

5 Spirit Encounters on a Polynesian Outlier

Anuta, Solomon Islands

Richard Feinberg

Anuta, the easternmost island in the Solomon Islands, is a half-mile in diameter and has about 250 residents. Its nearest neighbor, Tikopia, which it resembles closely in language and culture, lies just over seventy miles to the southwest. Still farther west are the Melanesian islands of the Santa Cruz group.

Anutans trace their ancestry to immigrants who came from the Polynesian islands of Tonga and Uvea approximately fifteen generations ago. Later arrivals from Samoa and Rotuma augmented the community. The contemporary social structure was formed about nine generations ago when a chief named Tearakura, assisted by his two younger brothers and his brother-in-law, slaughtered the remainder of the island's male population. These four men became the founders of Anuta's four major descent groups known as *kainanga*, "clans."

The earliest recorded European sighting of Anuta was by the *HMS Pandora* in 1791. Missionary activity did not begin, however, until a century and a quarter later when the Anglican Bishop of Melanesia left two Tikopian teachers on the island. The first systematic anthropological studies of Anuta occurred during the 1970s, making reconstruction of pre-Christian activities problematic. Fortunately, the memories of older Anutans as well as those who have worked to keep alive the island's oral traditions are affirmed by comparative material from Raymond Firth's detailed investigations of Tikopia beginning in 1928-1929 (see particularly Firth 1936, 1939, 1967, 1970), when half the population still actively practiced the traditional religion.

From SPIRITS IN CULTURE, HISTORY, AND
MIND, edited by Jeanette Marie
Mageo and Alan Howard. New York
and London: Routledge. 1996

I have been engaged in study of Anuta since the early 1970s. From the start, as I have gratefully acknowledged elsewhere (e.g., Feinberg 1981), my hosts seemed happy to share information on most topics. The one exception was traditional religion.

Anutans had adopted Christianity more than fifty years before, and I thought pre-Christian numinals were long forgotten. Granted, there were some discrepancies. Traditions were recited making reference to former chiefs' becoming major deities upon their death (see Feinberg 1979, 1981). Reference was sometimes made to kava ceremonies. Chiefs were said to have extraordinary *mana*, "supernaturally derived potency," derived from their position as descendants of the premier gods. Ideas of honor and taboo remained intact, and failure to respect persons of higher rank was thought to bring on illness, accident, or death (see Feinberg 1979, 1986). Still, I tended to perceive these scattered bits of information as relics of a distant past.

My first clear indication that non-Christian spirits retain much of their importance in Anutan life occurred on New Year's morning 1973. While walking through the jungle in the predawn darkness, a boy at my side noticed a phosphorescent glow just off the path. He grabbed my hand, shouted out, "A spirit!" and instructed me to shine my flashlight on it. When I did so, the glow disappeared, but when I turned the flashlight off again, it reappeared. After I had done this several times, my companion started to pull frantically at me exclaiming, "Let's go! Let's get out of here!"

Throughout that day, people kept inquiring whether I had seen the spirit. This gave me an opportunity to ask about their own spirit encounters, and soon a new world was opened to me. Over the next twenty years, I learned that people of Anuta recognize a plethora of numinals, ranging from a few that might well be described as "godlike" to a number that could be termed "spirits." In general, however, they emphasize categories that shade into one another, avoiding terms or concepts that imply absolutes.¹

Anutan numinals may be arranged along a number of continua involving: degrees of power; whether the entity was collectively worshiped or individually experienced; the number of people participating in worship practices; the clarity with which the entity was defined, distinguished, and endowed with a unique name, personality, and other characteristics; the degree of moral virtue attributed to it; and the degree to which it is perceived, today as in the past, to play a positive social role. Anuta has neither entirely free spirits whose personae are wholly unbound and whose wills cannot be influenced by human actions, nor beings that are always fully bound. God and spirit—or even spirit and human—are not rigidly distinct and separate categories.

