

Chapter 12. Self-Scaling the Earth: Relations of Land, Society and Body Among North Mekeo, Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

The language spoken by the North Mekeo peoples of the Central Province of PNG has been classified by linguists (Jones 1998; Ross 1988) as one of three dialects of Mekeo in the Western Papua Tip cluster of Western Oceanic. Consequently, their language possesses many contemporary reflexes of Proto-Austronesian reconstructions. With regard to the topic of territorial categories and institutions, for Proto-Austronesian **banua* and **tanah* rendered as 'land', 'territory' or 'dwelling place', North Mekeo have *paunga* and *ango*, or 'village' and 'land', respectively.¹ Note that Proto-Oceanic for 'land' is **tanoq* (Pawley and Ross), *tana(q)* (Grace 1969a) or **panua*. In this chapter, I explore the meanings villagers themselves attribute to these notions, roughly extending to generalised understandings about space and time, particularly the contours of human society and the human body.

The last of these domains—the human body—might initially appear to fall outside the theme of this volume. However, as I have described about North Mekeo culture earlier (Mosko 1985), space and time, society and the body are conceived as homologous and interconnected. Moreover, in recent publications (Mosko 1992, 1997, 1998a, 2001a, 2000b, 2002), I have been investigating additional related dimensions of North Mekeo sociality, particularly the dynamics of personhood, chiefly agency and socio-cultural change, which may now shed considerable new light on North Mekeo notions of territoriality. I thus begin within some of the parameters of my original accounts of North Mekeo culture, social organisation and embodiment. First I locate North Mekeo notions of village and land in the local cosmology of the entire world, *ango faka*, as comprising two distinctive kinds of space, the village or human world, *paunga*, understood to be an 'outside' place, and the bush, *ango aonga*, or 'inside' land, an 'inside' place. In the temporal rhythm of daily human activities, however, the village/bush spatial duality is recursively crosscut by the inside/outside distinction to produce a fourfold totality of space-time relations—a structure of bisected dualities that I have characterised as distinctive to the culture generally.

Thus North Mekeo notions of land and village are first apprehended through temporal coordination of inside and outside spaces.

It is in accordance with these same dimensions of meaning that North Mekeo conceptualise the human body and society. In the second section, therefore, I attempt to summarise how indigenous classifications and processes involving the human body and social relations in analogous terms of inside and outside also conform to the dynamics of the bisected duality pattern. Borrowing the terminology of chaos theory, I argue that for North Mekeo, world, body and society are not merely formally analogous, they are fractally connected dimensions of one another, thereby constituting an instance of self-similarity or self-scaling (Gleick 1987; Stewart 1989; Mosko in press).

In the third section of this chapter, I introduce newly acquired ethnographic information suggesting that the lands, bodies and social relations of North Mekeo are understood to be *substantively* as well as structurally connected. In several field trips in the past decade, I have learned of a substance termed *ngaka*, which is thought to cycle between villagers' lands, bodies and social relations in the course of human life and death. Interestingly, North Mekeo can be seen here to qualify as a coastal Melanesian instance of the 'fluid ontologies' characteristic of non-Austronesian groups in the Highlands of PNG (Goldman and Ballard 1998; Stewart and Strathern 2001) and the 'flow of life' which has been reported widely for Austronesian-speaking societies of South-East Asia, particularly Indonesia (Fox 1980). In this context, I focus on the implications of processes and transactions involving *ngaka* in accordance with other writings concerning 'partible personhood', sociality and agency among Mekeo specifically and in Melanesia generally (Mosko 1985, 1992, 1995, 1998b, 2001a, 2002; Strathern 1988; Wagner 1986, 1991). In short, the critical element of interpersonal exchange and elicitation of which North Mekeo people and social relations are composed and decomposed is the substance, *ngaka* acquired originally from resources and beings of the territorial world, incorporated into the bodies and relations of human beings and, on death, returned to the ground in human burials. I regard this emendation of the North Mekeo ethnographic record to be itself of considerable ethnological value as it conjoins recent discussions of the dynamical fluid ontologies of the New Guinea Highlands and the flow of life across Indonesian societies with the supposedly distinctive Melanesian notions and processes of personal partibility and sociality.

With these points as ethnographic background, in the final section I focus on the intersection of North Mekeo notions of territoriality and personal agency with chiefly polity. Mekeo people have by now become one of the more well-documented examples of Austronesian-speaking 'chiefly' societies in Melanesia (see Seligmann 1910; Guis 1936; Hau'ofa 1981; Stephen 1974, 1995; Mosko 1985; Bergendorff 1996). Yet there remain in the recent ethnographic

and historical literature of Mekeo (as for many other Austronesian-speaking societies in the Pacific) questions about the exact nature of 'chieftainship', and particularly the nature of chiefly agency (Mosko 1991a, 1992, 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 2001b; Hau'ofa 1971, 1981; Powell 1996; Hage 1998; Scaglione 1996; Peterson 1999; Stephen 1995, 1996, 1998; Bergendorff 1996; Rumsey 1999). With reference to the foregoing analysis of North Mekeo classifications of space, time, body, person and society, I attempt to clarify the nature and territorial extent of Mekeo 'chiefdoms'.

