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# MOTHERLESS SONS: 'DIVINE KINGS' AND 'PARTIBLE PERSONS' IN MELANESIA AND POLYNESIA

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Two disparate formulations of personal agency have recently been proposed in Pacific Islands ethnology. From Melanesia, on the one hand, Strathern has introduced the 'partible person' who, in acting, is *subtractively* decomposed into his or her composite parts or relations. From Polynesia, on the other hand, Sahlins has invoked the image of the 'divine king' in whose heroically *expansive* actions other members of society are hierarchically encompassed. This article explores the opposed implications of these two models in a single instance of a Melanesian chiefly society – the Austronesian-speaking Amoamo (North) Mekeo of Papua New Guinea. By comparing the politico-ritual capacities of Mekeo commoners and hereditary officials in marital and mortuary exchange, it is suggested that the agency of Polynesian as well as Melanesian chiefs might be best characterized in terms of personal 'partibility' rather than heroic 'hierarchy'.

In her recent book, *The gender of the gift* (1988), Marilyn Strathern contrasts Melanesian sociality and images of the 'person' with Western notions of the 'individual' and 'society'. The interesting aspect of this juxtaposition, however, lies in the novelty of her terms and in the way she has carefully located them in dialogues comprising Western orthodoxy, within different constructions *we* have about ourselves and Melanesians. This article endeavours to broaden that comparison by proposing another one internal to the Pacific itself, between Melanesia and Polynesia. Specifically, I counterpose Strathern's construction of the Melanesian 'partible person' with the model of the 'heroic' or 'divine king' recently developed by Sahlins (1985*a*; 1985*b*; 1991) for Polynesia.

Given the network of overlapping ethnological axes distinctive to the Pacific, there are several reasons why this reorientation of Strathern's arguments is probably inevitable, and possibly fruitful. First, the similarities and differences between Melanesia and Polynesia have for decades attracted considerable attention and debate, and in those discussions Sahlins (1963; 1989) has played a conspicuous part (see also, for example, B. Douglas 1979; Allen 1984; Mosko 1985: ch. 9; Thomas 1989). Secondly, on the basis of linguistic and cultural criteria, one of the two major ethnographic regions which figure prominently in Strathern's discussions, the Austronesian-speaking Massim, straddles the Melanesia/Polynesia divide and arguably possesses more in common with Fiji, Hawaii, New Zealand, Tonga and so on, than with the other major region of her Melanesian focus, the non-Austronesian-speaking New Guinea Highlands.

Thirdly, Polynesia has already been invoked in certain other influential works as epitomizing non-Western societies by explicit contrast to the modern, 'individualistic' societies of the West. I refer here, of course, to the critical place which Polynesia has held in Dumontian sociology. Just as Strathern has relied upon the distinction between 'gift' and 'commodity' economies (Gregory 1982), Dumont has long held up Polynesia, along with India, as an exemplar of a certain mode of sociality – 'hierarchy' – wherein the *a priori* relation between the 'individual' and 'society' of Western ideology and social science is profoundly altered or displaced (Dumont 1959: 9–10, 11–12, 16, 29–30, 32–4; 1960: 52–3; 1980: 48–9, 213, 364–5). In his more recent writings on Polynesia, Sahlins (1985a; 1985b; 1991) has drawn heavily from the Dumontian formulation of 'hierarchy'.<sup>1</sup> Given that various elements of Strathern's treatment of Melanesian sociality deviate from the Dumontian approach (see, for example, Strathern 1987: 280–1; 1988: 13, 15, 72, 99, 102–3, 321–2; cf. M. Douglas 1989: 18), a new and provocative contrast between Melanesia and Polynesia is implied. More curiously still, Dumont himself has already pointed to Melanesia as yielding conceptual formulations which depart from the hierarchical orders typified by both India and Polynesia (1979: 789; see Mosko n.d.1; n.d.2; in press).

But more can be said of the contrast between Melanesian and Polynesian sociality as represented by Strathern and Dumont, respectively. Although they share a keen scepticism regarding the comparative utility of the Western notion of the 'individual', Strathern – unlike Dumont – also rejects orthodox anthropological constructions of 'society' as reifications.<sup>2</sup> Both authors have sought resolution of the same problem – i.e. the ethnocentrism or sociocentrism inherent in the notion of the unitary 'individual' – but in opposite directions, as it were. Where Dumont would holistically encompass the 'person', or merge a multiplicity of such 'persons', within the greater social totality, Strathern partitions every 'person' into his or her composite and detachable parts and relations.

But even this falls short of apprehending the most salient theoretical issue now on the Oceanic horizon. For on the one hand, Strathern, with her model of the 'partible person', and on the other, Sahlins (1981; 1985a; 1985b; 1991), with his programme of structural history which currently represents the most celebrated application of Dumontian sociology, have each developed powerful theories of social action – theories which profoundly diverge. The essence of this difference concerns the specific dynamics of agency attributed to the epitomizing 'person' for each region. For Strathern, the (Melanesian) 'person' is not a unitary 'individual' but a 'dividual', multiply or plurally constituted of the earlier contributions and relations of other persons. Action thereby consists in detaching and revealing the person's internal capacities as previously composed of the actions of other persons. In acting, the 'person' *externalizes* those internal *parts* or contributions, and agency consists in a process of personal *decomposition*. It should be added that this view of sociality does not depend upon there being any hierarchical arrangement among the detachable parts.

For Sahlins, however, the 'person' is epitomized in the divine king or chief whose heroic capacities and actions summarize, unify, encompass and thus *expansively internalize* the relations of society's members as a *whole*. Such figures are 'social-historical individuals' (1991: 63). Persons of this magnitude personify their

respective societies almost literally, that is, as 'heroic societies', and the histories marked by their actions are described as 'heroic histories'. Moreover, such divine kings and heroic societies are indicative of a certain type of social solidarity and organization – Dumontian 'hierarchical' as distinct from both the 'mechanical' and the 'organic' of Durkheim. Quoting Johanson (1954: 180) on the New Zealand Maori, for example, Sahlins says of the Polynesian chief that he 'lives the life of a whole tribe, ... stands in a certain relation to neighbouring tribes and kinship groups, and ... gathers the relationship to other tribes in his person' (1985a: 35). The following passages augment this view:

At once encompassing and transcending the society, the divine king is able to mediate its relations to the cosmos – which thus also responds, in its own natural order, to his sovereign powers (Sahlins 1985a: 34).

Here history is anthropomorphic in principle, which is to say in structure. Granted that history is much more than the doings of great men, is always and everywhere the life of communities; but precisely in these heroic polities the king is the condition of the possibility of community (1985a: 34–5).

This really is a history of kings and battles, but only because it is a cultural order that, multiplying the action of the king by the system of society, gives him a disproportionate historical effect (1985a: 41).

