SOME PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY
OF OCEANIC RELIGION

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Abstract: The author notes that certain 19th-century ideas persist in the anthropological study of religion. Using the concepts of "mana" and "tapu" the author demonstrates the tenaciousness of early reifications grounded more in Western preoccupations than in Polynesian modes of thought, following lines suggested by Rodney Needham's critique of the notion of "soul substance" in Needham's paper, "Skulls and Causality" (1977).

Résumé: L'auteur de l'article fait remarquer que certaines idées du xixe siècle sont encore bien présentes dans l'étude anthropologique de la religion. Se servant de concepts tels que «mana» et «tapu» l'auteur montre la ténacité des premières réifications implantées plus dans la mentalité occidentale que dans le mode du pensée polynésien. L'auteur s'appuie sur la critique de la notion de «substance spirituelle» telle qu'elle est apparue dans l'article de Rodney Needham intitulé : «Skulls and Causality» (1977).

Introduction

Writings on "primitive religion" continue to have a highly conservative cast, in contrast to other subfields of anthropological study. Despite the 20th-century demise of cultural evolutionism, despite the deconstruction of totemism and "primitive thought," despite elegant structural analyses of ritual and cosmology, despite sophisticated recent debates about rationality, many elements of 19th-century thought regarding non-Western religions remain strong, if implicit.

My primary concern will be to characterize and cast critical light on these submerged premises and the discursive modes they shape. I shall do so by examining two concepts widespread in Oceanic religions, *mana* and *tapu*, that not only serve (in ethnological discourse) to typify Polynesian thought, but have long since passed into the comparative metalanguage of our discipline. Taking these concepts and our interpretations of them as texts, I shall exam-

ine how and why we have transmuted pragmatic orientations toward unseen beings and powers into theologies, into which we have projected Western assumptions.

My exploration of these themes follows lines suggested by Rodney Needham, in a brief but brilliant paper, "Skulls and Causality" (1977). Needham examines critically the quest for "soul substance" supposed, according to ethnological interpretations of religions of insular and mainland southeast Asia, to motivate head-hunting. The "soul substance," Needham infers, is an artifact of European, not indigenous, thought: a projection of Western logics of causality and agency and of 19th-century physicalist models of hydraulics and electricity.

Mana in Oceanic Languages and Religions

Codrington introduced the Melanesian concept of *mana* to the anthropological world, characterizing it as "a power or influence" which "attaches itself to persons, and to things, and is manifested by results which can only be ascribed to its operation" (1891:118-119). Comparative theorists such as Marett, Lehmann, Hubert and Mauss seized on this conception of *mana* to characterize the evolution of primitive religion and the nature of primitive thought.

In the decades that followed, ethnographic and comparative accounts of *mana* confirmed Codrington's view that the concept was widespread in the religions of Oceania. The centrality of *mana* in Polynesia, as an invisible medium of power manifest in the sanctity and authority of chiefs, was established in the literature. Handy (1927), explicating a mystical "cosmic dynamism" in Polynesian religion, likened *mana* to electricity; C.E. Fox (1924), describing the Arosi (Makira, southeastern Solomons) conception of *mana*, likened it to an invisible liquid medium of power in which sacred objects or powerful leaders were soaked. *Mana* as a kind of invisible medium of power became clearly established in the metalanguage of anthropology.

From the outset, there had been some disquieting ripples in this current of thought. A decade before (under Marett's influence) Codrington established an orthodox view of *mana*, he had warned that "it would be very difficult to ascertain whether . . . *mana* . . . is thought to originate in connection with . . . spiritual beings. The notion conveyed by the word . . . is vague, and the origin of the power not likely to be clearly conceived in the native mind" (1881:278-279). When a decade later he submerged his doubts, he still noted in passing that objects and acts and people could be characterized as *being* mana, as well as *having* mana. He observed that "an abundant crop on the tree or in the garden shows that [the stone used by a magician] is *mana*," to which he had appended a footnote that "an object in which *mana* resides, and

a spirit which naturally has *mana*, is said to be *mana*, with the use of the verb'' (1891:119). Hubert and Mauss noted that:

> Le *mana* n'est pas simplement une force, un être, c'est encore une action, une qualité et un état. En d'autres termes, le mot est à la fois un substantif, un adjectif, un verbe. On dit d'un objet qu'il est *mana*, pour dire qu'il a cette qualité; et dans ce cas, le mot est une sorte d'adjectif. . . . En somme, ce mot subsume une foule d'idées que nous designerons par les mots de: pouvoir de sorcier, qualité magique d'une chose, chose magique, être magique, avoir du pouvoir magique, être incanté, agir magiquement. (1902-1903:108)

But in the end, the ambiguity was resolved by conventions of anthropological discourse, not ethnographic clarification: *mana* was fundamentally a substantive.