The Village and the Bush

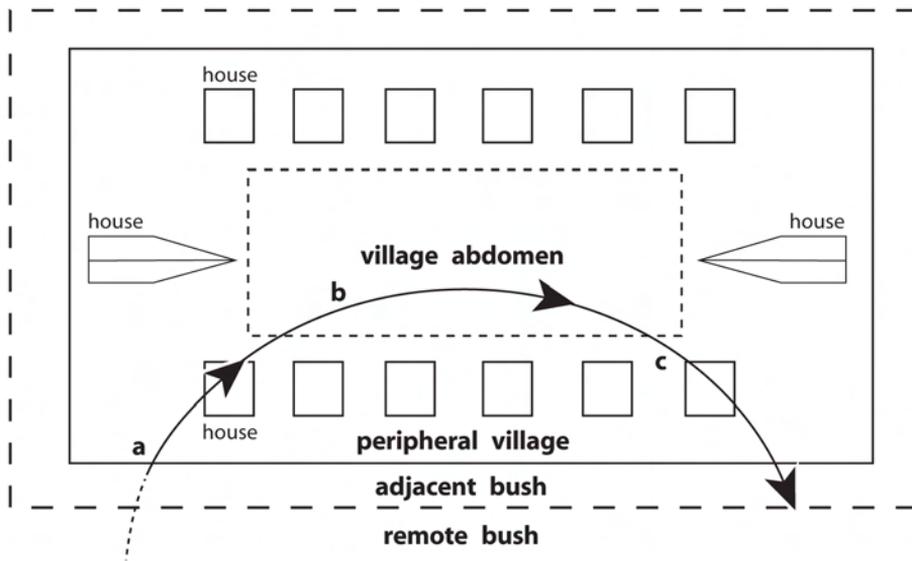
The entire world, *ango faka* (lit.: 'great world'), for North Mekeo consists principally of two kinds of place, the village, *paunga*, and the bush, *ango aonga* (lit.: 'land inside'). As the label indicates, the bush is conceived as an inside place. Thus when passing from the village to the bush, people or things 'go inside' (*ke koko*). Correspondingly, the village is viewed as an outside place, and moving from bush to village is to 'go outside' (*ke pualai*). This nomenclature is in fact used quite regularly in villagers' discourse, as one often hears people remark, 'So and so has gone inside' (i.e. to the bush) or 'So and so is coming out' (i.e. returning from the bush to the village). And the existential experience of villages as relatively open places as compared with the enclosed, lushly vegetated, canopied spaces of the bush generally is consistent with the outside/inside designation.

Mekeo villages (*paunga*) are named and possess distinctive histories of their original settlement (see below). Stereotypically, villages are rectangular in layout, with a peripheral fence or hedge (*fangapu*, literally, 'skin place') of colourful crotons dividing the village from the surrounding bush. Domestic houses are arranged along the length of the village in parallel rows. Two clan clubhouses (*ufu* or *kofu*), each belonging to a different resident clan, stand facing one another at opposite ends of the village. The domestic dwellings and clubhouses, however, along with all other artefacts of daily life, are concentrated on the perimeter of the village, as the central promenade, termed the 'village abdomen' or 'womb' (*paunga inaenga*) is ordinarily kept entirely clear of all structures.² It is in the village abdomen that many of the most important rituals are performed, most significantly mortuary feasts, and in pre-colonial times it was in the ground underneath the abdomen that people buried the bodies of their dead relatives. The abdomen of every village thus served as the ritual focus for the human groups who resided there (Mosko 1985: Ch. 2).

While village and bush are thus opposed categories as outside to inside, human life is dependant largely on regular movements and transformations of objects between the two domains (Figure 1). A preponderance of things composing the village perimeter—the building materials for all types of human dwellings (domestic houses, chiefs' clubhouses, platforms)—are obtained from bush

materials and are transformed into village resources. Garden foods and nearly all other things processed and consumed by human beings in the village are similarly obtained in untransformed states from the bush. Indeed, the very space constituting a Mekeo village was initially cleared 'out' of the inside space of the bush. This means that the outside village contains much that originated in the inside bush.

Figure 1: Village, bush and daily transfers between them (after Mosko 1985: 36)



At the same time, the inside bush regularly receives contributions of essentially outside village products. In particular, it is in the region of the bush immediately surrounding the rectangular village where human beings deposit their waste products—their own bodily waste products and all the other detritus of their daily lives. Thus just as the village is inhabited by considerable amounts of transformed bush materials at the perimeter, a significant part of the bush contains large quantities of transformed village materials deposited in the bush adjacent to the village. But before village wastes are carried to the nearby bush, each morning they are swept and gathered into piles in the village's central abdomen.

So as a consequence of this temporal two-way transfer of materials between village and bush, each of the two zones is bisected. The peripheral zone of the outside village largely comprises bush materials transformed by human labour into village resources. In the *paunga's* abdomen those things are accumulated once their usefulness has been exhausted. The remote bush is the source of materials for village resources, and it is in the adjacent ring of bush space

surrounding the village that those things are redeposited once they have become wastes. In terms of inside and outside, the village contains one unambiguously outside place, the peripheral zone of transformed village resources, and an ambiguously *inner* part of the outside village, the village abdomen where wastes accumulate. Analogously, the bush contains one unambiguously inside place, the remote bush, and the ambiguously *outer* part of the inside bush adjacent to the village where human wastes are deposited. The North Mekeo world as a totality is thus constituted of an initial duality of inside bush and outside village, which is bisected by the same duality again to result in purely inside and outside spaces plus an 'everted inside' space of the bush adjacent to the village and an 'inverted outside' at the village's central womb.³

Following my own work (1985: 32), these relations can be characterised as:

inside	:	outside	::	inverted	:	everted
				outside	:	inside
remote	:	peripheral	::	village	:	adjacent
bush	:	village		abdomen	:	bush

Within the Austronesian sphere, I do not believe that this classificatory patterning of village and bush is unique. Although cast in the different terms of the sea versus land, Sahlins has identified for Fiji, and thus for much of the remainder of Polynesia, basically the same structure of a bisected duality (Sahlins 1976; see also Hocart 1936; Valeri 1985).

