitation—exaggerations, in Hviding’s (1993: 813) terms—of one aspect of sociality at the temporary expense of others. They are partial identities released in a process of decomposition through which ‘forms appear out of other forms’ (Strathern 1992b: 245, in Hviding 2003: 73).

A different approach—what Foster dubs the New Melanesian History—has shown that indigenous appeals to custom (*kastom* or *kastam* in many Melanesian pidgins), including representations of social relations and land tenure, must be contextualized as emergent within colonial and postcolonial history. While rejecting the idea that reifications of tradition in current Pacific Island discourses are culturally inauthentic, contributors to this approach have nevertheless emphasized that, precisely because such objectifications are always the mutable products of ongoing social relations, ‘what appears customary may be much more recent than it would seem at first glance’ (Carrier 1992: 19). Much of the literature that constitutes the

New Melanesian History aims, therefore, to situate Melanesian discourses and practices as creative responses to confrontation with an external other (e.g. Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Keesing 1992), or as artefacts of a shared history of ‘entanglement’ (e.g. Errington and Gewertz 1995; Thomas 1991).

Hviding acknowledges that Marovo people activate and de-activate different aspects of their sociality in ‘any number of contexts, external and internal’ (2003: 104), yet his concentration on how they do so as a culturally consistent means of managing encounters with outsiders effectively brings the New Melanesian Ethnography together with the New Melanesian History (2003: 72-73, 81; cf. 1996: esp. Chapter 8). Hviding’s argument that Marovo people deploy essentialized models of their sociality in ‘intercultural encounters’ (2003: 100) in ways that extend their intra- and inter-*butubutu* modes of interaction points, I suggest, to a certain formal congruency between these analytical approaches (cf. Foster 1995: 8). Both approaches assume that there are no static pre-constituted social identities, groups, or even societies, and that, in a world of constant social flows, these entities are generated and transformed through social interaction (see esp. Carrier 1992: 19). It could be said, therefore, that human sociality at large—like Marovo and other Melanesian forms of sociality—is a process of mutual difference and identity elicitation through engagement; or, put differently, the Melanesian model of sociality can function analytically as a putatively regional and cultural variant of a universal process, a point to which I return in my conclusion.

Furthermore, Hviding's analysis, according to which—not the content—but the process of Marovo *kastom* formulations in relations with outsiders exemplifies an enduring cultural practice, may be read as reconciling a tension between these two approaches (cf. Foster 1995: 3; Jorgensen 2001: 103-105). If, as he intimates, Strathern essentializes Melanesian culture as a 'time- and placeless status quo' (Hviding 2003: 72; but see Strathern 1988: 16), he provides a case study of how, to the extent that Marovo sociality exhibits key features of Strathern's model, this culturally particular sociality is inherently a process of continuous historical transformation 'generative of new forms in and beyond' local contexts (Hviding 2003: 79). In this way, through a focus on cultural processes rather than content in indigenous essentialism, Hviding's implicit coordination of the New Melanesian Ethnography and the New Melanesian History acknowledges an important element of cultural continuity in historical change. At the same time, however, the Marovo case and these two analytical approaches combine to cast doubt on the long-standing character and centrality of the cultural **content** of land claims in Melanesia that appeal to unilineal identities.

Against this weight of counterindicative ethnography and theoretical resistance, my aim in this article is to show that articulations of matrilineal connection to place among the Arosi of the island of Makira (Makira/Ulawa Province, Solomon Islands) are more than the partial delimitations of a broader sociality precipitated by the socio-political entanglements of the recent past. With due consideration of the ways in which colonial history has made land tenure a central concern among Arosi, I acknowledge that

Arosi do indeed essentialize the relationship between a matrilineage and its territory as a given isomorphism. Through analysis of the distinctive features of Arosi land disputes, I also argue, however, that they do so in ways that recover and revalue culturally persistent mythic models of ultimate origins and narratives of place-making. These models represent Arosi socio-spatial order as predicated on an original plurality of autonomous pre-human categories of being that give rise to human matrilineages via transformative processes of inter-relationship and territorial emplacement. Yet, despite being constituted by processes of inter-relationship, human matrilineages remain, according to Arosi, fundamentally different: each is the bearer of a unique essence consubstantial with the essence of a particular pre-human category; collectively, they reproduce the plurality of the pre-human categories as an ongoing plurality of fundamental elements. When Arosi today seek to secure their matrilineal ties to land, they index these mythic models and narratives in discourses and practices that collapse the distinction between actual matrilineages and their core essences and objectify the unity of a matrilineage with its territory as a pre-constituted, static whole.

These Arosi understandings of a primordial and continuous plurality of fundamental elements resist analysis in terms of the always-ongoing plenitude of relations modelled in the New Melanesian Ethnography. In a manner analogous to some mortuary rituals elsewhere in Melanesia (e.g. Fortune 1932; Foster 1990, 1995; Macintyre 1987, 1989; Thune 1989; A. Weiner 1978, 1980, 1988), Arosi essentializations of their landholding matrilineages disarticulate matrilineal identities from a wider sociality. In



Arosi—and perhaps in some of these mortuary contexts as well—this process effects an approximate return to a mythic primordial condition in which autonomous pre-human categories existed in absolute isolation. Recognition of this fact highlights what the New Melanesian Ethnography has so far obscured: practices that reassert primordality in this way indicate that some Melanesians conceptualize something antecedent to, prerequisite for, and ultimately beyond the plenitude of all possible relations. Some Melanesians, it seems, recognize irreducible elementary essences characterized by an original absence of external relations (contra Strathern 1992a: 74).

### **Arosi representations of matriliney and land tenure**

Arosi assert that the ongoing essential unity of a matrilineage, often termed a *waiipo* (umbilical cord), remains pure despite the exogamous ‘mixing of blood’ (*‘abu haidorari*) that situates each lineage member in a particular bilateral kindred. For Arosi there is a fundamental difference between their connection to members of their own matrilineage and their connection to other kin. The former is regarded as an inherent, permanent consubstantiality; the latter a socially achieved, temporary intermingling. Whereas the members of a *waiipo* are ‘simply one’ (*ta‘i moi*), relatedness to a matrilineage and its ancestral spirits through a male diminishes generationally, as does relatedness between the descendants of two opposite sex siblings. The shared blood said to constitute the latter types of relatedness is thought to become increasingly diluted. After a debated number of generations, the descendants have become ‘different people’.

