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► **To cite this version:**

Sandra Revolon. Iridescence as Affordance: On Artefacts and Light Interference in the Renewal of Life Among the Owa (Eastern Solomon Islands).. Oceania, 2018, Living Beings and Artifacts: Vital and Technical Processes in Oceania, 88 (1), pp.31-40. hal-01842142

HAL Id: hal-01842142

<https://hal.science/hal-01842142>

Submitted on 12 Mar 2022

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Sandra Revolon

Aix Marseille Université, CNRS, EHESS, CREDO (UMR 7308), Marseille, France

Iridescence as Affordance: On Artifacts and Light Interference in the Renewal of Life among the Owa (Eastern Solomon Islands)

Abstract:

This article focuses on identifying the technical and cognitive processes that imbue artifacts and practices with forms of efficacy central to the relations the Owa people have with surrounding invisible entities. In particular, it aims to describe the correspondences between the schemas at work, on the one hand, in material logics, by analyzing the making of magical artifacts and, on the other hand, in ritual logics, through an analysis of the practices and representations involved in Owa rituals. These two domains—technical action and ritual action—are both locally understood as ways of acting on and in the world.

This efficacy rests on the relationships established between vital processes and technical processes, or more precisely on the co-construction, by specialized humans and by invisible entities, of artificial devices that reproduce visible phenomena considered by the Owa to be visible manifestations of powerful entities' effective capacity to intervene (*mana-ity / mana-ization*) in the world. These include a broad category of phenomena that can be seen in the atmosphere and on the bodies of living organisms and which all display, in different ways, chromatic distortions that are mobilized and imitated by Owa carvers, who apply them to the surface of magical artifacts.

By illustrating one of the ways in which Owa craftsmen imitate vital processes through artifacts, this article examines what this imitation indicates about how the Owa conceive the renewal of life and act upon life in an attempt to control it. The idea of “vital processes” should be understood here in a broad sense to include all the processes that benefit life and result from non-human action.

*

Aorigi is a coral island six square kilometers large, situated in the eastern Solomon Islands and inhabited by some eight hundred Melanesian fishers, farmers, and carvers who speak the Austronesian language of Owa. The Owa reside in sixteen hamlets and villages and are divided into six clans, split into two matrilineal, exogamous moieties. Although the Owa converted to Christianity in the 1950s, they

continue to place great importance on maintaining equilibrium between humans and the invisible beings (*ataro*) who govern their lives.

These invisible beings fall into two categories. The first category includes beings who never had human existence, who are called *ataro si fenna*, “beings of the earth, of inhabited places,” or *ataro ni matawa*, literally, “beings of the abysses, of the horizon,” also known as “beings of the sea” (*ataro iesi*). The second category is comprised of beings who come from humans who have died either in ordinary circumstances (from old age or illness)—these are called *ataro ni nuni*, “beings of persons”—or as a result of violence: *ataro si gapu*, “beings of blood.” All of these beings contribute more or less directly to the reproduction and growth of living beings—in particular, humans and pigs—to the fertility of the land, to the growth of domestic plants and edibles, and to the proliferation of marine resources, fish, and crustaceans. What does the existence of these beings or agents teach us about Owa ethnotheories of life? How do the Owa understand vital processes such as growth, reproduction, or the degeneration that brings death? Is there, for the Owa, a common principle, shared by dissimilar beings, that explains why they are all considered “living”? To answer these questions within the context of the Oceanian world, we must understand the relations between these vital processes and *mana*.