Despite general theorizing about *mana* based essentially on a Codringtonian interpretation, the empirical bases for these interpretations have remained shaky. Hocart's accounts of Simbo (Western Solomons), Fiji and Tonga noted that *mana* in these Oceanic languages is commonly used adjectivally to describe state of efficacy — medicine or magic that works *is mana*. The subtlety of the *mana* concept in Polynesia was further clarified by Firth's paper on *mana/manu* in Tikopia:

> In this land *manu* is there in the lips of the chief. In his speech whatever he may ask for, if a chief is *manu* then when he asks for fish, they will come; when he speaks requesting a calm it falls. That is a *manu* chief. (Pa Fenuatara; Firth 1940:494)

> Again and again I hammered away at my informants trying to find what was the meaning of *manu* itself apart from the evidence of it in crops, fish and the like. But all my inquiries . . . came to nothing. Always it was insisted that the crops and the fish *were manu*. (Ibid.:497)

> To the Tikopia, *manu* I am sure has not the connotation of an isolatable principle, a power, or any other metaphysical abstraction — though it may be conceived of as a specific quality. The interpretation in terms of such abstraction can only be the work of the anthropologist. (Ibid.:497-498)

Hogbin had encountered a similar pragmatism on Guadalcanal (Solomons): ''nobody knows how *nanama* [= *mana*] works, and I gathered the thought had never occurred to anyone until I made inquiries'' (1936:245).

In a series of recent papers (Keesing 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989) I have drawn on these ethnographic ambiguities, comparative linguistic evidence, and my own field data from Malaita in the Solomons to cast further doubt on Codringtonian orthodoxies. Let us first briefly examine the linguistic evidence.

I have shown (1984) that across a vast geographical zone of Oceania, from the western Solomons to New Zealand, and northward through the eastern and central Carolines of Micronesia, forms derived from Proto-Oceanic *mana(ng)* are used in a stable complex of meanings and grammatical forms:

(1) as a stative verb (translatable with English adjectives), carrying meanings of "be efficacious, be potent, be realized";

(2) as an active verb (often with transitive or causative marking morphologically): *mana*-ize "empower, protect, support" (usually with reference to ancestors, gods, spirits);

(3) as a noun, carrying meanings of "potency, efficacy, empowerment, luck, blessing, authority, etc."

Linguistic distributions strongly suggest that the first two verbal usages lie at the root of the *mana* concept and that the noun use is (historically) derivative from the verbal usages. The distributional evidence, briefly, shows that:

(1) *Mana* cognates are pervasive in languages that can be tentatively classed as "Eastern Oceanic" (Keesing 1988): Southeast Solomonic, North-Central Hebridean, Fijian-Rotuman, Polynesian, Nuclear Micronesian, but have limited distribution in the Oceanic languages of western Melanesia and western Micronesia (which represent early splits from Proto-Oceanic).

(2) In these western Oceanic[1] languages, *mana* cognates are used as stative verbs. Thus, Tubetube (Papuan Tip) *naManaMa* "be effective, work, be good, be true, fulfill potential." The canonical usage of *mana* to characterize (magical) medicine as "effective" extends across the entire Pacific and seems to lie at the core of the concept.

(3) In western Solomons [Meso-Melanesian] languages, also distantly related to the Oceanic languages to the east,[2] *mana* is pervasively used as a stative verb (Roviana: *mana* "be potent, effectual," Simboese *mana* "be effective, propitious, favourable, true"); as a vocative in prayer (*mana tu* "bless it, Amen" in both languages); and (with transitive suffix) as a transitive verb (Roviana: *mana-ni-a*: "bless it," Simboese *mana-ni-* "grant it, bless it, cause it to come true"). Where, in Roviana, a noun form is used, it is marked as an abstract verbal noun by the infix *-in-*: *m-in-ana* "mana-ness, efficacy, potency" (cf. Roviana *mate* "die," *m-in-ate* "death," *mangini* "be hot," *m-in-angini* "heat," *malahoro* "be weak," *m-in-alahoro* "weakness").

