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|Colloquia|

More on Polynesian gift-giving

The Samoan *sau* and the fine mats (*toonga*), the Maori *hau* and the treasures (*taonga*)

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This commentary explores the Samoan concept of *sau* in relation to the Maori concept of *hau* and elaborates on a comparison—once made by Marcel Mauss—between the sacred gifts of *taonga* (Maori) and *toonga* (Samoa). After illustrating how Lévi-Strauss' interpretation of Mauss' concepts of "the sacred" and "mana" had abusively narrowed the latter's thoughts that led him to write the *Essay on the gift*, this paper presents new ethnographic material on the Samoan notion of *sau* in order to rethink the sociocosmic quality of the Maori *hau*. This material reveals that the sacred gifts of Samoans and Maoris are to be understood not through their material specificity (fine mats, nephrite carving, etc.), but through their capacity—given to them through ritual—to capture reference to the origins of the clan.

Keywords: the sacred, spirit, gifts, fine mats, *mana*, *hau*

For Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa

This brief commentary aims to offer an insight into the Samoan concept of *sau* in relation to the Maori concept of *hau*, and to further elaborate a comparison—first examined nearly a century ago by Marcel Mauss—between the sacred gifts of *taonga* (Maori) and *toonga* (Samoa). Indeed, HAU seems the most appropriate venue for such an inquiry. Besides taking the name from the Maori concept, the journal's intellectual agenda draws on the fecundity of "conceptual disjunctures," illustrated by its editors as follows:

> HAU is a call to revive the theoretical potential of all ethnographic insight, wherever it is brought to bear, to bring it back to its leading role in generating new knowledge. Above all, we see ethnography as a pragmatic inquiry into conceptual disjunctures. . . . by adopting the term hau as a mark of our enterprise, we are placing ourselves within a particular stream of anthropological scholarship that over the last three decades has

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> addressed such disjunctures, and the moments or events of "speculative wonder" or "positive equivocation" to which they give rise. Concepts like hau . . . are events, unclassifiable remainders that rearrange preconceived notions and categories by juxtaposing different cultural images and positions. (da Col and Graeber 2012: vii)

In line with this methodology, I will suggest how the Samoan concept of *sau* leads us into viewing the whole of gift-giving as a life-giving process. Through comparison, I will further show that the Maori *hau* is not about an esoteric theory of magic, as many have presumed, and that the Maori *taonga*, as well as the Samoan *toonga*, need to be understood at a much wider sociocosmic level.

Lévi-Strauss, Mauss, the *hau*, and "the sacred"

While it was Marcel Mauss' translation of the Maori *hau* that initially popularized the concept in anthropological and philosophical circles, it was Claude Lévi-Strauss' interpretation of the Maussian translation that inaugurated the long-standing debate over the concept's significance (Lévi-Strauss [1950] 1973; Mauss [1925] 1973). Lévi-Strauss' interpretation had been very useful when, right after Word War II, the ethical urgency was to apprehend social configurations and mythological schemes from "nonmodern" societies in a way that would enable a universalistic comparison, far from any fundamental opposition between a so-called rational-modern type of thought and those that would have remained at a "prior" step, still embedded in a "prelogical" turn of mind. Lévi-Strauss wished, at all costs, to discard the Maussian notion of the "spirit" in the gift (i.e., the Maori *hau* as a specification of the more general belief of *mana* in Pacific societies, or *manitou*, *orenda,* etc. in Amerindian societies), as he feared it would be remembered only as a translation of a local concept, a magical "spiritual" entity within a specific theory elaborated by Maori priests or magicians. More generally, he aspired to discard any ethnography that could add water to the mill that divided the putatively prelogical thoughts at work in "traditional" societies and the rationality of "modern" societies. Thus, discarding *hau*—and even the specifically Maussian interest in the Pacific *mana*—Lévi-Strauss led his reader to the new ground of a grand universal theory of reciprocity (ibid.).

But Lévi-Strauss, and many more after him, seriously narrowed what Mauss really meant with his translation of the word "spirit" and his larger interest in the ethnography of the Pacific *mana*. Mauss had been using this terminology with interest to Pacific ethnography long before he became aware of the Maori notion of *hau*. One only need look to his earlier elaborations on the theory of "the sacred"—a very broad theory that he wanted to be valid for all human groups. There is no space here to present the whole Maussian theory of the sacred and to gather the numerous and necessary quotations.[1] We can only give a brief and consequently oversimplistic summary.

