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‘Press the Button, *Mama!*’ Mana and Christianity on Makira, Solomon Islands

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Almost tearful, a 65-year-old widower in a rural Anglican parish on Makira Island, Solomon Islands, requested in Solomons Pijin: ‘*Presem baten nao, Mama!*’ (Press the button now, *Mama!*).¹ A valuable tribal heirloom in his possession had gone missing. The item had been passed on from his ancestors and legitimised tribal ownership of a certain disputed land. So the request to ‘press the button’ referred to a perceived ‘spiritual switch’ that when triggered would make ‘something happen’, and the item would be recovered.

In this chapter, I discuss the implicit theology of *mana* in the context of that ‘spiritual switch’ in Makiran Christianity. *Mena* is the native Arosi word for *mana*. To explore the implicit theology of *mena/mana*, I begin with examples of events I have experienced as an Anglican priest serving the community. Next, I review selected literature on *mana*, considering the usefulness of scholarly accounts for the Makiran context. Finally, I pose questions about *mana* and efficacy in relation to the idea of pressing buttons and the work of the Holy Spirit. I argue that a proper understanding of *mana* is vital to the continuing efforts

1 *Mama* is the Makiran word for father or dad, and also the title used for a priest.

of contextualising the Gospel in Makiran Christianity and clarifying Makiran contextual theology for scholars interested in the social dynamics of Solomon Islands religion.

Background

My approach is that of a *maamaani* (story/storytelling) based on the *hinihini* (strong belief) of Arosi people on northwest Makira Island. *Hinihini* refers to what Arosi hold to be true, our views of reality. *Maamaani* refers to an important story and the act of sharing this story. I further contextualise this *maamaani* as coming from the *raronai ruma* (inside of the house) in an Arosi *hanua* (home, land, place), the opposite of a view from an *abau'omaa* (outside of the house) perspective that is associated with visitors to Arosi. The two perspectives, *raronai ruma* and *abau'omaa*, are mutually supportive and involve a continuous dialogue. My *maamaani* shares in that dialogue about *mana*.

Fieldwork data for this *maamaani* comes from interviews and pastoral experiences during the Christmas periods of 2010, 2011 and 2012. Thirty-two informants were interviewed in 2011, with follow-up interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013. Although the view I express in this chapter is specifically from the context of Arosi, for the purposes of comparative analysis I also interviewed informants from Ugi, Bauro, Santa Ana, Kirakira (the provincial capital of Makira/Ulawa Province) and Honiara, the national capital located on Guadalcanal Island.

The people of Arosi number around 10,000 in the recent population census (Solomon Islands Government 2011: 12). The Pijin word *kastom* (custom), found in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, is also used in Arosi with similar meanings to the Arosi word and concept *ringeringe*. The anthropologist Michael Scott, who did fieldwork for his doctoral dissertation in Arosi, gives a useful discussion of *ringeringe* (our way of doing things) as it is used interchangeably with *kastom* (Scott 2007: 6–10; see also Lindstrom 2008).

The main Christian churches to which Arosi belong are the Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM), the South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC), and the Seventh-day Adventists (SDA). ACOM is rooted in the Melanesian Mission (MM), begun by George Augustus Selwyn, Bishop of New Zealand, who took the first Melanesians to New Zealand

in 1848 and later consecrated John Coleridge Patteson as the first Bishop of Melanesia (killed on Nukapu in 1871). After many years of missionary work, MM gained independence from the New Zealand 'parent' church in 1975 and became the Church of Melanesia. In the Provincial Synod held at St Nicholas High School, Honiara, in 2008, the present name the 'Anglican Church of Melanesia in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia' was adopted.