One man pointed this contrast precisely: ‘A *waipo* is long; the father’s blood is just short.’

Matrilineages that are said to be autochthonous to the island of Makira are called *auhenua*. The word *auhenua* is a compound of *au*, meaning ‘person’ or ‘thing’, and *henua*, the Arosi exemplar of a widespread group of Austronesian cognates for ‘land’. Arosi use this compound to refer to any denizen, object, or quality intrinsic to Makira. Rocks, birds, mythical beings, spirits, ethical norms, and human matrilineages can all be *auhenua*. At the same time, to describe a matrilineage as the *auhenua* of a particular area of land is to specify that the matrilineage alone is irrevocably joined to that area and exercises control over it by virtue of a long history of ancestral habitation. Thus, in addition to signifying a given connection to the island as a whole, *auhenua* also denotes an achieved connection between a matrilineage and its exclusive territory, established in the past through the deeds and deaths of ancestors.

Members of the *auhenua* matrilineage of a particular area ought to be able to navigate through, direct activity, and know the ancestral powers and sites in their territory with reference to a genealogically ordered lineage narrative (*mamaani auhenua*). Examples of what James Fox (1997) terms narratives of topogeny, such accounts describe how lineage ancestors entered into and made land their own by clearing and settling it, building ossuaries and ancestral shrines (both called *hera*) and shrines (*birubiru*) dedicated to spirit-sharks, placing tabus to govern behaviour at specific places and leaving their personal names in association with certain localities. Although only a few especially knowledgeable members of a

matrilineage will know the full *mamaani auhenua*—beginning as far back as twelve generations—these knowledgeable people should ensure that other lineage members know enough about their sacred sites, ancestral spirits, tabus and the extent of their land to live and behave appropriately vis-à-vis non-lineage relatives, neighbours, and the dead.

Strict lineage exogamy and a preference for patri-virilocal residence patterns contribute to an ideal model of Arosi polities as multi-lineal communities in which those who understand themselves to be representatives of the *auhenua* matrilineage of the place act as benefactors to the *sae boboi*, or ‘people who have come from elsewhere’. As the socio-spatial centres of multi-lineal polities, the *auhenua* of the place should be magnanimous to outsiders, placing them on the land, granting them the use of food sources and building materials, pooling resources for bride price and feasts on behalf of non-lineage residents, and settling disputes among them. The *auhenua* should promote cohesion and stability without becoming overbearing and making others feel unwanted. Early ethnographic sources for Makira support the Arosi assertion that, in the precolonial past, matrilineages installed specially anointed chiefs to maintain a balance between the precedence and prerogatives of the *auhenua* in their land and the needs and interests of the *sae boboi* (Fox 1924; Verguet 1885; cf. Scott 2000).

Although most Arosi would validate the theory of matrilineally-based sociality and land tenure outlined above as their true *kastom*, they acknowledge that this system is no longer viable owing to the demise of many *auhenua* matrilineages during the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. As in other Pacific contexts, the arrival of Europeans in Arosi brought new diseases that caused heavy mortality. Partly as a means of combating disease and depopulation, colonial administrators of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate sought to relocate Makirans living in the bush to collectivized coastal villages in the early twentieth century. As a result, Arosi today regularly assert that the *auhenua* matrilineages of the coast where nearly everyone now lives are extinct and that the current residents are all *sae boboi*. Moreover, when questioned about the history of the often weathered or overgrown remains of pre-Christian ossuaries and shrines still visible in the landscape, people admit that they do not know who made them or whose bones might be deposited in them. They are spoken of as the vestiges of the matrilineages that once were *auhenua* in the coastal villages. While many Arosi are willing to consider the possibility that the ancestral spirits of the old matrilineages remain powerful in the land, more than a century of Arosi Anglicanism has opened debate about the moral nature, power, and position of ancestral spirits in relationship to the Christian God.

In this context of uncertainty and ambiguity and without acknowledged *auhenua* matrilineages occupying their lands, people in Arosi today usually explain their residence and gardening patterns with reference to a socio-spatial reorganization sometime in the mid to late nineteenth century under the auspices of ‘the people of old’. Construed either as the last remnant of the old coastal *auhenua* or as senior men appointed by them to oversee their lands after their deaths, the people of old are said to have settled many of the male forebears of present-day Arosi in particular village hamlets and to have assigned them tracts of gardening land stretching from

the villages up into the bush. Ostensibly, then, a land tenure system of father to son transmission has been in practice since the time of the people of old.<sup>1</sup> Arosi say that, in the past, members of an *auhenua* lineage living on their land could claim to ‘eat through the mother’. Today, however, everyone ‘eats through the father’; that is, everyone’s access to land and its productivity comes only through the father.

### **Heterotopia in Arosi: case studies**

Open assertions that ‘we are all *sae boboi*’ and that ‘everyone here eats through the father’ notwithstanding, in confidential conversations with *kastom* experts, I discovered that members of several matrilineages are quietly engaging in practices that express and produce competing *auhenua* identities in relation to areas of coastal land. These practices take three main forms. In some cases, representatives of different matrilineages are working out and even writing down genealogical narratives that implicitly lay claim to land in the vicinity of the same coastal ossuaries and shrines. More rarely, some people are alleged to have constructed spurious shrines with the aim of passing them off as genuine indices of their ancestral precedence. Other matrilineages are striving to assert control over particular personal names thought to confer agency over contested places. Unlike land disputes elsewhere in the Solomons (e.g. Burt 1994a; Foale and Macintyre 2000; Hviding 2003: 85-86; Schneider 1998), the conflicts that these practices define and generate remain largely covert, silenced by the ethical norm according to which the *auhenua* of the place should not crassly assert their status and authority. To be seen to do so is, in fact, to open oneself to the

accusation of being an impostor. As the following case studies reveal, latent land disputes are imperceptibly constructing the Arosi coast as a 'heterotopia', a context 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault 1986: 25).

No doubt hoping that I might recognize and openly declare their *auhenua* identities in ways they felt they could not do themselves, a number of Arosi made me privy to recitations of their lineage narratives and written *kastom* books. It soon became apparent that representatives of several matrilineages were revealing narratives that emplaced their *auhenua* identities in intersecting ways by incorporating some of the same sites and spirit powers into supposedly unique histories of ancestral activity. A particularly striking instance of this mode of heterotopia production involves three matrilineages that understand themselves to be the *auhenua* within an area of Arosi that runs along the coast for approximately seven kilometres and up into the bush for approximately eight kilometres.