The merging of numinal and human beings suggests issues of possession and spirit mediumship, the existence of permeable boundaries between self and other, and an associative model of the person. Key elements in contemporary Anutan discourse about numinals are Christianity and the conversion process,

continuities and contrasts between the old and new religions, and the role of numinals—both godlike and spiritlike—in moral discourse and in the maintenance of social order. Finally, a theme that runs throughout this chapter involves a form of relativism that permeates Anutans' understanding of the spiritual realm and helps explain their willingness to accept Christianity while maintaining a belief in the existence and importance of pre-Christian gods and spirits.

TYPES OF SPIRITUAL BEINGS

Anutans recognize two levels of existence, which they term *ia tangata* and *ia nga atua*. These may be roughly translated as "pertaining to the world of human beings" and "pertaining to the world of numinals."² In addition, they perceive a realm between these two great worlds. This is the realm in which numinals inhabit (*pakaitino*, "become embodied in") natural objects. Sometimes they inhabit plants, cliffs, caves, or stones, thereby making themselves visible and tangible to human beings. They may be seen as otherwise unexplained lights on the sea or in the bush; as animals that act in a manner out of character for their species; or as abnormally large, powerful people who are able to appear and disappear at will and perform superhuman feats. Under certain circumstances, numinals can enter people's bodies, control their behavior, and speak through their mouths. This ability to possess ordinary mortals is seen in spirit mediumship, a common Polynesian phenomenon in older times and, in modified form, perhaps even today (e.g., see Firth 1967, 1970; Feinberg 1979; Besnier, chapter 4).

Undistinguished Spirits and Ghosts of Ordinary People

Anutans have two basic terms for numinous beings: *atua* and *inpuia*. Of these, *atua* is the more common, and it applies generically. The most frequently encountered are *atua vare*, "common spirits" or "undistinguished spirits."

Atua vare are the most spiritlike of Anutan numinals. They haunt the bush, primarily at night, lurking in dimly lighted places rarely frequented by humans. It is difficult to see their faces, although their bodies often are quite visible. They may cause accidents or minor misfortunes, but tend to be more frightening than truly dangerous; thus, it is possible, albeit difficult, to face them down (cf. Mageo, Chapter 2). Occasionally, Anutans attribute distinct names and personalities to such spirits, but they usually do not.

Some *atua* are believed to be the incorporeal remains of deceased people, but most are viewed as never having taken human form. Some people, when they die, are said to become *atua* and return to haunt the living; others do not. *Atua vare* have inhabited the world since time immemorial and continue to be a major feature of Anuta's cultural landscape. Yet, despite their generally spiritlike character, such *atua* also manifest some godlike features. They are sometimes differentiated, occasionally named, may be bound to particular places,

objects, or circumstances, and quite readily appear to persons occupying any status in the social hierarchy, including chiefs.

Identifiable ghosts of the recently deceased often behave much like *athua vare*. Both types of spirit make brief appearances, then quickly disappear. They typically are witnessed by one or two people who have been temporarily isolated from their companions. The witnesses seek out support from other people, describe their experience, and if possible return in force to the scene of the events; but by the time they get back to the site of their encounter, the spirit has always disappeared.

Such spirits are most likely to appear in times of stress, either to the individual or the community. The period surrounding the funeral of a close relative is a time when spirits are particularly apt to display themselves. Their appearance usually induces overwhelming fear, perhaps reflecting a reluctance to let go of friends and relatives, combined with fear of death and a reminder of one's own mortality.

When spirits are seen, they often look like people, only larger and more powerful. Observers feel they have a relatively clear view, yet they can rarely see the spirit's face. Thus, his or her identity must be inferred from context or judged from body contours, and is often subject to interpretation and debate. If someone has recently died, the spirit is likely to be identified as that person's ghost. Otherwise, there may be no particular identification, and the intruder then is said to be an "undistinguished spirit." Such encounters may be illustrated by the following accounts recorded in my 1972-73 field notebooks.