Meeting *mana*

My engaging with *mana* arises out of the need to understand how *mana* is applied in the mission and ministry of the church in Arosi and the wider ACOM context. We, Arosi, hold the *hinihini* that *mana* at work in the church comes from God. This belief is held in tension within a *hanua* where views about God are a mixture of pre-Christian and Christian ideas. This mixture affects how we contextualise Christianity. For example, our beliefs about *mana* and spiritual power, being *abu* (sacred), *mamaunga'a* (deep religious spirituality), being *maea* (holy), and *hairaru* (spell, charm) are pre-Christian concepts that affect our pragmatic approach to life. Arosi pragmatism influences expectations of efficacy and agency that are loosely configured in the popular Oceanic concept of *mana*. To be able to press a button is an example. Mama Jeffrey Mata described that button in the following way:

A battery is in this torch [holds out a torch (flashlight)]. The battery has *mana*, because there is power in it. But that *mana* cannot act unless you turn on the switch. That is *mana*. *Mana* is power where you apply something [switch], and then it [*mana*] will act [and have an effect]. (Interview with Mama Jeffrey Mata, 'Umara village, Ugi Island, 7 November 2011)

Although the torch used analogically in this example is an item bought in a trade store, the concept of 'activating *mana*' existed before torches and batteries were introduced to Makira, as can be seen in the words/concepts of *tagorahia* (to work) and *biringia* (activate; lit. to press). *Mana* that is working in that perceived spiritual switch is assessed by spiritual evidence that is manifest physically. Such evidence can come through either Christian or non-Christian means. Within Christianity, *mana* from God manifests through the clergy, members of religious orders such as the Melanesian Brotherhood

(known as *Tasiu*), their companions, *ha'ausuri* (catechist-teachers), and in the lives of ordinary Christians who believe in God's *huuna i mena* (true and everlasting *mana*).² Evidence from local *kastom* comes from *adaro* (ancestral spirits) and *kastom* magic or *hai'uaasi* (sorcery).

Simply put, if I don't press a button, then *mana* is not present in my interactions. I am ineffective as a church worker. The ability to press a 'button' connected to the spiritual wiring system of God is more readily seen in someone who is *mamaunga'a*. Such a person is *to'o mena* (has *mana*) and is able to control and direct events. As Charles E. Fox noted, the purpose of Arosi religion after all is 'to receive and use helpful *mena*, and to avoid or overcome harmful *mena*' (Fox 1962: 62).

How, then, does one approach or use helpful *mana* in contemporary Christianity? Such a question challenges contextual approaches to theology within Makiran Christianity. Consider the following selected stories of my encounters with *mana*.

Saudaria was a married woman in her late 50s. Although I did not interview her, I recorded her story because of her request. Seven years ago, Saudaria's husband left her. She reasoned that he had worked his *madu* (love magic) to 'capture' the heart of a much younger woman. I could not independently verify the use of love magic, but other villagers that I spoke with said the couple separated because she was plagued with harmful jealousy. It got to a point where the husband was never free to speak to his sisters without being accused of impropriety, which was unacceptable in Arosi *ringeringe*. Despite the best efforts by a succession of parish (and retired Arosi) priests, the Mothers Union, the Melanesian Brothers, the Sisters of Melanesia, the Sisters of the Church, and chiefs from both sides—from prayers to counselling to

2 The *Tasiu* (short form of *Retatasiu*), a 'Company of Brothers' (Fox 1962: 67), is an all-male religious order in Melanesia began by Ini Kopuria in 1925. *Tasiu* Kopuria is from the island of Guadalcanal. The companions to the *Tasiu* are a Church-wide group with thousands of members who support the work of the *Tasiu*. To become a companion, one is admitted by a *mama*, and makes a vow to the effect that a companion must always offer support in prayer and almsgiving to the *Tasiu*. A companion member makes promises as lifelong vows. Many former members of the *Tasiu*, commonly referred to as ex-*Tasiu*, have become companions, as well as members of the Roman Catholic Church, United Church in Solomon Islands, and South Seas Evangelical Church. A *ha'ausuri* (catechist-teacher) is a person who conducts daily morning and evening worship services. Excepting the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, a *ha'ausuri* also acts on behalf of a priest in many instances. A *ha'ausuri* is therefore quite an important figure in the spiritual life of Arosi villages because he is usually the first person that people run to for help in times of need, especially in situations where a priest is not immediately available.

kastom reconciliation of *ha'anagu* (to make a peaceful relationship)—Saudaria and her husband remained separated.³ She turned up a few days after I arrived in Arosi in 2011 with her candid but disturbing request.