Lineage A says that it controls a spirit-shark shrine (*birubiru*) called Eta on the slopes above the site of an old littoral village. Although not in the physical centre of the lineage's territory, Eta is a symbolic centre for Lineage A because it marks the birthplace of the lineage's mythical apical ancestress. Lineage A also claims a small constellation of shrines loosely connected to one another through the cult of a spirit-shark named Misu. According to Lineage A, an ancestor named Ramo used to offer sacrifice to Misu and another spirit-shark called Uhi at a coastal *birubiru* called Rua located near a small promontory in the eastern part of the lineage's land.

Representatives of Lineage A told me that the lineage had other *birubiru* strung along the coast to the west of Rua, but did not give me any details about them. Up in the bush, they identified two shrines as falling within their orbit. Above Eta one first encounters the shrine called Oru where a stone and a resident snake are both said to be images of the same spirit-shark, Misu, to whom Ramo sacrificed on the coast. Still further up in the interior beyond Oru lies the shrine known as Hai.

An elderly custodian of Lineage B's narrative told me that the symbolic centre of his lineage's territory was Rua, the shrine located near a small finger of land jutting into the sea at the eastern end of Lineage A's supposed territory. 'Rua', he explained, 'is the central *birubiru* and [our other shrines were] spread out from there.' He identified the 'leading' spirit-shark at Rua as Bare'o and said that Misu—Lineage A's leading spirit-shark—was just one of several lesser sharks there. For Lineage B, Bare'o is also the head spirit-shark at Oru *birubiru* in the bush. This man also named three *birubiru* that out-marrying members of Lineage B had been permitted to establish on the land of other lineages in eastern Arosi, elsewhere on Makira, and on the neighbouring island of Ugi. Each of these shrines had a different head spirit-shark and, taken together with Oru, formed a network of satellite shrines around Rua. A young woman of Lineage B, from whom I learned about the western part of the lineage's territory, indicated that there is another *birubiru* tied into this constellation situated west of the others on a similar coastal outcrop. Here, she said, two different spirit-sharks, one of which has a distinctive hybrid animal form, dwell at the shrine called Ono.

At a village very near to Ono there is an additional ossuary called Rima that Lineage B regards as one of its ancestral burial grounds.

Lineage C, like Lineage A, began near Eta. For Lineage C, this area is associated with a man called Saemwane. This lineage ancestor transported stones associated with a spirit-shark—also called Misu—away from this nucleus to establish other shrines down the coast to the west and then up into the bush. Saemwane first went along the coast placing stones at Biu where an old woman lived and at Rima where a brother and sister lived together. Saemwane also carried stones from Eta up into the bush to establish shrines at Oru, Waru, Hai and three additional sites. At all of these shrines, members of Lineage C offered uncooked pig and food to Misu. The lineage also gave burnt offerings to Misu at the Ono shrine in the west of the territory and at the Siwa shrine near the eastern end of the land. Like Lineages A and B, Lineage C claims the Rua *birubiru*. A recognized Lineage C authority told me that two male ancestors, Memeapu and Ria, looked after the offerings to Misu at that site.

Because each matrilineage uses different rivers to demarcate the eastern and western boundaries of its land, the three lineage territories are not absolutely congruent. Nevertheless, the three lineages independently construct their overlapping identities over the same core terrain. The main nodes of intersection among the three accounts are Rua *birubiru* on the coast and the Oru shrine in the bush. Each of the lineages claims the spirit-shark Misu as a power uniquely associated with its lineage, either as its only spirit-shark (Lineage C) or as one among a distinctive group of related sharks (Lineages A and B). Four additional sites are contested by two out of



the three lineages. Lineages A and C both refer to the Eta shrine as the starting point for the dispersal of their lineages and also claim Hai shrine. Equally invested in these two focal points, Lineages A and C nevertheless situate them in very different multifocal networks. Similarly, Lineages B and C both consider Ono shrine to be a place where their ancestors offered burnt sacrifices to spirit-sharks peculiar to them. Representatives of Lineages B and C also told me that Rima was an important ancestral site.

Although not involved in open contestation or court cases against one another, these three matrilineages are aware of one another as rivals. Anxious to avoid confrontation but equally concerned to defend themselves against one another's potential claims, they employ narrative techniques of subversion that I discerned at work in other similar disputes (Scott forthcoming). While closely guarding their own versions of ancestral events, parties to such disputes are on the lookout to pick up information about their rivals' versions in order to introduce refuting representations into their own. Once seized upon, details from one lineage's narrative may be revalued by being recontextualized in another's or may be directly contradicted in editorial asides. Thus, for example, Lineage A stakes its claim to *auhenua* status around Eta through an important matrilineal ancestress, but Lineage C subverts the import of this claim by casting this woman as a person from elsewhere who married a man of their matrilineage. At the same time, all three matrilineages refer to themselves by the same lineage name and regard one another as pretenders who are just 'telling lies' (cf. Burt 2001).

A less common indicator of heterotopia is the actual or rumoured manufacture of new 'ancestral' sites. No such incidents occurred during the

period of my field research, but I learned of a few purported cases from the recent past, at least one of which occurred in connection with a court action over land. This type of activity involves the surreptitious relocation of the small rock forms known as shark stones (*hau ba'ewa*, or simply *ba'ewa*) formerly used in the construction of *birubiru* dedicated to spirit-sharks. Representatives of a number of lineages told me that these stones are 'images of the sharks' to which their ancestors once offered sacrifices. Some appear to have been worked into tubular or S-curved shapes; others have been naturally smoothed and rounded (cf. Fox 1924: 286-287). Those who are supposed to have tampered with *birubiru* are said to have absconded with these elements of existing shrines in order to ensconce them in new structures they could point to as marks of their matrilineal ancestors' formative deeds in the land.