The Human Body

The specific North Mekeo designations of the village and bush as outside and inside, respectively, may seem peculiar and counter-intuitive to many English speakers. For example, people live 'in town', and when they go to the countryside for holiday they get 'out of town'. However, the sense of North Mekeo inside and outside territorial designations and their inversions and eversions becomes perhaps more apparent in respect of analogous discriminations of the human body. This is implied strongly by the Mekeo word for outside, *fangai*, as applied to the world is a distinctively bodily metaphor meaning literally 'on the skin'. And similarly, as already noted, the term for the central village abdomen, *inaenga*, is also the word for bodily abdomen or womb.⁴

More importantly for present purposes, the human body, like the territorial world, contains unambiguously inside and outside regions and their ambiguous eversions and inversions resulting from temporal ingestion and excretion of resources and wastes, respectively. To North Mekeo villagers, the human body (*kumau*) is divided into inside (*aongai*) and outside (*fangai*) regions. The skin or *fanga* is the essential boundary between the two primary zones, just as the world

has a category of 'skin' termed *fangapu* or *fangapu* (or 'skin place') which demarcates the village from the bush—i.e. the fence or hedge of crotons mentioned above. And just as human life is dependent on regular transfers and transformations of things across the skin dividing village and bush, the life of the human body requires the movement of resources and wastes between its outside and inside regions.

Villagers are extremely diligent as regards the precise regulation of these flows, and with good reason. For if the appropriate sort of things are properly transferred from outside to inside and inside to outside, human life will continue. If inappropriate things from the outside are ingested or inappropriate parts of the inside are ejected, however, then the opposite of life, or death, is the result. Thus it is vital significance to every human being that the transfers and transformations between the inside and outside of his/her body are properly regulated. And in many ways it is possible to envision the entirety of Mekeo culture and social organisation as extenuations of these bodily ins and outs—from the processes of cooking, ingestion, digestion, excretion, sexuality and reproduction, generally, to ceremonial gift exchange, mortuary feasting, sorcery practice and the wielding of chiefly agency (Mosko 1983, 1985, 2001a). In this paper, I will have the opportunity to touch lightly on only a few of these embodied contexts of territoriality and sociality.

For present purposes, the regulated movements of things between the outsides and insides of human bodies result in an analogous classification of the body initially itself into four basic zones: unambiguous inside and outside regions, and ambiguously inverted and everted bisections of these. Much of the world at large consists of materials or things that have never been part of a human being (or human-like being; see below) and are hence unambiguously outside of the body, or part of the 'body outside'. Interestingly, these are predominantly things that originate from the unambiguously inside portion of the remote bush—wild animals and plants, the ground or soil of bush lands, waters flowing in the rivers and creeks, etc.—which are transported and transformed by human ingenuity or cleverness (*etsifa*; see below) for use in human life concentrated at the outside village. In contrast with the sector of the world that is external to the body is the body's own interior space, comprised of the bloody, fleshy parts, which, in a healthy state, remain inside and are never excreted. This includes the body's various organs, the bones, and in general all the bloody internal parts. Ordinarily in the course of life these bloody parts of the inside of human bodies remain there. They do not come out. Human life, however, is dependent on the transfers of different sorts of things, first from outside to inside and later from inside to outside, which result in ambiguously outside parts of the space inside bodies (i.e. outside inverted) and ambiguously inside parts of the space outside bodies (i.e. inside everted). On the one hand, ingested cooked foods can be taken to typify the former category. On ingestion, foods are transported to

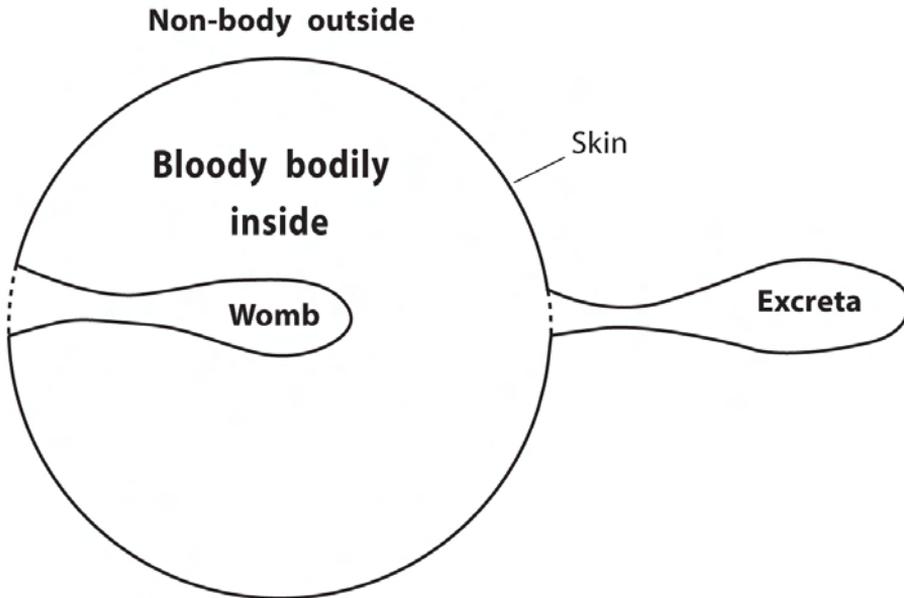
the abdomen whereon certain elements they contain (*ngaka*; see below) are assimilated into the inside of the body proper in the form of blood and tissues. The remaining wastes (faeces, urine), containing neither blood nor the constituents of blood, accumulate in the abdomen for eventual externalisation. Once excreted, they can be seen to occupy inside bodily space that has been everted, analogous with the waste deposit area of the bush surrounding the village. And it is no coincidence that it is in this same zone of the bush that the body's non-bloody wastes are normally deposited.