I want you to pray for my husband so that something will *to'o* [happen] to him ... a big sickness, a heart attack ... that will make him lie in bed, helpless ... to make him realise [his] mistakes and then turn back to me ... his real wife ... When he is sick ... the woman he is with will leave him. But I will not [desert him] ... I will go to him and care for him. (Discussion with Saudaria, Tawaatana village, Arosi, Makira Island, 24 November 2011)

Saudaria then followed through with the Gospel verse in Mark 10:9 that priests say during church weddings: 'What God has joined together, let no one separate' (Church of Melanesia 1982: 243–49; Church of Melanesia 1985: 263). In Saudaria's emotive reasoning, her husband had lied to God, the angels in heaven, the *mama* who conducted the wedding, and to the Arosi public. He should be smitten with 'a big sickness, a heart attack' so that 'he can repent' and renounce his perfidy. And in all of that, I was to be the person to *biringia* my spiritual 'button' in order to make 'something' happen to her man.

If pressing the button can cause sickness, it can also heal. Another story concerns healing that was done by a certain *ha'ausuri*. A family of five was kept awake half the night as a teenage daughter suffered from horrible abdominal pains. The nearest rural health clinic was about three hours' walk away. However, they were unable to get medical help because a tropical cyclone was raging outside and kept the family indoors. Under such circumstances travel was dangerous. They finally managed to approach the village catechist at about 3:00 in the morning. As the girl's father said, 'The *ha'ausuri* came, pressed [a] button only ... [and] my daughter was healed'.

A second set of stories relates to the pastoral work of Colson Anawelau, an ex-*Tasiu* (Melanesian Brother), Mama Jeffrey Mata, and Mama Clayton Maha, Diocesan Mission Secretary in the Anglican Diocese of Huanuato'o. In Arosi there is a practice called *tongo* (off-limits) that is done on properties such as betel nut trees, coconut plantations and

3 A *ha'anagu* (to make a peaceful relationship) is an exchange of shell money by both parties to restore relationships.

bush gardens. I have seen examples of how this is done in *kastom* before I became a priest. First, a person takes an object of spiritual significance such as bone scrapings, hair, or fingernail clippings from a deceased relative. Pebbles from pre-Christian shrines have also been used. Then he utters a *haiaru* (charm) to invoke the *adaro* associated with the object. He then places this in a plantation, garden, or even in a dwelling. The spirit associated with the object becomes what is called a *didiusi* (protective spirit) or a *suura'i* (defensive mantle) that guards against potential thieves (in the case of a garden) and intruders (in a dwelling). A coconut palm frond or a bunch of dried grass is tied around a tree in a plantation to show that 'something' is placed in that area.⁴

A Christianised version is called a *tongo maea* (holy off-limits; that is, a *tongo* that is placed using Christian prayers). In some cases, a *mama* or *ha'ausuri* simply makes an announcement in chapel to inform villagers, followed by Christian prayers to *ha'aabu* (make a tabu) on a property. In other instances, a strip of red cloth or a bottle of *wai maea* (holy water) is tied to a stick and conspicuously placed in a betel nut grove or cocoa plantation to let the public know of the *tongo maea* (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. *Tongo maea*.

Source: Photograph by Aram Oroi, 'Ubuna village, Arosi, Makira Island, 23 November 2011.

4 Fox has given some pre-Christian examples in his writings (see Fox 1924: 254–64).

I checked with Mama Mata about this practice and he admitted initial skepticism and hesitance in doing it. Asked why, he replied that people often 'tested' a *tongo maea* to see if it was *mana*; that is, whether there was potency in the practice or not. In other words, people were 'putting to the test a perceived button' that was associated with the practice. 'When they do that, they end up getting hurt or even killed.' Mama Mata then shared an incident involving a man who harvested a bush garden over which a *tongo maea* had been placed. 'He came to my house in the middle of the night, mourning painfully. His private parts were so enlarged as a result ... they were as big as that thing', sighed Mama Mata while pointing to a reasonably large soot-blackened kettle that he used to boil water for tea. In harvesting the garden, this man had triggered 'a button', the results of which were clearly painful to him. Mama Mata prayed over the man for restoration to normalcy (which happened) and then followed through with teachings about the practical results of disobedience. The consequences of blatantly disregarding a *tongo maea*, blessed in the name of God who is/has *mana*, are physical as well as spiritual.