Whether or not they have human existence, and regardless of their fields of action, invisible beings—who all possess, in an immanent way, a power referred to as *mena* or *mwaru*, a local variant of the Melanesian *mana* defined by Codrington (1891, 118-20)—seem to have always dominated human affairs. To this day, throughout the year and in all kinds of circumstances, individual and collective rituals are performed to honor them (*wosagi*, to worship), to make up for offenses (*tara*, “payment of compensation”), or to solicit their support (*nungifa*, “to ask”). All means are used to attract these beings during worship: areca nuts are consumed in order to cause trances during which invisible entities enter human bodies; an *ataro*’s true name is pronounced in ritual expressions, rather than a circumlocution; offerings and sacrifices of prepared foods are made, including yam and taro

puddings, bonito fish,¹ and steamed pig quarters, as well as the first fruit from gardens and orchards, bonito blood, areca nuts, tobacco, shell currency, paper money, coconuts, the yam premices, and *Canarium* nuts. Beyond their seeming diversity, all these rites share the same goal: to summon the help of the *ataro* in executing human actions, and thus to benefit from the generative power of their *mana*, necessary for the reproduction and growth of all living beings. The beautiful objects used during rituals—individual and collective bowls, large canoes with sewn and caulked boards—reproduce certain optical phenomena seen in the atmosphere or on certain living organisms to which the Owa attribute a non-human origin (Revolon 2012). These objects play a key role in the stratagems that living beings use to co-ordinate their actions with those of invisible beings.

Whether it is a matter of anthropology of art, approach to “religious materialities”, extension of “material culture studies” to the most physical aspects of technical practices or the development of cognitive approaches to the production as well as the reception of artifacts, contemporary research on objects is characterized by the combining of disciplines, itself the outcome of research since the late 1960s, in France and England more particularly, often conducted in Oceania. The first phase of this approach was to replace objects in their local context of production, exchange and use. As R. Firth (1973) reminded us, such objects must be considered “as works of art in their own right, to be judged as expressions of artists’ original conceptions in the light of their cultural endowment”. Based on this postulate and influenced by the seminal ideas of A. Forge and then A. Gell, one of the central concerns in anthropology has been to show “how objects ‘work’ in their cultures” (Gell 1992) and more specifically, to quote J. Coote and A. Shelton (1992), to determine

“why art objects should function as they are supposed to do? How in fact they do so, and why and how they are vehicles of meaning? ... Here, the importance

¹ Grouped together under the generic term *waiiau*, these include *Auxis thazard* (frigate tuna or frigate mackerel), *Katsuwonus pelamis* (skipjack tuna), and *Euthynnus affinus* (mackerel tuna), all related to tuna and part of the *Scombridae* family.

of art objects as objects is considered, the way that they are supposed to work is investigated, and the forms they take explained, as well as their functions and meanings explored.” (1992, 3).

Today, in an effort to deepen the relation established by A. Gell between the notions of esthetics and efficacy, one of the major fields investigated by anthropology of the object is that of the cognitive and relational processes that endow artifacts with the capacity to arouse emotion. For Gell, esthetics “has nothing to do with universal qualities or standard of beauty, but with people’s conceptualizations of the effects of their art works” (Gell 1992). He therefore proposes to see art as a system of action whose purpose is to change the world. These forms of action involve a mechanical chain of causes and effects that bring into play the visual perception system and human thinking. Among Gell’s methodological options, certain seem particularly productive for the analysis of Owa ethnographic material, first of all because the notion of efficacy itself is at the heart of the practices and discourses associated with material and ritual logics; and then because using C.S. Pierce’s semiology, and the notion of indexicality in particular, can be useful in explaining the different figurations of the dead in this Melanesian society.

We can nevertheless regret that Gell’s analysis of the object as a system of actions did not take into account recent developments in an anthropology of modes of action that is attempting to go beyond the dichotomies (tangible/intangible, living/dead, nature/culture, human/non-human) that were an obstacle to the study of humans’ relations with materiality. For instance, the mechanisms he defines to explain the notion of “agency” applied to artifacts – as material indications of social agents’ capacity for intervention – unfold in a paradigm unquestioningly based on the nature/culture division, which we now know not to be universal (Descola 2005). Since Gell’s work, T. Ingold, for example, has suggested developing a “new kind of ecological anthropology, one that would take as its starting point the active, perceptual engagement of human beings with the constituents of their world”

(2000: 60). J.-M. Schaeffer in turn has defined the esthetic experience as a specific cognitive behavior, “a modality of activating” (*modalité d’activation*) objects, events or actions produced in risk-laden communication situations – seduction, struggle, submission – encountered in humans and animals (2008: 174-6; 2009).

