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The dead are looking at us. Place and role of the *apira ni farunga* (“ceremonial bowls”) in end-of-mourning ceremonies in Aorigi (Eastern Solomon islands)

par

Sandra REVOLON*

RÉSUMÉ

Tous les cinq à dix ans, à l'initiative d'un “grand de la fête” (arafa ni farunga), chacune des deux moitiés de l'île d'Aorigi (Est des îles Salomon) organise successivement les différentes étapes des rites de clôture de deuil (farunga). Pour chaque personne décédée au cours des années précédentes, la cérémonie finale nécessite la fabrication de grands bols localement appelés apira ni farunga. Le jour dit, remplis de pudding d'igname et de quartiers de cochon, les apira sont placés dans une grande maison construite pour l'occasion. Le jour et la nuit suivants, tout se passe comme si la maison n'abritait pas des bols, mais les défunts eux-mêmes, et les gestes, les comportements et les rites observés durant les veillées funèbres sont fidèlement reproduits.

Cet article explore les mécanismes qui permettent à ces bols de représenter symboliquement les défunts et qui rendent possible leur retour temporaire parmi les vivants, afin que ceux-ci puissent remercier leurs parents disparus pour la terre et les richesses dont ils ont hérité.

MOTS-CLÉS : sculptures, îles Salomon, ancêtres, rites post-funéraires.

ABSTRACT

Every five to ten years, the two moieties of the island of Aorigi (Eastern Solomon Islands) organise end-of-mourning rites (farunga). The carving of large ceremonial bowls (apira ni farunga) is required to honour the dead in the final stage of the ceremonies, when these containers are filled with yam pudding and cooked pork. They are then placed in a big house built for the occasion. These bowls of food are a substitute for the dead and become the focus of a mortuary ritual lasting a day and a night. The wooden artefacts and their contents symbolically represent the dead, who temporarily return to join the living in a re-enactment of the ceremonial wake for the recently deceased. In the so-called end-of-mourning ceremony, the living take the opportunity to thank their dead for the land and wealth they have inherited. This paper explores the mechanisms that enable the ceremonial bowls apira ni farunga symbolically to represent dead people and allow their temporary reunion with the living.

KEYWORDS: carvings, Solomon Islands, ancestors, post-funeral rites

Aorigi is a small coral island situated in the east of the Solomon Islands and inhabited by some 800 Melanesian fishermen, horticulturalists and carvers, who speak Owa, an Austrone-

sian language. The Owa group are divided into sixteen hamlets and villages, and organised in six clans distributed between two matrilineal moieties. Three churches are currently represented,

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everyone being Christian; but pre-colonial religious representations and practices are still omnipresent in the everyday life of the island's inhabitants.

As much by the nature of the components of the person, so to speak, as by the organisation of his or her rites funeral rites, Owa funerals have a number of things in common with those observed in this part of Melanesia. Variants are no less numerous in the Solomons, which touch on the way the body is dealt with (cremation, exposure, burial, etc.) or the way the person is transformed (in particular the role played or not by money), but also on the articulation of funerals with other rites (initiation, first fruits), on the existence of specific kinds of funeral in accordance with the deceased's rank (commoners, chiefs, victims of murder) or on the ancestors' ambiguous role and their mode of presence in the world of the living.

The starting point of this paper is the premise that death rituals cannot be understood without considering how funerary objects are thought, manufactured and used. Against this background, I shall try to answer two questions: What transformation(s) are the deceased subjected to? What role do objects play in these transformations?¹

Owa representations of the make-up of a person

For the Owa, a human being (*ainuni*) is a body (*apena*) comprising a skeleton (*sunna*), flesh (*fisigo ni ape*), blood (*gapu*), and covered by skin (*gawona*). It also possesses a breath (*manawana*), an "image" (*anunu*) – sometimes called "shade", or "shadow" in the literature on the region – and a vital principle (*figona*).² This *figona* is the immaterial principle that lies at the origin of the life of humans, animals and plants, and of the earth. Although the origin of the *figona*, where it comes from and how it is formed remain unexplained, it is nevertheless clearly defined as a life-force essential to every living being or, as one informant put it, "iu cannot live nating" (Solomon Pidgin for "you cannot live without anything").

