Esau Tuza

Spirits and Powers in Melanesia*

Introduction

Going down to Lae, I noticed with curiosity the following words written on a monument at Kasam Pass on the Highland Highway:

> This Plaque is placed here in memory of Rupert Roelof Haviland 22.9.32-19.10.59 by his friends. IN 1953 AS A PATROL OFFICER IN THE DEPARTMENT OF DISTRICT SERVICES AND NATIVE AFFAIRS, RUPERT HAVILAND OF THE CONSTRUCTION GANG WHICH BUILT THE FIRST VEHICULAR ROAD FROM GISBUT THROUGH THE KASAM PASS INTO THE HIGHLANDS. MAY HIS COURAGE AND DEVOTION TO DUTY ALWAYS BE REMEMBERED.

Returning to the realm of the 'old' days, I viewed with interest seven old photographs of traditional shrines decorated with human bones and skulls. I once lived within the areas of these shrines and later visited a number of them, some as recently as 1977. I asked myself the question, "What actually happened in these places?" To the question, "What did you do and say when you performed rituals in the 'skull' houses? the majority of the twenty-six informants stated:

> We presented puddings, first fruits and pigs to the recent dead in their memory. We recalled their names, their great deeds and how they were recognised when they were still alive. Because of this, we invoke them so that their spirits will keep on protecting the living.

These two examples tell us some of the similarities and differences in the way people 'remember' things and what remembrance means to them. Rupert's name is remembered in the written word engraved on concrete. His past deed in this written record is only defined in relation to 'his friends' and in terms of chronology (1953-59). An important assessment of Rupert's memory in connection with the Highlands Road Construction could also be made by historical analysis. If this were done, Rupert would become a 'memory' not only to his friends, but also to those of us who benefit from the Highlands Highway and to those who may read the written record.

The 'memory', despite the fact that Rupert's body is dead and

gone, still has some 'impact' upon the living, for this memory is connected to the Highlands Highway which in turn affects the life of living men. Further, the friends who erected the plaque were not primarily impressed by Rupert's physique or appearance, but with 'his courage and devotion to duty', which, so to speak, pointed towards the release of an energy driving the 'construction gang' to be zealous in road building.

With the skull houses *(sope),* the memory is engraved both in symbol and thanksgiving. Skulls, human bones and certain material representations bring back to life that which people valued during a person's lifetime. Since the deeds of a person's life are worthy of recall to influence the living, puddings made out of *ngali* nut and taro, first-fruits and pigs are given to him in his honour. This is 'worship'[1] to the ancestor.

However, worship as such is a two-way process. On the one hand, man has a need to give praise to what is considered worthy and heroic. Should such deeds be seen or realised as performed by a man, praise needs to be given. On the other hand, worship or praise is man's constant response to what is constantly helpful and ideal in human situations. Hence, rituals are performed to highlight the continuing influence of good deeds among the living.

Taking the two above examples together, we note that, although each one has a connection with the dead, both speak of issues that affect the life of living people. Both have an 'impact' on the people who are still alive. What is the identity of this impact? It involves what my people call 'Spirits and Powers'.

By identifying 'impact' with 'spirits and powers', I would like to destroy the false notion that spirits are beings high above men and can only be thought of in terms of the next world, the world of the dead. In my research into the traditional religions of the people of Choiseul and New Georgia in the western Solomons, I have come to understand 'spirits' and *mana* as dynamics related to man's existence.

This paper, therefore, advocates a new understanding of 'spirits' and *mana* (powers) whereby man, the living man, sees and explains the external influences that affect his earthly life. To do this, the paper is divided into three main sections. Each of the first two sections, on the 'Spirit' and *mana* (powers) respectively, deals with linguistic conceptions while the last section, on 'man's access to *mana,* attempts to show the intricate connections between the spirits and *mana* as they are seen to operate in human lives through ritual performances.

The Spirits

Man as he lives on earth, is a marvel to himself. He feels, touches,

smells, sees and reasons. These senses are equally as true to man while he is awake as when he is asleep. If these senses are true both for the living and the 'sleeping' ones, man as a total being must dwell in two worlds at the same time.