(4) In some Eastern Oceanic languages (Rotuman, Marshallese) *mana* is used only as a stative verb (and in some, an invocation or active verb as well), not as a noun. In others (Fijian and a number of Western Polynesian languages) *mana* is used as a noun only in highly restricted senses semantically (characteristically for meteorological events, particularly thunder and/or lightning, or events seen as supernatural portents). The dominant meaning in all these languages is the stative "be effective, be potent." In some other Eastern Oceanic languages (Malaita, Solomons) the nominalized form is (as in Roviana and Simbo) marked by an affix as an abstract verbal noun (*mana*-ness, *mana*-ization).

Once this pattern where the stative (and vocative verbal) senses of *mana* are dominant is noted, further regularities strikingly emerge. The prototypical

usage of *mana* characterizes magic, particularly (magical) medicines or treatments, as "potent" or "efficacious." Ironically, this sense of *mana*, so different from the standard anthropological one, turns up in Codrington's own dictionary of Mota, the Melanesian language he knew best: the entry for *meserere* is "banana leaves made *mana* with fire and rubbed on the arms before fighting, for strength and valour" (Codrington and Palmer 1896). This usage turns up in languages separated by 4 000 (or more) years of time-distance and many hundreds of miles. In Yapese, so aberrant historically that its status as Oceanic is in some doubt, *maanging* is "effective, powerful, of medicine." Hocart, working first in Simboese, then in Fijian and then in Tongan, found that in each language *mana* was used to characterize magic or folk medicine as "potent" or "effective." Yet Fijian and Tongan separated some 2 000 years ago and Simboese is very distantly related to both, representing a split going back almost to the initial breakup of Proto-Oceanic. The stability of meanings here is amazing. Martha Macintyre worked with a folk healer on Tubetube in Papua New Guinea's Milne Bay Province who told her, *naManaMa ne nima-gu* "My hands are *mana*." Quite independently but at the same time, Barbara Herr worked with a folk healer in the Lau Islands of Fiji who told her, *se mana na liga-qu*, "My hands are manna." The Fijian includes an utterance-initial aspect marker, but otherwise each of the morphemes in these parallel utterances, in languages probably separated by some 4 000 years in time and 2 000 miles of ocean, corresponds to the same ancient Proto-Oceanic form. We could find no more striking evidence than this of the historical coherence of a conceptual system: but one very different from the one anthropologists have represented.

I have shown (Keesing 1982) how, among the Kwaio of Malaita, the concept of *nanama* is used to characterize retrospectively and pragmatically a quality of success or efficacy: something is *nanama* because it "works"; we know that the ancestors have *nanama*-d for us or *nanama*-ized us when we observe that our children are healthy, our pigs and taro gardens are growing well, our financial transactions are prospering. *Nanama-ngaa*, the nominalized form, is (like "luck") a state of (ancestrally conferred) grace inferred from positive outcomes, not an invisible medium of power.

I have discussed (Keesing 1987, 1989) how Codringtonian orthodoxies have distorted ethnographic understanding and led to pervasive mistranslations. In eastern Melanesia, two generations of ethnographers have encountered *mana* used as a stative and transitive verb and translated it as if it were a noun. In one striking case, a Solomon Islander who had studied anthropology translated a prayer in his own language, literally "make these words of mine *mana*" as "give *mana* to my words" (Bogesi 1939).

In some Oceanic religions, particularly in parts of eastern Polynesia, the nominal form of *mana* has become dominant, and the abstract verbal concept

has given way to a substantivization. *Mana* seems to have been, particularly in New Zealand and Hawaii, viewed as a kind of medium of sacred power (as in the classic anthropological accounts) — although the stative and verbal senses remain in view. I have hypothesized (Keesing 1984) that this elaboration and substantivization is a consequence of the emergence in eastern Polynesia of priestly classes, whose role was to develop a theology connecting sacred chiefs to the gods, and to legitimate their power. However, careful analyses of old texts suggest that *mana* was a less central concept even in many of the eastern Polynesian islands, including Tahiti and the Marquesas, than earlier interpretations, based in part on European mysticism, had suggested. Even for the Maori, where *mana* was clearly used to designate supernaturally-conferred potency, usage was semantically complex: "*Mana* has many and various meanings; for instance it means fulfill . . . *ka mana taku kupu i au* (I will fulfill my word); and it means potent, as *he karakia mana* (a potent charm); and it also means effective, as *he kupu mana tana kupu* (his word is effective) . . ." (Gudgeon 1885:217).