For the living, the *figona* resides in the head (*qauna ainuni*), itself defined as the body's *figona*:

"The *figona* makes a child grow when it is in its mother's womb. It makes the body grow; it is the power of the body. It results from the encounter, in the woman's womb, of the 'water of the man' (*oro*) with that of the woman (*aoro*). (...) The *figona* sits in the head and hence the head grows first. The same applies to animals, where the head grows first before the body. The head of the yam (*qauna aui*) is also the *figona* of the yam: that is where it sprouts. For other plants, the *figona* is found in their seeds."

The idea of *figona* is linked to that of *mena*, which is the local version of *mana*, defined by Codrington (1891), Hogbin (1936) and more recently by Keesing (1982, 1984, 2000) as "a power of influence over people and objects" (Codrington, 1891).

Anunu represents the mute image of an individual, its shadow, its visible part, its appearance: "When you look at the picture of a person, it is the *anunu* that you see." The *anunu* grows in the foetus together with the body, owing to the *figona*'s action. When a child begins to crawl, the *anunu* is considered to be completed, which in turn explains that it "starts to think and to recognise people". In the course of its earthly existence, the *anunu* may leave a person's body. This dissociation is often identified as a cause of illness. Only religious experts, who are often also experienced healers, can intervene to place it back into its fleshly wrapping.³

In Aorigi, the person's death causes the *figona* in his head to be transformed immediately into an *ataro*, a spirit. From that moment onwards, the *ataro* possesses a special power called *mena*, which is located in the skull of the deceased. The *mena* is described as a quality or characteristic of the deceased's spirits that can also benefit the living, who have various rituals at their disposal for absorbing and appropriating the *ataro*. It nevertheless remains first and foremost an immanent quality of the spirit. The *mena* of the *ataro* is more powerful when the deceased died a violent death; furthermore, if a man possessed the *mena* of a deceased person, it will remain "active" (*famagasi*), even after the person in question has died.

1. The political dimension of these rituals has been discussed elsewhere (Revolon 2003: 85-93). See also Davenport (1986), who analyses the economic value of objects as well as acquisition of prestige by the individuals and groups organising funerals in "Aoriki" in the 1960s.

2. On the make-up of the person and in particular the question of the person's image in this part of Melanesia, see e.g. Coppet (1981: 178), Firth (1967: 337), Keesing (1982: 33-34), Monnerie (1996: 92, 108-114).

3. Keesing (1982: 106), too, points out the existence in Malaita of a "soul" composed of two parts, and stresses the contradictory and fuzzy exegesis the Kwaio offer of this. The *anunu* also bears a resemblance to the inner soul, *kanu e pe*, of the Maenge (in New Britain), described by Panoff as the "reflection of the person", or, "his mirror image", leaving the body "during one's sleep, illness or death", but equally as a result of a "shocking surprise" or a "sudden scare" (Panoff, 1998: 43).

Rather than being a rupture, death is considered to be a change of state and place that results in the *figona* becoming an *ataro*. This transformation is called *tatari*, which contains the idea of escape (*tari* means “to run”): “Someone’s *ataro* is like his child (*kere*). When someone dies, his *ataro* [the transformed *figona*] comes out of the corpse (*gafua*) because it is frightened by the cadaver. It runs far away from the *anunu* trapped in the body.” From there on, the *ataro* starts a period of wandering called “searching for one’s children” (*garitanga kerena*), during which it refuses both to abandon the world of the living and to forsake its children. This is equally a period of sadness and anguish for those close to the deceased, who can do nothing but wait for their relative’s *anunu* to accept its fate: “Death (*mae*), it is as when you sleep and you wake up in a different place: you look for your house, you cannot leave your children. This explains why an *ataro* may still come back to his village and his house for some time.”