In trying to comprehend the patterning of these distinctions, I have developed an illustration (Figure 2) that has been inspired by Leach's (1961) famous discussions of topography. Think of a balloon, the skin of which demarcates an unambiguous boundary between inside and outside regions. Now with your thumb on the outside, push or fold the skin of the balloon inwards and then pinch it off at the point where it diverges from the balloon's spherical outline. The outside space occupied by your thumb would nonetheless appear to be inside, that is, outside space contained within a folding of the balloon's skin, thus analogous to an abdomen or womb—a portion of the space outside the body folded on itself. Now conceive as well of the reverse operation; that is, from the interior of the balloon extend the skin with your finger so that it protrudes beyond the otherwise spherical boundary of the balloon's skin, and fold or tie it off also. The result is a portion of inside space that is nonetheless outside the ordinary sphere of the balloon, analogous to excreted bodily wastes. Thus the duality of inside and outside spaces is stretched and twisted to produce four discernible spaces: simple inside, simple outside, inside everted, and outside inverted.

At a very broad level of generalisation, this interpretation of North Mekeo spatial categorisations is consistent with broader patterns of cultural integration. The Central Mekeo ethnographer Hau'ofa (1981) noted, for example, a consistent 'ambiguity' of indigenous Mekeo conceptual dualisms, such as senior and junior, male and female, as well as inside and outside, which I have elsewhere refined and formalised in terms of 'bisected dualities' (1985, 1991b). But this interpretation of North Mekeo spatial categorisations of the body is also useful for explaining an enormous range of specific ethnographic imponderabilia which otherwise appear to be inconsistent and/or inexplicable. For instance, human blood in all of its manifestations, including sexual fluids, is regarded as 'dirty' and 'hot' or dangerous when it is transferred from the inside of one body, where it ordinarily safely resides, to the inside of another human's body. If a human being should inadvertently ingest the blood of another human, especially a dead human, the ingested blood and the soul or spirit it embodies would act like a poison and lead to their death. Men's ejaculated semen, however, although it is dirty, hot and dangerous if orally ingested, does not cause sickness or death even though it appears to be deposited inside a woman's body during copulation.

This is because a woman's womb is not technically inside her body; rather, her womb is outside space folded inside, a process known in topography as invagination. So even though a man's semen would sicken a woman if she took it into her body orally, when deposited into her womb it remains contained within the inverted, invaginated *outside* space of her body.⁵

Figure 2: Body Space: inside, outside, inside everted and outside inverted



Thus the human body, like the territorial world, consists in an initial distinction of unambiguous inside and outside spaces, which, as a result of temporal transfers between the two zones, results in an analogous fourfold totality of inside, outside, inverted outside and everted inside spaces:

inside	:	outside	::	inverted	:	everted
				outside		inside
remote	:	peripheral	::	village	:	adjacent
bush		village		abdomen		bush
bloody	:	non-body	::	bodily	:	bodily
body		things		womb		excreta

It is interesting that this particular classification of bodily space and process is not unique to North Mekeo among Austronesian speakers, for again it seems that the same pattern or structure is widespread in Polynesia, on the evidence of Gell's analysis of the logic of tattooing in the region: 'The basic schema of

tattooing is thus definable as the exteriorisation of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorisation of the exterior' (1993: 39).

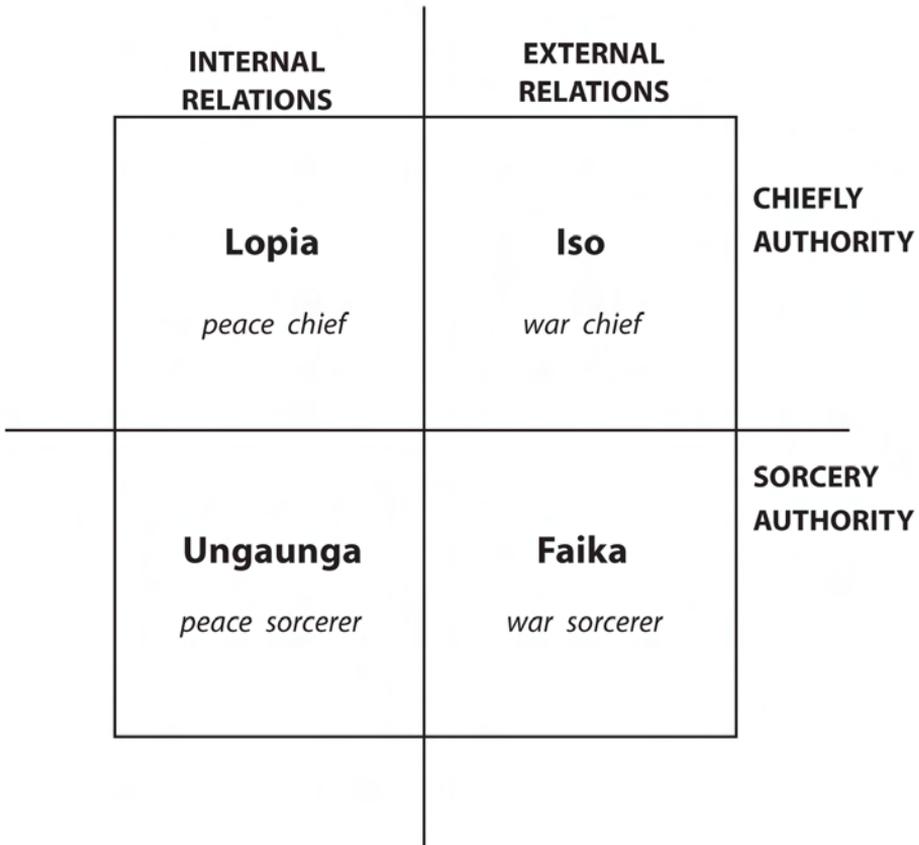
Society

The North Mekeo classification of society is homologous with villagers' classifications of the territorial world and the human body. From what can be reconstructed reliably on the basis of early post-contact information, however, North Mekeo society was organised at a number of different levels or scales: lineage, clan, moiety, village and tribe. I will do my best in this section of the paper to sketch the patterning of social organisation at all of these levels, which I hope to show is isomorphic with the bisected-duality-type patterning of bodily, land and territorial classifications discussed above. In this context, however, the village (*paunga*) is simultaneously a territorial and a social entity, and it is this relationship that I will be seeking to characterise in most detail.

