

DANIEL DE COPPET

...LAND OWNS PEOPLE

In Honour of the Late Aliko Nono'ohimae Eerehau

A TITLE of this sort, in the form of an 'Are'are statement, indicates that in contrast to the other contributors in this book I will limit myself to an allegedly dull *context*, that is, *land tenure*, through which ultimately the whole of this society is revealed.

First, a few points concerning method are in order. When dealing with societies very different from our own, our goal is to understand their ultimate values. This comprehension is indispensable if we wish to compare these societies among themselves and with our own. Comparison is only possible if we analyse the various ways in which societies order their ultimate values. In doing so, we attempt to understand each society as a *whole*, and not as an object dismantled by our own categories. In our view, the very topic of this book, 'contexts and levels', paves the way for a comparison not of social sub-systems but of societies in their own right.

In distinguishing our own individualistic society from holistic societies, Louis Dumont has insisted that the latter show more interest in relations between men, while the former emphasises the relations between individuals and things. In Melanesian ideology, men and things are fully *beings* at different stages of their transformations. Dumont's statement might be bluntly translated in the following manner by a Melanesian: 'We Melanesians are strictly bound to a chain of beings, while you Europeans run after the possession of beings, even though these are not always goods.'

A statement made about religion in 1982 by a young evangelical catechist from the Solomon Islands gives us some insight into Melanesian views concerning the upper end of the chain of beings: 'For white missionaries religion seems to be nothing more than a boring monologue which takes place in church every Sunday, while for us in Melanesia religion is a dialogue; God answers us through our own voices and we are able to act out this dialogue in the church or

wherever we may be.'

These two Melanesian assertions trace the boundaries within which this paper tries to shed some light: in what do the links between ancestors, humans and mere objects consist? Social relations would appear to be of a different kind when, for the sake of the continuation of the universe, humans are viewed as contributing to the parts being played by all 'beings', i.e. things, animals, humans and ancestral deities.

The observation of 'Are'are land tenure on the island of Malaita in the Solomons is an engrossing task to which I have devoted myself over many years. Recently, during the last week of 1982, the 'Are'are paramount chief Aliko Nono'ohimae Eerehau in his house at Maruitaro dictated to me an extensive text, comprising a list of forty-eight articles with an introduction, and explaining in detail the different rules of this Melanesian land tenure system.¹ Land tenure has always been a matter of great concern to the 'Are'are: they vigorously opposed all attempts made by the colonial power to modify their tenure system or to register their land, arguing that a European land code would certainly disregard their own and destroy 'Are'are society. Nowadays 'Are'are land tenure is something that the new generations, brought up in the schools, find very difficult to grasp, since they have been taught the European way. Eerehau's land tenure codification provides a comprehensive explanation of the 'Are'are system intended to contribute to the establishment of peaceful relations between the older and younger generations. The text has great anthropological interest as well, since it combines clarity with a kind of 'translation' understandable to Westerners as well as to the Westernized.

'Are'are society forms part of Melanesia; the people speak an Austronesian language and cultivate gardens using a slash-and-burn technique. Land is plentiful, although fallow periods last ten to fifteen years. Their principal set of rituals concerns funerals and must be performed on the death of every man or woman,² thereafter giving rise to an ancestor cult. Funeral feasts as well as all others consist of a very intricate circulation of prestations which can be understood simultaneously from three different points of view: 1) as mere reciprocity between the individual actors in the exchanges; 2) as two complementary ceremonial functions enacted by two groups of people

1. In 1943 Aliko Nono'ohimae Eerehau became the leader of the Maasina Ruru movement known as Marching Rule, which advocated full respect for Melanesians and fair treatment from the whites. For the rest of his life he was a great political figure, capable of predicting and shaping the future of the Solomon Islands. In 1982 he had just spent seven weeks in Europe comparing Melanesian and European societies, enjoying his discoveries and strengthening his ideas about the future of Melanesia. Sadly, he was found to be suffering from severe kidney failure and had to return home, fully aware of the fact that his life was almost over. His codification of the 'Are'are land system is the last text he offered me for publication. It should be recognized as his testament. He died seventeen months later, on 31 May 1984, after attending an important political gathering.