The presence of the spirit of a deceased person is materialised in the sound of footsteps, the rustling of leafs against the wall, the murmur of houses, and objects disappearing. Dogs, which have the ability to see *ataro*, bark to chase them away. At night, lamps are lit in the houses, the cooking fire is kept burning, and those close to the deceased come together and put off sleep until the early hours of the morning. After a while the signs of the *ataro*’s presence wane: “When the night returns to silence, it means the *ataro* has reached Rotomani, the world of the dead.”

Rotomani designates the dwelling-place of the dead. It consists of six invisible islands called Rokarokaasi, Asiramarama, Asinununu, Paranisau, Manuanina and Parangagianita, all situated near Aorigi. As is often the case worldwide, the representation of time is inverted, and it is day in Rotomani when it is night in the land of the living. A healer, who has the ability to “dream travel” to the islands, explains: “The villages of the spirits of the deceased resemble our own. One can see men, women and children. They look exactly like living beings except that their eyes are white (*iaforo kamaata*: “eyes rolled up”). They have houses, just like us. There are

flowers, fruit trees and yam gardens. They also have fishing canoes. *Ataros* travel. They shuttle between Rotomani and their *raperape* in Aorigi.” *Raperape* are the sacred sites reserved for Aorigi’s spirits of the dead. These could be either their grave, or the spot where the blood of the deceased had been spilt in the past, or an ossuary containing the remains of eminent deceased. These places and the *ataros* both remain invisible to human beings other than religious experts and healers, except when the *ataro* appears in a perceptible form, notably that of a shark.

By contrast, the *anunu* does not leave the dead body immediately. The five days and five nights that follow the death of a person are called *tafa fenua*, literally: “to return here”. During this period, it is deemed that the deceased “may rise again”, for he is still inhabited by his spirit. After the wake, the body is committed to the ground, the face turned to the west. At dawn on the fifth day, the body starts to decompose, allowing the *anunu* to leave (*iafarara kanunu*, literally: “sorrow of the shadow”). Once freed, the *anunu* travels with the sun and follows its trajectory until evening, at which time it goes to Iarita, one of the isles of the Three Sisters situated west of Aorigi: “Over there exists a cave, nearby which grows a pandanus tree (*akakaru*, not identified). The *anunu* grasps one of its branches, blackened and polished by so many hands which have held onto it, and enters from there into the cave called *awaqa*. A white stone (*afau*) is then added onto a pile of other white stones. Thus ends the final voyage of the *anunu*, which now will never return to Aorigi.”⁴

Funeral procedures: a material transformation of the dead

On Aorigi, the material operations by which the dead are transformed differ according to the circumstances in which the death occurred. I will first discuss the general case, then I will turn to the rituals dealing with the most powerful *ataro*, the spirits of the blood.⁵

For every person who dies, the funerals (*manunga*) start when the *anunu* is still joined to the body. A wake is held by the women and men of

4. Difficulty in reaching the land of the dead is also quite common. See for instance Monnerie (1960: 108–109). For the Maenge “after having jumped across the enormous wooden log (*pora poranga*) which delimits the inferior world (...), the *soare* (the ghost, resulting/emerging from the *kanu e pe* and the *kanu e soali* of a person who recently died) penetrates the depths of the earth” (Panoff, 1998: 45). But there is no general rule here: the Trobriand’s *baloma* journey to the island of the dead is long but easy (Malinowski 1916).

5. Generally speaking, as in Malaita (Coppet 1970: 762; 1981: 179, 194–195) or in Eddystone (Hocart 1922: 92, 96), Aorigi’s Owa form a society in which ancestors are eminently responsible for the well-being of the living.