Colson Anawelau and Mama Clayton Maha were involved in what is called a Clearance Mission. This is a time towards Christmas when the Melanesian Brothers go out into villages to set up what is referred to as a Binding, a practice similar to a *tongo maea*. The idea of a Binding began to be formally accepted in some ACOM dioceses in the 1990s in order to address sorcery.

First, the *Tasiu* (Melanesian Brothers) went to villages and talked to people in order to discover the practices that were associated with elements of *mana* from *kastom*. Second, the *Tasiu* would collect and destroy the items that they discerned to be associated with sorcery, sometimes filling up a whole sack with an assortment of animal and human bones, dried herbs and *ria* (ginger), cloth, hair and magical lime from burnt coral or river shells. After that, they would ritually cleanse a village with prayer and holy water before setting up a Binding.

The Binding consisted of an *ariari* (stone enclosure) of about two metres square. In a Binding that I saw, a blessed pebble called *hau maea* (holy stone) was placed inside a three-inch waterproof container, and then buried in the centre of the *ariari*. Angels were then invoked to stand guard at the *ariari* in a spiritual radar-system that kept harmful spirits at bay and maintained peace and well-being in a village.

Arosi experiences have confirmed that people have been affected by a Binding, including instances where *adaro* from other parts of the Solomons were brought into a village where a Binding is in place.

For Anawelau, *mana* that was working with the Clearance Mission team enabled them to carry out their mission, including that of 'finding out' the *ria* planted for use in sorcery. For example, *mana* in a Brother's walking stick had a gravitational pull towards sorcery *ria*, a sort of 'zeroing-in' effect on *ria* planted in bush gardens. After clearance prayers, Anawelau said that he double-checked the next day just to be sure. He confirmed that the *ria* that they visited had wilted, which was a sign that *mana* had taken effect. They had activated something through their prayers.

On another occasion, Mama Maha went with two members of the *Tasiu* following requests by a certain rural parish to address sorcery. Rural Melanesian parishes consist of a number of villages. It took about one and a half months to visit every village and complete the Clearance Mission. Halfway through the mission, Mama Maha's team found out through prayers of Christian exorcism that a certain feared sorcerer was named in most cases of spiritual possession. Babies as young as two months old, who could not speak, even uttered the sorcerer's name. When the mission team came to the feared sorcerer's home village, they took him to the village chapel for questioning. He argued that his *kastom* magic was for healing. When requested to reveal the *kastom* objects and *ria* he used in his healing practices, he refused. Moreover, he demanded, 'If you want to prove me wrong, make me die, now, right now! If I am in the wrong, I would like to see it, now. If you are wrong, I would like to see it, too!' (Interview with Mama Maha at Alangaula, the Administrative Headquarter for Ugi Parish, Diocese of Hanuato'o, Ugi Island). One of the *Tasiu* took his walking stick, threw it in the air (above a chapel pew) where it hung on its own, and then said in Pijin, '*Babae yumi lukim*' ('We will see it'). They left the matter at that. The phrase 'we will see it' refers to the *hinihini* that the truth will be revealed.

The sorcerer reportedly collapsed three months later outside his house. He died instantly. His death was viewed as a situation in which he had requested a 'button' and had in the end triggered it. The community reported to Mama Maha that the sorcerer's tongue spilled out to about

a metre from his mouth. This was taken as a demonic sign of his having lied to the Clearance Mission team. The tongue is meant to tell the truth, but a refusal means it will be spilled out to 'reveal' the truth.

In these stories, *mana* is recognisably Christian—it depends on a church leader metaphorically pressing a button—but it also evidently has ties to pre-Christian *hinihini*. In the next section, I examine traditional interpretations of *mana* and consider its philosophical basis.