From the linguistic point of view, the word *pota* (my soul or my spirit) in Bambatana language, Choiseul Island, and *maqomaqo* in Roviana, New Georgia group of islands, western Solomons, both refer to man's total existence. The word *potaqu* (*qu* meaning 'my') can mean 'my soul' or 'my spirit' or 'my self'. If I use *potaqu* of my wife, I mean that she possesses my earthly as well as my spiritual dimension. This reference may include 'my heart', 'soul', 'bowel', 'my very self', and 'my after life'. In other words, it points to a person's totality.

One's totality can even be spoken of as surviving death. In other words, it exists now and will continue to exist. The experience that lies behind the belief that the spirit lives after death, can be understood, in primal societies, in two ways. In dreams, it is possible for man to communicate with those who have already died before. During sleep, the *pota zozo* (the walking spirit) leaves the body and brings back to the sleeper its contact with the dead spirits. These contacts are experienced by the man who is asleep. Such experiences are 'true' because the body that is asleep 'feels' what is going on.

These experiences are related to the body by the *pota kokuo*. *Pota kokuo* is believed to reside in the heart and at death depart through the nostrils. If a person is about to die, people try to prevent the departure of the *pota kokuo* by placing the hand on the nostrils.

Harmony between *pota zozo* and *pota kokuo* must be maintained since it signifies a peaceful co-existence necessary for living. Disharmony between the two is said to have occurred when *pota zozo* does not enter the body after sleep. To guarantee, however, that *pota zozo* comes back and resides in the body, the sleeper must be awakened slowly and gradually. This will enable the *pota zozo* to return and exist with the *pota kokuo*.

If there is disharmony, a resultant sickness called *galo* becomes visibly evident. *Galo* occurs when the sick man dreams about a particular thing repeatedly. If this happens, it is believed that his spirit *(pota zozo)* has still not yet returned. To bring back harmony, a ritual involving the calling back of the *pota zozo* is performed.

The departure of both 'spirits' from the body indicates that a person has died. Death shows the departure of *vuvusulu* (the wind) or *sininona* (the wind, in Roviana) through the nostrils. This tells the primal man that visible earthly existence has ended and another form of existence has begun in the realm of the spirits.

The Living and the Dead

To make sure that the spirit lives on after death, feasts are provided either at death or well after it. Festal occasions are often accompanied by exhibitions of wealth and food. These feasts are said to preserve a strong connection between the living and the dead as well as providing a safe passage for the spirits of the dead. Perhaps the main impulse behind this ritual is the thought that the continuing relationship between the dead and the living is reciprocal in nature. While the living person gives that which he values in life to the dead, the spirits in return will be concerned with the welfare of the living.

The concern for the welfare of the living is clearly apparent from the fact that chiefs, who, in life, demonstrated their good deeds, are given top priority in burial rituals. An informant in Choiseul stated that ordinary or common man is often neglected in funeral rites, while 'the chief, if he died, they carried his body in public, in a coffin, blew pan-pipes and danced around it before cremation'. An example of this took place in Choiseul Island, at the death of chief Joseph Su'u in July 1977.[2] His cousin Tanakesa put on his traditional dress (*popolo*, strips of clothings just hiding the private parts of a man) and waved about bows and arrows, spears, shields and wealth (shell-money). This was to indicate that Su'u departed as a warrior as well as a rich man.

Su'u and the living now have a point of connection, namely, the public show of wealth and armour which tells the living that Su'u has been a protector (a warrior) and a very generous man (wealth) and that at his death, these 'ideals' continue as vital pillars for the living. These ideals also now live in the 'spirits'.

Two distinctions are made regarding the spirits. Some are 'spirits' of the dead while others are the 'spirits' located in certain substances such as trees, stones, valleys, hills, mountains, etc.

Although the distinction is made, both refer to some form of movement. This may be the sound of a bird (totemic spiritual force), animal or stirring caused by the wind.

I recall a very vivid example from my youth of movement by the wind, and the related force of the spirit. My mother was once affected by epilepsy. Before she gnashed her teeth, rolled about and threw my younger brother on the floor, she called out, "He is coming! He is coming!" My mother's calling out convinced us that the 'spirit' was certainly coming. Its coming was signified by a force which caused my mother to scream, gnash her teeth, bite her tongue and roll about.

If we assumed that the spirit was present with an identifiable force, how did we locate its presence? At the time when my mother was affected by epilepsy, I believed that the spirit had to be located by detecting a movement around the walls and the doors of our house. I therefore took a very sharp bush knife, waved it about and called out, "You bastard spirit, come and let us have a fight!"