2. Except those of 'murder victims', on which see below.

performing together a complete ritual, such as marriage, funerals, the restoration of peace or the reaffirmation of a big man's renown; 3) and finally, from a point of view where no explicit exchange can be observed, except that between life and death. In the third case the three different elements pervading the universe and composing each living human being move along different complex, criss-crossing chains of transformation (for more details, see Coppet 1981; Barraud *et al.* 1984). These elements—'the body', 'the breath' and 'the image'—are ordered hierarchically. The 'image' encompasses the two others, not simply because it contains them, but because images are responsible for the separation of the three elements (which occurs at death) as well as for their re-unification (that is, life) through marriage and conception. Shell money, in its circulation, is converted into each of the three elements but is also, in its own right, *the images of the dead*, that is, the might of the ancestors.

In the introduction to his text, Eerehau explains why 'land is not to be taken in vain':

First appeared the Word,³ Fate (*sihoto'o*) and Good Fortune (*nanamaha*). From them people came into being. First arose the apical ancestors (*Rioanimae*), from them follow all the genealogies down to the present time. Apical ancestors stood up and ruled over all places (on the land); in the ground they were ancestor-snakes; in the rivers, ancestor-crocodiles; in the sea, ancestor-sharks; and on the mountain tops, ancestor-eagles.⁴

This recourse to the myth of origin shows how ancestral authority is fused with locality, not only on the surface of the land but also vertically, in the depths of the earth, in the rivers, in the sea and in the sky. In fact, locality cannot even be conceived of without the apical ancestors and their subsequent deeds at each of the places of origin. If earth (*mako*), rivers, sea and sky previously existed materially, land proper (*hanua*) came into being with the apical ancestors and was then extended to all funeral sites by their descendants, the entire 'Are'are people, down to the present.

Eerehau's introduction continues:

[...] The apical ancestors revealed the five sacred rituals of Prosperity, of Magic, of Killing, of Pig Breeding and of Taboo Lifting. From these fundamental rituals all works derived: praying (to the ancestors), healing, fighting, pig-raising, gardening, house-building, sea travel and the making of shell-money.

After the rise of the apical ancestors, Eerehau indicates, the main rituals were introduced and, closely linked to them, nearly all the various activities. Work decidedly does not depend on the individual's initiative, but on the performance of specific rituals which repeatedly associate the society with its ancestors. Daily

3. *Warato'o*, literally 'the word that hits and creates at the same time'.

4. All apical ancestors were humans, but only some of them later became one of these predatory animals. They were and still are supposed to govern locally and tame the wild species in question.

life appears as part of the greatest task: the performance of all rituals in the name of something higher.

The text goes on:

Three kinds of leadership ['big men'] were established among the people: Aaraha ni mane, Hahuaaraha and Namoaaraha.⁵

The apical ancestors issued ten commandments:

- Do not defile what is sacred.
- Do not kill without reason.
- Do not despoil one another.
- Do not harm one another.
- Obey the will of the apical ancestors.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not be obsessed by women.
- If you have had sexual relations, then marry.
- Do not slander another.
- Do not try to rise above others.

We thus see that the land tenure codification refers first to the apical ancestors, then to the principal rituals, thereafter to the 'big men', and finally to the code of conduct for individual action. Leadership is introduced after the principal rituals, clearly indicating that the 'big men', as well as ordinary people, must conform to the rituals.

The introduction ends with a brief statement preceding the first of the forty-eight articles:

We 'Are'are, we live through the Word. The Word spoke and created land and sea; it spoke again and created people. This is why land owns people and people take care of land. [...]

§1. 'Are'are people do not own the land. The land owns 'Are'are people. The Land owns men and women; they are there to take care of the land.