Mauss' theory of the sacred can be summarized as follows. In any social group, *collective representations*—the unconscious materialization of the feeling of belonging to a group that each individual has—create the notion of an external

1. This, together with the Samoan ethnography of gift-giving, will be available (in French) in a book due to be published: *Marcel Mauss à Samoa: Le holisme sociologique et le don Polynésien*. Marseille: Pacific-Credo Publications.

force which is permanent. This offers a guarantee of the fact (indeed, the belief) that the group will go on forever. This level is thus far above any individual consciousness. As soon as Durkheim and Mauss conceptualized those schemes around 1908, moving away from their prior notion of the sacred as a static system of wide divisions between what is "forbidden" and what can be "touched" (their first conceptualization of the sacred/profane dichotomy), it appeared to them that these collective representations of the perennial nature of the group (in one word: the *sacred*, in its new definition) are always embodied and materialized in "circulatory" form. The force, they theorized, "comes and goes." It invades one object or person, at least for a short time—and the whole work of ritual is to try to make it stay longer in that the force contains the "powers of life," the guarantee of social reproduction.

Early on, Durkheim and Mauss had been struck by the ethnography of concepts like *manitou, orenda*, etc. among North American Indians, and also with the concept of *mana*, prevalent in a large part of the Pacific. They chose the latter as the archetypical case, and created the following sociological model: *mana* is "the sacred" as a total force (i.e., it binds everyone into the group) and it is always circulating. Indeed, several times in the *Essay on the gift* (from here on, the *Essay*), Mauss mentions a notion of the "circulus." Expanding *mana* (and related concepts) into the area of the economical and juridical notions of truck and exchange, Mauss analyzes gifts (at least those which are "total prestations," which represent a whole group or subgroup and circulate in this wide "circulus") as "vehicles of *mana*," a conceptualization which was already present in his study of magic as "*choses à* mana"[2] (Mauss and Hubert [1904] 1973). From his study of magic to the *Essay*, the model of *mana* remains intact; only the notion of "circulus" was new in the *Essay* and now central to the *mana* model.

Thus, Lévi-Strauss' attempt at interpretation in 1950 should be taken with extreme caution. Lévi-Strauss wished to persuade the readers of the *Essay* that they need not pay attention to the concept of *mana*, which would just be a misleading reminiscence of Mauss' former study of magic. For Lévi-Strauss, the real new concept at work in the *Essay*, even if not explicated by Mauss, was *reciprocity*—the universal mark of all social life. This attempt was ethically useful in those years, as we said above; but it also erased what in fact was at the very heart of Maussian sociology.

A more detailed study of Mauss' texts, and his later references to the *Essay*, easily reveal that his interest in the Maori *hau* was that it was a clear instance and explication of the *mana* model at work in all societies. It was useful because it was a concept explicated by the Maori themselves, within their exchanges of gifts. Thus Mauss thought it would be a pedagogic example that could persuade economists and jurists (the primary audience whom the *Essay* was aimed at) of the following: behind any exchange between two individuals, there could be a whole collective circulus if the gifts exchanged belonged to the total-prestation type. Mauss did not mention *mana* prominently as he did not want the *Essay* to appear only as an application of his and Durkheim's theory on religion, but his usage of the formula "vehicles of *mana*" in the *Essay* is, for us, a very clear sign of *mana* being used as

2. An English translation is rather difficult: things (*choses*) made of *mana*, things belonging to *mana*, things organized by *mana*.

pedagogic exemplification. Mauss' interest in the Maori *hau* was not because he thought he could build his case on a local theory of magic, because for him the *hau* was not that at all; it was a local explication of the universal circulation of *mana*, which is to be expected in any social life configuration.