The king assumes, and in his own person lives, the life of the collectivity ... the expression as ontology of a principle of extension, such as makes the people particular instances of the chief's (*cum* ancestor's) existence (Sahlins 1985b: 207).

From these and other indications, it would appear that the efficacy of the Polynesian divine hero lies precisely in his (or her) hierarchical '*supercomposition*'.

It should be observed that this construction involves an important departure from Sahlins's (1972) earlier analysis of Polynesian redistributive reciprocity. There, chiefs and commoners alike were conceived as essentially integral beings, reciprocally exchanging and centralizing quantities of material wealth and services. The difference is that in the earlier formulation there is no hint that with acts of exchange the 'boundaries' of chiefly or commoner persons impinged upon or encompassed one another.

Now men do not personally construct their power over others; they come *to* power. Power resides in the office, in an organized acquiescence to chiefly privileges and organized means of upholding them. Included is a specific control over the goods and the services of the underlying population. The people owe in advance their labor and their products. And with these funds of power, the chief indulges in grandiose gestures of generosity ranging from personal aid to massive support of collective ceremonial or economic enterprise. ... In any case, the material residue that sometimes falls to the chief is not the main sense of the institution. The sense is the power residing with the chief from the wealth he has let fall to the people (1972: 139–40, original emphasis; see also pp. 188–90, 208–9, 236).

The point is, in his new model of the encompassing Polynesian divine chief, Sahlins has recognized the possibility of attributing elastic boundaries to the acting person.

The pertinent question then becomes: in what interactions, and with respect to which actors, are those boundaries adjusted? In Strathern's interactive model, social practice is portrayed as a fundamentally 'subtractive' process; in Sahlins's, practice is rendered as essentially 'additive' or 'expansive'.<sup>3</sup> The Melanesian person's capacity for action, according to Strathern, arises from separations and differences, not from unities, and it is with incompleteness rather than completeness that agency is effected. With Sahlins's heroic figure for Polynesia, however,

it is in the very presumption that certain persons *do* incorporate other persons and relations *completely*, even to the extent of embodying or encompassing the entire society or cosmos, that the capacity and realization of agency lie. Persons of lesser order, as incomplete or less complete by comparison, are to that degree of lesser historical efficacy.

A way of clarifying further the contrast between these models of Melanesian and Polynesian sociality is by analogy with one of Strathern's critiques developed specifically apropos Melanesia, namely her running disagreement with Herdt (1981) over the nature of New Guinea male initiation. Despite the obvious differences between Herdt's and Sahlins's prototypical subjects, there is a crucial similarity between them: at the respective ends of their enabling trials – the Sambia male initiate's ordeal and the Polynesian king's sacrifice – the two are represented as achieving fully socialized states or conditions, that is, of realizing personal completeness; henceforth their respective efficacies are seen to derive from that completeness. Furthermore, it is perhaps not coincidental that the initiated adult Sambia male and the heroic Polynesian king or chief are both seen by their analysts as similarly spiritually qualified or endowed. The point I raise with Sahlins thus roughly parallels Strathern's point with Herdt. Where Sahlins would attribute the extraordinary agency of divine kings and chiefs to a sort of extension or expansion of the Western 'individual' to heroic proportions, I suggest the possibility instead of something like its partibility, detachability and reduction.

I should emphasize that my motivation here does not arise merely from some hypothetical Melanesia/Polynesia comparison. For Lutkehaus (1990) has recently proclaimed that some Melanesians of the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea – the Austronesian-speaking Manam – exhibit properties of heroic organization and hierarchy along the lines which Sahlins has traced for Polynesia.<sup>4</sup> While the Manam apparently lack a 'divine king' or 'magical chief', she argues that they possess an 'elementary form of "heroic" leadership' (1990: 180) inasmuch as power and authority are vested in certain hereditary 'village chiefs' (*tanepoa labalaba*). And although the Manam otherwise share many cultural and structural features with their Sepik neighbours, both Austronesian- and non-Austronesian-speaking, the heroic and hierarchical elements of Manam social structure make it 'significantly different from these others' and from 'mainland New Guinea in general' (Lutkehaus 1990: 180).

Recognition of this 'rudimentary' Polynesian-type 'heroic', 'hierarchical' form in Melanesia must constitute, therefore, either an important counter-instance to Strathern's construction of Melanesian sociality or an illustration of the distortions and misconceptions which, she claims, can arise from misapplying such Western reifications as the 'individual' and 'society', or the logic of commodity exchange generally, to Melanesia.

My principal purpose in this article is to examine a Melanesian example of hereditary chieftainship – one which may be provisionally viewed as embodying the sort of hierarchical capacities that Sahlins and Lutkehaus have emphasized in terms of 'divine' or 'magical' authority and the anthropomorphic representation of whole groups in 'heroic' persons. These are the hereditary 'sorcerers' and 'chiefs' of the Austronesian-speaking (North) Mekeo peoples of the Central

Province of Papua New Guinea.<sup>5</sup> A close scrutiny of the symbolic and social grounds for their efficacy will lead me to conclude that the distinctive agency attributed to and evinced by Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers more closely resembles the sort of practice involved in Strathern's construction of ordinary Melanesian 'partible persons'. Indeed, it is the *extraordinary* and *exaggerated detachability or decomposition of hereditary officials* as compared with ordinary Mekeo villagers – their 'de-conception' as I call it – which critically distinguishes their supposedly 'divine', 'magical' or 'supernatural' capacities. In other words, in their official practices Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers are heroically empowered towards the members of their groups, not by summarily or expansively encompassing those other persons within their own, but by subtracting and externalizing some parts or relations of their own identities on an even greater scale as compared with non-heroic commoners. Paradoxically, perhaps, the efficacy of hereditary Mekeo authority consists in personal reduction and simplification rather than in hierarchical encompassment.

Nonetheless, the Mekeo case draws attention to certain difficulties with Strathern's model also. Melanesian sociality as she constructs it rests on the gendering of relations and the male-female pair and, hence, on the contrast and alternation of same-sex and cross-sex relations (see especially 1988: chs. 7–10). The 'multiplicity' or 'plurality' of relations composing the Melanesian person in her account thus seems always comprised of a duality. More recently, Strathern (1989) has extended her analysis of the partible person to the case of Mekeo male/female interactions in these specifically dyadic terms. I suggest, however, that in the case of the Mekeo, and especially in consequence of comparing the partibility of ordinary villagers with that of hereditary chiefs and sorcerers, the plural composition of the person consists of a four-fold or quadripartite arrangement, and is revealed as such in action. So although I think Strathern has correctly postulated the axioms for Melanesian contexts, the fundamental arithmetic, at least for some Austronesian-speakers including the Mekeo, may require minor correction.