***Mana* and the anthropological literature**

Mana has been debated ever since scholars first learned about it, with a massive literature and many controversies regarding interpretation, description and definition. Writing in 1940, Raymond Firth commented that 'despite sixty years of discussion and a bulky literature', arguments about the nature and meaning of *mana* 'are still far from settled' (1940: 483). The controversies go back to Robert Henry Codrington, who defined *mana* as 'a supernatural power or influence' that 'works to effect everything which is beyond the ordinary power of men, outside the common processes of nature; it is present in the atmosphere of life, attaches itself to persons and to things, and is manifested by results which can only be ascribed to its operation' (1891: 118–19). For Codrington, *mana* is spiritual power that, in its presence or absence, shows in results experienced by the human senses. Many other scholars have followed this general interpretation, including Friedrich Rudolf Lehmann, R.R. Marett, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, and Émile Durkheim. *Mana* was interpreted as a substantivised force or power. In other words, an understanding of *mana* as spiritual power can lend itself to a view of *mana* as a metaphorical substance.

Recent scholars have been skeptical about Codrington's interpretation of *mana*. For example, Ben Burt states that there are 'serious doubt[s] on the way many writers, mission scholars and anthropologists, Solomon Islanders and Europeans' follow Codrington's interpretations (1994: 54), and Darrell Whiteman writes that 'Western scholars, including Codrington, have made far more of it [*mana*] philosophically and intellectually than would Melanesians' (2002: 74). Firth clarified this by saying:

too often it is the European's own conception of the meaning of the term that has been placed on record and not an exact translation of texts spoken by the natives themselves ... The observation and analysis of actual native behavior in situations where *mana* has been used as an explanatory concept is at a minimum. It is particularly to be regretted that Codrington, who knew his Mota people well, did not base his exposition on the analysis of examples which he actually recorded or observed, but instead composed some of them for his purpose. (Firth 1940: 488)

Firth's argument is taken up further in Roger Keesing's article, 'Rethinking Mana', where he argues that Codrington used 'insecure ethnographic evidence' that was 'deeply flawed' and 'fundamentally erroneous' (1984: 138). Keesing counters that *mana* is:

canonically a stative verb, not a noun: things and human enterprises and efforts are mana. Mana is used as a transitive verb as well: ancestors and gods mana-ize people and their efforts. Where mana is used as a noun, it is (usually) not as a substantive but as an abstract verbal noun denoting the state or quality of mana-ness (of a thing or act) or being-mana (of a person). Things that are mana are efficacious, potent, successful, true, fulfilled, realized: they 'work.' Mana-ness is a state of efficacy, success, truth, potency, blessing, luck, realization – an abstract state or quality, not an invisible spiritual substance or medium. (Keesing 1984: 138)

Keesing further emphasises that to philosophise or theologise spuriously about 'mana as a diffuse *substance*, an invisible medium of power that humans sought from ghosts, spirits, and gods' is a metaphysical 'creation of European, not native, theologians' (Keesing 1985: 203). For Keesing, contemporary linguistic and ethnographic evidence suggests a 'tripartite usage of mana as stative verb, active verb, and abstract noun' (Keesing 1985: 203). Recent scholarly writing on *mana* generally agrees with Keesing (Blevins 2008; Blust 2007; Keesing et al. 1989; MacClancy 1986; Tomlinson 2006).

Taking a similar approach to Keesing's, Esau Tuza, a theologian and minister in the United Church in Solomon Islands who comes from the Western Solomons, writes that *mana*:

is often spoken of in terms of 'impact' made on man and its sources ... Suppose you came across a dead tree that suddenly falls and almost hits you in the face. You were missed by inches. Mana is not spoken of as some power or person felling the tree, but rather as the force that directs the tree to 'miss' you and so save you. (Tuza 1979: 102)

Tuza then explains three ways in which *mana* is accessed. First, *mana* is 'determined by a person's own skills or gifts in life' and is transferrable, from mother to daughter for instance; second, it is a gift from the supernatural world, and exists as part of a blessing of creation; and third, it is accessed through the *Sope* ritual (1979: 104–05). The *Sope* is a *kastom* house, built with rituals and charms in which ancestors imbue their descendants with *mana*.⁵

Tuza is a significant author because he is a native Melanesian. Most well-known interpretations of *mana* have been made by non-Melanesians and contribute to Keesing's concern about issues of cultural mistranslation. Additionally, *mana* as a force that directs a tree to save a person indicates that one can 'use and direct' *mana* through 'a reality [that] involves a living relationship' connecting spirits and humans (Tuza 1979: 103). Tuza's explanation correlates with Codrington's, that 'this power, though itself impersonal, is always connected with some person who directs it; all spirits have it, ghosts generally, some men' (Codrington 1891: 119).