The most notorious case of shrine creation occurred approximately thirty years ago. I learned about this case while walking along the coast with a friend to visit Bwaaniwai, an elderly party to the incident. My traveling companion told me that Mae, the shrine builder in this affair, stole a shark stone from an old shrine near Bwaaniwai's village. Allegedly, Mae took the stone to use as the centrepiece of a *birubiru* he was secretly constructing. When he had completed his *birubiru*, Mae argued in local court that it was an old shrine that proved his ancestors had formerly lived in the land he was claiming. My friend expressed the generally held opinion that Mae won his case thanks to the counterfeit *birubiru*. After Mae's death, another man, who claimed to know where Mae had acquired the stone, told Bwaaniwai to take it back to where it really belonged. When I interviewed Bwaaniwai he

confirmed the details of my friend's account and, showing me the stone, described how he had retrieved it. He told me some of the stories associated with it and explained that, after the last unbaptized person to sacrifice at the shrine had died, the spirit-shark had gone wild and had 'just swum away'. Some months following my conversation with Bwaaniwai, yet a third man, who lived near Bwaaniwai's village, gave me the same basic account of Mae's theft. But this man asserted that, although Bwaaniwai has the stone in his possession, it does not belong to Bwaaniwai's lineage. He went on to give me a detailed narrative of his own lineage, the shark stone, and the spirit-shark. Advising me that several of the people who had recently manipulated or kept the stone had dreamt that they were the victims of shark attacks, this man wryly noted: 'If I worked this *birubiru*, all these people would truly have been eaten by the shark.'

Other more recent examples run along similar lines. One young man stated his belief that, like Mae, one of his fellow villagers had moved a long white shark stone from a neighbouring village and furtively relocated it to a disputed area of land. My consultant in this case, himself a party to the dispute, suggested that the man had intended to fabricate a false shrine. At the time of our conversation, this friction, like most Arosi disagreements about land, remained part of a live but latent feud. Another interlocutor, a middle-aged woman, also claimed to have been the victim of shrine theft and went so far as to characterize the present tensions surrounding land to a perpetual, if undeclared, state of war. Implying that the culprits would be punished by offended spirit-sharks, she commented: 'They don't live well or long because of it. But you know war; they want to win.'<sup>2</sup>

Lineage personal names are also susceptible to theft and assimilation by rival lineages in ways that map divergent readings of coastal land. Arosi matrilineages maintain and reuse sets of ancestral personal names, each putatively proper to one lineage alone. Some names are regarded as endowing those who hold them with special efficacy and authority over land modified by the foundational acts or residence histories of namesake ancestors. When a child is given such a name it is with the intention that he or she will come to live at and look after the land with which the name is associated and hold it for the matrilineage to which the name belongs. The same Arosi term, *adaro*, means both a personal name belonging to a deceased person and an ancestral spirit. Thus, recycling a personal name—an *adaro*—revivifies a distinct ancestral spirit—an *adaro*—so that the name and the ancestor simultaneously link the child to an area of land. Although various names are said to be exclusive to a given matrilineage, this does not mean that only members of the matrilineage may receive them. To the contrary, lineages routinely bestow their personal names on children of lineage males as a means of activating relatedness with them and investing them with some of the lineage's resources and privileges (cf. Fox 1924: 302). As a result, name-based claims to *auhenua* identity at a place—although regularly relied on by many would-be *auhenua*—are relatively weak and vulnerable to contradiction precisely because names have histories of interlineage circulation. As described below, accounts of past namings frequently indicate that different matrilineages regard the same names, along with the lands they govern, as having originated solely with them.

Lineages D and E hold conflicting perspectives regarding the name Atana and the area of coastline to which it is connected. Representatives of both lineages state that the first person to bear this name, Atana 1, lived at a place called X where his matrilineage was *auhenua*. Furthermore, both lineages agree that Atana 1's son, Bwaru, having no children of his own, bestowed his father's name on the firstborn of a woman, Urao, who lived at a place called Y. As a result, Urao's son, Atana 2, currently controls the land at X. Lineage D maintains that the woman Urao and Atana 1 were both members of their lineage and that the places X and Y both fall within their territory. Therefore, from their point of view, when Bwaru named Urao's son Atana 2, Bwaru was simply keeping the name, along with oversight of the place X, within the lineage to which they belong. In contrast, Lineage E maintains that Atana 1 was a member of their lineage, but that Urao was not, and that her son Atana 2 now looks after part of their territory although he is not of their lineage. They argue that although Bwaru, as the son of Atana 1, was welcome to live at X, he was not *auhenua* there and had no authority to give his father's name to Urao's son. Therefore, from Lineage E's point of view, Bwaru 'sent away' part of their land by bestowing one of their names without their consent.

Present-day Arosi naming practices both respond to and compound this type of dissension. Fearful that they are losing control of their names and, with them, portions of their territories, many matrilineages are seeking to 'hold firmly' onto names they take to be powerful residues of their unique *auhenua* histories in the land. This can mean that members of a matrilineage will attempt to build up their *auhenua* self-understanding in the form of a

cache of esoteric personal names withheld from circulation even within the lineage. Those who advocate this strategy seem to think that, beyond ensuring that the matrilineage's *adaro* are kept safe from misappropriation, it also recoups the essential power of the *adaro* for the lineage even when they are not put to use as a means of placing people on the land. At the same time, to 'hold firmly' onto names can also involve actively deploying them within the lineage to counterbalance the power that non-lineage persons currently bearing the names may try to exercise over land. Although Arosi acknowledge that this latter strategy, which allows two living persons to bear the same name at once, is contrary to *kastom*, those who use it see it as a necessary effort 'to bring back' the names rightfully belonging to their matrilineages.<sup>3</sup>

These case studies of mutually disqualifying lineage narratives, shrine theft and fabrication, and holding firmly to lineage personal names all uncover the heterotopic composition of the Arosi coastline today as a landscape at once devoid of recognized *auhenua* and constituted by a multiplicity of clandestine *auhenua*. In the following section I explore the multi-causal nature of this situation, arguing that Arosi heterotopia is best understood as the historically contingent transformative intensification of ongoing indigenous processes. Interpreting colonial land policies as threats that land seen to be empty would be taken away from them, Arosi have, since the early twentieth century, been fearful that an inability to point to customary landowners *in situ* may lead to loss of land to outsiders. Additionally, and increasingly, the prospect of development or resource extraction is motivating Arosi to prepare to put themselves forward as the

rightful customary landowners who must be consulted. I suggest, however, that these factors are not introducing a dynamic of *auhenua* identity production that is alien to or previously absent from the Arosi context. Rather, these factors are inspiring Arosi to innovate the practices described above by recovering and revaluing ancestral practices modelled in Arosi understandings of coming into being as a constant transition from an original condition of spatially sequestered pre-human categories to an achieved condition of emplaced and socially entangled matrilineages.