This point touches on one other. All Strathern's analyses of Melanesian partible persons stop short of addressing hereditary chiefly forms of politico-ritual organization, apparently regardless of whether such a consideration, in any particular instance, is ethnographically warranted. In *The gender of the gift*, Strathern (1988: 288) lists the contexts to which she has applied her model – male initiation and female menstrual seclusion, procreation and childbirth, ceremonial exchange, bridewealth payment and marriage, and mortuary ritual – but hereditary chieftainship is not among them. That oversight might be explained by Strathern's greater intimacy with Highlands societies, where 'big men' and now, thanks to her and Godelier (Godelier & Strathern 1991; Godelier 1986), 'great men' are seen to predominate; indeed, in a later essay Strathern (1991a) insightfully extends her partible person model to differentiate Highlands 'big man' and 'great man' leadership patterns. But the other Melanesian region which is salient in Strathern's discussions is the Massim, where it cannot easily be said that hereditary rank and chieftainship are absent in quite the same way. My point here is clearly distinct from that of Josephides (1991) and Jolly (1992) – that Strathern has not quite come to grips with the facts of power and domination, especially those based upon gender differences. Instead, I wish to recall Hau'ofa's (1971) early

admonition against the tendency to essentialize Melanesia and thereby overlook one of the more important dimensions of its variability (see also Keesing 1992: 129–30; cf. Strathern 1992: 150–1; 1991*b*). That I should concur with Hau'ofa is scarcely surprising, since our positions derive from the same ethnographic source.

My treatment of Mekeo chieftainship and official sorcery should be seen, then, as an elaboration of Strathern's theory of sociality *qua* personal detachability and partibility in a Melanesian context in which she has not yet herself pursued it, and with parallel implications for Sahlins's theory of divine kingship in Polynesia.

### *Persons composed and de-composed*

I begin by recapitulating just those elements of Strathern's overall approach which I shall draw upon (it should be emphasized that this brief summary represents only a fragment of her much broader argument).<sup>6</sup> According to Strathern, Melanesian persons are constituted in forms quite different from the supposedly discrete, unitary, or whole 'individual' of the West. Rather, each Melanesian person is a composite formed of relations with a plurality of other persons. The relations comprising any one person have or compose a history in the sense of a record of others' prior contributions. By the same token, the relations of which a person is composed constitute so many capacities for action, and so every person can be said to have a future. But in acting as agents themselves, persons externalize the parts or relations of which they are, or until then have been, composed. By acting, in other words, persons are 'decomposed'. As agents in this sense, persons evince and anticipate the knowledge or recognition of their internal composition and capacities in the responses of others. Thus decomposing and externalizing their parts, relations or capacities, persons stimulate one another to action and reaction. For Strathern, following Wagner (1975), every action is in this way both conventional and innovative.

Analogous Mekeo notions of composing and decomposing persons and relations are contained in a single word, *engama*, which I have elsewhere (Mosko 1983; 1985; 1989) rendered as 'conception' and 'de-conception' (also 'beginning', 'end', 'happiness'). In order to highlight and contextualize the *engama* conception and de-conception pertinent to hereditary Mekeo politico-ritual authorities, however, it will be necessary first to discuss these two countervailing processes as they relate to ordinary persons, that is, to *ulalu* ('commoner') village men and women. And in the course of that, I shall be able to show how Mekeo conception and de-conception are quadripartite in organization, as mentioned above, and thereby differ from the simpler gendering activity implicated in Strathern's dualistic model.

### *Ordinary conception*

According to villagers' explicit descriptions, every human being is conceived or begun (*engama*) in the act of sexual intercourse. As a result of those exertions, the respective procreative 'bloods' of the parents – semen in the case of the father, womb-blood in the case of the mother – are exuded from inside their bodies, in roughly equal proportions, to the enclosed space of the mother's 'womb' or 'abdomen'. There, the semen 'dries', 'hardens' or 'coagulates' the wet amorphous womb-blood of the mother. If enough semen and womb-blood are mixed

together, they will continue to form and develop into a foetus and eventually emerge as a human infant rather than as menstrual blood. It is worth noting that, even though sexual relations between a pregnant woman and her husband are suspended after she has missed three periods in succession, the father's procreative donation to the child is sustained through his contributions of special foods to the mother's diet both before and following parturition. Since the parents' procreative bloods are understood to be roughly equal in quantity, half of the progeny's blood is the same as the mother's, half the same as the father's.

Every human being thus conceived enters this world composed of the blood of two gendered sources, male-derived and female-derived. And to this extent the Mekeo case conforms with Strathern's notion of a plurally (i.e. dually) constituted, androgynous person. But also, for the Mekeo, inasmuch as the father's and mother's procreative bloods are identified with their respective (patrilineal) clans, every human infant shares through its father and its mother the bloods distinguishing all members of their respective clans. Thus, although a person is a member or 'owner' (*ina ngome*) of his or her father's clan, he or she is also a member or 'woman's child' (*papie ngaunga*) of the mother's clan on the basis of sharing the mother's clan blood. Moreover, since exogamous Mekeo clans were ideally organized in pre-colonial times into exogamous moieties, every child is said to embody the gendered bloods of the two moieties comprising the society at large.

Villagers, however, ordinarily trace the constitutive identities of their newborn children so as to include the child's four grandparents and their respective bloods and clans. Just as the child receives father's and mother's bloods in the forms of semen and womb-blood, the two parents were each conceived as a result of the mixing of *their* two parents' bloods. By means of these extended blood continuities, then, every newborn child is plurally conceived as a four-fold complement of its four grandparents' procreative clan bloods – father's father's and mother's father's semens, and father's mother's and mother's mother's womb-bloods. And since, according to the rules of exogamy and marriage exchange, the child's parents and grandparents would have been prohibited from selecting people of their own respective clans, moieties and mothers' clans as spouses, the clan bloods and clan identities of the child's four grandparents are ideally exclusive; the child's four grandparents, quite simply, must come from four separate exogamous clans, two from each moiety. For the same reason, the composite bloods transmitted to every child from grandparents and parents are non-redundant. Moreover, since a child's four grandparentally-derived bloods must originate from distinct exogamous clans, every village child possesses as components of his or her complete personal identity the bloods of the four clans comprising the tribal society as a whole (see Mosko 1985: ch. 6).