To the Westerner, even if he reads the text very carefully from the beginning, this assertion comes as a surprise. It is easier to accept the idea that ancestors control the living and extend their authority over the land than to acknowledge that the land itself 'owns people'. In this case people are strongly subordinated to the land, that is, to their ancestors who are buried there and to whom they are related. Land is not only part of the genealogical origin of each living person, land is also *intimately related* to each succeeding generation, to each male or female descendant, including those living today.

At death all descendants, from the *apical ancestor* down to the present, have become *intermediary ancestors* who intervene in everyday life to benefit or harm the living. They act in all rituals and 'works' (with one exception), inflict illness and, ultimately, death. Each intermediary ancestor is located within a funeral site. Each piece of land is related to his ('its') descendants, and the ancestor (the land) 'rules over' all activities which take place there.

Land is clearly not simply soil, but rather an entity always fused with the ancestors, under whose joint authority the living are placed. This is land

5. The first applies to the whole 'Are'are, the second is typical of southern 'Are'are, the third of northern 'Are'are.

considered as *hanua*, that is, 'land as a sacred being' invested with a definite power over all the deeds of both men and women.

We now understand why the living have to *look after* the land and take good care of it. This principle requires the constant observance of all duties regarding the ancestors and their funeral sites, the fulfilment of all the rituals taking place on a given piece of land, the efforts of men and women to embellish the land, particularly with beautiful gardens, houses and feasts, and finally the correct behaviour of all its inhabitants.

From the underlying precept which states that 'land is not a thing to be taken in vain' to the first article of the land-system code, Eeerehau has forced us to cover a substantial distance:

1. 'the hitting and creating Word' caused the *apical ancestors* to appear at definite places on the land;
2. they established the principal rituals and entrusted responsibility for both land and people to *the intermediary ancestors*;
3. leadership was introduced among the people, with three different types of *big men*;
4. the apical ancestors also imposed a strict code of behaviour on *individuals*.

Since land exercises authority over people, Eeerehau goes on to list thirty-six articles incorporating many details that specify how to deal with land and laying down all the fundamental rules thereon. The basic subordination of all individuals to higher values becomes obvious, especially for the 'big men', who must not only obey the ancestors, but also lead the main rituals.

Something should perhaps be said about the difference between the two kinds of ancestors, apical and intermediary. Apical ancestors are the origin of the society. No one gave birth to them; their afterbirth was not ritually dealt with (for they were not born), nor were they put to death by their ancestors (for they had none). They were not buried and were not given proper funerals, which would have had to include the many money prestations usually presented in honour of the 'image', as well as the transformation of their two other components, 'the body' and 'the breath', into money. Apical ancestors were not transformed into money circulating through the whole system of exchanges. Their corpses were simply left to rot on the ground like the bodies of those who have been murdered. In some cases, their putrified body fluids were metamorphosed into the ancestor-predatory animals already mentioned.

Intermediary ancestors on the contrary had a normal birth, and their afterbirth was buried. When they were put to death by one of their own ancestors, they were given proper burial and complete funerals. All three of their elements (body, breath and image) were properly transformed into money and therefore entered into the overall circulation between life and death which is the society's responsibility. Intermediary ancestors are located at their funeral sites

and at the same time, in the form of money, they are part of the total system of exchanges.

They participate as well in all the principal rituals—those concerned with prosperity, magic, gardening, pig-raising, house-building, travelling and the making of shell money, with the exception of the one involving the preparation and commission of a murder. This latter ritual is always performed with the assistance of the 'killer's' agnatic apical ancestor. On no other ritual occasion do apical ancestors participate.

Two different *levels of value* can be identified here: one where only an apical ancestor is invoked, that is, when killing is involved, and another in the case of the prosperity ritual, where reference is made only to intermediary ancestors.⁶ When 'Are'are society is considered as a whole, the encompassing superiority appertains to the intermediary ancestors, who are responsible for all exchanges, for the circulation of money and for the successful circulation of the basic components of the universe and of individuals: the body, the breath and especially the image (see Barraud *et al.* 1984). All the principal rituals such as funerals and marriages are oriented towards this endless task, and not just ordinary individuals but even the most eminent, the 'big men', have to act accordingly. Only the 'killers' with their peculiar goals have to rely on the superiority of the apical ancestors, at a special value level where the intermediary ancestors are encompassed.