Several informants told me of how a man named Pu Penukimoana and a girl known as Corrine had seen Corrine's father, Pu Raroipi, shortly after his death. On the day of the funeral, Pu Penukimoana saw Pu Raroipi while on his way to the spring. Later the same day, Corrine observed him on the hilltop and ran to a man named Pu Atapu who was nearby but apparently did not notice anything peculiar. Neither of these people saw the spirit's face, but the events took place in broad daylight, so the principals got a good look at his body. Corrine's brother, Pu Nukuriaki, interpreted his father's appearance as an indication of the strength of his love (*aropa*) for his daughter. He noted that he had no wish to be loved as much as his sister. . . . "*Kau mataku pe*," "I am fearful."

One night Pu Maravai and Pu Nukumanaia were in a tree, hunting birds. Pu Nukumanaia had gone first and was higher in the tree. An *athua* started climbing up the tree toward Pu Maravai, who became frightened and suggested that they urinate on the spirit to cause him to leave. However, Pu Nukumanaia's fright was less than his revulsion at the idea of climbing down a tree trunk saturated with urine. So he handed his net to Pu Maravai and climbed down the tree to do combat. He went to step on the *athua's* hand, but the latter pulled it away and fled before Pu Nukumanaia could touch him. Pu Nukumanaia gave chase, but no *athua* was found.

Ghosts of Deceased Chiefs and Ancestral Shades

At the opposite extreme from *athua vare* in the traditional religion are deceased chiefs. They were powerful, systematically worshiped, and bound in material representations as well as prayers, songs, oral traditions, and ordinary discourse. The most important of such beings is Tearakura.

Tearakura was a culture hero, a man of great *manua*, "mana; supernaturally derived potency," and a prominent ancestor in the present chiefly line. After his death, he became the island's premier deity. Kava ceremonies (*pai kava*) were performed on his behalf, during which the senior chief invoked his assistance to ensure the land's productivity and the community's prosperity.

In such ceremonies, the chief was represented by one of his ritual assistants, known as *matapure* (see Feinberg In Press a). *Matapure* recited prayers, threw out bits of food, and poured water on the ground. The kava plant (*Piper methysticum*) is absent from Anuta and, therefore, not used despite the ceremony's name.

According to Pu Nukumarere, who had witnessed kava ceremonies as a child, the ritual was characterized by elaborate organization. The rites were led by specialists but involved the whole community in such activities as fish dives and collective feasting. In the rites that he observed, special attention was given to Tearakura and to a stone that served both as his resting place and material representation. Tearakura, like other gods, had power of autonomous movement; yet even he was bound in some degree to the ceremonial ground, Tapu Arika, and to his special stone located therein. The stones were elaborately decorated, similar to the way Anutans decorate themselves for dances or for major rites of passage.

Other deceased chiefs also achieved divinity and were regularly worshiped. Of special note in this regard were Toroaki, Pu Tepuko, and Pu Tauraro. Toroaki was Tearakura's great-grandfather and the first of the current line to hold chiefly office. Pu Tepuko was Tearakura's younger brother and became Anuta's first junior chief. Pu Tauraro was Tearakura's great-grandson, a later holder of the Tui Anuta title. Like Tearakura, he was born with his face "colored like a rainbow" (*pani marara*), which marked him as an *ariki pakatomo* or *ariki manuu*—a chief of exceptional mana.

Other chiefs entered the spirit world as well after their deaths, and they were sometimes worshiped. However, they were less important than the *ariki manuu*, and less is remembered about them.

After death, non-chiefs also survived in spirit form. People who had been extraordinarily imposing in life tended to become major presences in the suprahuman world and were at times invoked by their direct descendants. But they exercised less power than former chiefs, were not worshiped through formal kava ceremonies, and were invoked by their particular descent lines rather than on behalf of the community at large.

One major exception to this rule was Nau Arika, Tearakura's older sister. As

her name implies, she is regarded as an *ariki papine*, "female chief"; indeed, she is the only one recorded in Anutan oral history. Little information exists about her, but she appears not to have had much of a political role, and her recognition as *ariki* was primarily honorific. Still, she is said to have possessed tremendous *manuu*; commanded worship in the form of kava rites; assisted those who worshiped and respected her; and taken awful retribution against those who failed to give her proper recognition.