The Mekeo-speaking peoples occupy the middle reaches of two adjacent river systems, the Angabunga and the Biaru. Those Mekeo who historically lived in village communities along the Angabunga have come to be known as Central Mekeo, or Mekeo proper, while those Mekeo living along the Biaru River generally are known as the North Mekeo. While all Central Mekeo speak a single dialect, North Mekeo speak two distinct dialects (Jones 1998). From before the imposition of colonial control to the present, the Central Mekeo have been organised politically into two 'tribes', the Biofa and the Ve'e (Seligmann 1910; Hau'ofa 1981; Stephen 1974; Bergendorff 1996). Similarly, the North Mekeo have comprised two tribal groupings, the Amoamo and the Kuipa. In pre-contact times, relations between members of different tribes tended to be hostile. Accordingly, tribal groups have been by rule endogamous.

While individual tribal groups were named in earlier times and continue to be so-named today, there does not appear to be in the language a generic term for 'tribe'. Among the Amoamo (North Mekeo) who I have studied most closely, the tribal unit consists of four dispersed patrilineal clans (*ikupu*) organised ideally into exogamous patrilineal moieties (*ngopu*).⁶ Each clan is typically composed of more than one localised branch, and ideally each localised branch of a clan should contain a full complement of politically and ritually specialised lineages, relating to the well-documented fourfold division of Mekeo chiefly labour between 'peace chief' (*lopia*), 'war chief' (*iso*), 'war sorcerer' (*faika*) and 'peace sorcerer' (*ungaunga*) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Classification of North Mekeo chiefly offices



It is these 'residential clans' that are usually the main landowning groups. To the extent, then, that the territories of the residential clans composing a tribe are contiguous, as is usually the case, the tribe can be considered a territorial as well as a social entity.

There are several important qualifications to this generalisation, however, which must be noted. First, the decades preceding the establishment of colonial peace were marked by considerable migration of family, lineage and clan groups across the region. As a result, many lineage and/or clan groupings nowadays lay claim to parcels of land that lie outside their own village and tribal territories. Thus members of the Akaifu clan of Nganga village consider themselves 'owners' of land now occupied by members of other clans belonging to other villages. And some clans lay ancestral claim to lands that otherwise are now part of Biofa or Ve'e tribal territories. The exigencies of history have, therefore, greatly complicated the correlation of tribal groups with tribal lands. Secondly, related to this, as is common everywhere in PNG, practically every claim to ownership

of land is contested by other individuals or groups either within the same village or tribe or in different tribes. It is, I believe, inherent in contexts of landownership that there is no one-to-one correspondence of a single group of owners with respect to a single parcel of land owned. And thirdly, to speak of the relation of people to land in simple terms of 'property' and 'ownership' seriously distorts the character of how villagers conceptualise their ties to land and, thereby, how they see themselves and their social relations (see Mosko 2002). This aspect of the problem invokes the distinctive sense of Melanesian personhood, agency and sociality on which I will focus later in this chapter.

Typically, the members of the several clans composing a tribal grouping do not live in a single location but reside in a number of nucleated villages, usually situated adjacent to a river or other water source. Ideally, each village is composed of members of the localised branches of two clans, one from each exogamous moiety. Thus the village of Nganga consists of members of the Pitoli and Akaifu clans plus the male members' wives and children, minus their married sisters (unless they married into the opposite clan in the same village). The nearest village, Ainapa, consists of another localised branch of Akaifu clan and the senior and junior clan branches of Ofuenge clan. It is the ceremonial clan clubhouses of these two clans that usually stand facing one another at opposite ends of the village abdomen (Hau'ofa 1981; Mosko 1985: 25), and it is the peace chief of the clan who nominally owns the clubhouse who is responsible for proceedings that take place there.⁷ Adult male members of the clan meet in their clubhouse daily to discuss matters of common concern. And importantly, it is in their clan clubhouse that members entertain visitors from other clans, particularly those designated in special exchange relations, termed *kofuapie* (or *ufuapie*) and *pisaua* (see below).

Again, it is clan groups typically that are the collective owners of hereditary land—village house sites and surrounding bush lands used for gardening and hunting. It is usually the case also that villages have been established on the land owned by just one of the two (or more) clans resident there. This means that the peace chief of the landowning clan is the nominal owner of the village, but aside from his and his clan's special relationship with respect to the land itself, the peace chief's authority does not extend any further. That is, in all other contexts, the two peace chiefs of the two (or more) resident clans engage with one another as ritual 'friends' (*pisaua*) without any precedence of one before the other. There is, therefore, no such indigenous status as 'village' or 'tribal chief' (cf. Hau'ofa 1981; Stephen 1974; Bergendorff 1996). Peace chiefs, along with the other three types of hereditary officials I will describe below, are essentially *clan* functionaries. Aside from the local situation of the chief of one clan owning the land occupied or used by members of another clan, there is no chief who wields authority over members of other clans beyond in-marrying