Apparently, however, since the walls of our house are made of sago palm leaves, bits of leaf that stuck out could easily be blown and moved about by the wind. In such locations I believed the spirits could be found and fought! The spirit could also be attracted or distracted by the wind. When a traditional medicine-man was sought to cure my mother's epilepsy, two very important things were witnessed.

The medicine-man, after giving mother some traditional herbal medicines, exclaimed, "Get out you terror spirit!" Just at the end of the exclamation, he blew his hands signifying that the spirit causing epilepsy was driven away.

While the wind may drive away a spirit, it may also attract the coming of spirits. Mother in this case was forbidden to eat sugar-cane. Sugar-cane leaves, when dead, lean down and are moved about by the wind. This movement, it was believed, attracted the spirits to re-enter her and cause epilepsy.

The 'Presence' of the Spirit

Not only do movements by the wind attract the spirits, but they can also be considered the 'presence' of the spirit. A living example of this is seen in the story (legend) related to the leader and Founder of the Christian Fellowship Church in the western Solomons. Silas Eto,[3] the Holy Mama, was said to have gone into the bush, one day, to pray. In the bush, all was quiet and not a thing moved. Then suddenly, a string (vine) in the bush began to swing slowly sideways. Silas then cut the string, brought it home, and told his people that the string signified the presence of the spirit. Now, the use of strings as an aid to worship is used throughout the villages connected with this Church.

The presence of the spirit on a string is also traditional in Choiseul Island. There people still believe that a certain spirit, *sinipi* (*manuru sinipi* in Varese language, Choiseul) only sits down on string. He is said to have a very sharp-pointed bottom that could not pierce through hard wood, but could pierce through strings (vines)[4] in the bush. This spirit is a good spirit. He is said to have shown man where to find money, to have fought for the weak and the poor, and to have liberated the people who were under certain oppressive authorities.

At least, in our analysis of the spirits, a number of things can be deduced. First of all, through his sensory experiences man lives in two realms of existence. He lives in an earthly world by his physical contact with the world. And yet he also lives in the 'other world' through specific sensory contacts (mainly in dreams). In other words, he lives in the world of the living as well as in the world of the 'sleeping ones'. Although in terms of analysis we may speak of 'two'

different worlds, in terms of normal human existence, we may speak of the realm of a total self. The world of the total self is a reality also supported by the linguistic usage of the word 'spirit'.

Secondly, the primal man, in his rational attempt to speak of two different realms of one existence, speaks of two different types of spirit: *pota zozo* and *pota kokuo*. Wholeness is achieved by the harmony of their co-existence and death results when both depart the body. Thereafter they begin another life.

Thirdly, although the spirits may be identified as distant spirits of the dead or other spirits located in specific areas, common belief states that their force and movements are often discerned locally by detecting things moved by the wind.

This belief is perhaps initially related to the idea that when a person dies, his 'wind' leaves him. This belief is also fostered by the fact that wind is movement, and hence, activity.

Finally, we may now say that wherever there is a spirit, there is also activity, movement and the wind. In other words, there is force and *mana* (power).

Power *(mana)*

Linguistically speaking, it is useful to see the difference between 'power' and *mana*. The word power, in the sense of physical strength or force in the accomplishment of extra-ordinary activities, is called *karaputa* in Bambatana language, Choiseul, and *niniranira* in Roviana, New Georgia. If a great wind destroys houses, if a big flood causes extensive soil erosion or if a man lifts up a very heavy load, the force can be spoken of in terms of *karaputa*. If a person has big muscles and strong arms, he has *karaputa* or *niniranira*.