### *Ordinary de-conception*

Although for certain ritual purposes (see below) villagers do trace genealogical pedigrees beyond the grandparental generation, blood identities in ordinary human conception are not uniformly compounded further than the four grandparents. This is because at the moments of marital and mortuary exchange, villagers act to de-conceive themselves of the bloods of their two grandmothers and/or



grandmothers' clans. As I have described in detail elsewhere (Mosko 1983; 1985: ch. 6; 1989; 1991a), marital exchanges of pigs and other valuables between fathers' and mothers' clans of both bride and groom preliminarily de-conceive (*engama*) the prospective marital partners of their respective fathers' mothers' and mothers' mothers' bloods. In Strathern's terms, it could be said that relations between the bride or the groom to the members of their respective grandmothers' clans are detached from their personal identities. As a consequence, those blood and clan identities of the groom which are revealed as *not* detached from him (i.e. the bloods of his father's father's and mother's father's clans) are precisely those blood and clan identities which are revealed as indeed detached from the bride (i.e. the bloods of her father's mother's and mother's mother's clans); correspondingly, the bloods which are detached from the groom are those which are not detached from the personal identification of the bride. As a consequence (assuming that the rules of moiety and mother's-clan exogamy have been observed by the relevant parties), the compounded bloods of groom and bride are just four in number and non-redundant. In their pairing, de-conceived bride and groom thus join together the four clan bloods constitutive of the total, endogamous tribal unit. When bride and groom eventually mix their procreative bloods in sexual intercourse, each of their progeny will embody a complete complement of his or her four grandparental clan bloods and the tribal society as a whole.

In ordinary marital conception, then, relations among non-kin become relations of shared blood, kinship and cognation; in ordinary marital de-conception relations among erstwhile kin and cognates are transformed back into those of non-blood and non-kin, or of potential affinity. By manipulating their relations, villagers effectively transform the components of their own persons, their identities, themselves.

As for ordinary mortuary de-conception, I have described the process in greater detail in other publications (Mosko 1985: chs. 7 & 8; 1989). In brief, it accomplishes in final form what marital de-conception effects only tentatively. Through the exchange of raw foods at mortuary feasts, villagers effect the permanent de-conception or unmixing of the deceased's procreative clan bloods precisely as was rehearsed in his or her provisional marital de-conception. The 'true' as distinct from 'fictive' (i.e. marital) de-conception of the bloods comprising a person occurs at his or her death. In all other respects, the two ordinary de-conceptions are isomorphic. Specifically, in the presentation and receiving of garden foods and pigs, mortuary feast-givers (relatives of the deceased) de-conceive the deceased and, in accordance with blood connexions traced through him or her in life, return the female-derived, or grandmothers', bloods of the deceased to the clans of their origin. Conversely the feast-receivers, from their point of view, reclaim the bloods of their respective clans which passed into the bodies of members of other clans as a result of their female members having married and procreated persons with them. The mixing of distinct clan bloods initiated in conception following the marriage of the parents (and before that in the parents' own conception) is reversed by means of mortuary de-conception and the unmixing of those bloods once their use in life has been exhausted (fig. 1).

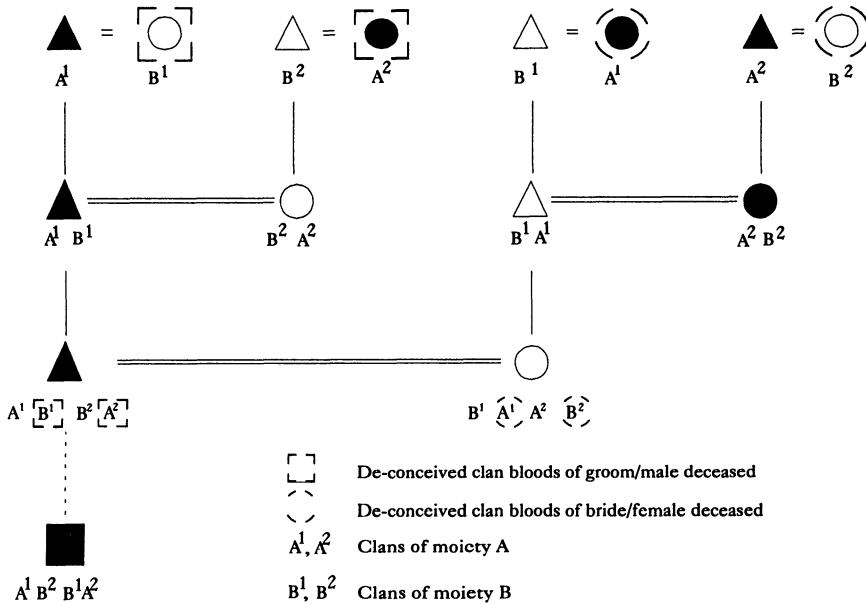


FIGURE 1. Ordinary marital and mortuary de-conception.

Several points must be emphasized here. First, the two processes of conception and de-conception, paralleling Strathern's notions of composing and decomposing, apply to all Mekeo persons whether they are commoners or installed hereditary officials. Secondly, before turning to the additional sorts of conception and de-conception appropriate only for hereditary chiefs and sorcerers, it should be noted that, since the father's and the mother's contributions to every child are *each* androgynously comprised of male and female elements (i.e. bloods from a grandfather and a grandmother), Mekeo constructions of human conception do not include the implication of a completely antithetical relationship between men's 'semen' or 'grease' and women's 'blood', as is frequently postulated in many other regions of Melanesia. Therefore, for the Mekeo, since semen and womb-blood are both androgynously constituted, they can be conceptually assimilated to one another as complementary types of a common substance, *ifa* ('blood') (cf. Bonnemère 1990).

Thirdly, when Mekeo persons are de-conceived, as I have described, members of different clans and moieties who earlier shared blood as cognatic kin become non-kin and potential affines. De-conception enables relatively 'distant' kin of the same endogamous tribe to renounce that kinship and thereby initiate new affinal ties and, following from them, new cognatic kin and blood relations.

Hence, fourthly, when villagers affect their de-conception, revealing thereby their capacities for action *vis-à-vis* clan, kin and affinal relations, their capabilities as agents consist in a condition of incompleteness or partialness as compared with the completed condition of the recently conceived infant or child. Only in a condition of relative incompleteness, in other words, are married adults

considered to be capable of significant action, that is, of effectively participating in the reciprocities and discourses comprising most village life. Relatively complete persons, such as infants, children and unmarried youths, are to that degree socially ineffective.

Fifthly, however, and most importantly for my purposes, the de-conceived condition of the marriage or mortuary celebrants is itself as yet an incomplete or partial de-conception. The bride, groom, deceased and survivors have been reduced from four to two shared bloods, but two others are retained – i.e. father's and mother's bloods or, with reference to the grandparental generation, father's father's and mother's father's bloods. There is still the potential for further de-conception. This is quite unlike Strathern's New Guinea Highlands or Massim prototypes who are described in their decomposed and agentive conditions as single-sex 'male' or 'female'. Therefore, although ordinary Mekeo agency is gendered, even after having externalized some of the relations of which they are composed in marital and mortuary de-conception commoner men and women remain androgynously constituted as both male and female at least in so far as their blood identities or blood relations are concerned. They simply have more bloods, more identities, more constitutive relations to start with.<sup>7</sup>

*Extraordinary conception and de-conception: chiefs and sorcerers*

This Mekeo deviation from Strathern's model of the prototypical Melanesian person-actor is critical, for it is the *further* de-conception of the already-de-conceived-but-still-androgynous ordinary villager to a non-androgynous, unambiguous state of pure masculinity which defines the hereditary status of sorcerers and chiefs and marks their power and authority as extraordinary. It is in their additional de-conception to a strictly male blood identity that Mekeo chiefly figures establish, as in Sahlins's view of Polynesian kings, their 'heroic' or 'divine' credentials and capacities *vis-à-vis* ordinary villagers, and return to the mythical beginnings of their society when people lived immortal lives.