PHOTOGRAPHY 1. – Cut out of porks during a *manunga* (funerals). Aorigi, 1998.

the deceased's clan in his or her house. The next day, the burial takes place in the cemetery of the deceased's clan. Then, for five days, the spouse and the children of the deceased do not leave the house; they may not wash themselves or cook, but only drink. The village is wrapped in total silence and, any manifestation of joy is forbidden. After these five days – which coincide with the departure of the *anunu* from the corpse – the relatives of the deceased (brothers, uterine nephews and uncles) wash themselves in the sea. At that point, the water ban is lifted. This moment is called *mamanu*, meaning “to wash [the body]”.

Some ten days after the burial, a feast is organised by the blood relatives of the deceased. The pigs that have been tied to the house of the deceased are suffocated, prepared and cooked (photography 1). A pudding of yam and taro, mixed with *Canarium* nuts, is prepared, together with rice. In the evening, the food is shared with the other villages, and each household receives its portion (photography 2). In this way, the

relatives express their gratitude to those who respected and shared the mourning with them. One hundred days after the death, the clan of the dead person organises a second distribution of the same type of food to all the households on the island in order, as they say, to celebrate the completion of the *anunu*'s voyage and “to thank those who kept the wake” (*faqasu qongi*).

Several years after an adult dies, a ceremony (*farunga*) is held by the descendants, which consists of two rituals that one would call second funerals and then the end-of-mourning ceremony. The first, *ratai matafu* (“to complete the graves”), takes place when the stones or cement are placed on the graves of the deceased being honoured. The second stage, called *muri ni muni* (“after a person”), definitively concludes the mourning period. It requires the construction of a vast house in which ceremonial bowls, *apira ni farunga*, made by master carvers (*mwane manira*, literally: “men of know-how”), are placed awaiting the distribution and consumption of their contents. One new bowl is carved for each person who has passed away since the last *farunga* took place (that is approximately once every ten years) (photography 3).

As during the *manunga* – the feast which follows the burial – the pigs that will be eaten are tied to the big house *ruma ni farunga* for some days, where they finally create a belt of spoilt land that marks the mourning of the inhabitants of the house in which the deceased was kept, or that of those staying in the *ruma ni farunga* in which the ceremonial bowls filled with pudding of yams or taros and *Canarium* nuts topped with pieces of cooked pork are kept. Besides this keeping of pigs around the house, the type of songs sung at that time and the final destruction of the building suggest, in my view, that this ceremony can be equated with the *manunga*, and that we have here a provisional burial (*manunga*), which is followed by the definitive one (*muri ni nuni*).

At this stage, the “ordinary” dead have been transformed into deceased people who can be asked for help but who are no longer owed anything. Owa explicitly say that, after a *farunga*, one can finally forget the dead.

As is not uncommon in this part of Melanesia, things are very different in the case of the powerful dead, those who were assassinated or who committed suicide.⁶ Until the 1920s, the enemies of Aorigi were a succession of groups from Hanununu, which lies northwest of Makira, and

6. On the question of murder victims, see in particular Coppet (1981: 178), Monnerie (1996: 108–109) and Keesing, who explains that in Malaita: “The most important distinction Kwaio draw is between a person who has been killed – murdered or killed in a fight – and a person who has ‘died’” (1982: 144).

PHOTOGRAPHY 2. – Distribution of food to each household during a *manunga* (funerals). Aorigi, 1998.

PHOTOGRAPHY 3. – *Apira ni farunga* filled with pudding of yams or taros and *Canarium* nuts topped with pieces of cooked pork. Aorigi, 1998.

then from Santa Ana, a small island distant 3 km from Aorigi. The blood of the murdered person generated spirits of the blood (*ataro si gapu*), which, literally, were born (*aparaia*: “to give birth”) from the blood flowing from the mouth, the anus and the body of the dead person. As I have said, for the Owa, the *ataro* of all persons contained *mena*. Today, the *mena* of these blood spirits is still considered to be extremely powerful.⁷

After a violent death, a male descendant or the brothers of the deceased could decide to honour him or her with a cult, in order to appropriate his or her *mena* by means of specific procedures: removing the skull from the dead body some time after burial and placing it in an ossuary (this was only for a man, not a woman), or immediately beginning the cult on his or her grave or on the spot where the blood was spilt.