Mana, on the other hand is different. Although in some respects it may include manifestations of physical strength, it is often spoken of in terms of the 'impact' made on man and its sources. In relation to physical force or power, let us suggest a human example. Suppose you came across a dead tree that suddenly falls and almost hits you in your face. You were missed by inches! *Mana* is not spoken of as some power or person felling the dead tree, but rather as the force that directs the tree to 'miss' you and so save you!! In this sense, physical strength is not related to how the tree fell or to the force behind the tree that caused it to fall; rather it is connected with the force that directs the tree to miss you. In considering *mana* as a force that saves, it is traditional to think of it in two ways. First, we may think of it in terms of its operations among human beings. The words *mana* (in Bambatana), and *minana* (in Roviana) have connotations of good fortune. These connotations are evident from associated terms such as *sigaoro* (be wholesome); *kuo vasasapu* (stay well without illness); and *makaolo* (be fortunate in all that you

would want to do and be prosperous in wealth and food). These realities, since they are necessary for living, dominate the thinking of primal man. Codrington spoke to this point when he wrote:

> The Melanesian mind is entirely possessed by the belief in a supernatural power or influence, called almost universally *mana*. This is what 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 operations. When one has got it he can use it and direct it, but its force may break forth at some point; the presence of it is ascertained by proof.[5]

It is possible to speak of *mana* as being possessed by man as well as the spirits. This is not to say that it originates in either. For amongst living men, some are distinguished by their extraordinary impact or influence over others. A warrior who leads his men to victory, a wise man who cures the sick, a ritual specialist who is able to propitiate the anger of the spirits—these people have *mana* and their *mana* affects the lives of people.

Having *mana* and being able to use and direct someone's *manae* (literally meaning 'his *mana*') constitutes a reality which does not stop at death, because this reality involves a living relationship. In this respect, when a person such as a chief or warrior dies, his impact upon the living persists. This is particularly seen in the beliefs about the role of the dead in burial rites as stated earlier, and the consequent belief that the spirit world possesses *mana*. As Codrington has observed:

> Among the living men, there are some who stand out distinguished for capacity in affairs, success in life, valor in fighting and influence over others; and they are so, it is believed, because of the supernatural and mysterious powers which they have and which are derived from communications with those ghosts gone before them who are full of these same powers. On the death of a distinguished man, his ghost retains the powers that belong to him in life, in greater activity and with stronger force: his ghost therefore is powerful and worshipped, and so long as he is remembered, the aid of his power is sought and worship offered him: he is the *tindalo* of Florida and Lio'a (spirit) of Sa'a.[6]

It is clear from this that earthly contacts made while people are still alive continue to have value in the realms of the spirits. While we may speak about *mana* as coming from the spirits, we must also be careful not to see the spirits as the ultimate source of *mana*. For primal man, the existential qualities of the dead man are primary. While the dead man's body disappears from naked eyes, the living man experiences the continuing impact of the departed as spirits.

The people have no definite belief about the source of *mana*. This may be due to one or two factors. Firstly, since they have not created an ordered doctrinal system, they have not probed into the source of *mana*. In the majority of cases, informants stated that

mana happens because *mana* exists. In other words, they have accepted its operations but not theorised about its origins. However, quite a number have stated that if *mana* does not come from the spirits after sacrifices were offered, then it must be sought from the gods. *Tamasa*[7] (god) or *Bangara* (god in Choiseul), is said to be the creator of the world. He is not an Outsider,[8] but receives the respect given to old people; his command must be carried out by his agents. In this respect, the spirits[9] may be thought of as the agents of this deity. When the spirits fail to give *mana*, then a sacrifice must be offered to *Tamasa*. Only to this extent do people refer to the deity as the source of *mana*. Should *mana* not come about through the sacrifice, however, they either put the blame on man's failure to perform the correct ritual or on some other unknown factor.

We have considered so far the linguistic usages of *mana* and given attention to its impact and sources. But how does man have access to *mana*? The answer lies in exploring the interplay of *mana* and the spirits.

Man's Access to *Mana*

Mana's involvement with man can be thought of in three different ways. Firstly, it can be thought of as determined by a person's own skills or gifts in life. Should this be the case, we speak of it as a person's *manae*, something that is quite inseparable from his own nature as a man. In this sense, *mana* can be transferred from father to son or from an older person to a younger person. Secondly, it can be spoken of as something given from the supernatural world. In this sense, no efforts of man can bring it about; rather a man is 'blessed' by *mana*. Thirdly, a man may have access to it through the *sope* rituals.

In reference to a man's skill or gift, a distinction is made between technical skills and *mana*. For example, in a clan in northern New Georgia, the cure of leprosy is considered a gift handed down by one's predecessors. This may also apply to other things such as magic, predictions, and physical strengths. These skills or gifts are recognised as practical skills, but when they are transferred from one person to another, they are referred to as someone 'giving *mana*'. Transference of skills or gifts involves certain rituals by which the person who has *mana* transfers it to another. It may involve the eating together of certain herbal medicines or it may involve words spoken by the man who is to transfer *mana*. It may also involve the showing of secret places by access to which *mana* can be obtained. The transferring of *mana* often takes place when a person possessing *mana* learns he is dying.