Long ago, so the story goes, the ancestors of the Mekeo resided, not in villages, but underground in 'holes' or caves of the bush. Those ancestors consisted of men only. Lacking women, they knew neither birth nor death. When their skins became wrinkled with age, they just shed them like snakes or prawns and grew new, young ones. Consistent also with an existence lacking village amenities including women, the men of autochthonous Mekeo society had no gardens for food, they did not hunt and did not drink water.

Mythically, the transformation of this condition into that with which villagers are today familiar began when the leader of the ancestral group, a man named Foikale, emerged from his underground 'hole' and, walking about the bush, came upon the garden of the culture hero of all the Mekeo peoples, the god or spirit, Akaisa (or Oa Lope).<sup>8</sup> As a result of that and subsequent encounters, Akaisa bestowed on Foikale and his underground comrades the various amenities associated with village life: gardens, plant food, meat, water, fire and so on. As his greatest gift, Akaisa gave Foikale's men his own daughters and, through them, sexual relations and the means of conception and procreation. When the men of Foikale's group came out to the village and had children with their new wives,

those children married the children of Akaisa's group. Life and society as the Mekeo now conceive it was inaugurated.

Nonetheless, initially there were two major differences. In Akaisa's series of bestowals to Foikale, there was neither death nor any differentiation among the people according to hereditary, official specialization. According to myth, human death, and with it ordinary de-conception and the four-fold division of politico-ritual authority among peace chiefs, peace sorcerers, war chiefs and war sorcerers, came later.

Much of the remainder of this article consists of an analysis of the myth at issue in order to show how it is that the four types of hereditary clan official initially appointed by Akaisa, in their persons or in their ritual actions, effectively return or decompose Mekeo society to its autochthonous, strictly masculine origins.

The story which purports to describe the inauguration of the first chiefs and sorcerers begins when the spirit, Akaisa, assumes the shape of a young boy and allows himself to be adopted by an old and childless woman. Every day he goes hunting with the men, but all the animals go only into his net, avoiding the nets of other men. And even though Akaisa would have shared his meat with all the people, the men beat him and take all the big meat, so he is left with just the small immature animals. But Akaisa blows into the animals' anuses and they miraculously grow to enormous size, and he shares the abundance of meat with his mother.

One day, in retaliation for his repeated sufferings, Akaisa takes the women of the village fishing. After they arrive at the river, he steals those men's wives who have not yet given birth, allowing the women who do have children to return to their husbands at the village. That night Akaisa sleeps with the childless women in the bush. When their husbands come to kill him the next morning, Akaisa separates them into two groups, and with war sorcery he forces them to kill one another instead. Three times they kill each other, and each time Akaisa revives them. Finally, he distributes among these men the requisite powers and paraphernalia of the four categories of hereditary clan office. Some of the men become clan 'peace chiefs' (*lopia*), others become 'peace sorcerers' (*ungaunga*), 'war chiefs' (*iso*), or 'war sorcerers' (*faika*).<sup>9</sup>

Otherwise, there are two distinct endings to this episode of the myth. In one version, Akaisa kills the women so that their husbands are left without wives, or without the means of reproducing sons and heirs. In the other, it is implied that the wives of the chiefs and sorcerers are not killed but are eventually returned to their husbands, later to give birth to his (Akaisa's) and their (the women's) children.

The essential points here are (1) that the four types of chiefs and sorcerers experience 'death' followed by 'rebirth' on the model of snakes or prawns shedding their skins, that is, without the mediation of birth-giving women; (2) that according to one version of the myth, appointed chiefs and sorcerers are left without wives, and thereby without the means of sexually conceiving sons and heirs, and (3) that according to the other version, the first-born sons of the original title-holders are also said to be first-born 'sons' of Akaisa.

All three of these points distinguish chiefs and sorcerers from their commoner fellows; hence, the four types of hereditary entitlement obtained from Akaisa are

known collectively as *au akaisa* or 'Akaisa Men'. Beyond that, the points I have emphasized entail certain critical contradictions. There is the obvious discrepancy between the versions of the myth in which the women are killed and those in which they are not killed. But also, the different mythical elements here recapitulate circumstances in the Foikale myth quite inconsistently. For example, since the Akaisa Men's deaths are not final but are followed by rebirths, their condition following their official inauguration is like that of Foikale and his group *before* meeting Akaisa, and similarly as regards their wife-less condition in the one version of the episode's conclusion. According to the myth's other version, however, since their future sons and appointed heirs are (or will be) born of women, the Akaisa Men's condition resembles that of Foikale and his band *after* their meeting with Akaisa.

Fortunately, there is a sequel to the Akaisa saga, as I have related it so far, which helps to resolve these dilemmas. It focuses again on the themes of death, maternity and paternity, and claims to hereditary office but adds the notion of extraordinary or, one might say, 'heroic' mortuary de-conception. In this final episode, Akaisa quarrels with his younger brother, Tsabini. As the two trade aspersions, their dispute escalates to the point where, to trick Tsabini, Akaisa kills a pig and declares that it is his mother, which he feeds to his people in a great feast. Not to be outdone, Tsabini kills his actual mother and feeds her flesh to his people in a large feast. When Tsabini subsequently learns of Akaisa's deception, he kills Akaisa's son, his own namesake, young Tsabini, with sorcery. Akaisa responds by killing his own namesake, Tsabini's son, young Akaisa.

In his grief, Akaisa wanders across the Mekeo plain carrying his son's rotting body until he arrives at the crest of a mountain and there finally places the corpse on a rack so as to dry the bones. Each night, young Tsabini's bones turn to wallabies, jump down from the rack, and eat the grass growing there. When Akaisa discovers this, he calls all the Mekeo peoples to come and catch the wallabies with their nets. And with these wallabies Akaisa makes a mortuary feast. To every peace chief and peace sorcerer he gives part of his son's body and, hence, part of his own blood identity in the form of wallaby flesh, and these officials distribute the meat amongst the commoner people of their clans.

As the full myth ends, Akaisa is left with no sons born of his own wives, nor even his son's bones. This result is comparable to that of the previous episode when, according to the one variant, the newly appointed Akaisa Men lost their wives in death and thereby the prospect of producing sons and heirs through heterosexual conception; in other words, Akaisa gives the body of his own sexually conceived son to his appointed or *non-sexually* conceived sons or heirs who, themselves, lack sexually conceived sons and heirs of their own. Significantly, the Akaisa Men who receive the bones or wallabies of Akaisa's son do not themselves consume them, they are eaten strictly by the commoner members of their clans.