In the same vein, anthropologists have devoted increasing attention to the crucial role played, alongside living humans, by invisible beings (deceased humans and non-human beings) in the processes of production and reception of living beings, events and artifacts in Oceania and elsewhere (Revolon 2006, 2012, Santos-Granero 2009, Morgan 2010, Lemonnier 2012, Pitrou 2012, Coupaye 2013). The present article is situated within this particular theoretical framework, and my principal aim is to analyze how humans capture sensuous qualities they perceive in nature and transform them into material devices allowing them to co-ordinate their actions with those of invisible agents so as to obtain effects they know themselves incapable of producing on their own. What are the specific characteristics of material actions in ritual actions? What material and conceptual mechanisms allow the Owa to ensure the presence of *ataro* during acts that, without them, would have no effect? By exploring the articulations between perception and action among humans, this article illustrates one of the ways in which perceptible qualities attributed to certain objects in the world, natural phenomena, and human artifacts are locally perceived as acting effectively on the world. Methodologically, highlighting the vital processes that the Owa seek to produce in certain circumstances requires identifying, within certain rites, the elements that make it possible to represent these vital processes and the actions expected of the non-human agents said to produce them.²

Light, a Sign of Non-Human Agency

Luminous phenomena are ubiquitous in the Owa’s visual environment: first, in the marine world, where an exceptionally high concentration of species generate a bioluminescence well known to navigators in the region, who have long used it—the light from corals in particular—to locate coastlines and to navigate at night

² In a similar manner, Perig Pitrou has described and analyzed devices developed by the Mixe of Mexico to enlist supernatural entities in their enterprises (Pitrou 2012).

(George 2012). Second, phenomena of light are seen in the celestial world, on this archipelago located in a subduction zone where permanent seismic and tectonic activity generates many different electromagnetic phenomena (Devereux 1989). Humans have ample opportunity to observe and integrate into their conceptual universe all these phenomena from the viewpoint of their tiny island surrounded by the immense ocean and an unobstructed horizon. Thus, they have various terms to describe that which is luminous, most of which refer to things locally considered to be primary, direct sources or forms of light: a fire, a lamp, the glowing end of a cigarette, the stars. In common language, the verb *toga* applies to that which shines, sparkles, twinkles, or dazzles. A second sense of the word expresses the action of secondary sources of light, which do not themselves produce radiance but rather reflect and diffuse it. When these notions are discussed by holders of local knowledge, the verb *toga* and its noun form *togatoga(na)* take on a more precise meaning, and designate that which emits a blinding, and necessarily reflected, light. According to these exegetes, these terms refer to phenomena produced by a very diverse set of surfaces and materials: the skin of bonito fish and the mark it leaves on the torsos of young men when they are initiated; the ocean surface at dawn, sunset, or when the moon is reflected on it; certain clouds; the shell of the pearly nautilus when it is polished; or coral lime powder.

At the perceptual level, all these phenomena display light interferences and, in particular, a chromatic aberration found throughout nature and known to biologists since Buffon: iridescence—also called irisation or goniochromism—: a property of certain bodies that, because of their structures, reflect solar light while at the same time decompose it in such a way that only certain colors appear.

Photometeors, visible in the atmosphere, are created by the reflection, refraction, or diffraction of solar or lunar light; hydrometeors are created by water particles suspended in the atmosphere or settled on objects on the ground. The skin of bonitos is covered with iridophore pigment cells and diffracts light, generating blue and green iridescent shades, which mark the chests of initiates on whom the skin is placed. When cut, the flesh of these small tuna fish also displays iridescent reflections. Irisations can be seen at the edge of clouds, appearing as an arch whose