7. Among the 'Are'Are (Coppet 1981: 178) and the Owa, ancestors born from the blood of someone who has been killed/murdered are inhabited by a strong desire for revenge. Coppet speaks of the “avenging arm”, of a biceps-spirit (1981: 177 and 192). The Owa, on the other hand, call the *ataro si gapu* “*ataro si ramua*”, “avenging spirits”. But unlike in the Owa culture, for the Are'Are, only those who have “died of an illness can become ancestors. They thereby accede to a true posthumous life” (Coppet 1970: 762).

PHOTOGRAPHY 4. – *Apira ni mwane*, “men’s bowl”. Aorigi, 2002.

In all cases, the man who wished to appropriate the *mena* of the deceased prepared a pudding of *Canarium* nuts, taro and cooked pork. He pronounced the name of the deceased, telling him that the food was for him, and ingested part of the gift. This procedure is called *mwaruia*, “to put the power in oneself”, or also *mafata ianataro*, which means “to share with the spirit”. After that, it is said that the man had put the power of the *ataro* in his body in a permanent way, that is, until he himself dies and one of his descendants decides to appropriate the *mena* in turn.

The man who has decided to devote a cult to a *ataro si gapu* asks an expert carver to make an *apira* similar to a ceremonial *apira*, but smaller in size, called *apira ni mwane*, “men’s bowl”, used only by men (photography 4). These master carvers faithfully follow the aesthetic conventions dictated in the past of the men by powerful ancestors (*ataro si gapu*). The same experts can also be “contacted” by the deceased, through dreams, who lets him know which design he wants for his *apira*, or in order to add a new motif to the catalogue of imposed forms which pre-condition the fact that an item may become a ritual object. These designs aim explicitly to attract the deceased, to win them over during the cult organised for them and to “make them look at us” (Revolon, 2006: 105).

It is precisely because they reflect the conventions established by the ancestors that beautiful objects are a tangible proof of the existence of the ancestors and, at the same time, succeed in seducing them. Attracted by the beauty of the objects and by the delicious dishes served, it is said that the spirits gather and take part in the feast along with the living.

Regularly, at least once a year, these *apira* are employed at the time of ceremonial meals, which are held on the sacred sites of the island. For that occasion, the man and his male relatives consume pudding of *Canarium* and pork to worship their dead. During these cults, the “*apira ni mwane*” bowls both attract the spirits and tangibly confirm their presence (Revolon, 2006: 105). It is said that, during a ceremonial meal, the celebrants who hold the *mena* of an *ataro* in their own body eat for the dead (*ngaungau wogasina*: “to eat and to worship”), thereby renewing (*fagamasia*: “to activate, to reactivate”) the powers inside them.

Conclusion

In conclusion: We can consider that Owa practices follow the steps described by Robert Hertz (1960). The funerals and the collective meals which end the five days and five nights of mourning following the death of a person mark the start of the disintegration of the corpse and, symbolically, of the person. Afterwards come the end-of-mourning ceremonies, which, according to Hertz, conclude the integration of the deceased in the ancestors’ mythical world. That is what happens with the “ordinary” spirit on the day of the final ceremony of the *farunga*, when the funeral *apira* filled with food are placed together in the *ruma ni farunga* house. As we have seen, the gestures, behaviour and rites observed during the wake for a deceased person are faithfully reproduced during this particular event. Everything happens as though the big house was not filled with food bowls but with the deceased