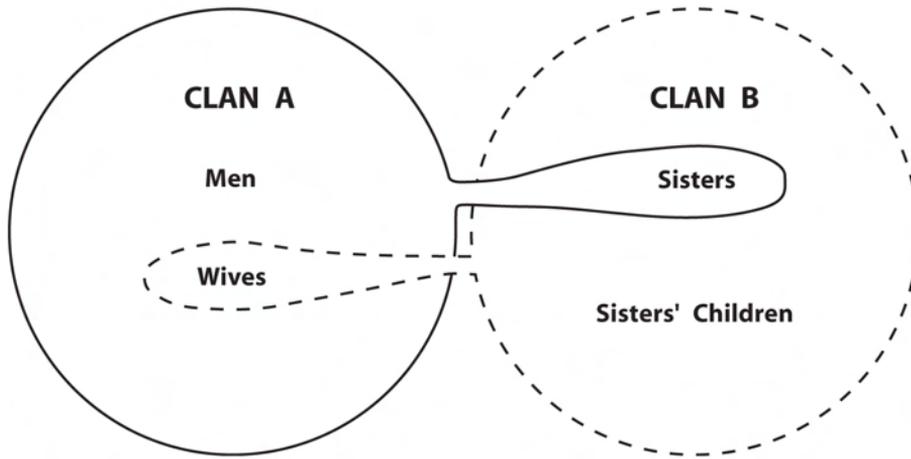
spouses when they attend mortuary feasts and the female members' offspring (*papie ngaunga*, or the 'women's children' of the clan).

Nonetheless, at the societal levels of village and tribe, which correspond roughly with territorial contiguities as noted above, there is an important coordination of functions that corresponds with the processes of inside/outside transfer in relation to classifications of territoriality and the human body. To illustrate this, I will describe the indigenous conceptualisation of clan groups as themselves analogous to human bodies of two gendered types, male and female, with certain kinds of interactions between them. For it is in these terms of interacting clan bodies that village and tribal entities or 'chieftainships' are constituted. Here, particularly, the relevance of the inside/outside classification of space/time and body domains for societal organisation becomes apparent.

The Clan as a Body

The term for 'clan' and its various subdivisions is *ikupu*. North Mekeo clans are patrilineal on the basis of continuous transmission of shared agnatic clan blood from fathers to children. It is the sharing of the same agnatic or male blood that defines the clan, for all of its members are regarded as 'one blood'. Literally translated, the term *ikupu* means 'closed', and the term is used frequently in reference to the ritual procedures whereby men and women restrict the flow of substances in and out of their bodies. Men close their bodies by fasting and various types of abstinence when they engage in magical practices that require manipulation of dirty, bloody residues of dead humans—the basic category of substances employed in most types of sorcery. Women correspondingly close their bodies in the period between their weaning of one child and their resumption of sexual relations with their husbands (see Mosko 1983, 1985: Chapters 4 and 5). Clans, like bodies, however, are not entirely closed, for if they were this would imply that they are endogamous (Figure 4). By rule, clans are exogamous and, consequently, open to one another through marriage and the resultant exchange of cognatic bloods. So just as women and men periodically open their bodies to the flow of substances in and out, including the substances of one another's bodies, clans exchange parts of one another and thereby open their boundaries. Moreover, just as the inside and outside of the human body is bounded by the skin, a clan has a 'skin' too. It is commonly remarked that the women of a clan are the 'skin of the clan'. On marriage, they (or parts of them) go out and into other clans. The part of a woman's body that goes out of one clan and into another clan as a result of sexual intercourse and procreation is her blood, specifically into the bodies of her children.

Figure 4: The clan body and *kofuapie* relationships



It may appear to be contradictory that clans that are open to one another through the exchange of women's or female blood are seen as being in some way closed. However, just as women and men periodically close their bodies, clans do the analogous thing by returning the blood previously incorporated into the bodies of their members through their mothers. This is accomplished in the context of reciprocal mortuary feasting. I have elsewhere (Mosko 1983, 1985) called this process 'de-conception'. By returning the female blood of other clans that had rendered their own clan temporarily open, members of a clan close their boundaries to one another. In the long term, then, clans are closed bodies. And it is because they periodically close their respective bodies to one another that clans can reopen their relations through future marriages.

In sum, just as human bodies have open and closed modes of interrelationship, clan bodies open and close their boundaries to one another. Moreover, it is through the opening of their bodies that life is generated and sustained, and it is in the closing or severing of their relations that death occurs.

***Ngaka* Vital Essence**

The homologies that I have traced between the territorial world, the human body and society are not merely structural or even self-scaled fractal versions of one another, for these three contexts are also substantively linked. The key notion here is *ngaka*, which I will gloss in its positively valued or life-giving form as 'vital essence'.

I first learned from villagers of the existence of *ngaka* in their accounts of the relations between food and sexual bloods. Presumably, the critical life-giving element of ingested foodstuffs that are assimilated into the blood and tissues of human bodies is *ngaka*. Vegetable foods and meat foods each contain *ngaka*, but

of distinct types, such that the human body requires both sorts in order to live. Analogously, human sexual bloods, semen and womb blood, which are required for procreation, contain or consist of complementary types of *ngaka*. Thus humans acquire life-giving *ngaka* from one another in procreative transmissions, and they acquire it as well from the foods they consume. Interestingly, the foods from which people acquire *ngaka* are obtained from resources that people extract from the remote inside bush. However, in their untransformed bush forms, the *ngaka* they contain is not utilisable by humans. Human labour and 'skill' or 'cleverness' (*etsifa*) is required to transform and combine the raw bush forms of *ngaka* in such a way that they can be absorbed into human life. Thus the contribution of human cleverness and labour is essential in the process of transforming bush resources into village ones. And to the extent that people usually exchange the products of their own bodily labours with other people rather than consume them themselves, even the food that people ingest for making the blood of life contains in effect the *ngaka* consequent to the actions of other human bodies. The *ngaka* that people produce in their labours and subsequently exchange thus contains the personal contributions of other people. It is almost as though the essence of human bodily blood and social relationship is to transmit in orderly fashion *ngaka* vital essence between people so that human life can continue. Moreover, to the extent that one's life is dependent on numerous prior exchanges and ingestions of *ngaka*, every person is constituted of the personal contributions of other people. Here you can detect the way in which my and other Melanesianists' discussions of personal partibility enters into the flow of *ngaka* vital essence throughout human life (Mosko 1985, 1992, 1995, 1998a, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, in press; Strathern 1988; Damon 1983; Battaglia 1986; Wagner 1986, 1991; Munn 1986; Foster 1995).