I mentioned earlier, in discussing ordinary de-conception, that the foods given at mortuary feasts for commoner villagers who have died consist of those bloods of the deceased which were originally derived from both grandmothers or grandmothers' clans (or alternatively, from the point of view of the de-conceived bride or groom, the bloods of spouse's clan and spouse's mother's clan). In the final episode of the Akaisa myth, Akaisa's bestowal of wallaby meat is also connected

with the giving of a grandmother's blood or flesh. Just before Akaisa and Tsabini kill each other's sons and their own namesakes, they kill their own 'mothers' and provision feasts with them. The myth effectively equates the flesh or blood of Akaisa's sexually conceived son with that of Akaisa's sexually-conceiving mother and, in reference to the alternative version of the earlier episode of the myth, with the bodies of Akaisa's 'wives' (i.e. the wives of the newly appointed Akaisa Men who went fishing with Akaisa and slept with him, survived and were returned to their husbands).

In sum, in this mythical mortuary feast Akaisa detaches and gives away to his own chiefly and sorcerer successors the flesh and blood of his mother, his son and his wives. These are bloods, relations, or parts of commoner persons which, it will be remembered, in ordinary marital and mortuary de-conception are *not* detached or given away. It is therefore of critical significance that all four types of Akaisa Men, like Akaisa himself, ritually detach from their persons and bestow on one another these constitutive cross-sex, feminine parts or relations in special meat portions, termed *iku fuka* (literally 'mountain magic'), comprised of special cuts of pig skin and organs and the intact carcass of a dog, at their own feasts of installation.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, in de-conceiving or reducing themselves in this way, they reveal their purely masculine identities and their extraordinary or magnified capacities as motherless sons of Akaisa.

It should be noted that in the mortuary feasts whose organization is the exclusive prerogative of peace chiefs, and which they perform on behalf of all their clanspeople, the ordinary de-conception of commoner villagers is always accompanied by the extraordinary de-conception of the feast-giving chief. At every mortuary feast, in other words, the host peace chief gives away some *iku fuka*, making the occasion equivalent to his rite of installation even if he performs it numerous times. The hereditary entitlements of the other three types of Akaisa Men – peace sorcerers, war chiefs and war sorcerers – do not allow them to de-conceive commoner villagers in ordinary fashion; only peace chiefs can do that. But they still possess the extraordinary capacity to de-conceive themselves of mothers', sons' and wives' bloods and relations in their own separate rites of inauguration. In those contexts, they too give and receive *iku fuka* and thereby affect purely masculine identities and extraordinary specialized powers over androgynous commoner men and women.<sup>11</sup>

Just as chiefs and sorcerers, and only they, can give or receive the special portions of *iku fuka*, they are forbidden from ever eating any of it themselves. If an Akaisa Man did eat a bit of *iku fuka*, even inadvertently, he would automatically relinquish his office and become an *ulalu* commoner. To Akaisa Men, *iku fuka* meat is their flesh, it is a part of themselves, in the same way that it was Akaisa's flesh and a part of himself, and they simply cannot eat it. Commoner villagers, however, are required to eat all of the *iku fuka* meat that their clan chiefs and sorcerers receive at feasts and installations.

Therein lie the extraordinary capacities of Akaisa Men towards commoners. The principle underlying all Mekeo ritual and sorcery is that the practitioner must first physically or mystically insert some small bit of human blood or tissue (*iofu*, 'dirt') into the body of his victim. Thereafter, the agent can employ various procedures from a distance to manipulate the victim and his or her future course,

leading the victim, say, to sicken or die, or to recover (Mosko 1985; Hau'ofa 1981; cf. Stephen 1979; 1987). As living chiefs and sorcery officials de-conceive themselves and implant these externalized *iku fuka* parts or relations into their subjects, they are empowered with Akaisa's extraordinary capacities over them. The legitimate, divine authority of Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers, therefore, is but one instance of a much more general type of sociality and practice wherein power and agency are dependent upon personal reduction rather than personal aggrandizement. And although the feasting acts of Akaisa Men make them extraordinary, motherless sons of Akaisa, they do not merely re-enact the condition of Akaisa at the end of the myth, shorn of mother, wives and son; in the partibility of their persons they also evince the strictly masculine and miraculous potentialities of the heroes at the myth's beginning – of Foikale and his companions reproducing without women and living without death.

### *Conclusion*

This examination of Mekeo politico-ritual organization and myth brings me back finally to the ethnological issues concerning Melanesian persons which I posed earlier. There is something to be gleaned, I suggest, from holding up Polynesia as a comparative backdrop to Melanesia; specifically, the divergences between the two most influential theories of social action in current Pacific anthropology become clearly apparent. There is, on the one hand, Strathern's image of the 'partible person' who, by detaching and externalizing his or her constituent parts or relations, reveals other persons' prior contributions and anticipates the reactions of still others. Personal agency here involves a reduction in the scale of the 'person'. With Sahlins's prototypical 'divine hero', on the other hand, the efficacious actor gathers the relationships of others into his or her person, and by increasing personal scale lives the life of society as a whole. Power and agency thereby consist in personal aggrandizement and hierarchical encompassment. The two models of Pacific sociality are thus oriented in opposite directions, the former towards simplification and subtraction, the latter towards extension and expansion.

In this perspective, the Mekeo case is pivotal. As Austronesian-speakers, the Mekeo participate in the same broad linguistic and cultural tradition as the chiefly Manam and all Polynesians, along with many others. And on superficial inspection, the Mekeo at least appear to possess a related variant of hereditary, 'hierarchical', redistributive politico-ritual leadership and authority. By regional affiliation, however, the Mekeo are Melanesians, and the official capacities of their chiefs and sorcerers derive, not from attaching to themselves relations with commoner people, but from detaching them, as mythically chartered by the deity, Akaisa. Although Akaisa Men become singularities, they are reduced rather than expanded to that condition, and it is through that reduction that they are extraordinarily capacitated. In their ritual actions, Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers de-conceive themselves into the parts and prestations of which commoner persons are ordinarily composed instead of enlarging themselves so as to incorporate the unit (i.e. society) which persons altogether compose. Once separated and exchanged in feasts, the de-conceived components of Akaisa Men's persons are distributed throughout the tribe. There is, then, a sense in which the Mekeo

heroes and society are identified. But it is not the Akaisa Men who encompass others, it is the other members of society who appropriate the chiefs' and sorcerers' de-conceived components and who are thereby rendered subject to them. As relatively incomplete persons, Akaisa Men are both counterposed to commoner villagers and divinely empowered towards them.

The Mekeo, therefore, are critically positioned in Pacific Islands anthropology, drawing attention to a possibly new dimension of comparability between Melanesia and Polynesia. Their hereditary chiefs and sorcerers may resemble heroic kings and chiefs, but in elaborating the notion of 'partible persons', they turn the hierarchical logic imputed by Sahlins to Polynesia inside-out, as it were.