With regard to land, the intermediary ancestors have far greater importance than the apical ones. They intervene in numerous crucial activities such as gardening, pig-raising, travelling, house construction and the making of money. All these activities are dependent on the goodwill of ancestors located in nearby funeral sites. Land also plays an important role in the transformations of both 'the body' and 'the breath' of the dead. Without a good taro harvest 'the body' cannot achieve its transformation into money at the conclusion of funerals; 'the breath' relies on good pig-breeding in the forest in order to achieve its necessary conversion into money. These transformations are accomplished under the authority of the intermediary ancestors located in the land. Even the conversion of 'the image' of the deceased into money is strongly, though only indirectly, related to his land and to that of all the persons attending his funeral feast. These lands are the domain of the intermediary ancestors.

However, each piece of land is in addition always connected with an apical ancestor, who is at the origin of a genealogy including all his male and female descendants. The site of an apical ancestor is the only place where his male descendants may carry out the war and murder ritual if they want to go out on a killing expedition and be purified after the killing. The site is not only the place of origin of a long genealogy of people, but also of an extended series of different settlements spreading out from the initial spot, each of which has become a funeral site. It is the place where the male descendants keep up their fighting

6. The main rituals are ordered on two scales, which refer to the various ripening stages of both the coconut and the areca nut. These two scales show that the prosperity ritual *tauahahi* precedes and transcends the 'killer's' ritual.

strength and their right to fight. Apical ancestors are fixed at each place of origin, ready to help their male descendants in their killing activities. In invoking this help, the descendants must trace the agnatic line back to an apical ancestor. In all the other domains apical ancestors play no role whatsoever. Such a fact shows how limited in value is the *origin* compared with the everlasting exchanges which result in the cycle of life through death.

On the whole, as many myths indicate (see Coppet and Zemp 1978: 94–9), apical ancestors and intermediary ones belong to two different levels of value which, in the special context of 'big men', differentiate between the 'killers' and 'the masters of peace'.

Land proves to be a very special entity, created by the Word prior to the apical ancestors. It contains and materializes all the ancestors up to the present, and rules over the living and all their activities. This reversal of the European ownership relation is thus in strict conformity with the fundamental ideology of 'Are'are society.

PEOPLE OWN LAND

But Eerehau now startles us with the code's thirty-seventh article:

The Land owns people, but people own land:

1. because *your Tree* is there!
2. because *your Afterbirth* is there!
3. because *your Funeral Site* is there!
4. because *your Apical Ancestor* is there!

That is why you own land, that is why you rule over land!

Here the basic precept has been completely reversed. Our surprise is increased by the fact that the order in which the four points of the demonstration are listed has also been inverted; the apical ancestor, for instance, now appears in fourth position. The complete change of style is also striking: Eerehau suddenly addresses *you*, the reader. It is clear that we now are led to consider land from the individual's point of view.

1. 'Because *your Tree* is there!' The linguistic formula here is particularly remarkable because normally the word 'tree' takes a quite different possessive adjectival mark. In the 'Are'are language, these marks belong to one of three series: 1) *ku, mu, na*, which apply to the majority of kinship terms, to the different parts of the person and especially to the three basic elements 'the body', 'the breath' and 'the image'; 2) *nau, 'oo, na*, which apply to four kinship terms (husband, wife, son and daughter), to ancestors, funeral sites, genealogies, feasts (funerals, marriages, etc.), food and various objects, some of which are dangerous such as flutes, body ornaments and money; and 3) *haku, hamu, hana*, which concern things on which persons may stand, sit or lie, like beds, seats and

canoes as well as land.⁷

When talking about a tree, one always uses the second series, since trees fall into the category of objects. 'Your tree' would thus be rendered by 'ai-'oo. But here Eerehau employs the expression 'ai-mu, utilizing a possessive mark from the first series. This is an ancient idiom, which proffers the greatest respect to the person addressed. It indicates that one's tree is intrinsically part of his person, in exactly the same way as his head or his 'image'.