Similarly, a wide misinterpretation has been done to Mauss' usage of the word "spirit." It is again a core concept in Maussian sociology from early on, long before the *Essay*. It is enough to read his several critiques of Frazer in those years. He constantly opposes Frazer's *laïque* approach of all religious social facts to a "spiritual" one which would be much more "sociological." Frazer thought he could explain religion as a rational system of deductions mistakingly applied to the environment (i.e., primitive societies misunderstanding the causes of natural phenomena), while Mauss, along with Durkheim, tried to show the *spiritual* mechanism at work in the socius. This wasn't a "spiritual turn of mind" of putatively primitive societies, but a universal mechanic involving conceptions of the soul or the spirit. In short, every member of a social group has a representation of its own spiritual individuality, its own identity (whether called a "soul" or anything else), as being a part of a collective spirit—which is again to be understood through the *mana* model. Social life creates in everyone the belief of a collective spiritual force, and from there everyone represents his or her own soul as being in essence a part of the collective one. There lies Mauss' interest in all manifestations of a *spiritual* type, as they all illuminate a part of the sociological mechanism of belonging to a group. Thus sociology must focus on *spiritual* social facts. When Mauss translated the *hau* of the Maori gift as a form of "spirit," he had in mind the idea that any gift, at least when being a total prestation, is put into circulation as a form of expressing and reaffirming the link that ties an individual to the group. For Mauss, the *hau* of the Maori has to be understood within the wider *mana* model.

Now, back to ethnography.

The *sau* and the *hau*

Within an area such as Polynesia, clearly defined at least in linguistic terms, ethnography always gains from regional comparison. Thus, if indeed a Maori concept called *hau* has or had some centrality in Maori cosmology and social practices, it is worth asking if we can find a linguistic equivalent in other Polynesian societies. Linguists and language archivists have of course raised that question in specialized attempts at reconstructing many Proto–Polynesian words. These are usually limited to readings of previous ethnographies, and thus to the words that had been noted down by ethnographers. When looking at one particular and well-known dictionary,[3] the results are disappointing. Besides in the Maori world, occurrences of *hau* or *sau* (the phonetic variability is regular) with meanings linked to "return for services or to a gift," appear only in languages of Fiji, Ifira-Mele, Pukapuka, Tonga, and West Uvea. The Samoan example is missing, as no published ethnography of Samoa had mentioned the concept of *sau* in the context of gift-giving. It could be that, for similar reasons, references to other regional languages are also missing.

3. See *POLLEX* ("Polynesian Lexicon," an on-line database initially directed by the late Professor Bruce Biggs, now by Ross Clark, at the University of Auckland): http://pollex.org.nz/entry/sau.5/

It could also be that this *hau/sau* of the gift would have been, from the start of Polynesian languages or even before, a specialized application of the widespread homonym which designates (or has designated) in many Pacific societies a high chief, and specifically the life-powers of those chiefs. (Chiefs are, and have to be, gift givers *par excellence*, redistributing the flux of ceremonial gifts converging to them.) Yet, beyond linguistic questioning, and beyond the Maori case, no comparative ethnographic enquiry has been conducted that searches for local meanings and word-usages of *hau/sau* in gift-giving contexts. As I happened to be doing fieldwork in Samoa in the 1980s and 1990s (on other issues mainly: chieftainship, political evolution, gender, and kinship), I could not resist asking my Samoan friends and mentors about *hau/sau*. I must say that I, myself, did not hear that word in the formulas that were uttered during ceremonial gifting or exchanges. But, having the Maori case in mind, I was tempted to make a try through direct questions.

Most people of low rank did not know how to answer my questions. However, all of them did mention the "dew." It is probably another homonym of *hau/sau*, again widespread in Polynesia; interestingly enough, one friend directly linked the *sau* of the gift to the morning dew (see below, respondent no. 3). Only people who were at the same time of a certain or high rank, and had been involved in ceremonial oratory, could answer and comment.

Conversations were in English with parts in Samoan. (My translations or comments are between brackets and parenthetical descriptions of the respondents are also included; Samoan words are written following official modern rules in Samoa which avoid all diacritic signs.)