While *mana* may be spoken of as controlled by man to a

certain extent, it is also spoken of as something that comes to man without human effort. Perhaps the English sense of being very 'lucky' is comparable. While Westerners may speak of someone as 'lucky', in the traditional societies people believe that nothing comes about without a cause. Hence *mana* is often seen as the reason for good fortune. This aspect of *mana* mainly refers to circumstances where someone ought to have died but was spared. For instance, if you were involved in a car accident and all the other people in the car died except you, the people would say it is 'because of *mana* that you were spared'.[10] The question as to its ultimate source—whether from God or from the spirits—is secondary, unless it is related either to sacrifices or to the *sope* ritual.

The *Sope* Ritual

The *sope* ritual involves the advent of *mana* through the spirits and ancestors. Mention has already been made of how movements, activity, and the wind signify the 'impact' of the spirit. We have also noted that the impacts within and from the realms of the spirit are also existential, that is, they refer to influences on the living by the dead. These 'impacts' or influences are seen as ideal qualities for which man must strive. When they are seen to be operative in human lives, they are called *mana*.

The *sope* ritual is a means of making *mana* operative. A *sope* is a little hut with two roofs touching the ground. An informant who helped to build a *sope* and worshipped in it, described the ritual thus:

> Let us build a *sope!* we all said in agreement. We went to wash our hands, we ate *sumuku,*[11] we put on *papaqala.*[12] Then the cone shell set aside for wisemen was blown ... After that we begin to work. We sewed leaves together ... made roofs and completed the whole house. We sewed the leaves together for the walls and put them on. After that we collected fish, yams, and taro which were set aside for worship purposes, started a fire and burnt them all at the door of the *sope.* When all this was burnt up, cone shell was blown again and we made our way downhill. There at the foot of the hill we washed our hands again, broke our *papaqala* and threw them to the sea. Finally we came home and ate a feast. I felt extremely good inside me.

Inside a *sope* the skulls or bones of people with distinguished roles in life were collected for worship purposes. These skulls are arranged in straight rows, and in between them are man-made idols,[13] *lanono* (shells used for necklaces), *jiku* (armlets) and at times *kesa* (shell-money). (See diagram A.) *Lanono, jiku* and *kesa* are key valuables in any form of social exchanges in Choiseul as well as in Roviana in New Georgia. Taro and puddings, often burnt at the door of the *sope,* are two very valuable foods in traditional celebrations. The material valuables including human bones and skulls are associated with a chief, a warrior or wiseman, people whose impact on the living provides some lasting values in any social

system. These impacts become 'alive' to the living worshippers as they see them represented inside the *sope*. Not only does the worshipper see impacts 'alive', but he also feels as if he is already in the presence of these impacts *(mana)*. This is evident in the shape and the environment in which the *sope* is built. The shape is triangular with the two roofs touching the ground (diagram B). This particular shape and the corresponding smallness of the building gives the feeling of being enclosed in the realm of the ancestors. The awareness that inside the *sope* the spirit really exists is described by informants in the following words:

> No ordinary man is ever allowed to enter a *sope*. Anyone can look towards it, but to enter, not at all. Since this is the house of the spirit, only the owner of the *sope* can enter. But even to see, one has to see it only from a distance. The law concerning *sope* is this—'If you want to look towards it, do not look sideways, but look straight on. But if you do not want to look towards it, don't look towards its direction at all. To look sideways is forbidden'.[14]

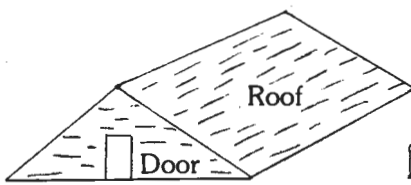

DIAGRAM B
Sope design

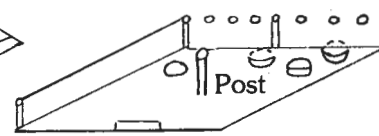

DIAGRAM A
Inside the *sope*

- idols
- armlets
- *papagala*
- *lanono* or *kesa*
- skulls

The feeling of the real presence of the spirit is further enhanced by the location of the *sope*. The *sope* is often built either on a hill or near a huge tree said to be inhabited by other powers. Such a location gives a sense of height, awe, wonderment, greatness and hence of worship.