### **A tale of two vacuities: colonial and Arosi visions of empty land**

The current efflorescence of *auhenua* identities on the Arosi coast may be explained in part as a response to events and ideas of the past 100 years that have inculcated a concern among Arosi that land perceived by outsiders to be unoccupied or unworked is vulnerable to appropriation. As elsewhere in the British empire, colonial officials in the Solomons approached land and resource management informed by a long tradition of moral philosophy and law according to which unimproved land, even where inhabited, might justifiably be taken over and developed for the greater good. They operated, in Judith Bennett's apt phrasing, with 'the Western settler view that idle land was anathema' (2000: 182; cf. Williams 1986: 109-138).

Consequently, between 1896 and 1913 the Protectorate allowed approximately 240,000 acres of Solomon Islands land to be alienated under regulations that, first, recognized the category of land 'vacant by reason of the extinction of the original native owners and their descendants' and, later, defined 'waste land' as 'land which is not owned, cultivated or occupied by

any native or non-native person' (Allan 1957: 37-38; cf. Bennett 1987: 125-149; 2000: 41-42; Heath 1981: 62-66). When Solomon Islanders objected that much of this land had been incorrectly identified as ownerless, the Protectorate repealed these regulations. But despite the return of half of this land to indigenous claimants between 1919 and 1925 (Bennett 2000: 88), Islanders remained wary that the colonial government was looking for ways to identify and take charge of under-exploited land (Allan 1990: 172; Bennett 2000: 147, 151; Heath 1981: 68).

The post-World War II movement known as Maasina Rule (c. 1944 - c. 1952) further heightened people's fears that foreign or government agents were readying to take their land. Variouslly characterized as a proto-nationalist movement, a civil rights initiative, a manifestation of anti-colonial resistance, or a cargo cult, this multiplex movement originated on the island of Malaita c. 1944 and was imported to Arosi c. 1946. Contrary to Bennett's (2000: 141) assertion that Maasina Rule was 'not focused on land matters', I found that many Arosi understood the movement and its practices as a campaign aimed to prevent a new influx of foreigners from usurping land (Scott 2007: Chapter 3; cf. Akin 1993: 343-344; Allan 1957: 92; Burt 1994b: 179-181; de Coppet 1998: 190; Fifi'i 1989: 64; Laracy 1983: 106-107). Older Arosi recalled having been instructed by leaders of the movement to fill up the coastal land in preparation for unknown invaders, a process one man referred to as 'blocking the land':

All the land was split up. In Maasina Rule we thought any country could come—Africa or Malaysia, black people or white people too,



America too...But if they wanted land, we'd already taken up all the land; so, many places were blocked.

Another man, who had been eleven or twelve years old at the time, explained how he and other children had been set to make gardens so that, 'If someone came and asked "Does a person live here?" we were to say, "Yes."' As was typical elsewhere during Maasina Rule, local movement leaders in Arosi also directed the remaining bush residents to come down to the coast and join newly consolidated villages. Although my consultants did not articulate this purpose explicitly, it seems likely that, by reorganizing the amalgamated villages into rows, L-shapes or chevrons along the coast, they were presenting a scene of total population plenitude to the eyes of anyone who might arrive by sea (cf. Davies n.d.: 88-89, 133).

It must be recognized, therefore, that the impetus among Arosi to attach themselves inalienably to their land as the legitimate *auhenua* has emerged in its present form in the context of colonial encroachment and indigenous resistance. Although covert rather than collective, current representations of *auhenua* identities are semantically equivalent to earlier assertions by Solomon Islanders that 'there is no such thing as waste land' (Heath 1981: 71; cf. Allan 1957: 287). As late as 1974—four years before independence from Britain—a government Select Committee reported that, throughout the Solomons, people still condemned the old waste land policy as having been wrong 'because every part of the Solomons was owned by some group, even if they did not use it at the time' (Heath 1981: 72). The Arosi discourse that everyone is *sae boboi* on the coast notwithstanding,

representatives of the Arosi matrilineages are, separately and secretly, making a similar claim that original customary landowners still hold all the land.

Likewise, the differing rationales Arosi offered for who was placed where during Maasina Rule suggest that the heterotopic constructions of coastal land encountered in Arosi today either already existed or were taking shape in this context. According to some Arosi, people were positioned at one place or another depending on their broad inter-lineage entanglements with those who had recently lived or gardened in those areas, without reference to any putative underlying *auhenua* matrilineages. Others, however, represent these arrangements in ways that presuppose their own self-understandings as the *auhenua* of the places in question. These conflicting interpretations reflect the fact that Maasina Rule became, for some Arosi, a drive to recover the genealogical histories of their matrilineages in order to reaffirm their connections to ancestral territories as the only sure defence against dispossession by outsiders (cf. de Coppet and Zemp 1978: 106-107; Naitoro 1993: 130). One woman who had been a teenager during the movement described how she had been instructed to this end: 'It is a preparation for when they come and ask, "Where is the *kastom* landowner, the *auhenua* person who has the land?"' Like this woman, many of the *kastom* experts of today are people who gained their knowledge under the guidance of Maasina Rule leaders.

Clearly, the history of the past century has politicized, foregrounded, and objectified customary land tenure in Arosi in ways that are not likely to have been prevalent in the precolonial past. The anticipated arrival of

logging interests and even gold prospecting was, furthermore, reinvigorating these processes in the 1990s. But if recent history and the possibility that land may be given new value help to account for why Arosi find it necessary to emplace themselves as the true *auhenua* in their land, it does not explain either the particularity of the practices they employ in so doing or by what Arosi criteria such practices are meaningful and appropriate. Fuller understanding of the practices generating heterotopia today additionally requires, I suggest, attention to the way in which the colonial quest for empty land has intersected with Arosi conceptualizations of empty land as a kind of primordial chaos that, apart from pressures exerted by external forces, poses a problem for Arosi sociality in its own terms.