In speculating about the sociological and political circumstances that may have led to a substantivization or hypostatization of an abstract concept, I have drawn on recent writings of Lakoff and Johnson (1980; Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987) on conventional metaphor. The metaphysic that lies latent in metaphoric scheme may be elaborated into a theology and dramatized in ritual. Boyer (1986, 1990, 1993) has usefully suggested that *mana*, particularly in acquiring this substantivized meaning, resembles a "natural kind term,"in labelling a category seen as having some essential defining (though not necessarily visibly manifest) characteristic.

I will suggest below that our analytical errors derive partly from our over-systematization of pragmatic religions more concerned with manipulating and retrospectively interpreting the visible world than explaining the invisible one that lies behind; and partly from our taking conventional metaphors and supplying the metaphysic they seem to imply. Before I develop this theme further, let me turn to the concept of *tapu*.

The Concept of *Tapu*/Taboo

The word *tabu* first entered Western parlance through accounts of Captain Cook's third voyage. In 1777 Cook encountered chiefs at Tongatabu, Tonga, who could not sit or eat; they were *tabu*, "which word has a very comprehensive meaning, but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden." Later Cook found the same term widely used in Tahiti (in its more common Polynesian form *tapu*). In Hawaii, the restrictions associated with the sanctity of chiefs had been strikingly elaborated. After Cook's death, King continued his diary (Cook and King 1784 Vol. 3:10-11):

This sort of religious interdiction they call taboo; a word we heard often re-
peated, during our stay amongst these islanders, and found to be of very power-
ful and extensive operation.

On our inquiring into the reasons of the interdiction of all intercourse be-
tween us and the natives ... we were told that the bay was *tabooed*. The same
restriction took place ... the day we interred the bones of Captain Cook. In
these two instances the natives paid the most implicit and scrupulous obedi-
ence; but whether on any religious principles, or merely in deference to the
civil authority of their chiefs, I cannot determine. ...

It is necessary to observe that ... they apply the word *taboo* indifferently both
to persons and things. Thus they say the natives were tabooed, or the bay was
tabooed, and so of the rest. This word is also used to express anything sacred,
or eminent, or devoted. (Cook and King 1784 Vol. 3:163-164)

By 1791, the term had entered English usage, often in the form "tabooed,"
a misrendering from Cook's voyage of the Polynesian use of *tabu* as a stative
(adjective). Sir Walter Scott's 1826 diary observes that "conversation is sel-
dom excellent among official people. So many topics are what Otahaitians
call *Taboo*."

From these earliest accounts the incorporation of the term into scholarship
on primitive religion has gone in two directions: on the one hand, compara-
tive study of the *tapu* concept in Oceanic religion and society (see, e.g., Ellis
1829; Churchill 1911; Williamson 1924, 1933; Handy 1927; Lehmann 1930),
and, on the other hand, comparative study of parallel systems of interdiction
carrying moral force, around the world, interdictions for which the Polyne-
sian term has provided a general label—taboo (French *tabou*). Here I will be
concerned with our interpretations of *tapu* in Oceania.

A first point is that *tabu/tapu* is found not only in Polynesian languages,
but in many other Oceanic Austronesian languages, in island Melanesia. Be-
cause the concept there usually occurs without an association with hereditary
chiefs and their sanctity and political power, the Melanesian usages illumi-
nate the Polynesian ones.

For Polynesian religion, one of the best sources remains Ellis's *Polynesian
Researches*, whose observations I quote selectively:

In most of the Polynesian dialects, the usual meaning of the word *tabu* is "sa-
cred." It does not, however, imply any moral quality, but expresses a connec-
tion with the gods, or a separation from ordinary purposes, and exclusive ap-
propriation to persons or things considered sacred; sometimes it means devoted
as by a vow. ... It ... is opposed to the word *noa*, which means general or
common.