> 1) "Yes, we say for instance: *Lelei o le sau o le faifeau.*" [My translation: "It is a nice gift that has been given to the Pastor."] (Respondent: an elderly lady much involved in the ceremonial life of her village.)
>
> 2) "Yes we have notion of *sau*. It is linked to the personhood. We say: *O le sau o le ola* [literally: the *sau* of the life]. If we say that, we mean that your arrival, your *susumai* [a formula of welcome addressed to a superior] is the *sau* of my life; it liftens up [me], it strengthens my life." (Respondent: a senior chief who is also a teacher.)
>
> 3) "You want to know about the *sau*. It is a gift that you are particularly happy to give. For instance, a gift to your Pastor, *o le sau o le Faafeaiga* [another respectful designation of a Pastor, besides *Faifeau*]. You also have the gifts you give to a high Chief . . . well in fact any kind of gift. For instance, you made a new plantation, you are very happy with your plantation, really very happy with what it has produced; then you feel so happy, and immediately you want to make a gift to the Chief. This feeling of happiness, it is the same as when you wake up early and you, or a baby, goes out to enjoy the morning dew, which is something very powerful to cure all kind of sicknesses." (Respondent: a middle-age high chief and orator.)

I particularly cherish this latter comment: the happiness to make a gift (whereas a Westerner might have expected to hear about the happiness to receive a gift), the force of happiness that takes up the person and drives her to make a gift, a gift that one *has to make* because one *wants to make* it, etc. Mauss would have loved this comment, so expressive of the "obligation" of the gift that he was trying to

understand. It also rejoins with answer no. 2: the *sau* is at the level of the whole of life, it invades the person as a feeling imposed from outside, it "strengthens one's life."

Professor Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, a leading figure in research within Samoan studies since the early 1960s,[4] has made a useful academic comment for our purposes here. In a talk she gave in 1994 at my university (EHESS), where she had been elected as Visiting Professor, she presented her views about Samoan personhood—more exactly the components of "the *mauli* of the person" (*mauli*, *mauri* in other Polynesian languages, translates anywhere from "soul" to "the total spiritual part" of the body). "The *mauli* of a Samoan person includes," Aiono said:

> *Iloilo*: reasoning, capacity to make a choice
>
> *Masalo*: capacity to foresee
>
> *Mana*: power to implement [this is the famous Oceanic and Maussian *mana*]
>
> *Sau*: capacity to create
>
> *Mafaufau*: capacity to think
>
> *Manao*: desire, affect
>
> *Finagalo*: one's will

Upon hearing Aiono mention the *sau*, I asked her during the public discussion if she could comment further. She added:

> It is the creative part of the human. Today it means also wealth, presentation of food, and gifts, but it is the part where human equates God; you can create, create people (beget children), create things. God is said [to be] the *mataisau*, the chief-creator.

Thus, with the Samoan *sau*, we are very far from any specific, esoteric theory of magic and very far from any "spirit" located within the objects given (in the material sense that Westerners have kept in mind from their reading of Lévi-Strauss' comments on the Maussian translation of *hau*). We are, rather, at the most general level of a life-giving cosmology.

I will not dare to dwell longer in Maori ethnography of the *hau*. But this level of generality demonstrated by the Samoan example suggests that we follow an interpretation given by Dame Anne Salmond:

> In Maori ontology, *hau* is the source of life. When the world began, a burst of energy generated thought, memory, and desire. Desire made knowledge fruitful, and from knowledge came the *Pō*, the realm of ancestors, and the *Kore*, the "seedbed of the cosmos." It was not until

4. Although now of an advanced age, she is still very active in organizing, with other people (including some of her daughters), a primary, secondary, and tertiary level of education in Samoan language and culture, a proper "house of knowledge" as the Maori had in ancient times.

> *hau*, the wind of life, blew that the phenomena of the everyday life could emerge, impelled by exchange in spiraling networks of relations.[5]

Samoan *toonga* and Maori *taonga*

If we are indeed at such a general level of a life-giving cosmology, far from any local, specialized, esoteric, or magical theory of a "spirit" residing in objects given, then we are led to raise a query on what has been written about those Maori and Samoan objects of gift-giving. Shall we encounter the same encompassing level of "life-giving" powers in the Samoan *toonga* and the Maori *taonga*?

Mauss himself, in the *Essay*, initiated a comparison between the Samoan and the Maori case. Of course, he did not compare the Maori *hau* with the Samoan *sau* directly, as he was not aware of the Samoan concept, but he certainly did compare Samoan gifts with the Maori category used to designate gifts animated by the *hau*. He noted that the Maori *taonga*, those items that (so it seemed to him) are given with and circulate because of the *hau*, could be linguistically cognate to the famous Samoan fine mats *ie toonga*, or just *toonga* (pronounced /tōnga/ with a long "o").[6] Mauss even found the Samoan example to be a perfect introductory case for his Polynesian chapter, the first chapter of the whole *Essay*. In Samoa, two kinds of gifts circulate, *oloa* and *toonga* (we won't comment here on their debated dualism). Only the *toonga* seemed to Mauss (from his reading of the ethnography from the LMS Missionaries) to constitute "total prestations," as only the *toonga* clearly referred to the clan, the genealogy, the land, and not to an individual; the *oloa* (food, tools, and also, since contact, European imported items), on the other hand, seemed to Mauss to be a more individual (rather than clan-based) type of property.