'Your tree' means all your achievements, your beautiful gardens, your numerous pigs, the splendid feasts you have given, the assistance you have rendered to others, the great amount of money you have contributed for ritual and musical performances. Your success is seen as a superb tree rising high over your land and embellishing it.⁸ Its roots extend deeply into the earth, its highest branches reach up into the sky: in its spreading vertical dimension, it resembles a living transposition of an apical ancestor's extension after death.

If this tree comes as a surprise, it is mainly because such an ordinary piece of property, distinct from its possessor, has been transformed here into a living part of him. No longer considered an object, it becomes consubstantial with the person as an essential extension of the self, bringing personal identity to completeness. This shift exemplifies the reversal, in favour of the person, of the possessive relation between land and people, and shows why individuals deserve such an unexpected superiority.

2. 'Because *your Afterbirth* is there!' In accordance with the 'Are'are birth ritual, the afterbirth must be buried by the mother (or by a woman who assists her in childbirth) in the forest near the small hut where she has just given birth. The word for 'afterbirth' here takes its usual possessive mark, from the first series, which is used principally for the different elements of the human body. The burial of your afterbirth is a clear indication that an important part of your self remains in the land, the part which, together with your person, has grown out of the combination of your father's semen with your mother's 'piece of blood' and thus recalls the fact that your birth involved both 'sides of (your) genealogy', paternal and maternal. In the tenure system, land is inherited both from the father and from the mother. Consequently each man or woman has rightful access to the land located around all funeral sites where one of his or her many ancestors has been buried. On its burial in the land, your afterbirth becomes proof of your multiple ancestral network of funeral sites extending on both

7. The word 'land' can take a possessive mark either from the third or the second series. With the third series mark, the only polite form, one cannot determine whether the person in question simply lives on the land or is also its owner. The second series mark, which is always used with a definite purpose, emphasises the true ancestral relation of the person to a specific piece of land.

8. Asked whether this ancient idiom 'ai-mu, 'your tree' had any relation to the commonly used word 'ai-mu, which simply means 'your arm' or 'your hand', Eerehau denied any possibility of confusion.

'sides'; the land itself bears witness to this. As 'your tree' extends your self vertically, 'your afterbirth' testifies to your relation to different pieces of land, extending your self horizontally to all the funeral sites of your intermediary ancestors.

Just as the vertical dimension of 'your tree' resembles the extension after death of an apical ancestor, the burial of 'your afterbirth' authenticates your genealogical relation to all these pieces of land and gives you a status resembling that of an intermediary ancestor related to many funeral sites.

Other evidence also helps us to understand the importance of your afterbirth's burial. Only women may bury afterbirths; only men may bury dead men or women who die non-violently. But while these dead must be buried in a special way which prevents their corpses being eaten by pigs, afterbirths are just superficially covered over with earth, without any protection against pigs. These two kinds of burial may be contrasted with the treatment given to the bodies of 'murdered' persons, which are always 'left to rot on the ground' or eaten. In addition to true murder victims, this latter category includes suicides, women who have died in childbirth, and dead foetuses. In fact, afterbirths are disposed of in a way similar to that of murdered people.

When the women bury the afterbirth, they seem to plant it like a taro, actually a dead taro which has lost its living stem (the new-born baby). Without its stem a taro is ready to be eaten, either by men after being cooked, or by pigs if raw. In fact, the way afterbirths are buried does not prevent pigs from digging them up and eating them. The afterbirth is treated like a taro, except that it is left to be dug out and eaten by pigs in the forest.