colors, from violet to red, are created by sunlight filtered through drops of water in the atmosphere. The iridescent hues of the sunset are also due to the refraction, dispersion, and selective absorption of sunrays, as is the anti-twilight arch known as the Belt of Venus, where the bluish shadow of the Earth can be seen just above the horizon; above this, there is a glow of warm colors, from pink to purple, that comes from the scattered light of the rising or setting sun. As for nacre, its iridescence is due to its composition: superposed thin layers of aragonite and conchiolin are bonded to ionized water molecules and reflect light rays; depending on the refraction angle of the light, this causes certain colors to appear or disappear. Coral lime, which is made of calcium carbonate, presents iridescent properties similar to those of nacre. The vibrant, moving, column of light formed by the moon's reflection on the ocean surface and connected to variations in atmospheric refraction produces an optical effect known as scintillation. Bioluminescence, another phenomena of light that can be seen in nature, is a biochemical reaction that allows certain organisms, such as glow-worms or fireflies, to produce fluorescent or phosphorescent light—this light is one of the forms entities take for the Owa and many other Pacific populations. In the depths of the ocean, cephalopods—nautilus in particular—equipped with light organs produce a cold light that allows them to hide their silhouettes in the dimly lit deep waters. Finally, certain corals produce light.

These phenomena of reverberation, saturation, and contrasts of dark (anthracite gray, jet black, dark blue, purple) and light (blinding white, gray, light blue or pink), dusky hues, iridescence, scintillation, and luminescence are characteristics of the beings, artifacts, places, and temporalities that have relations of proximity to invisible entities—the dead in particular. Thus, certain clouds (*rotona rarapuru*) are considered the manifestation of the malevolent deceased, as are the sudden, heavy rains that fall from them and cause fevers, which, without the intervention of a healer, can be fatal. Sunset—*faufau tai nuni*, literally “the hour when one cannot recognize people”—because of the nature of its light, the source of which can no longer be perceived, is for the Owa the moment when things blur together and beings, living or dead, encountered on a path or the seashore, are

indistinguishable. Representations associated with bonitos accord their blood specific qualities: like nautilus and coral lime, their blood it is supposed to immanently contain *mana*. Other shells—such as cowries (*Ovula ovum*) or mother-of-pearl (*Pinctada maxima*), which are worn as ornaments or used as lure for bonitos—are considered vehicles for this force. In other words, whether natural or created by humans, these plays of light make tangible both the presence of invisible powerful beings and their capacity to act on the world; their *mana*.

Materializing the Performative Dimension of Action

Within the Owa conceptions, *mana* is understood as a potentially unlimited capacity for action, recognizable through the events it is thought to cause, and cognizable within the relationship between living humans and supernatural entities (Codrington 1981; Drew and Fox 1915; Fox 1925; Hogbin 1936; Firth 1940; Ivens 1972; Keesing 1982; 1984; 2000; Kolshus 2013). It is a transverse phenomenon, as light, which, in its physical, biological, and artifactual manifestations is the visible sign of *mana*. According to Owa understandings, *mana* results from the transformation of a vital principle called *afigona* that occurs at a person's death. *Afigona* is defined as “the living part of a being,” the site of life and health, located in the head, and it is seen as the origin of every form of life, whether plant, animal, or land; the island itself has a site considered to be the seat of its *afinona*. While alive, a human person does not inherently, spontaneously possess *mana*, and does not produce it. On the other hand, he or she has this “living part,” *afigona*, which, at the moment when an embryo (*apena*, the corporeal wrapping) is conceived, animates it by giving it a material entity (*anunu*, which is distinct from the body itself, *apena*) and breath (*manawana*). Neither the living part of the being (*afigona*), nor the material part (*anunu*), nor the breath (*manawana*) contains *mana*. It is at the moment of death that the living part, *afigona*, transforms into a being (*ataro*), which leaves the bodily wrapping and possesses *mana* immanently. As for the material part, *anunu*, it detaches from the body after five days and leaves the world of the living for good. Thus, *afigona* and *mana* are like two states of the same principle: in its living form, *afigona* animates the flesh at the moment of conception and keeps

the body it inhabits alive; its metamorphosis into a being (*ataro*) animated by *mana* leads to the body's metamorphosis into a cadaver. Five days after this change of state—as many days, it is said, as it takes yams to germinate³—the alteration of the flesh allows the material part of the body, *anunu*, to detach in turn. The body is then definitively emptied of all the principles that kept it alive,⁴ and can be buried.