This implies, therefore, that human bodies and social relations including inter-clan transmissions of women's blood, are constituted and sustained by exchanges of *ngaka*—in effect, parts of other people. Moreover, to the extent that land is associated with particular people or groups of people (e.g. clans, villages, etc.), the world is itself a personalised universe. Every tract of village and bush land has the history of other people's contributions to it, and extractions from it. Thus through the extraction of *ngaka* originally from the land, people are not just part of one another, they are part of the land too. And so too are groups that occupy the land. The *ngaka* that they circulate in defining themselves as groups in their internal and external relations are also derivative of *ngaka* from the land—village and bush. So the continuity of the world as a territory, the human body and human sociality is not just formal, it is thoroughly substantive.

This continuity of world, body and society is also constituted by the recursive processes involving analogous crosscutting inside/outside relations. Expectably, the bodily excreta of human bodies contain no positively valued *ngaka*. With

digestion, the 'good' *ngaka* of food is assimilated into the body. The wastes of human life, including the bloodless bodily excreta deposited in bush adjoining the village, are discarded because they have been depleted of their original good *ngaka*. Although they are classified as 'dirty' (*iofu*), and people avoid ingesting or otherwise using them in the pursuit of life, these non-bloody substances are not inherently dangerous; rather, they are inert, and only a crazy person would consume them.

There is, however, a second category of *ngaka*—*ngaka abala*, or 'bad' *ngaka*, which if consumed or otherwise ingested by human bodies leads to sickness and death. Villagers indicate that bad *ngaka* is the same substance as good *ngaka*, only it has died. Thus bad *ngaka* is found in its essential form in the bloody flesh of dead human beings. And just as consumed good *ngaka* leads to life in human bodies, bad *ngaka* produces sickness and death when ingested. It is the exploitation of precisely this capacity of bad *ngaka* to produce sickness and death that serves as the chief ontological and epistemological basis for the dangerous categories of sorcery, for which Mekeo are famous. Basically, sorcerers insert either physically or spiritually the bloody bodily residues of dead humans into their victims' bodies, so that bad *ngaka* does its work by reversing the transformations that support life. Rather than contributing to the formation of blood that stays inside the body, the victim's own bad blood containing bad *ngaka* is excreted to threaten still other people. And because every trace of bad *ngaka* is in effect part of another person—and if that person is dead already, it contains that person's soul or spirit—all sorcery is a social act on the order of personal partibility (Mosko 1992, 1997a, 2002; cf. Stephen 1998).

It is particularly noteworthy in this context that ideally the ultimate destination of all bad *ngaka* is underground in the village abdomen, for it is there that Mekeo in the past buried the corpses of their relatives. Wastes of human life that contain no *ngaka* vital essence are deposited above ground in the bush adjacent to the village, but the bad *ngaka* of human life is buried in the village abdomen, in the land, in the territory of that part of the world associated with those people and their social relations. People are connected with their land not only because they extract from it the good *ngaka* incorporated in their living bodies, they are connected with their land when the good *ngaka* of their bodies has died and become bad *ngaka*, whereon it is returned to the abdomen of the village where it resides forever.⁸

This general sort of cycling of life-giving substance is widespread among Austronesian-speaking peoples of island South-East Asia (Fox 1980) and non-Austronesian societies of the New Guinea Highlands (Goldman and Ballard 1998; Stewart and Strathern 2001). This cycling has not been heretofore reported for Mekeo or, as far as I am aware, other Austronesian-speaking peoples of Melanesia.

Village and Tribal Chiefdoms

I now turn to the relation of notions of land and village to the politico-ritual institution of North Mekeo chieftainship. For it is chiefs, and indeed the whole fourfold hierarchy of chiefly clan officialdom, who are instrumental in the regulation of these transmissions of *ngaka* among village and bush places, among people and their outside and inside bodily zones, and thereby among the social relations that define tribal groupings.

Basically, every named clan should have a full complement of four chiefly and sorcery offices, as noted above. The division of labour between the peace and war officials corresponds with the distinction of internal and external tribal relations, respectively. Thus peace chiefs and peace sorcerers are responsible for the regulation of the two main types of inter-clan exchange that I have described already: the transmission of exogamous bloods between clans of opposite moieties in procreation and the inverse exchange of bloods between clans in mortuary feasting and de-conception. These are, in fact, the essence of the *kofuapie* and *pisaua* exchange relationships that have received considerable attention in the various ethnographic accounts of the Mekeo peoples from Seligmann onwards. To the extent that the bloods of conception and de-conception embody the good and bad *ngaka* obtained originally from their own tribal territories, peace chiefs and peace sorcerers can be seen as the official regulators of life and death in the sphere of *intra*-tribal relations.