For a spirit to potentiate *mana* there needs to be a living relationship with a human being. Only through that connection can one witness the idea of having *mana*, or have the quality of being *mana*-ised (Keesing), which is what we Arosi refer to as *to'o mena*. On that note, in Western Christianity a traditional and strongly held viewpoint suggests that a living relationship between spirits and humans is un-Christian, wrong and unhealthy. Codrington did not suppress this important idea about spiritual connections. Tuza therefore brings additional clarity to the argument about how *mana* is interpreted, and so can be seen to give credibility to Codrington as an observer, whose views represent in some ways a Melanesian perspective that can be respected and not dismissed as a western misinterpretation (see also Kolshus, this volume).

5 In some ways, the *Sope* house resembles the sacred space and place that a contemporary church building offers to Melanesian Christians, where God who is/has *mana* is met daily in the Liturgical life of a community.

Closely aligned with Tuza is Fox, who defines Arosi *mena* as ‘spiritual power’ (Fox 1970: 254).⁶ As Fox writes: ‘certain places are impregnated with *mena*’, ‘words handed down from old times possess *mena*’ and ‘certain men can manipulate it and cause it to pass into objects’ (Fox 1924: 252). Arosi refer to Fox’s third example—to make *mena* pass into objects—as the ability to *ha’atarauhia i mena* (to make *mena* move). The idea that *mana* can be manipulated strikes a chord with Tuza’s view that *mana* can be inherited/bestowed and used/directed/transmitted. I argue that the idea of directing *mana* is dependent on a spiritual connection, a living relationship that is perceived as a stringed-connection that can take place through *manawa* (breath), *haiaru* (spells, charms), and *iirara* (to find out; as in divination). In a certain sense, this accords well with physical metaphors of buttons, cords, electricity, and the idea that *mana* is made to move through connections (see also Mills, this volume). In the context of Melanesian priestly ministry in ACOM, which is rooted in teachings about Apostolic Succession, a *ha’atarauhia i mena* takes place during a priest’s ordination with the laying on of hands with prayer.

I checked with my non-ordained informants about how they have access to *mana*, and the answer given was that *mana* from God is made available to Christians during baptism, making a living connection between baptism and God’s mantle of protective *mana*. Sister Catherine Rosa, a member of the Sisters of Melanesia, also mentioned that she was given access to *mana* during her baptism, but added that her admission into a religious order has ‘empowered’ her with ‘more *mana*’. As a result of this *mana* from God, she was able to enter as a woman into a shrine on her island of South Malaita and ‘nothing happened to her’. That is, the spirits in the shrine did not attack her or make her sick.

Fox also mentioned *mana*’s use as a transitive verb, as in *ha’a mena* (cause to be *mena*) or ‘to make a thing [to be] *mena*’ (Fox 1970: 254). However (and here is where Keesing’s argument about abstract metaphysical constructs becomes an issue), Fox went beyond simply understanding *mana* as a verb. In doing that, he risked defining *mana*

6 Charles Elliot Fox (1878–1977), an Anglican missionary-priest and scholar who spent nearly 70 years with the Melanesian Mission, lived on Makira for about 15 years, with the better part of that time spent in Arosi. We respect his views because he came to Arosi and did what we call *mono* (to live a lifetime), instead of doing on-and-off visits.

as a substance or force that could have similarities to the Biblical concept of the *ruach* of God. James D.G. Dunn describes the Hebrew sense of *ruach* as 'an invisible, mysterious, powerful force' that 'can be disturbed or activated in a particular direction, can be impaired or diminished and revive again', and is meaningful when understood as 'a supernatural force taking possession' of a charismatic person or a prophet (Dunn 2006: 5–6). It appears that Dunn's explanation of *ruach* is applicable to the idea of *mana*-isation—the quality or state where someone is *to'o mena*.⁷

Having said that, to fully understand the power of the term *mana*, one needs to understand the power of the sacred or spiritual that both underlies the concept and also helps constitute it. Fox viewed *mana* not just as a verb but also as 'something' that could be linked to the Christian God. In doing so, Fox was able to convey a far better understanding of *mana* to the people of Arosi because he fully understood the sacred in a way that Keesing was perhaps unable to.