... The idols, temples, persons, and names of the kind, and members of the
reigning family; the persons of the priests; canoes belonging to the gods;
houses, clothes, and mats of the king and priests; and the heads of mean who
were the devotees of any particular idol were always *tabu*, or sacred. The flesh

of hogs, fowls, turtle, and several other kinds of fish, cocoanuts, and almost everything offered in sacrifice were *tabu* to the use of the gods and the men; hence the women were, except in cases of particular indulgence, restricted from using them. (Ellis 1829)

From the earliest accounts, European observers have puzzled over the association, in a single concept, of apparently negative connotations of the forbidden and apparently positive connotations of sanctity, a problem discussed at length by Steiner (1956). Marett observed that: "Whatever is supernatural is ... *tabu* — perilous to the unwary; but as such it may equally well be holy or unclean, set apart for God or abandoned to devil, sainted or sinful, cloistered or quarantined" (1914:112).

Marett further usefully noted that some of the difficulties of English-speaking scholars in understanding *tabu* reflect a semantic focus of "sacred" in English from which French is free: *"L'idée du sacré* may be apposite enough in French, since *sacré* can stand either for 'holy' or 'damned'; but it is an abuse of the English language to speak of the 'sacredness' of some accursed wizard" (ibid.:110).

Thus Durkheim can observe that "toutes les interdictions religieuses se rangent en deux classes: les interdictions entre le sacré et le profane, celles entre le sacré pur et le sacré impur" (1906:432).

One recent direction for resolving this apparent contradiction, pursued across a wider field in relation to "taboos" in the general anthropological sense, is analysis by Leach and Douglas in terms of category anomaly. Leach's interpretation of taboo in terms of categorical anomaly will illustrate:

> Whatever is taboo is a focus not only of special interest but also of anxiety. Whatever is taboo is sacred, valuable, important, powerful, dangerous, untouchable, filthy unmentionable. (1964:37-38)

> It is the ambiguous categories that attract the maximum interest and the most intense feelings of taboo. The general theory is that taboo applies to categories which are anomalous with respect to clear-cut category oppositions. If A and B are two verbal categories, such that B is defined as "what A is not" and vice versa, and there is a third category C which mediates this distinction, in that C shares the attributes of both A and B, then C will be taboo. (Ibid.:39-40)

> To be useful, gods must be near at hand, so religion sets about reconstructing a continuum between this world and the other world. But note how it is done. The gap between two logically distinct categories, this world/other world, is filled in with tabooed ambiguity. The gap is bridged by supernatural beings of highly ambiguous kind ... credited with the power of mediating between gods and men. (Ibid.:39)

This general approach has considerable power, although, as Needham notes, "there is no good evidence that either the conceptual appreciation of

boundaries or the psychic response to them is a constant in symbolic classifi-
cation, let alone that the common term is danger'' (1979:47). However, my
main concern here is with the ethnographic foundations of the apparent prob-
lematic whereby the positive — sacred and powerful — is confounded with the
negative — dangerous and unclean — in Oceanic religions.

I have suggested that this problematic is largely an artifact of our own con-
ceptual system, not those of the Pacific Islanders whose languages and cul-
tures we engage.

> The basic meaning of tapu in both Melanesian and Polynesian languages seems
> best rendered as simply ''off limits.'' This captures the relational nature of tapu
> in a way that ''sacred'' and ''forbidden'' do not; and it keeps us free of the
> seeming contradiction between the positive valence of sacredness and the nega-
> tive valence of ''pollution'' and interdiction. Something that is tapu is . . . ''off
> limits''; and that inescapably implies: (1) an agent; (2) a perspective; (3) a con-
> text. . . . Something that is off limits, tapu, is always off limits *to someone*, not
> in and of itself. . . . A place or act or thing that is tapu this afternoon, from the
> perspective of some people and in the context of a particular ritual or circum-
> stance, may be noa (or tapu) for *different* people tomorrow. This underlines
> why translations of tapu as either ''sacred'' or ''forbidden'' are misleading. . . .
> We steer clear of the pseudoproblem . . . of why the term refers both to sanctity
> and to the prohibited or polluted. It refers to both and to neither. (Keesing
> 1985:204-205)

The concept of *noa*, which in many Polynesian languages denotes a state
not marked off by *tapu*, has often been rendered by ''profane'' in the Durk-
heimian sense. Maranda and Maranda (1970) usefully suggest an alternative
semiotic rendering of the *tapu/noa* contrast as marqué/non-marqué.[3]

An illustration from the languages of western island Melanesia of the
misrendering of indigenous concepts of *tabu* will be instructive. The Bible
has for many of these languages been given the title ''Buka Tabu,'' supposed
to mean ''Holy Book.'' But characteristically, in these languages this meant
not that the book was sacred, but that some people were forbidden to read it.
(This highlights the overlay of Christianity and Biblical conventions which
now hides and distorts indigenous conceptualizations.)