Mekeo chiefly partibility and de-conception also touch upon certain ethnological themes which have usually been treated separately with respect to Melanesia and Polynesia respectively. Taking Melanesia first, Mekeo Akaisa Men represent one of many instances of 'chieftainship' which by now have been recognized in the region.<sup>12</sup> For most of the history of Melanesian ethnology, these societies have been considered fundamentally different in character from the supposedly more typical, 'egalitarian' and 'loosely structured' systems correlated with leaders of the big-man type (e.g. Sahlins 1963; Hau'ofa 1971; Allen 1984; Chowning 1977; cf. Thomas 1989; Jolly 1987). In this respect, Lutkehaus's assertion for Manam chieftainship – that it is a form of 'heroic' leadership associated with a quite different kind of social structure (1990: 180) – is but a recent instance in a long line of similar claims. My analysis of extraordinarily de-conceived Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers, however, shows how these 'hierarchical' systems might instead operate on similar principles to those that operate in the cultural contexts of other, 'non-hierarchical' Melanesian societies. In other words, much of the apparent distinctiveness of Melanesian hereditary chieftainships disappears once they are also examined as instances – albeit exaggerated – of 'partible persons'. If Melanesian thought and sociality approximate at all to Strathern's very general characterization of the region, one should expect more of the same wherever the capacity for action is deemed to be the greater. And by the same token, if detachability, decomposition, de-conception or whatever are as pervasive in Melanesia as has been suggested, then those same processes, or analogous ones, ought to be detectable with regard to parts and relations of persons other than those defined in terms either of gender or of other similarly dyadic constructions. The point is not that hereditary leaders everywhere in Melanesia must be extraordinarily 'partible persons' merely because Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers are; rather, the Mekeo case illustrates how chiefly agency elsewhere might be effected according to the same interactive logic and processes encountered in other domains of those same societies.

With specific respect to politico-ritual relations, my description of de-conceived Mekeo Akaisa Men indicates how the full range of Melanesian leadership types might at last be accommodated within a single, homogeneous analytical scheme. As 'partible persons', chiefs and other hereditary officials become recognizable transformations of the two other prototypical Melanesian leaders – big men and great men (see especially Strathern 1991a; Wagner 1991; Mosko 1991c; Godelier 1991: 301-3; also Godelier & Strathern 1991) – rather than instances of an essentially distinct sociological type. All being 'partible



persons', big men, great men and chiefs are of a single set. No longer must the 'hierarchical' systems of the Melanesian seaboard be regarded as 'significantly different' in kind from their evidently less stratified neighbours or from 'mainland New Guinea in general' (Lutkehaus 1990: 180).

What significance, finally, might Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers have for Polynesia? Sahlins's (1981; 1985a; 1985b; 1991) celebrated analyses of divine kingship among the Hawaiians, Fijians and Maori stand as the most influential characterizations of distinctively Polynesian sociality and agency. In my introductory section, I identified the key Dumontian underpinnings of Sahlins's formulations of 'hierarchical solidarity', 'heroic society' and 'heroic history'. Although Sahlins's overall structural-historical approach carries a number of implications which might apply to non-heroic, non-chiefly societies (Mosko 1991b; in press), his model of Polynesian social agency is rooted in notions of personal expansiveness, extension and encompassment. 'The king encompasses the people in his own person, as projection of his own being' (1985b: 214-15). Such historically efficacious persons are 'social-historical individuals':

Their acts engage social totalities, in the first place by virtue of structures of hierarchy in which as chiefs they encompass the others. This is logical as well as sociological; the chief represents the logical class of which the people are members (Dumont 1970) (Sahlins 1991: 63, citation in original).

In his earlier work, however, Sahlins (1972) had developed what seems to be a quite different model of the activity and organization of Polynesian chiefs (and chiefs elsewhere). They are not so much supercomposed persons as agents of material redistribution, who effect a 'collection from members of a group, often under one hand, *and redivision within this group*' (1972: 188, emphasis added). This 'redivision', being predominantly material, may assume a number of practical or instrumental forms: 'subsidizing religious ceremony, social pageantry, or war; underwriting craft production, trade, the construction of technical apparatus and of public and religious edifices; redistributing diverse local products; hospitality and succor of the community (in severalty or in general) during shortage' (1972: 190). Still, it is a chiefly *division*. The chief's or king's power, rank and position are as much a consequence of the partition, detachment and subtraction of wealth as they are of pooling, centralization and unity. In their critical redistributive functions, in other words, Polynesian kings and chiefs epitomize division and separation to no less an extent than do Mekeo Akaisa Men in their feasting prestations.

This element of redistributive separation, division or partibility, I suggest, is nonetheless evident in Sahlins's more recent disquisitions on Polynesian divine heroes, but with a rather different emphasis – neither material nor economic, but political and, especially, ritual. Polynesian kings and chiefs perform their definitive redistributive functions as 'stranger-kings'. Their bequests to the commoner people, therefore, amount typically to a divine 'sacrificial cult' (Sahlins 1981: ch. 2; 1985a: chs. 2-4; 1985b; 1991: 69-70). From Frazer and Hocart to Valeri and Sahlins, sacrifice has been deemed central to Polynesian chieftainship. And of course in the classic theoretical treatments on that subject – by Frazer, Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Hubert and Mauss, Radcliffe-Brown, and Leach, among others – *separation* or, if you will, *detachability* plays a critical part.<sup>13</sup> With Hawaii, for example,

Prerogative of the king, human sacrifice is what puts the god at a distance and allows mankind to inherit the earth ... [T]he temples consecrated in Hawaii by human sacrifice, *separating the 'sacred' (heavenly) from the 'secular' (earthly) or tabu (kapu) from noa*, would liberate the rest of the terrestrial plane for mankind. Something like that happens during the New Year ritual, as played out in the relation between Lono and the King. ... [W]hen Lono is gone, the king consecrates the main Ku temples by means of human sacrifices. He then tours the Island re-opening the fishing and agricultural shrines – agricultural shrines of Lono. *The king has been able to assume or put on Lono. Yet in order for the king to thus transfer to the people the fruitful benefits of Lono's passage, the god himself must be deprived of them. The god will be the first sacrifice of the New Year* (Sahlins 1985a: 115–16, emphasis added).

From the perspective of 'general sociology', Sahlins writes,

[T]he great chiefs and kings of political society are not of the people they rule. By the local theories of origin they are strangers, just as the draconic feats by which they come to power are foreign to the conduct of 'real people' or true 'sons of the land', as various Polynesians express it. The stranger-kings, we shall see, are eventually encompassed by the indigenous people, to the extent that their sovereignty is always problematical and their lives are often at risk (1985a: 78).

It should be added that, as their lives are 'at risk' with sacrifice, so is the integrity of their 'persons'.