I also sense that Keesing's difficulty in understanding *mana*'s spiritual dimensions comes from a hesitation to commit his *hinihini* in the face of western rationalism. He did enter the *raronai ruma* in Kwaio to observe *mana* at work (Keesing 1978: 246–56). But having done so, he was held back by the rationalistic approach that guided his anthropological enquiry. This might not have been a weakness on Keesing's part, but the problem is that it made him appear to watch from either a 'doorstep' or a 'window' of a Melanesian *ruma*. In addition, Keesing's disregard of *mana* in Christianity mirrors the general attitude of hostility towards Christians by non-Christian Kwaio. For a Christian to enter non-Christian Kwaio territory without invitation and proper *kastom* protocol is, even in contemporary Malaitan society, nothing short of asking for serious trouble.⁸

7 Drawing on Fox and Keesing, as well as my own knowledge, I can offer a contemporary Arosi tripartite understanding of *mana*: first, as a stative verb when we speak of '*a mena*, 'it' works; second, *mena* as an active verb when we speak of '*e mena*, a word/action that involved *mena* or was brought about because of *mena*; third, as a noun, *i mena*, a word/action that was possible through a quality or state of being *mana*.

8 A group of westerners were lucky to escape with their lives after breaking all ancestral *tabu* by taking toilet paper with them into a non-Christian Kwaio village (Montgomery 2004: 198–99).

Given that both Keesing and Fox had a deep respect for Melanesians, one can hazard a suggestion that they wrote from two opposing perspectives. Keesing argued as an anthropologist with a low opinion of Christianity who refused to accept that *mana* is a contemporary social ‘force’ worthy of understanding, and Fox wrote from a Christian spiritual view influenced by his *mono* (living a lifetime) in Melanesia. In interpreting *mana*, they faced two conceptual difficulties: (a) the difficulty of proving *mana* empirically using linguistic evidence; and (b) the difficulty of disproving *mana* when there is spiritual evidence. Citing Paul Radin’s arguments (1937: 13), Robert Blust reasons that these differing interpretations point ‘to differences in the data rather than to differences in the approach or temperament of the investigators’ (Blust 2007: 405). Blust has a point, but the differing views proposed by Fox and Keesing suggest that their beliefs did affect their interpretation of *mana*.

It is noteworthy that when both Fox and Keesing died, their mortal remains were returned to the people with whom they lived and had come to love and respect. Fox was buried at Tabalia, headquarters of the *Tasiu*. Keesing’s ashes were given to the people of Kwaio (Macintyre 1995).

***Mana* and contextualising Christianity**

What does the above suggest about contemporary Arosi understandings of *mana* when viewed through the work of the Holy Spirit?

From a *raronai ruma* perspective, I argue that western concepts of *mana* as a force or power are just part of the story and do not fully explain or understand *mana* when based on observations excluding spiritual experiences. Failure to fully understand the spiritual dimensions of *mana* is problematic, although Keesing’s insights into *mana* as a verb—as doing something, not as a thing—are important. In other words, it is one thing to observe *mana* at work. It is also another thing to actually become an instrument of *mana* to direct and manifest *mana*.

During my conversation with Anawelau, I was using a small audio recorder that could fit in the palm of my hand. At the same time, I was also charging a mobile phone as a standby recorder in case I ran out

of batteries. The mobile phone was plugged into a small convertor and connected to a portable five-watt solar panel placed in the sun a few metres away from where we were sitting. Anawelau looked at the gadgets and then said, 'You see, that is *mena* at work. In the past, if you want to send an important message to Kirakira, you have to walk or paddle. Nowadays, you simply go outside of your house, press buttons, and then you talk to people through that mobile phone.'⁹

Anawelau could not have been more right in picturing *mana* through the buttons of a mobile phone. Moreover, he highlights Tuza's point about *mana* and relationships. Buttons connect to somewhere. Human relationships beget a movement of 'something' being transmitted through the airwaves and connected to a device held in one's hand. *Mana* as that 'something' must move in order for 'it' to manifest or show out. Without that movement through connections *mana* will have no effect.