Rendering *tabu* as ''off limits'' or ''restricted'' not only more faithfully
represents the contextual, contingent and relational nature of the term than ei-
ther ''sacred'' or ''forbidden,'' and eliminates the spurious contradiction be-
tween the negative and positive. It also avoids the false metaphysic that
emerges in some accounts of Polynesian religion, whereby *tapu* is portrayed
as a kind of dangerous radiation that emanates from sacred chiefs or sacred
objects. *Tapu* is commonly used as a stative; and only rarely and in restricted
contexts, as a noun. Yet its hypostatization as radiation-like has helped to
generate anthropological interpretations linking *tapu* intimately with *mana*.
Such a conceptual linkage may have existed in some Polynesian cosmologies

(e.g., among the Maori); but in most of Polynesia, the two concepts seem to have belonged in different universes of discourse, as they do in the parts of Melanesia where both occur.

Let me turn now to more general issues. Following Needham (1977), I believe these misrenderings of Oceanic linguistic meanings and conceptualizations reflect more fundamental distortions in the way anthropologists have interpreted "primitive religion."

Problems in the Interpretation of "Primitive Religion"

The roots of misinterpretations lie, I believe, in the 19th century when cultural evolutionists sought evidence, in the ethnographic accounts of missionaries, travellers and pioneer ethnographers, for the early forms of human religion: animism, animatism, totemism, sacrifice and the belief in a high god. Scholars such as Tylor, Marett, Frazer, Durkheim, Bastian, Lehmann and Schmidt searched the fragmentary evidence not for contemporary beliefs and practices, but the survivals that could be gleaned from them. There was a parallel search, by these scholars and others such as Lévy-Bruhl, Hubert and Mauss, for evidence regarding primitive thought. Yet another element in 19th- and early-20th-century writing on tribal religions was filtered through European racism. Dark skinned Africans or Melanesians were seen as having genuinely primitive religions; peoples with copper skin and straight hair — Indonesians, Polynesians — were often seen through a more romantic eye, attributed mystical wisdom and developed philosophical systems (often assumed to be of Indic origin).

These interconnected discourses on "primitive" (and not-so-primitive) religions, as Needham (1977) has suggested, drew heavily on physicalist models of latter 19th-century natural science, notably those of electricity, magnetism and hydraulics, to characterize the cosmologies underlying practices such as headhunting and concepts such as *mana*. The use of such physicalist metaphors and models was characteristic of the thought of the period (just as computer metaphors and models characterize contemporary discourses). Freud's hydraulic models of the psyche, metaphors reified into entities, fluids and forces, are a case in point. As Needham (1977) points out, such physicalist models for "primitive" thought may not only create spuriously systematic and global cosmology, but may introduce into the analysis concepts of cause and agency alien to the worlds we seek to characterize. Needham exemplifies this problem with the "soul substance" supposed to motivate the quest for human heads among southeast Asian headhunters and to link head-taking with the fertility of the crops. Needham, going back to texts and other ethnographic data, argues that there is (for many of these peoples, at least) no evidence for such a "soul substance" in indigenous thought: it is, he suggests, an element introduced by European scholars to interpret a seeming hiatus in

causal logic connecting the taking of the heads with power and fertility. My explorations of *mana* provide further illustrations.

The Problem of Oversystematization

Let me take first the problem of oversystematization. Ron Brunton (1980) and I (Keesing 1984) have taken the degree of global closure and elaboration of cosmological schemes as an empirical question to be investigated, and related to sociological factors, rather than as a starting point of our analysis. It is too simple to say that peoples who lack social classes and political hierarchy have undeveloped and unsystematized "theological" systems: there are too many counterexamples, from Aboriginal Australia to the tiny hamlets of the Mountain Ok peoples of New Guinea (Barth 1988). However, developed theologies have in most times and places apparently been the creation of theologians: religious specialists, members of priestly classes sustained by state resources. It is no accident that the philosophical elaborations of Pharonic Egypt, Mesoamerica, Mesopotamia, China and India emerged where and when they did. There were, of course, many less strikingly elaborated but still richly complex philosophical systems in the non-Western world. My point here is not to advance a general theory regarding such elaborations and their absence, but simply to post a warning that there are grave dangers of the anthropologist becoming the theologian of a system which may be less global and systemically coherent than our assumptions and theories lead us to expect. The religions of many tribal peoples are pragmatic, relatively unsystematized and perspectival. Concepts such as *mana* that would seem to imply a metaphysic and a global philosophy may have no such implication.