One of the first visible signs of a body's change of state from life to death may be iridescence—for example, a golden-green reflection, or a rainbow—seen on the raw flesh. This phenomenon is especially common on tuna muscles, and undoubtedly can also be observed on human flesh. Iridescence, an unstable and moving effect, is for the Owa an indication of this metamorphosis, and it visually marks the change in state of the *afigona-mana* principle that underlies the existence of all animated beings. Thus, iridescence is the perceptible quality of phenomena that can *mana-ize* or that are in a state of *mana-ity*. More broadly, it is my hypothesis that for the Owa, light interferences are tangible manifestations of the performative dimension of action, which by definition produces effects: here, iridescence marks the transformation of the imperceptible form of the *afigona* principle into *mana*, a form that can be assimilated by living humans. The change of state from *afigona* to *mana*, which takes place independently of all human and non-human action, has an immanent agency, just like the *afigona* principle itself, which is necessary to all forms of life but whose origin and modes of action remain mysterious and out of human control. This is not the case with *mana*, which can and must be captured by living beings either temporarily or definitively, through complex, costly (Schaeffer 2009), multisensory (Lemonnier 2012), and potentially dangerous material procedures. Thus, the livings attribute to themselves a role and

³ This indicates that the process of decomposition is combined with a process of germination/regeneration.

⁴ Fox also discussed the relationship between *afigona* and *mena* in his works on the island of Makira: “There is a great source of *mena*, whose source is the serpent *afigona*, and in the last instance in a personal centre of *mena*, the spirit *Agunua*; from this central source *mena* is imparted to *adoro* (ghosts) and to material objects” (Fox 1925, 236). We find mention of this principle on many of the eastern Solomon Islands: *vi'gona* at the south of Guadalcanal (Hogbin 1936, 244); *hi'ona* on Ulawa; and *li'oa* on Sa'a (Ivens 1972). In general, the term refers to a supernatural principle or entity that may be manifested in the form of a giant serpent. On Aorigi, we may say, the term *afigona* refers to a disembodied vital principle.

a responsibility in the reproduction of the conditions necessary to the existence and preservation of life on earth. One of the procedures used for this is the spreading of iridescent bonito cells on the chests of boys during their initiation. As adults, other procedures allow men to literally incorporate the *mana* of a powerful dead man; this *mana* will remain attached to their bones well after their own deaths. A transmission of *mana* may occur among the livings, between a father and son, between two brothers, or from an uncle to a nephew, and may take several forms. In one, the two protagonists share an areca nut mixed with *Pipper* leaves and coral lime powder, which the bearer of *mana* chews first, after pronouncing the appropriate ritual formula. He may also place the same mixture on a cut on his successor's arm so that it will mix with his blood. The transmission of *mana* from one man to another is called *tafagaroa* or *mafata iana taro*, which means "to share with the spirit," and conveys the idea that the same principle is present in non-human beings, humans, places, and objects.

Transmitted *mana* is thought to have been literally and definitively placed in the bodies of living beings. A man who has incorporated the *mana* of a dead man is said to have "the son of a dead man" in his body, as this is how the being *ataro*—which is literally born from the human body at the moment of death, and which contains *mana* immanently—is designated. The seat of a dead man's *mana* is his skull, which explains why the lower jawbone of *mana*-bearing men is particularly used in their descendants' worship.

In order to enter into communication with powerful invisible beings, young men must go through an initiation during which they are visibly marked with an iridescent trace left by being anointed with iridophorous bonito cells. Here, a part of a living being becomes an artifact capable of promoting a vital process linked to *mana*. Afterwards, the transfer of substances (blood or saliva) allows some of the young men to incorporate the being generated from a deceased person. In doing so, they incorporate its capacity of action, which guarantees that their own actions will have greater efficacy than those of ordinary living beings. In exchange, they must regularly honor and satisfy the entity they carry within them by making it small, frequent offerings (of tobacco, betel, money) and by organizing a meal once a year

for it, in which officiates place food (the lower jawbone of a pig, yam pudding) in ceremonial bowls and eat in order to feed “the child of the dead man” and reactivate its *mana*.