Thus, Mauss opened the first chapter of his *Essay* with the Samoan case in order to draw the reader's attention to the type of gifts that are "total" (which meant, very simply, gifts that represent a social group). He wrote (and I paraphrase and summarize): in Samoa there are two types of gifts, but let us keep in mind the *toonga* which are the only ones to enter into total prestations. The Samoan word *toonga* then made a perfect transition for Mauss' more substantial section on the Maori *hau* and the Maori *taonga*. Hence his construction of the first chapter, from the Samoan *toonga* to the Maori *taonga*, which then, in turn, reveals the Maori concept of *hau* and the anthropological idea of the "spirit in/of the gift."

This led me to raise a question. Would the Samoan word *toonga* refer to the *materiality* of that gift made of fine mats, to a quality linked to that material (e.g., the "fineness" of the mats), or rather to some much more general idea, as general as the concepts of *hau* and *sau* appeared to be? A long inquiry, both sociological and linguistic, led me to a clear-cut conclusion. The word does not refer to "mats" or to any physical material (a meaning carried by the word *ie* that comes before *toonga*); nor does it refer to any quality of fineness. "Fine mats" are, indeed, *ie toonga*, often shortened to just the word *toonga.* But when it is not used as a

5. Salmond's quote is from her endorsement of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*: http://www.haujournal.org/endorsements

6. Mauss spelled it *tonga*, from his reading of missionary accounts; modern Samoa spells it *toga*, as it conventionally writes the /ng/ phoneme just as "g," and it does not use any diacritical signs such as the macron. I shall write *toonga* to remind the reader of the length of the vowel, which explains how the word can be cognate to the Maori *taonga*.

shortened version of *ie toonga*, the word *toonga* still sometimes refers (and always referred in the nineteenth century) to a *group of various gifts* (fine mats, tapa cloth, body ointments), themselves linked to the persona of the unmarried "lady" or *tamaitai* (and those gifts play a prominent role in marriage gifting as they refer to the engendering powers of life that the bride potentially represents). In marriage, but also in all ceremonial exchanges, a dominant reference is the "covering" or "wrapping-in" of the body (with mats, tapa, and ointments), itself a very direct symbol of the maternal gift of life. In ceremonial exchanges of food, etc. (*oloa*) and mats, etc. *(toonga*), the *toonga* are given in return for a first gift of *oloa* and are announced as "the covering" of the initial gift and givers. At a cosmological level, the Samoan fine mat is, fundamentally, a "cover for life." This last remark opens up another vast ethnographic inquiry; suffice it here to mention that, in the legends of origins, the first fine mat revealed its powers when a Samoan woman saved the lives of other Samoans, who had been captured by Tongans, by covering them with such a mat. In historical Samoa and up to the 1960s, anyone who was about to be killed in an act of revenge could have his life saved if he presented himself in front of the enemy entirely covered by a fine mat (Tcherkézoff 2002, 2008). Actually, there is a good chance that the linguistic history of the word *toonga* (and of the Maori *taonga*) is linked to the Proto-Polynesian *taqo (-ga being a nominalization suffix) base which meant "to cover."

We are thus tempted to return to the Maori *taonga*. Perhaps *taonga* have also been seen, in a restricted way, as specific ritual objects used in various "magical" rites. Mauss was the first to give to the Maori *taonga* a larger sociological dimension, but of course he did not have access to detailed ethnography. Later on, Annette Weiner, while she was advancing her new—but quite questionable—ideas of the "inalienable" or "keeping-while-giving" character of some gifts in Oceania (like the Maori *taonga* or the Samoan *toonga*), insisted quite rightly on the variety of objects that are considered as *taonga* (Weiner 1985, 1992). But it was Paul Tapsell who, in 1997, finally opened the door on the wide generality of the *taonga*; he showed—even if he did not mention the Maussian expression—that the *taonga* are indeed "vehicles of *mana*" in the largest possible sense.[7] He had and has the vantage point of being a trained anthropologist and a direct participant in Maori ceremonies. Allow me to quote at length his ground-breaking paper (Tapsell 1997).