Under the scrutiny of a colonial gaze in search of waste lands, the Arosi gaze has seen in depopulated and socially reorganized land the return of a state of chaos envisioned in a variety of Arosi idioms as a condition of semantically empty space (Scott 2005). From the Arosi point of view, then, the recovery of *auhenua* identities is more than a defence against land loss or a stake in hoped for development revenues, it is also an attempt at recovery from a postcolonial situation that Arosi experience as one of cosmic entropy and social anarchy. Analyzed at this level of meaning, the current practices that are generating heterotopia come into focus as new inflexions of ancestral activities designed to bring coherently emplaced social order out of a chaos of spatial and moral vacuity. While uniquely generated by recent colonial and postcolonial history, these practices simultaneously reference and reframe Arosi models of order production that entail an ongoing transition between two contrastive modes of primordially.

The first mode, which I term utopic, refers to a vision of ultimate origins figured by mythic primordial beings dwelling in asocial purity in indeterminate pre-social places. The second mode, which I term topogonic, refers to a vision of coming into being figured by the exogamous generation of truly human ancestors whose activities fuse matrilineages with distinctive socialized territories.

The clearest representations of the imagined condition I call utopic primordiality are accounts of how a variety of mythical beings that became the sources of the various Arosi matrilineages appeared spontaneously and autonomously at discrete sites around Makira. Mirroring the original condition of these mythical beings, these accounts are unrelated narratives held separately by the matrilineages without being joined together in a unified cosmogony or cycle of origin myths (contrast Bonnemaïson 1994). Although some of these accounts contain similar narrative material, Arosi regard them as unique narratives of unique origins. Thus, some lineages describe their progenitors as animate rocks autochthonous to Makira; others trace their descent from female snakes; one tells of having been called forth by the song of a bird; another says it goes back to a female spirit who emerged from a well; and others see themselves as the descendants of the quasi-human creatures of popular tales known as *masi* and *pwapwaronga*. These earliest ancestral beings were not, according to Arosi, ‘true people’ (*inoni mora*); rather, they represented a multiplicity of unrelated essentially different categories of being. They gave rise to true people, who in turn gave rise to human matrilineages, only when they entered into cross-category reproductive relations that anticipated matrilineal exogamy. Before entering

into these anthropogenic connections, however, these polygenetic categories comprised what might be termed proto-people, instantiating proto-lineages, isolated in pre-social or utopic spaces.

In the same way that fully human matrilineages are imagined as coming into being through relations among these pre-human categories, the specific territories that matrilineages come to hold are imagined as coming into being through relations between incipient matrilineages and land. Prior to the establishment of these latter relations, however, Makiran land is a social vacuum. Although the various ancestral beings are thought of as having appeared spontaneously at different—and thus, differentiating—spatial points, each such point is aptly described as utopic: in the beginning it was literally ‘not-place’. As yet unmodified and unencompassed within a wider humanized landscape, these primordial not-places are analogous to the proto-people that arise within them; they are, in effect, proto-places. Generic and indeterminate, they will not become true places, named and contextualized within recognizable lineage territories, until human beings form them through activities that are physically and conceptually topogenic.

The type of genealogically ordered lineage narratives already described also reference the utopic mode of primordality, representing it as an antecedent vacuity. Describing the first advent of lineage ancestors in a particular place, these narratives treat the land at the time of initial incursion as the uninhabited and untouched ‘virgin forest’ (*wabu*) these ancestors were the first to clear. One man articulated this idea clearly when telling me the history of his matrilineage’s descent from the island’s interior to the coast many generations ago: ‘When we first came down, no other lineage

was at the coast here.’ After recounting the formative actions of his ancestors in this vacant land, he concluded: ‘So, this is our land here along the coast; we have shrines and burial grounds, and no other lineage has such things here.’<sup>4</sup>

Building on James Fox’s (1997) concept of topogeny—a narrative of ancestral movement and place-making—I call the phase of primordiality described in such narratives the topogonic mode of primordiality. As previously seen in the narratives told by Lineages A, B, and C, Arosi topogenies tell how ancestral figures move out from and around a particular starting point, creating a multifocal field that becomes a lineage territory. By establishing new settlements, placing the remains of their dead in the land, laying down tabus, attaching their personal names to locales and cultivating trees and gardens, these ancestors came to form and be formed by the land they appropriated. Land and lineage come into being together; they did not and cannot exist apart from one another (cf. Abramson 2000; de Coppet 1985). Accordingly, land that has never been shaped by a matrilineage is, as Remo Guidieri (1980: 62) says of unsettled land among the Fataleka of Malaita, a ‘void’ or ‘black hole’ that can threaten a lineage with loss of identity. If, for European colonialists, idle land was anathema, for Arosi, utopic land is a vacuum that must be filled. To fill this vacuum, to make the transition from utopic to topogonic primordiality, is to become the *auhenua* matrilineage in that place.

When the custodians of lineage knowledge narrate their genealogical histories, they usually ‘narrate along the umbilical cord’; that is, they follow successive generations through women. At the same time, however, they

take for granted—if unaccounted for—the existence of marriageable others and sometimes mention the names of in-marrying men. The mode of primordality represented in these narratives pertains, therefore, to three distinct but simultaneous processes of coming into being. As well as describing how matrilineages acquire identity in relationship to land, these narratives also indicate—sometimes directly and sometimes implicitly—that the discrete proto-human categories depicted in tales of ultimate origins become matrilineages in relationship to one another. Inseparable from these two processes, Arosi social order thus emerges as a set of multi-lineal polities, each built on the foundation of a particular *auhenua* matrilineage anchored in and sharing the productivity of its land. The multiple dynamics of topogonic primordality suggest, in other words, that processes of definitive emplacement are necessary not only for the existence of matrilineages *per se*, but also for the aggregative achievement of a socio-cosmic order.

Recognition that emplacement is indispensable to proper sociality from the Arosi point of view can, I suggest, enhance understanding of the practical methods of, as well as the motivations behind, the current Arosi recovery of *auhenua* identities. In a socially and morally depleted postcolonial landscape, experienced as the virtual return of utopic primordality, the heterotopia-producing activities documented in the case studies above are new actualizations of the ancestral place- and society-making processes of topogonic primordality. By incorporating existing sacred sites into lineage narratives, constructing new sacred sites, and reclaiming lineage-specific personal names, representatives of the Arosi

matrilineages are revivifying the power of topogonic action in order to come into being as grounded centres for new social polities on the coast.