A similar mode of operation can be observed in the treatment of artifacts intended to become material medium that is, “receptacle[s] for temporarily manipulating a generative power whose destructive potential [must be] contained” (Chave-Dartoen 2013, 72). These artifacts are first marked with a brilliant sheen and then undergo ritual procedures to place them under the protection of the ancestor whose potential repository they become.

Imitating Nature to Reproduce the World

The last phase in the fabrication of magical objects consists in embedding finely cut and polished nautilus shell pieces on their surfaces, which have been varnished with black lacquer, thus giving them an iridescent mark similar to the one made on boys’ chests during initiation. The black lacquer is first applied to the surface of carvings, on which coral lime powder is then spread or polished nautilus pieces inlaid, giving them gleaming lines that resemble the sinusoidal outlines of a serpent—as we have seen, snakes are associated with the vital principle of *afigona* throughout the eastern Solomons—or the “W”-shaped form of frigate birds with outstretched wings, whose feathers are also iridescent. The quality of sanding and the fineness of the lacquer must be such that there is no roughness, and the object is soft to the touch. The inlaid nacre pieces are explicit references to the skin of bonitos, and the care given to fashioning them corresponds to the need to make them as brilliant as “the skin of the bonito.” Visually, the iridescence of the polished nautilus shell or the shimmering of the coral lime powder—which are always enhanced by a matte black background—condition the carved object’s elevation to the status of a “beautiful object,” and, *de facto*, its potential to enter into the sphere of ritual practices (Revolon 2006).

Once these shining marks have been imprinted on their surfaces, these artifacts undergo ritual procedures that literally render them active (*fagamamaru*, “to activate”; *mwaruai*, “to transfer *mana*”; *menaia*, “to make powerful”) and bind

them to the entity they were created to worship, whose exclusive property they become. During these procedures, the sacrificer convokes the being by pronouncing its true name, orally signifying his desire to place the object under its protection. Next, pirogues are anointed with bonito blood, and the sacrificer must consume yam pudding, *canarium* nuts, and pig meat from the ceremonial bowls; a portion of this food is then placed at the bottom of the bowl for the entity to whom the request is addressed. Once this has been done, the presence of these *mana*-ized objects outside of ritual contexts requires the occupants of a place to adopt an attitude of seriousness and to refrain from raising their voices or using harmful words, avoiding all questionable behavior, for these objects suggest the possible presence of the invisible entities to whom they now belong.

The Owa see these objects as capable of capturing the attention of invisible entities. The origin of the aesthetic canon governing their fabrication is attributed to the ancestors themselves, not to men. These numerous, complex formal conventions are the subject of decades-long teachings, at the end of which Aorigi carvers may become recognized experts, “men of skill” (*mwane manira*), who have mastered a certain body of technical, aesthetic, and mythological knowledge. These men are few (4 out of 800 inhabitants in 2011), and possess another remarkable skill: they are able to give material form to mental images transmitted to them by the deceased in their dreams. During their sleep, the dead come to them to mentally designate the prototype of the object that will be used for their worship.

The carved motifs are limited to a finite number of images, which are either figurative or abstract, and are linked to the sea (sharks, mackerels, bonitos, blue sardines,⁵ frigate birds⁶) or to the earth (dogs, land crabs, snakes, plant motifs), and they must display a certain realism: the animals represented on a carving must “resemble their living models,” to the point that “they themselves appear to be alive” as owa carvers say. The forms within this aesthetic system are metaphorical references to the beings who govern the appearance of bonitos and facilitate their capture by men; the choice of forms is also conditioned by the fact that they all refer,

⁵ *Spratelloides robustus*.