Worship involves the 'recalling' of ancestral *mana* to be operative among the living. This is done through sacrifice burnt at the door of the *sope*. When the fire begins to smoke, the recalling of past deeds commences. According to one informant who took part in the ritual, recalling begins with the most recent dead and reaches back to distant ancestors, as far as memory can probe.

They called the names of the recent dead especially the chiefs. They then connected them to the ones who had died long time ago in that order.[15]

The recalling of the past deeds is immediately followed by invoking the spirits to act on behalf of man. Gathered together as a family, clan, or tribe, the invocatory prayer runs as follows:

Keep us wholesome *(vutunu),*[16] so that we will be united in our tribe ... The *manae* of you gods and our ancestors will help us to be healthy. Sickness and death let them pass from us to others.[17]

In the invocatory prayer, wholeness and unity are stressed. Wholeness includes physical well-being as well as productivity of garden crops. According to local people, man should not be sick, but he should be healthy; people should not die quickly, but should die of old age; people should not meet accidents but they should die in worthy causes.

Harmony and Well-Being

To see man's well-being implemented, nature also should be wholesome; thus, gardens should grow well and produce much; the *ngali* nut tree (out of which pudding is made for sacrifice) should bear much fruit; taro should grow well and not be eaten by rhinoceros beetles; *kio* (small fish in big shoals) should not leave one's *gaza* (one's own beach area) and so on.

Man's well-being in harmony with nature is included in the concept of *mana.* Should anything disturb this harmony, the ancestors must be summoned to reveal the causes. For instance, should someone be sick, it is believed that either someone else causes him to be sick or that he did not keep within the bond of relationship between the dead and the living. In either case, the cause must be discovered.

To find out the cause, a ritual called *vore* is performed. *Vore* involves a gathering of a number of people in front of the *sope* (and at times at other chosen places) to witness what the spirit has to say. It begins with a sacrifice of food given in front of the door of the *sope.* While the fire is smoking, the person performing the ritual (*sisiama* man, male priest) puts on a *papaqala,* holds out a *jiku* and a *lanono* and begins to call upon each ancestor for an answer. While calling upon each ancestor's name, he waves *jiku* and *lanono* in a circular manner while he waits for their answers.

The answers are believed to have been given when the *sisiama's* hand feels very heavy and shakes drastically. This movement or experience is called *sabusabukae,* the possession of the spirit.

Sabusabukae, according to many, involves a heavy feeling beginning from the head and gradually moving to the arms and the legs. When that happens, the *sisiama* man has no control overhimself. The arms that wave around *jiku* and *lanono* suddenly

drop downwards and the whole body shakes. It is in this state that a man spells out, unknowingly, the answers supposedly given to him by the spirits as to the cause of disease or death or whatever the problem may be. It is also in this state that people predict what is to happen to people in their communities. For them this revelation process is *mana* coming from the spirits.

Conclusion

Briefly therefore, we have indicated that the spirit and *mana* have dynamic dimensions. Spirit, conceived of as a total self, is a force that lives on after death and an impact that points towards an ideal life situation. *Mana,* conceived of as a skill or a gift, is something that comes to man to save him without his doing anything, or is something mediated through the spirits. In both cases *mana* also points towards ideal concrete life situations. Points of connection between spirit and *mana* can be summarised as follows:

First, they both concern life as man on earth lives it. This life with its dynamics does not stop at the point of death of each person but continues through the remembrance of the spirit with the operation of *mana.* Secondly, *mana* and the spirits, since they have an impact on actual earthly life, assume dimensions also in the realm of the beyond or the spirits. The realm of the spirits (and *mana*) is connected to the realm of earthly existence in particular through the *sope* ritual. There in the *sope* ritual, the environment (*sope* building, its location and the feelings it arouses), and the ancestral influences come together to meet living man's spiritual demands. Third, when we think of the spirits and *mana* in the way outlined above, then it is appropriate to accept them as key points in the total life of Melanesians. This is where life is seen as both ideal and yet practical, spiritual and yet physical, beyond and at the same time present and concrete.[18]