That is to say, Makiran understandings of Christianity find validity in Whiteman's comment about religion being 'more experiential than it is cerebral. It is a religious experience that people feel more in their livers or their stomachs, than in their heads' (Whiteman 2002: 66). On that note, Christianity in Arosi is not the kind that is necessarily buoyed with systematic explanations of complicated theories about *mana*. An Arosi *maamaani* that could credibly be ascertained within Arosi *hinihini*, their *ringeringe*, and a walking stick that could hang in midair because of *mana* from God is what matters to Arosi Christians. In that regard, my attempt at deconstructing *mana* is enmeshed in what Solomon Mamaloni termed 'the foreign Jesus Christ culture' that brought Christianity to Arosi (Mamaloni 1992: 14) and raises tensions in contextual Arosi theological constructs. One main area has to do with the need to be clear about *mana* that forms the core of the Gospel message as it is contextualised. This is challenging in Arosi when spirits and spiritual forces continue to find some form of manifestation

9 In 2011, a telecommunications company called Solomon Telekom had set up solar-powered telecommunication towers at Alangaula on Ugi, at Pakera in Bauro, and Aboru in Arosi. These offered a limited form of communication via mobile phones, but only on some areas along the coast of north Makira. For some villages, connecting to the network meant walking for up to two or three hours to a 'hotspot' in order to catch the signal from the tower. Other people paddled out in small canoes to 'specific locations' on the open sea to catch the signal. Mobile phones are also expensive items for rural peoples and only those who can afford them have one. Also, Solomon Islands is probably one of the most expensive places in the Pacific to make domestic and international phone calls.

in a *hanua* that must be attentive to *kastom* magic, syncretism and animism as viewed from the standpoint of teachings about the work of the Holy Spirit.

What I can say about *mana* in Arosi is that how *mana* works and moves and has an effect depends on the context, the individuals inside the context, and what they ascribe to be *mana* or to have the quality of being *mana*. The *hinihini* that we, Arosi, hold about God, spirits and/or spiritual forces affect these understandings. Additionally, *mana* exists independent of actions/words, but is only realised when *mana* is made manifest, shows out, makes a display. That is to say, *mana* exists both inside and outside of words/actions, but *mana* can only be known as *mana* when *mana* is working and moving and having an effect.

Conclusion

To sum up, interpreting and ascribing *huuna i mena* (true and everlasting *mana*) to the work of God's Holy Spirit is meaningful within an Arosi *hanua* in distinctive ways. First, *huuna i mena* is that which existed before creation. No human effort can bring about its existence, because it is part of the blessing of creation. In this sense, *mana* and its connections to natural phenomena like thunder and lightning (Blust 2007: 415–16) are meaningful because the world is God's creation. Second, *mana* that is associated with the mysterious workings of God is capable of acting all at once as a noun, a verb, and an adjective. We cannot describe it because, as Serah Gede Tanara, an informant, explained to me, 'I see the effect of *mena*, but I don't know where *mena* comes from or where it is going' (compare this to the New Testament idea of wind and Spirit in John 3:8 and Acts 2:1–4). Third, *mana* and the movement of the Spirit is meaningful to Arosi in the sense that *huuna i mena* is capable of manifesting inside and outside of hierarchical human structures and is not restricted to a particular class of people. This leads to the fourth point, that *mana* is associated with relationships and connections. The metaphor of *mana* as electricity (Fox 1924: 252; Handy 1927: 28) appears useful and fitting in this sense. Without connections, batteries in torches cannot be activated. In like manner, God's Spirit thrives in relationships, a Spirit that moves and manifests within human connections. Identifying *mana* that is of/from God remains a challenge in Arosi contextualisation of Christianity.

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