The Kwaio of the Solomons I have studied (Keesing 1982) are a striking case in point. The way Kwaio invoke explanations based on ancestral manipulations to account for death, illness, misfortune (or successful outcomes) would seem to imply a belief that the ancestors are all-powerful and that all events in the universe are manipulated and connected by the ancestors. If a man climbs a tree to get canarium almond nuts or hunt a cuscus opossum and falls to his death, it was an ancestor—angry over some violation of pollution rules—that implanted the idea in his head or caused his hand to slip. If a tree falls on an axeman or a snake fatally bites someone in the garden, it was an ancestor who deflected the axe blow or "connected" the snake's movements to the victim's. But what about the snake's movements the rest of the time? What about trees that fall harmlessly in the forest? Kwaio explanations only concern *interventions in* human life; they imply no vast web of causal interconnections where ancestors control the entire universe. Put crudely,[4] His eye is on the descendant but not on the sparrow.

The Problem of Non-existent Metaphysics

The other side of Needham's problematic is that in supplying the missing elements that tie fragments of local practice and talk into a coherent system, we may create a level of philosophical order—a metaphysic—that has no counterpart in indigenous thought. Asking questions that have no local answers, seeking conceptual coherence in what may only be local ways of talk, we introduce both alien concepts of agency and alien levels of order.

If Solomon Islanders can use concepts such as *mana* in contexts of sacrifice or prayer or retrospective interpretation of events, does this not imply that there is some coherent theory of ancestrally-conferred power lying behind their talk? Not necessarily.

My own explorations of conventional metaphors provide one kind of alternative account. Tribal peoples may "mean" nothing more cosmologically salient and metaphysical with their talk of *mana* than we mean with our talk of "luck." As Pascal Boyer puts it:

> Usual [English] phrases convey the idea that luck is a fluid or substance that some people possess ("I don't have much luck"), a scarce commodity ("some people have all the luck"), or a personified agency ("luck was not with me today"). For some anthropologist from a remote culture, it would seem natural to say that these phrases indicate the English speakers' "mystical" conception of luck as both substance and person. The beliefs, however, are clearly not there. The phrases in question organize the role of chance in human endeavor in a metaphorical way, but no one in an English speaking culture is committed to the "metaphysics" of luck that they seem to imply. (n.d.)

George Lakoff, from whose recent writings (especially 1987) I have drawn much guidance, has suggested (1989:473) while commenting on a recent critique of mine, that:

> Linguistic evidence, when used with care, can be a guide to conceptual structure. But conceptual structure does not equal cosmology. When anthropologists describe the cosmology of a culture, what they usually have in mind is a folk model of (1) the universe that is (2) all-embracing, (3) consistent, (4) conscious, (5) believed, and (6) acted on. In general, the kinds of conceptual structure that we have found do not have all these characteristics. Individual conceptual metaphors map out separate conceptual domains that are very much smaller than the universe and limited in scope, domains like time, anger, love, thought, communication, morality, the self, and so on. Though internally consistent, they are often inconsistent with one another. Though occasional conceptual metaphors are conscious, most, like rules of phonology and syntax, are not. Some are believed by at least some people, some are disbelieved, and most, though used unconsciously for the purposes of . . . conceptualization, are never even considered as possible objects of belief. A given metaphor may even be consciously disbelieved but nonetheless used for understanding and acted on.

Recent writings by Pascal Boyer (1986, 1990, 1993) suggest another mechanism whereby "mystical" categories that seem to imply a coherent belief system are learned and used.