The distributed sacrifices of Polynesian 'stranger-kings' thus appear to be detachments and decompositions not unlike Mekeo Akaisa Men's inaugural de-conceptions. And rather than somehow hierarchically encompassing the collectivities they represent, Polynesian kings, chiefs and, hence, the gods – or sacrificial tokens of them – are incorporated by the commoner people over whom they hold dominion.<sup>14</sup>

The case of Mekeo Akaisa Men thus directly counterposes Strathern's model of 'partible persons' to Sahlins's image of 'divine kings'. It has long been maintained in Pacific anthropology that Melanesian chieftainships (and especially the Austronesian-speaking varieties) are small-scale versions of Polynesian kingdoms. If so, then the latter must also be considered exaggerated instances of the former. If, in other words, Melanesian chiefs, like the Mekeo Akaisa Men I have described, are extraordinarily de-conceived or decomposed persons, then there are substantial grounds for arguing that Polynesian kings are likewise – perhaps even more so.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted also that Sahlins is not alone among Oceanists who have turned to Dumont and 'hierarchy' for inspiration; see also Valeri (1985a; 1985b; 1989); de Coppet (1981); Iteanu (1983; 1990a; 1990b); cf. Mosko (n.d.1).

<sup>2</sup> While Sahlins has embraced many features of Dumont's formulation of 'hierarchy', apparently including the idea that certain heroic figures encompass other persons and, hence, whole collectivities in their persons (as discussed below), his view of the opposition between 'individual' and 'society' seems to be closer to Strathern's; see for example Sahlins (1985a: xiv, 108, 156).

<sup>3</sup> I have elsewhere employed the same dichotomy in order to differentiate among whole theories of, or approaches to, social reproduction; see Mosko (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Other Melanesianists besides Lutkehaus have employed Dumontian formulations of hierarchy in their ethnographic analyses. However, these scholars (e.g. Iteanu 1983; 1990a; 1990b; de Coppet 1981) have worked with societies which apparently lack institutions of hereditary chieftainship.

<sup>5</sup> The ethnographic field research on which the following analysis is based was conducted among the Amoamo (North) Mekeo in 1974-76 and briefly in 1990 with the financial support of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences, the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University, and the Trustees of Hartwick College.

<sup>6</sup> Interested readers should consult Strathern (1988, especially Part 2).

<sup>7</sup> From this observation it is possible to envision a dimension or elaboration of Mekeo gender differentiation and complementarity that goes rather further than previous analyses in terms of the ritual alternations of bodily 'opening' and 'closing' for both men and women. Interested readers can be referred to Mosko (1983; 1985: chs. 4 & 5) as well as Strathern's (1989) reinterpretation of those materials.

<sup>8</sup> For a more extended treatment of the Akaisa or Oa Lope mythical cycle, see Mosko (1985: 95-9, ch. 8, 258-70); also Seligmann (1910: 304-9), Guis (1936: 220-6), Hau'ofa (1981: 77-83).

<sup>9</sup> Detailed descriptions of the division of ritual and political authority among these four categories of hereditary leader are contained in Mosko (1985: ch. 6, 8; 1991c; n.d.2) and Hau'ofa (1981).

<sup>10</sup> The specific symbolism of *iku fuka* flesh of dog and pig is discussed in Mosko (1985: ch. 8). It can be noted here, though, that villagers describe wallaby not only as Akaisa's son, Tsabini, but also as Akaisa's dog.

<sup>11</sup> This extraordinary chiefly de-conception is asymmetrical inasmuch as the officials always detach and exchange their female components in reducing themselves to their single-sex, masculine condition. The reverse asymmetrical, extraordinary de-conception, however, is mythically chartered in the culture, and in that instance it is women who, in relinquishing the masculine parts of their persons, become purely feminine flying foxes (*afinama*): see Mosko (1985: 97-9, App. 7) and Guis (1936: 189-93).

<sup>12</sup> A non-exhaustive list of additional Austronesian-speaking Melanesian chiefdoms would include the Roro, Motu, Nara, Kabad, Sinaugoro and Hula of Southeast Papua New Guinea (Seligmann 1910; Davis 1981; Groves 1963), the Trobriands (Malinowski 1922; Powell 1960; Weiner 1976; Mosko 1985: 209-33), the Kalauna (Young 1971; 1983; n.d.), the Wogeo (Hogbin 1960), the Baluan of Manus (Otto n.d.), Vanuatu (Guiart 1963; Allen 1984), New Caledonia (B. Douglas 1979; n.d.; Bensa 1982). A number of non-Austronesian-speaking chiefdoms have also been described, however, including the Purari, the Toaripi and the Elema of the Papuan Gulf (Williams 1940), and the Koita of Southeast Papua (Seligmann 1910).

<sup>13</sup> In this regard I wonder whether, in the act of detaching Strathern's insights on Melanesian practices from Melanesia and externalizing them in the direction of Polynesian forms of decomposition, we might reveal, in true Melanesian style, unsuspected components of our own embodied anthropological thought – thought which consists in the contributions of our predecessors to ourselves.

<sup>14</sup> Schwimmer's (1990) recent study of Maori leadership describes for the *hapu* 'subtribe' a cyclical process of 'incorporation' and 'limitation' virtually congruent with the Mekeo alternation of 'conception' and 'de-conception', and with the countervailing tendencies of chiefly encompassment and division implicit in Sahlins's treatments of Hawaii. In the case of 'incorporation', Schwimmer describes the process whereby the *hapu* group increases in range and hierarchization as members are added by bilateral recruitment. With 'limitation', Schwimmer points to the periodic necessity for the chief to sever relations among *hapu* members and divide the group. Insightfully, Schwimmer describes the conjoining of these opposed processes as 'characteristically Oceanic' (1990: 313).

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## **Des fils sans mère : 'rois divins' et 'personnes morcelables' en Mélanésie et Polynésie.**

### *Résumé*

Des ethnologues spécialistes des îles du Pacifique ont récemment proposé deux formulations très différentes de l'action personnelle. Pour la Mélanésie, M. Strathern a introduit le modèle de 'personne morcelable' qui, de par ses actions, se décomposerait *soustractivement* en autant de parties que de relations dont elle serait le produit. Pour la Polynésie, Sahlins a, quant à lui, invoqué l'image du 'roi divin', dont les actions héroïquement expansives engloberaient les autres membres de la société dans un ordre hiérarchisé. Cet article explore les implications contraires de ces deux modèles à partir d'un seul exemple, celui d'une chefferie mélanésienne, la société des Amoamo - de langue austronésienne - du Nord Mekeo en Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée. La comparaison des compétences rituelles des gens du commun et celles des autorités héréditaires, spécialistes des échanges maritimes et mortuaires, permet de suggérer que l'action personnelle des chefs polynésiens et mélanésiens correspond plus à la notion de 'personne morcelable' qu'à celle de 'hiérarchie héroïque'.

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