Again, when women bury the afterbirth they seem to be burying a non-'murdered' person, but as the afterbirth may also be called *poo-na wera*, which means literally 'the pig of the child',⁹ it is as if they were burying a pig instead of a human. And we know that, in contrast with buried bodies protected against pigs, the burial of an afterbirth does not prevent pigs from eating it. In this respect, even though they are buried, afterbirths are left to the pigs like dead foetuses and all 'murdered' people who are left to rot on the ground. The afterbirth may be understood simultaneously as a kind of taro, cut off from its reproductive stem and left for the pigs to feed on in the forest, and as a dead 'pig', treated like a dead foetus or a victim's body and also left for the pigs to feed on in the forest.

Given its treatment as a taro and its denomination as 'the child's pig', the afterbirth may be considered as endowed with two of the three fundamental elements, that is, 'body' and above all 'breath', which are represented by the two sacred species taro and pig. Such a statement is in accord with the fact that murdered people have no chance of becoming an ancestral 'image', and that new-born babies have only a tiny and fragile 'image'. Afterbirths have no

9. The word for 'afterbirth' used in the text is *huhua-mu*, which takes a possessive mark from the first series, as it is a part of the body, as in the case of its synonym *poo-mu*, 'the umbilical cord and the placenta'. The word for 'pig', *poo*, takes a possessive mark from the second series. *Poo-na wera* is ambiguous, since it appertains to both the first and the second series and may suggest either the placenta or the pig.

'image' to recycle. As with the transformations that take place during the funerals of non-'murdered' people, which allow the deceased to be divided into the three elements ultimately transformed into money (that is, an 'image' or the intermediary ancestor himself), the burial of the afterbirth seems to accomplish a very important closing ritual which ensures success to the newly born child. It returns to the forest a taro-like 'body' and to the pigs a pig-like 'breath', which result from the childbirth process. Both have to rejoin and nourish the two distinct cycles in which respectively the 'body' and the 'breath' elements circulate. It should also be noted that while the dead are buried in such a way as to prevent pigs feeding on the corpses, only the burials of afterbirths and the bodies of murdered people left in the forest recycle the 'breath' element. Therefore, the burials of afterbirths are necessary stages along the chain of transformations which the 'breath' element follows before returning to the pigs.

If taros and pigs must first be eaten at funerals in order to achieve the transformation of the dead person into an intermediary ancestor, the birth of a child has to be followed by the burial of his afterbirth in the ground, where taro may grow and where pigs will certainly eat it. These facts indicate that nourishing the earth and feeding pigs with someone's afterbirth gives a 'body' element back to the taros and a 'breath' element back to the pigs. This process not only assures the child's vitality, but also guarantees the necessary return of the two fundamental elements to the sacred species, which makes them available for the human life cycle. If 'your afterbirth is there' in the land, it proves that, in return for your life, through the land, you have given back the share of 'body' and 'breath' which must rejoin the universal circulation. And that is also why you own land.

3. 'Because *your Funeral Site* is there!' With this third argument, Eerehau refers to the funeral site of an intermediary ancestor. For the first time in the text since the reversal of the precept, the presence of an ancestor's 'image' is directly invoked. Previously, only two extensions of the person into the land were explicitly referred to: his 'tree' and his afterbirth. Both concerned 'the body' and 'the breath' elements, although the 'image' element was also present somewhere in the background.

The funeral site itself is a clear indication that 'the image' is located 'there', in the land, and that you or your forebears have performed the complete funeral exchanges necessary to transform a dead relative into a full ancestor with all the appropriate qualities. At his funeral site you can talk to your ancestor and assure his participation in your daily life. Any man or woman is entitled to have definite rights over land, because 'the images' of his or her forefathers have been ritually dealt with and transformed into true ancestors. Since you participate in the unending series of funeral feasts which create your ancestors, you therefore own land.

That Eerehau speaks of 'your' funeral site, *te'ete'e 'oo*, implies the presence there of one of your many intermediary ancestors, whose identity is left

unspecified. But the expression 'your funeral site' also incorporates a startling ambiguity, for it could well indicate your own future funeral site!