The power of deified ancestors had its limits. They had many of the character defects one might expect to find among living people and could be deceived, coerced, and bluffed. Normally they communicated with "priests" (*ariki* and *matapure*), but occasionally they appeared to ordinary people. While these were Anuta's most important pre-Christian numinals, deified ancestors were not rigidly distinguished, conceptually or terminologically, from spirits of other kinds.

Totemic and Land Spirits
Between gods (*tapua tapu*) and undistinguished spirits (*atua vare*) are beings known as *tapua penua*, "land spirits," and entities that might be termed "totemic spirits," which have no distinct class label in Anutan.

The names of great pan-Polynesian gods—Rongo, Tu, and Taane—evoke from Anutans little hint of recognition. Tangaroa figures in some narratives recited for the benefit of children, mostly as bedtime stories. The name applies to a group of spirits associated with the ocean.

According to local tradition, Anuta was initially pulled from the ocean floor by the demigod Motikitiki—a character with analogues on many Polynesian islands. Other stories refer to Te Ao Rere, "Large Magellanic Cloud," and Te Ao Toka, "Small Magellanic Cloud," as female spirits (see below). Manu, "Bird," is a male spirit seen in a constellation consisting of Sirius (his "body"), Canopus (his "east wing"), and Procyon (his "north wing"). Manu's north wing is shorter than his east wing, having been broken in a fight with Motikitiki over the female spirit Taro (Antares). Since the establishment of Christianity, adults no longer take these stories seriously, referring questions of creation to the Book of Genesis.

Totemic spirits date to Anuta's settlement from Tonga and Uvea about fifteen generations ago. The immigrants brought tutelary spirits from their homelands: the Tongans' god was named Putiurua and was embodied (*pakitino*) in the eel (*te toke*); the Uveans' god, Tokitaitekere, inhabited the body of the lizard (*te moko*). After the creation of Anuta's four-"clan" system in the time of Tearakura, each *kainanga* had a special relationship with particular *atua*, residing in certain types of fish or other sea creatures. The Kainanga i Mua, Kainanga i Tepuko, and Kainanga i Rotomua all had the shark (*te mangoo*) as their *atua*. Spirit sharks could be identified by their unusual behavior, such as a propensity to come onto the reef to "lie" or "sleep" (*moe*) in front of Tapu Ariki near