Furthermore, a tension—legible but unresolved in the transition from utopic

to topogonic primordially—between being *auhenua* to Makira and

becoming the *auhenua* of a particular territory helps to explain how the

production of new coastal *auhenua* may be possible and plausible to Arosi.

Utopic primordially presents a model of ultimate origins that permits

multiple matrilineages to be equally autochthonous without competition

simply by virtue of their individual beginnings somewhere in the island.

Topogonic primordially, however, envisions conditions in which it is

possible, even likely, that the history of more than one matrilineage will

impinge on and come to reference the same geographical terrain. And, in

fact, despite the widely held Arosi conviction that, once formed, the

connection between a lineage and its land can never be broken, instances

reported to me of lineage turnover in some areas suggest that, in the past,

lineages that understood themselves to be *auhenua* somewhere on the island

have succeeded in subtly shifting their alignments with space so as to

become *auhenua* in lands formerly held by other lineages. Heterotopia, in

other words, may not be just a thing of the present.

But this is neither to say that Arosi are enacting routinized mythic

paradigms nor to say that Arosi socio-cultural order is essentially

unchanging. When Arosi seek to collect and record their lineage histories

and retrieve or strategically deploy their lineage personal names, they are

drawing on received forms that they understand to be repositories of

ancestral power, but they are not taking these forms as scripts for the



repetition of ancestral acts. Rather, in their postcolonial setting of semantically evacuated coastal land, they are finding new potential meanings in these received forms and recapturing them for the present in ways that alter and even invert their apparent previous emphases (cf. Kapferer 2003).

Paradoxically, although informed by ancestral models in their struggle to achieve a new transition from utopic to topogonic primordially, Arosi are endowing those models with a socially fragmenting power that may be original to the present. Whereas lineage narratives emphasize that the generation of matrilineages is a process of coming into being that depends on the establishment of relations between pre-existing categories as well as with places, the current drive to store up knowledge of such narratives creates lineage-cum-land identities as integral to themselves and as prerequisite to, rather than the outcome of, proper social relations. Similarly, whereas, lineage personal names might formerly have been used to specify ties with non-lineage kin, moves today to retrieve names from circulation outside the matrilineages represent, not only changes in practice, but also a devaluation of non-lineal relatedness that again seeks to reaffirm lineage-cum-land identities by extricating them from the very entanglements through which, according to narratives of ancestral activity, they were formed in the first instance. This extrication is necessary because the colonial processes that have rendered coastal land utopic have severed matrilineages from their lands but not from one another. Deracinated matrilineages, in effect, only partially instantiate the original plurality of isolated ontological categories proper to utopic primordially. Their anti-

social revaluations of ancestral precedents thus serve as the preliminary means to a greater social end: they attempt to complete the approximate return of Arosi matrilineages to asocial purity as a new starting point for new processes of emplacement and entanglement. In so doing, these revaluations tend to conflate the mythic vision of a proto-human category of being arising in a discrete but utopic space with the reified image of a matrilineage seated in its territory as a pre-constituted entity.<sup>5</sup>

### **Essential Arosi categories**

To acknowledge that, in the context of postcolonial efforts to secure land, Arosi are reconstituting their *auhenua* identities in ways that disarticulate matrilineages from their bilateral entanglements may give the impression that Arosi, like the people of Marovo Lagoon, are formulating an indigenous essentialism that activates unilineal identities while deactivating others and is thus amenable to analysis in terms of the Melanesian model of sociality. Without questioning Hviding's analysis of the situation in Marovo, I conclude, nevertheless, with the suggestion that the Melanesian model of sociality insufficiently, and thus inaccurately, theorizes Melanesian ontologies and socio-cultural contexts such as Arosi.

Studies of thought and practice in Melanesia that employ the Melanesian model of sociality posit a plenitude of relations as an analytical starting point and, furthermore, imply that Melanesians do so as well. From the perspective of this starting point, all relations are analogous and, apart from them, no entities exist autonomously. If this model accurately describes—not just the empirical reality of ongoing social relations—but

indigenous Melanesian theories of sociality and ontological principles of cosmology, then it follows that Melanesians should not be found engaging in practices designed to constitute and represent certain categories of being as wholly dislocated from relations (cf. Strathern 1992a: 100, 114) or as self-sufficient and transcendent (but see Foster 1990; 1995: 215). It ought to be contrary to the Melanesian outlook to imagine that it is possible to eliminate all relations as superadded and get back to an original immutable core essence that can fall into atomistic anomie. As Alfred Gell (1999: 32-33) pointed out, the Melanesian model of sociality is an idealist model of exclusively internal relations that cannot envision a realist ontology according to which initial relations are external and must be constructed. Yet this is precisely what Arosi appear to envision. The principles of Arosi sociality and polygenetic cosmology assert that it is possible to disentangle from accumulated ties of relatedness and return to a multiplicity of categorical essences that are the starting points on which socio-cosmic order is predicated. This process of disentangling may look amenable to analysis as decomposition from a plenitude of relations, but the underlying Arosi assumption that matrilineages embody autonomous primordial categories of being toward which they may revert fundamentally contradicts the Melanesian model of sociality, understood as 'their vision of the world' (Strathern 1992a: 114).<sup>6</sup>

Confronted with this non-conformity, a Melanesianist committed to the model has two options: subordinate Arosi representations of original plurality to the terms of the model, taken as the indigenous cultural baseline, so that such representations appear as transient 'cultural fiction', 'illusion',

or ‘mirage’ (cf. Foster 1990: 435, 444; 1995: 218), or assert that the model is only relevant to the analysis of living human persons, not mythic pre-human categories or ‘pre-procreation’ states (e.g. Strathern 1992a: 98, 100, 114-115 n. 4). Either option reveals the limits of the model. The former move inverts what I take to be the Arosi perspective; it compels Arosi to take as given what their discourses and practices suggest had to be achieved and needs constantly to be maintained. A blanket insistence on the indigenous prioritization of a fully realized relationality without constituent components begins to reveal, I would argue, that the model is less a distinctively Melanesian mode of sociality and more our own abstract semiotic theory of all relationality. As such, it has no special claim on the intellectual allegiance of Melanesianists, but is a general tool for the critique of cultural representations anywhere that appear to posit pre-constituted or fixed wholes (cf. Gell 1999; Josephides 1991). More problematic, however, is the latter move. By restricting its analytical focus to ideas about living human persons, the model sacrifices the possibility of differentiating between an indigenous ontology that posits a multiplicity of discrete categories in need of external relations from one that posits a single category in need of internal differentiations. The model, in fact, commits one to assimilating all Melanesian ontologies to the mould of monism (Scott 2007: 24-32).