Such an ambiguous statement should not be understood as a touch of humour, for it suddenly calls attention to the social fact of one's own death, treated as a necessary condition for life in general. To say that you own land 'because your funeral site is there' implies that your personal authority over land will never be stronger than when you approach the status of an intermediary ancestor. At this step of the demonstration, the individual's point of view becomes congruent with the holistic value level, where land has authority over people.

In this peculiar formulation, we recognize the generalized principle of 'hierarchy' which Louis Dumont has proposed in his effort to understand and compare societies: the encompassing of the contrary. Instead of simply acknowledging a paradox in the tenure system, which would seem to leave the society in a flatly contradictory situation, with no other issue than a dialectical *fuite en avant*, we find that the individual's point of view appears here as encompassed by the global value level, that of the society as a whole. The 'Are'are land tenure system thus reveals a typically holistic society.

4. 'Because *your Apical Ancestor* is there!' This statement follows the one concerning the intermediary ancestor, as if the two kinds of ancestors could not be isolated from one another. Since apical ancestors are at the origin of all their descendants—the intermediary ancestors as well as the living—they also authorize the possession of land by the people. But this last argument in support of the possession of land by individuals implicitly makes reference also to the right to kill, legitimated by an individual's relation with his agnatic apical ancestor. The demonstration of the right to own land thus concludes with a reference to the domain of killing and to the origin, which contrasts with the superior domain of exchanges by means of which the various cycles of the three fundamental elements are assured. The text thus fully sets forth the individual's point of view which is, however, restricted to an encompassed level of value.

Erehau has come full circle. His final argument proving people's right to possess land brings us back to the apical ancestors and their primeval deeds, the very place where he began his demonstration that

LAND OWNS PEOPLE....

In our effort to understand this Melanesian land tenure system, we have not encountered simple paradox and contradiction, but rather the hierarchical formula: 'the encompassing of the contrary'. The superior level of value corresponds to the totality and stresses that land owns people, this principle encompassing people's right to own land.

We have found also that the twofold demonstration comes full circle in a rather peculiar fashion. The hierarchy of values is firmly established in one unceasing circular movement embracing what Westerners separate: life and death. The precept is not only reversed, but this reversal is made possible by the fact that, in the global life cycle of the society, the living recognize the supreme value of the ancestors and partake thereof.

Each of the two opposite sides of the demonstration also comes full circle. Starting with the apical ancestors, the first side leads us to the principal rituals, which were first performed by the intermediary ancestors, then to the big men, and finally to the code of conduct for individual action, which introduces the remarkable 'tree'. This 'tree' gives its possessor an appearance similar to an apical ancestor's vertical extension after death.

The second side begins with the 'tree', continues with the afterbirth, which refers to the return of the 'body' and 'breath' elements into the land, then with the funeral site, where the intermediary ancestor's 'image' is located, and concludes with the apical ancestor himself, which is a reference to the most individualised ritual, that of fighting. This brings us back to the origin, when apical ancestors arose and initiated 'Are'are land, which owns people....

Eerehau's text, which evidences the encompassing of the contrary while at the same time coming full circle in its twofold demonstration, exemplifies Melanesian discourse which verbalizes and makes comprehensible the crucial circular movements that unite the ancestors with the living, death with life, the society with the universe. Although circular, these movements have no levelling effect on the hierarchy of values, which remains the kernel of the society, and rules over the whole process.

We are reminded of Douglas R. Hofstadter's book, where he analyses the work of Gödel, Escher and Bach (1980). What Hofstadter describes as 'strange loops' may be recognized in Eerehau's text, where different and contrasted value levels seem tangled together, but at the same time remain hierarchically ordered. The fact that Eerehau himself dictated the text, which evidences a 'strange loop', does not, however, mean that he is at an 'invisible and inviolate level', like Escher drawing 'Drawing Hands', the famous lithograph (*ibid.*: 689–99). Eerehau on the contrary is an integral part of the 'cosmomorphic' system of his society, and as such of its land tenure and overall social systems.¹⁰

10. The word 'cosmomorphic' is further explained in Barraud *et al.* 1984: 514.

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