Boyer argues that categories of religious thought among the West African peoples with whom he works, particularly the Fang of Cameroun, have a kind of empty or contentless character, in that they are not expressions of developed metaphysical ideas. While some of them are embedded in systems of conventional metaphor, others are not. Boyer suggests that such concepts have a conceptual/cognitive resemblance to "natural kind" terms, much discussed in linguistic philosophy. Natural kind terms label categories, prototypically kinds of animals or plants, that are not definable in terms of attributes or distinctive features. A dog has some essential dogness whether it has four legs or two, barks or is voiceless, etc. — even though there is no cultural theory defining this essential dogness. Psychological experiments indicate that learning and using natural kind terms are based on different cognitive paths than learning and using what we might call conceptual (or culturally-constructed) categories (such as kin terms). Boyer argues that "mystical" or "religious" categories encountered by anthropologists among non-Western peoples may be akin to natural kind terms — he suggests the term "pseudo-natural kinds" — cognitively. They are learned and used, he suggests, not on the basis of corresponding belief systems or folk models, but in the way natural kind terms are. Among the Fang, people with special mystical powers are classed as *beyem* "people who see." They are supposed to be different from others in having an unobservable property called *evur*. How do Fang know how to talk about "people who see" or use terms like *evur*? What is the essential difference that defines a social category? Boyer argues that Fang talk about "seeing," or Oceanic talk about *mana*, requires no underlying theory of *beyem*-nes or *mana*-ness. A child learns the ontological status of such categories by the things people say about them: that they are qualities, or agents, or substance-like. But learning such categories, and using them, need imply no folk model of what the quality "is" or how the agency acts, or what the substance "consists" of: the "essences" distinctive of categories are inferential and undefined. Boyer's approach and Lakoff's view of conventional metaphors and conceptual structures are, I think, complementary, not antithetical. Learning to use conventional metaphors — and they so pervade languages that we cannot talk without them — is one way of learning the "ontological" status of categories. As Lakoff argues, categories as complex conceptual structures, and conventional ways of talking about them, shape our thought and experience even though they are not reflections of coherent cosmologies.

Conclusions

Anthropological discourse on tribal religions has been prone to over-exoticize, over-theologize, over-systematize. Our distortions of Oceanic religion in terms of electricity or invisible media of power, our imputation of mystical philosophies of cosmic dynamism and spiritual energy, illustrate strikingly the impress of our own conceptual systems on those of other peoples. *Mana* and *tabu* are, for some Pacific Islanders at least, everyday words of everyday life. *Mana* is a mode of retrospective interpretation in pragmatic and this-world oriented religions. A cure or a spell or an enterprise is *mana* if it succeeds; a leader has *mana* if his ventures prosper. Yet (to quote Hogbin for Guadalcanal again) "nobody knows how [*mana*] works, and I gather the thought had never occurred to anyone until I made inquiries." As Boyer observes for the Fang categories, having a developed conceptual framework — a folk model — is not a prerequisite for using the term and acting as if there were some essential quality distinguishing *mana*-ness from its absence. *Tabu*, in most of the languages in which it co-occurs with *mana*, refers not to a mystical quality or aura of sanctity, but to a boundary, a separation, and its associated dangers.

These are words that seem, for most Pacific Islanders at least, not to have embodied a coherent philosophy of the agency of gods or ancestors in the universe or the nature and sources of "power." I use that term in quotes to draw attention to the fact that our *own* usages are pervasively metaphoric. We, following channels of language laid down metaphorically, treat contextually-based relations of domination or constraint as if these relationships were an invisible substance people have more or less of. Our metaphors of "power" as substance pervasively shape not only the theoretical apparatus of political science and sociology, which are committed to defining "it" or measuring "it" or characterizing how "it" is acquired, lost and used. These metaphoric notions also shape the way we think about religion (as well as politics) among non-Western peoples. We do not "believe" that power is a substance people have more or less of; but we talk and think as though it were. Our characterizations of other peoples' world views not only structure their worlds in terms of our assumptions of agency and explanation and coherence, but impose upon them the impress of our own language and our own metaphor-bound ways of talk. Ironically, in the process we may assume of them what intuitively — as witness "luck" and "power" — we know is not true of us.

Notes

1. A geographical, not linguistic, classification.
2. And to the north and south.
3. The Marandas are dealing with a Malaita, Southeast Solomons language, Lau, in which the contrast is between *abu* (the Malaita languages underwent a sound-shift *t > 0) and *mola*.
4. And possibly blasphemously, though with good wishes to the Ayatollah.

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