War chiefs and war sorcerers, in contrast, regulate life and death in the sphere of *intertribal* relations. At the advent of the colonial era, Mekeo tribes were predominantly endogamous entities. Peaceful marital exchanges of life-giving blood occurred between clans of the same tribe. Even so, distinct tribes also exchanged blood and, through it, *ngaka*. Violent death in warfare, like death caused by peace sorcery, is dependent on the ritual insertion of bad *ngaka* into the open bodies of enemies so that they cannot effectively resist physical assault and the consequent excretion of bodily blood from inside to outside. In order to be capable of inflicting death in this way, tribal warriors had to ensure that their own bodies were effectively closed to the bad *ngaka* of enemy war ritual. It was the responsibility of war chiefs and war sorcerers to insert bad *ngaka* into tribal enemies' bodies and prevent its absorption in the bodies of members of their own tribe. Thus, complementary to the peace officials, war chiefs and war sorcerers regulated life and death in the context of exchanges of blood and *ngaka* between hostile tribal groups.

This implies that territorial tribal groups, like clans and human bodies, constituted collective bodies with internal and external dimensions; that a result of war exchange was to further bisect the internal and external dimension of tribal relations with inverted and everted extensions; that intertribal warfare, like intra-tribal marriage and feasting, involved processes of life and death; that

life and death in the context of war, as in peace, involved the flow of good and bad *ngaka*; and that it was the war chiefs and war sorcerers of clan groups who regulated these processes.

In war and peace, chiefs and sorcerers acted only on behalf of fellow clan members. Ethnologically, this is a very important point. From pre-colonial times to the present, North Mekeo have been organised into tribal entities with territorial associations, as described above, but they have never possessed anything like a 'tribal chief' with authority over an entire tribal domain. As Godelier (1991: 303) has observed, among North Mekeo there are tribal 'chiefdoms' but no tribal 'chiefs'; that is, there are no politico-ritual functionaries whose dominion extends to an entire tribe. This contrasts in some respects with supposed chiefly societies elsewhere in Melanesia (e.g. the Trobriands; see Mosko 1995, 1997b; Powell 1997), Polynesia, Micronesia and Indonesia.

Conclusions

Much like the various flows of *ngaka* I have outlined here, my attempt to trace the relations of North Mekeo territorial categories to chiefly institutions has been hardly a direct one. In order to appreciate the meanings that villagers themselves attach to the categories *pangua* and *ango*, it has been necessary to consider them in relation to the broader spatio-temporal classification of the world or cosmos as a bisected duality of inside/outside plus their eversions and inversions as well as their fractal counterparts with respect to the human body and society. This, therefore, is my first conclusion: that in at least this one Austronesian setting, categorisations of land and territory must be seen in the context of indigenous self-scaled constructions of body and society. As I have already indicated, this conceptual scheme has been reported widely across many parts of the Austronesian-speaking Pacific.

Secondly, these analogies are not just formal associations inasmuch as the flows between village and bush, between the inside and the outside of bodies, and between exogamous clans and endogamous tribes involve the circulation of the one substance vital for life and death, *ngaka*.

Third, to the extent that it is elements of *ngaka* that are the critical components of the composition and de-conception of people and relations, North Mekeo agency and sociality as I have elsewhere analysed them in terms of personal partibility and the countervailing processes of conception and de-conception are encompassed thoroughly in the cosmic flows of *ngaka*. In this regard, the North Mekeo case provides an important point of convergence for some of the most convincing but heretofore separate models of the dynamics of Melanesian and Indonesian societies: partible personhood and fluid ontologies for the former, and the flow of life for the latter.

Finally, the system of North Mekeo clan chiefs and sorcerers provides another provocative example of what I have elsewhere argued pertains to the Austronesian sphere more generally: that there may be 'chieftainships' that are congruent with more or less territorially based tribal domains, but these domains nonetheless lack tribal 'chiefs'.

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ENDNOTES

¹ 'Village' in the Central Mekeo dialect is *pangua*.

² That is, until Christian crosses were erected in the central abdomen of most villages after missionisation. The designation of the central space of the Mekeo village as an 'abdomen' or 'womb' compares interestingly with Malinowski's (1965) report that the centre of a Trobriand garden is referred to as its 'belly'.

³ This global scheme is further complicated by the presence of categorical 'holes' (*ine*) in each of the four primary zones as the consequence of the recursive intersection of an additional inside/outside dimension. For the purposes of this article, I merely refer interested readers to the original account (Mosko 1985: 29-35).

⁴ *Inaenga* also refers to 'mother' (*ina*); see Mosko (1985: 75).

⁵ When I first developed this interpretation of North Mekeo reproductive physiology and anatomy a number of years ago (Mosko 1991b), I ventured that the indigenous theory of human procreation has the appearance of marsupial anatomy and physiology. I can now report that subsequent inquiries in the field have verified this proposition. According to my research associates, the marsupial female's pouch is termed her *inaenga* ('abdomen' or 'womb'), and it is in that cavity that marsupial males are thought to deposit their semen and that marsupial foetuses are understood to be conceived. The chief difference between placental and marsupial mammals is that the breasts (*gugu*) of marsupials are contained on the external skin that has been enveloped by the womb, whereas the breasts of placental animals are placed on the body's external skin and are not enveloped by the womb. Even so, women's breasts are regarded as having a special connection with the womb, as women and men maintain that a man's semen deposited in a nursing mother's womb will spoil her milk and make the nursing infant sick. This compares interestingly with Seligmann's (1910) report that among Austronesian-speaking Motu in the area of Port Moresby, women's breasts are understood to be intimately connected with their wombs.

⁶ There is considerable ethnographic uncertainty as to the pre-colonial existence of these moieties as bounded groups. However, whether named, discrete moieties existed in the past is, for present purposes, irrelevant, as the relations between specifically intermarrying clans co-resident in the same village were conducted as though they were from different moieties; see Mosko (1985: Chapters 6-8).

⁷ If there are senior and junior branches of the same clan represented in the same village, their respective senior and junior peace chiefs take responsibility for the same clubhouse (see Mosko 1985).

⁸ Unless stolen by a sorcerer for insertion into the bodies of other human victims (see Mosko 1985).