First he quotes Kawharu: "'taonga' refers to all dimensions of a tribal group's estate, material and nonmaterial—heirlooms and wahi tapu, ancestral lore and whakapapa, etc." (Tapsell 1997: 326). Here we can add some further commentary. The word *whakapapa* refers to the whole realm of genealogical ties (between the living and the dead, between the living themselves, and between the living and the gods). The mention that *taonga* are *tapu* is also quite revealing. This word duplicated, *taputapu*, can be used as a ceremonially polite way for designating *taonga* objects (Williams 1971: 385). It seems then that a *taonga* is more defined by its taboo state than by its materiality, since the word *taputapu* alone can formally replace the word *taonga*. Samoa has a parallel example: the fine mats can be

7. In the same paper, Tapsell shows that Weiner's theory of "inalienable possessions" cannot be applied to the Maori *taonga* (ibid.: 362); I would add that it also cannot be applied to the Samoan *toonga*.

referred to as "the *mea sina* of the country,"[8] the treasures of the country, or literally the "shining-white-luminous beings-things."

Elaborating on *whakapapa,* Tapsell stresses that *taonga* can only be understood in the context of a ritual recitation of genealogies (and all these genealogies belong ideally to the great cosmological scheme beginning with primordial forces and ending with the creation of humanity). Every living creature and every site of the landscape belongs to that story. In this *whakapapa* logic:

> The traditionally accepted role of *taonga* is to represent the myriad ancestor-land connections, reinforcing the kin group's complex identity and authority over their estates. . . . To reiterate, all items deemed *taonga* within the traditional Maori universe are *directly* associated with both ancestors and customary tribal lands. According to tradition, a *taonga* can be any item which recognisably represents a kin group's genealogical identity, or *whakapapa*, in relation to their estates and tribal resources. *Taonga* can be tangible, like a greenstone pendant, a geothermal hot pool, or a fishing ground, or they can be intangible like the knowledge to weave, or to recite genealogy,[9] and even the briefest of proverbs. (Tapsell 1997: 327, 331)

Still, within this vast category, objects which can be laid upon the ceremonial ground (*marae*) and can be given out—because they are man-made and not parts of landscape—are indispensable. In the different ceremonies recounted by the author, it is woven cloaks and ancient weapons that are the *taonga* around which the ritual concentrates. Without saying that they are more important but only "particular," Tapsell (ibid.: 333) writes:

> Among *taonga*, one particular type is termed *whakairo*. According to Williams (1971: 88), *whakairo* means 'To ornament with a pattern.' *Taonga whakairo* are any ancestral physical items crafted through the artistry of weaving or carving. . . . They are not only physical manifestations of tribal knowledge but also spiritual representations of certain ancestors with whose *wairua*[10] they have become associated over time. Each of these *taonga* was originally layered, by its artist, with a complex of interconnecting patterns reflecting fixed points within the kin group's dynamic genealogical past upon their lands. The most prominent *taonga whakairo* existing today are fine cloaks (*kaitaka, korowai, kakahu*), mats (*whariki*) and wall panels (*tukutuku*) woven from flax; canoes, houses, gateways, posts and long handled weapons (*taiaha*,[11] *tewhatewha*) sculpted from wood; flutes, fish hooks and club-like weapons (*wahaika, patu paraoa*) carved from human or whale bone; and stone effigies for

8. The word refers to a supernatural dazzling whiteness, such as only the sun or the moon can give. In Samoa, the fine mats are definitely associated with the side of the cosmological light or *ao*, as against the primordial darkness or *po*.

9. At several points in this study, Tapsell stresses the link between genealogical ties and the network constituted by weaving and plaiting. Vilsoni Hereniko (1995) had already made similar remarks in his study of Rotuman.

10. To translate *wairua* briefly and not very accurately, we could say "soul."

11. A long hard wood weapon which carries an ancestral name and represents land retention through the physical force of warriors.