Marilyn Strathern, whose work is most closely identified with the model, styles it ‘a kind of convenient or controlled fiction’ (1988: 6) whereby Melanesian sociality happens to be the approximate realization of the hypothetical inverse of Western sociality. By this device it can be said

that she never said that the model is the description of an indigenous Melanesian outlook. Yet, many Melanesianists assume the model as common knowledge about the way Melanesians think and act; anthropology's 'conventional Melanesian person is relational' (Foster 2002: 75; cf. Bamford 1998; Hirsch 2001; Mallett 2003; Reed 2003; Robbins 2004). Some, including Strathern, have even used the model as a measure by which to evaluate the work of other Melanesianists (e.g. Mosko 2000; Strathern 1992a: 115 fn. 6).

Ironically, however, this use of a model originally developed as a means of exploring alternative possibilities ends by limiting possibilities. Over against modern Westerners who assume the a priori integrity of individual selves who must work to collectivize into society, Melanesians are cast as living exemplars of theoretical inverse-Westerners who experience relatedness as given and must work to free fluid identities from an already completed sociality. Unlike other recent critics of the model (e.g. Bolyanatz 2000; LiPuma 2000), however, my concern is not that some Melanesians may, in fact, understand and comport themselves as individuals; my concern is to point out that there are Melanesians who posit neither naturally pre-constituted individuals nor a pre-existing pleroma of relations. If the current Arosi recovery of *auhenua* identities is, from one perspective, a historically conditioned indigenous essentialization of matrilineages as landholding units, it is also the transformation of a possibility not fully imagined in Strathern's thought experiment. It is the renovating recovery of a primordial aspatial, asocial condition that, for these Melanesians at least, represents the starting point for sociality. This does not

mean that living persons are not composite from an Arosi point of view. It means that, contrary to the premises of the Melanesian model of sociality, and at a conceptual level beyond its analytical scope, the Arosi vision of the world **does** confront a problem of how pre-existent parts fit together into a synthetic totality (contrast Strathern 1992a: 114)—a problem Arosi continue to address today, not only through mythic representations of a transition from utopic to topogonic primordiality, but through new practical deployments of those representations that reposition matrilineal emplacement as prior to and necessary for the proper socio-spatial organization of interlineage entanglements.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article is based on research conducted between 1992 and 1993 in northwest Makira (formerly known as San Cristoval), Solomon Islands, supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I am grateful to the government of Solomon Islands, Makira/Ulawa Province, and the people of Arosi for research permission and generous assistance. For purposes of this paper, references to Arosi refer to the council area of Arosi 1. All Arosi personal and place names used are pseudonyms. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at ‘Recovering the Past’, the Fifth Conference of the European Society for Oceanists, Vienna, July 2002, and at the Anthropology Seminar, Brunel University, April 2004. I thank the audiences at both venues for their helpful questions and responses. Without ascribing to them any of the positions here taken, I especially acknowledge Eric Hirsch, Krista Ovist, and Christina Toren for constructive engagement with the development of

this paper. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers who prompted helpful clarifications.

### **Endnotes**

1. Compare the account of former Lands Commissioner Colin H. Allan (1990: 126): ‘the “former people” consistently emerged in the tangle of previous land transactions when I was on Makira in 1956. Nowhere else in the Solomons did this theme obtrude itself so consistently as on Makira.’
  
2. This equation of shrine theft with warfare may signal a measure of continuity with the past. Fox (1924: 286) states that the seizure of shark stones was an element in pre-Christian Arosi warfare.
  
3. Annette Weiner (1992) identifies names as among the ‘inalienable possessions’ that Trobriand Islands matrilineages temporarily loan out to one another in ways that risk permanent loss. I would describe Arosi names as mobile extensions of matrilineal essences rather than ‘possessions’, and would argue that Arosi attempts to reclaim names represent efforts to defend matrilineal power and integrity from a culturally particular—rather than a general universal—form of ‘loss and decay’ (A. Weiner 1992: 7).  
Nevertheless, I take the processes of alternating distribution and retraction that Weiner describes in relation to such elements of value as comparable to those in which Arosi engage in naming. This comparative data suggests, furthermore, that the current Arosi retention of names, although apparently

novel in its extreme form, captures and privileges anti-social meanings already inherent in such forms of engagement in and withdrawal from inter-lineage exchange.

4. Indigenous ideas about the original emptiness of land settled by ancestral pioneers are well documented for the neighbouring island of Malaita (e.g. Burt 1994b: 24-25; de Coppet 1985: 80; Guidieri 1980: 41, 62-63; Ivens 1930: 291-292; Keesing 1992: 23-25; Naitoro 1993: 30).

5. My analysis here is similar in some respects to Thomas Ernst's (1999) analysis of the process he calls 'entification' among the Onabasulu (Papua New Guinea). Ernst shows how Onabasulu representations of themselves as socially and territorially bounded 'clan' entities draw on a cosmogonic tradition according to which the dismemberment of a primordial being created the culturally significant number of seventeen social and spatial distinctions. This tradition was not invented *de novo* in the contemporary context of resource extraction; rather, Onabasulu are reframing it in ways that strategically redefine and fix social and spatial distinctions. There is a critical difference between Onabasulu and Arosi, however: whereas Onabasulu ontology appears to posit an original unity in need of internal (and potentially fluid) distinctions, Arosi ontology posits an original plurality in need of external relations (Scott 2007: 242-243).

6. This is not to deny that one could apply the abstract principles of the Melanesian model of sociality to assert that Arosi representations of utopic



autonomy and topogenic relatedness logically imply and complement one another (cf. Hirsch's [1995a, 1995b] theorization of the complementary modes of 'background potentiality' and 'foreground actuality'). The model thus appears able to encompass the autonomy Arosi ascribe to utopic categories by casting that autonomy as the ideological inversion of an actual plenitude of relations. My point, however, is that to privilege the model in this way is to subordinate the ethnography of indigenous perspectives to a philosophical perspective of our own.

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