⁶ *Fregata minor*.

in one way or another, to observable qualities in nature that men seek to appropriate. Anyone who has ever caught a bonito will not forget the power of this animal and the strength required to bring it on board. Sharks are great predators: effective, rapid, and precise, capable of detecting the blood of their prey from several dozen kilometers away, and their graphic representation on canoes corresponds to an explicit desire to attribute the qualities of these remarkable hunters to the watercraft and to the fishers who use them.⁷ Frigate birds, also superior predators, are often represented by the Owa eating freshly-caught fish; recurrent graphical references to these birds, whose feathers are black with a bluish iridescence, undoubtedly testifies to men's desire to absorb their speed, agility, and the impressive piracy they display against other sea birds, capturing them in their talons and knocking them against the ocean surface to force them to drop their prey or regurgitate their food.

The co-operation between skilled carvers and invisible entities in different ways and at different moments in the conception and fabrication of artifacts guarantees that these objects meet the formal standards required for them to enter into the ritual sphere. Because these standards are based on conventions dictated by the ancestors themselves, once the artifacts are placed within the ritual context, they can and must function as lures (*pa'a*, the same word used to designate the blue sardine alevins eaten by bonitos) and thus they correspond to the belief that, just as the invisible entities have great appetites for the best food, they are also sensible to the aesthetic attributes that decorate the objects used to worship them. Subtle, sometimes almost imperceptible signs indicate the presence of such entity: a puff of wind, the rustling of leaves, the cry of a bird, an inflection in flames or in a sacrificer's voice—this alteration indicates that the being he is honoring is present in him and is speaking through his mouth.

Two types of representations are mobilized in the Owa aesthetic system: iconic representations through which men seek to appropriate qualities recognized

⁷ Similarly, in his study on the pirogues used during *kula* on the Trobriand Islands, Campbell (2002) showed that the animal characteristics depicted on boats' prows—"slipperiness, swift movement, and a quality glossed as 'wisdom'"—are those it is hoped will characterize the expedition itself.

in certain living beings, and indexical representations of metamorphosis and the performativity of action, indicated by phenomena of light interference. The role of objects in representative procedures is plural and composite. On the one hand, because they are beautiful according to criteria defined by the ancestors, they are means humans can use to attract invisible beings to their places of worship (in addition to pronouncing the entities' true name and offering them a feast). On the other hand, they are ways for humans to appropriate qualities recognized in other living beings of nature. Eventually, the iridescent marks imprinted on the surface of magical objects indicate the presence of entities and their capacity for action. By producing these objects, men give themselves the ability to act on the invisible entities—which are by definition dangerous and partially uncontrollable—with whom they must cooperate in order to guarantee the vital processes necessary for the renewal of the world: the reproduction, multiplication, and growth of living beings.

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In this socialization of nature—in particular of the sea and the seascape—humans attribute an imagined affordance (Gibson 1977; 1979) to the phenomena of light interference that surround them, and have developed material and conceptual devices allowing them to capture these qualities and, with them, to build modalities of a new form of mediation with non-human beings considered to have powerful agency necessary for the reproduction of the world. Carvings occupy a central place in the instantiation of non-human agency, through technical devices based on using certain shells to create phenomena of light interference that are believed to be visible manifestations of entities' effective abilities to intervene (*mana-ity/mana-ization*) in the world. Among living beings, only the bonito, the nautilus, and coral spontaneously and visibly produce phenomena of light interference (iridescences and luminescence) both while alive—on their surfaces—and on their flesh, pearly interior, or lime when dead. This particularity places them in a liminal state (Turner 1990) as both living and dead, which undoubtedly helps explain the central place given to them in the ontologies of the eastern Solomon Islands.

This examination of the means used by living beings to interact with invisible beings shows that, whether temporary or permanent, intrinsic or borrowed, possession of the polymorphic *afigona-mana* principle groups living humans, dead humans, and the non-human beings that have emerged from humans into the same category, separate from other beings, living or dead (plants or animals) that have a living part but do not generate *mana* at death. In Owa understandings, a line is drawn and materially emphasized in practices, between what is a (human or non-human) source of *mana* and what is not. At the same time, life and death appear as different states of single mode of existence in the world, in which mortal beings, in becoming intangible, acquire a capacity for action that extends and reinforces their social existence in the world of the living.

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