> protecting resources, sinkers, club-like weapons (*mere*,[12] *patu-onewa*) and personal adornments (such as *hei tiki*) made from various kinds of stone.

When the author mentions the great *taonga* imbued with the *mana* of the Te Arawa people, he writes:

> Traditionally, Te Arawa's *mana* over their district was physically manifested in the arts of weaving and carving, which continue with great strength even today. Fine feathered cloaks and *whariki* [finely woven *kiekie* (river side) plant [13] mat used on the *marae*], [14] symbolic representations of Te Arawa's *whakapapa* and *mana* (over lands and people), feature prominently among the many *taonga* that the tribe has presented to others over the generations at life-crisis type occasions. They are always presented by being laid out on the *marae*—symbolising Te Arawa's past and present, connecting land and sky upon the sacred courtyard, representing ancestors and descendants as one identity standing before their hosts or distinguished visitors. (Tapsell 1997: 356)

For our discussion, the most significant remark made by Tapsell is that one cannot know in advance what will be a *taonga* among the material objects produced by men or women. Greenstone weapons (*mere pounamu*, or just *mere*), whale bone weapons (*wahaika*), hardwood weapons (*taiaha*), canoes, ancestral houses (*whare-tupuna*), food repositories (*pataka*), personal adornments, as well as the tattoo (*moko*)—all these being fabricated by males—and all the cloaks, floor-mats, baskets, rain capes, etc. done by females, can be transferred after completion to the authority of the elders. The latter "decide the *kaupapa* (charter) of each item and under whose *mana* it will be controlled. Through the more public recitation of *karakia* (ritual formulae), the *tohunga-ahurewa* (spiritual specialists, priests) then empower the items with the *wairua* [soul] of certain ancestors, *which transforms them into taonga*" (ibid.: 363; emphasis added).

This precision is fundamental. What really defines the state of being *taonga* is neither the materiality of the object nor the gender category of its producer, but the fact of having become, through ritual, the incorporation of the presence and powers of ancestors. A *taonga* is nothing less than "the sacred" in the Maussian sense—a symbol of the link of belonging to the "total" reference of the group.

Once we understand that a *taonga* is a receptacle for the link to group origins, indeed a "vehicle of *mana*," we can appreciate that the *hau*, "in Maori ontology, is the source of life" (Salmond, op. cit supra). In Samoa, the *sau* is itself "the *sau* of life" (*o le sau o le ola*), as one of my friends said. To paraphrase him: when a high Chief, thus a sacred person (in the Maussian sense), comes to see me, his arrival "liftens me up" because his presence with me allows a sharing of that *sau o le ola*

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12. A *mere*, "a hand-held chiefly weapon," can be a *mere-pounamu,* which is made with nephrite (the green stone called *pounamu*). Tapsell (1997: 355) has a story of one which was so *tapu* that people could hardly come near to it.

13. *Kiekie* is a widely spread Polynesian word for a Pandanus species used for fine weaving; cf. the Samoan word for the fine mats *ie toonga* (/'ie/, pronounced with a glottal stop, is the regular cognate of *kie*).

14. This insertion is the definition for *whariki* given by the author in his Glossary, appended at the end of his paper (ibid.: 372).

(Respondent no. 2, op. cit supra). And, as I mentioned before, the famous Samoan fine mat is itself, fundamentally, a "cover for life."

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Réflexions sur le don Polynésien: le *sau* et les nattes fines (*toonga*) Samoa, le *hau* Maori et les trésors (*taonga*)

Résumé : Cet article explore le concept samoan de *sau* par rapport au concept Maori de *hau*. Il se penche sur une comparaison, elle-même proposée sous une première forme par Marcel Mauss, entre les dons sacrés des *taonga* (Maori) et des *toonga* (Samoa). J'évoque d'abord comment l'interprétation lévi-straussienne des concepts maussiens de « sacré » et de « mana » a réduit et déformé le projet qui avait conduit Mauss à écrire l'Essai sur le don. Ensuite, je présente des données

nouvelles sur la notion samoane de *sau*. Ce matériel nous révèle que les dons sacrés des Samoans et des Maoris doivent être compris non pas à travers leurs spécificités matérielles (nattes fines, sculpture de néphrite, etc.), mais a travers leur capacité—obtenue par le rituel—a contenir une référence aux origines du clan.

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