themselves, who partake of the last meal offered to them. To some extent – but this is a hypothesis – the *apira* bowls play the role of the dead. By representing the dead symbolically, they allow their temporary return among the living, who can then thank them for the land and the wealth left to them. After the collective feast, it is considered explicitly that nothing is any longer owed to the dead. The funeral and individual bowls used by the Owa in the meals can be compared with the *malanggan* described by Derlon and through which “the dead returned, alive, in the shape of objects which reproduce the final image the community had retained of them: their exposed corpses” (Derlon, 1997: 216, author’s translation). They also remind us of the monies displayed during funeral feasts of the ‘Are’Are of southern Malaita and which, for Coppet, also represent the dead (Coppet, 1998). Concerning Makira, north of Aorigi, Fox indicated that the clans present in the 1920s kept their corpses in canoes but also in large bowls: “Where preservation is practised, there are several varieties: the body may be wrapped up in the house, or exposed on a rock, by the shore, or on a tree platform, or on a burial mound called *heo*, in an oblong food-bowl called *hohoto*, or in a canoe called *ahaaha*. (...) a canoe was always used if possible; if not, a bowl” (Fox, 1919: 176).

The most potent dead, however, are not considered to be entirely detached from the world of the living. These dead have left a part of themselves among (in fact, within) some of the living and are regularly called by them to interact. As we have seen, the *mena* of these powerful spirits is literally placed in the body of certain men who choose to worship them. In doing so, they become part of a relation of interdependence through the exchange of food: the living person must feed the deceased to keep his *mena* active, but also to please him and keep him from becoming dangerous. In turn, the powerful dead person ensures the prosperity of his celebrant, protects his gardens and his pigs, ensures a good catch during fishing, etc.

At this point I submit that, through the appropriation of his *mena* by a living man, part of the dead person remains among the living, thereby preventing him from taking up his resting place with the dead. By doing so, the dead person is not completely banished from contact with the living and is “obliged” in a way to continue playing a role among them. This would explain the ambiguous influence, potentially positive or dangerous, the dead person may have on the one who is honouring him.

In the same vein, it can be said that the meals offered to these powerful *ataro* also anchor them in the world of the living. Because they are “slightly more” alive than the other dead, they have to be fed and worshipped regularly through an extensive list of rituals organised by the Owa over the year.

Although they share the same designs, the two types of bowl can therefore be seen as the materialisation of two different types of relation between the living and the dead.

In the first case, after the end-of-mourning ceremony, the *apira ni farunga* dedicated to the “ordinary” dead are left aside and forgotten or, today, sold to European art dealers⁸: the relationship between the living and the dead is no longer critical, and each is free to have his own existence in his own world. As previously mentioned, after the collective feast, it is explicitly said that nothing is any longer owed to the dead, even if they may intervene occasionally in the life of the living.

In the second case, the individual *apira* remain highly “marked” (Levi-Strauss, 1963: 136). They are *apuna*, taboo; and they cannot be sold or given to anyone, ever. They are precious kept inside houses and passed on from generation to generation, from father to son or between brothers. The link between the powerful dead and the living, of which *apira* are the concrete materialisation, remains strong, albeit in the form of an ambiguous cooperation.⁹

8. Before Europeans began showing an interest in this type of object, in the 1960s, when the ceremony was over, the objects were stored along the walls of the houses or under the floor of raised houses. Contrary to Davenport’s assertion (1986 : 98–99), in Aorigi, objects made for a ceremony could – and still can – be re-used when a new cycle is organised. In the absence of new ceremonies, the pieces were forgotten or left slowly to disintegrate, ending up as firewood. The people of Aorigi do not assign any particular significance to nor are they even particularly interested in the gradual deterioration of ritual objects. Unlike the *malanggan* of New Ireland (Derlon 1997: 246–253), for instance, no special representation is associated with their disintegration.

9. It should be noted in passing that, in his article on *apira ni farunga*, Davenport highlights the collective effort required to materialize these carvings, and the (prestige or economic) value thus attached to them. But he completely passes over the role of these objects in mediating between the living and the dead (1986). As we see, whether it involves carving (Revolon, 2006) or, as in the present case, objects as actors in relations with humans, the arrival on the scene of the deceased themselves somewhat alters our understanding of the “social life of things” (Appadurai, 1986). I would like to thank T. Leemans and N. Scott for the translation and correction of this article.

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