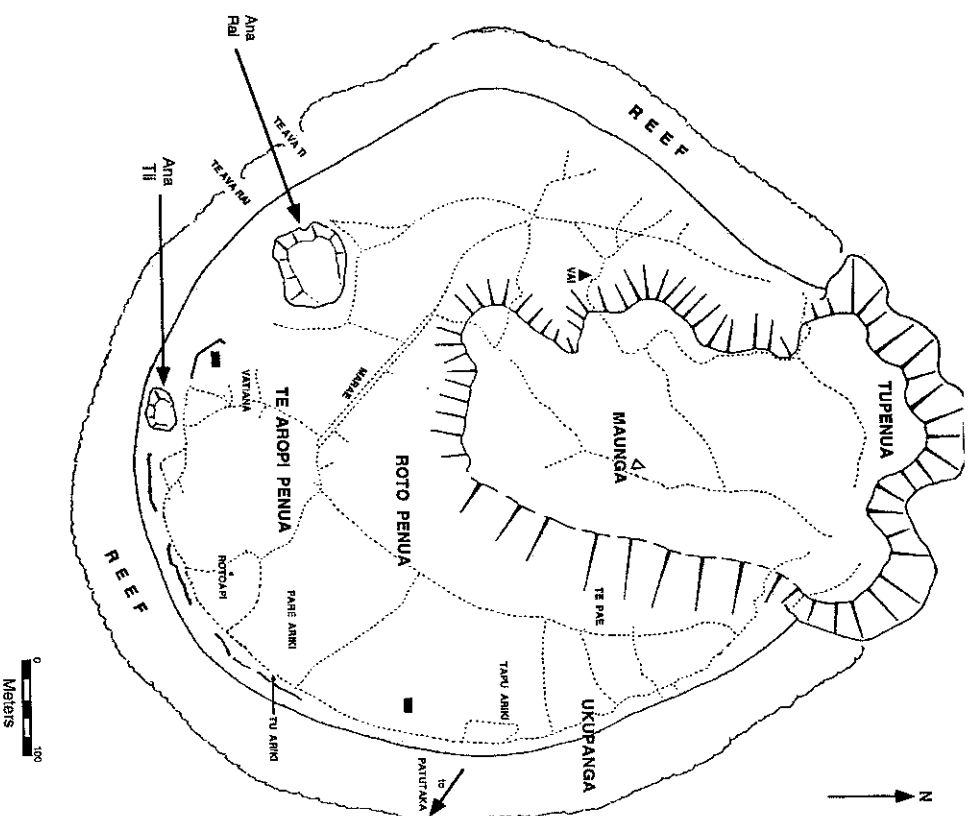


Figure 5.1 Map of Anuta Island

Rotoapi village (see map, figure 5.1). The shark was *te atua taa tangata*, "a man-killing spirit" or "war god." Another *atua* associated with the Kainanga i Mua was *te peke*, "the octopus," a female spirit connected with voyaging.

The Kainanga i Pangatau was associated with *te poru*, "sea turtle" and *te ririko*, "manta ray." In contrast with the shark, which anyone might eat, turtles and rays were *tapu* for Pangatau "clan" members in pre-Christian times. The *ririko* seems to have been Pangatau's voyaging spirit. In addition to the ray and turtle, Pita or Piitia i te Rangī was cited as a major god of Pangatau. This deity was male and not associated with any particular animal. He was both a voyaging spirit and a war god.

Little detail seems to be remembered about totemic spirits. By contrast,

Anutans have a good deal to say about *tupua penua*. These were native to Anuua, perhaps from the time of its creation (*pakatu*). Some informants claimed they were *atua tapu*, sacred spirits that helped people who respected (*pakaapa*) them and brought misfortune to the rest. They were numerous and of both sexes. Most preferred to live in caves, and some stories tell of battles for dwelling sites among *tupua penua*. Spirits of this type are discussed in greater detail in Feinberg (In Press b). Among the more prominent are:

Uperuu, a female spirit with one very long, folded breast (*ua uu e perupeni*), which she used to lasso men and force them to have sex with her.

Uunupine, a female spirit who lived in a cave known as Te Ana Rai "The Large Cave" (see figure 5.1) near the main passage to the ocean.

Rua Taka, meaning "Two Spinners" (*rua*, "two"; *taka*, "unmarried"), denotes a pair of sisters whom Tearakura banished from Anuua after a series of confrontations. Eventually, these spirits ascended to the heavens and became embodied in the two Magellanic clouds.

Paitia, who was sometimes male and sometimes female, is said to have had white skin "like a European."

Uunirenga, *Matania*, and *Pu Roa* were male spirits inhabiting a number of caves in different sections of Anuua's beach.

Tupua penua are godlike in that they are named, individuated, powerful, bound to natural phenomena (rocks, trees, caves, etc.) that served as their material representations, and may have been invoked through prayer. Their exploits and personalities are captured in story and song. But they are spiritlike in that they are amoral, egoistic, and dangerous. They have little positive role and, even in pre-Christian times, were usually avoided or placated rather than worshiped. Totemic spirits were somewhat more free-flowing in their representations, being bound in animals of various species, but they were godlike in that they were positive forces representing moral order and often called on for assistance.

Christian Spirits: God and Satan

In the modern era, Satan has been vested with many characteristics of *tupua penua*. Unlike his predecessors, he is a relatively recent arrival on Anuua and is not bound to a particular locale. However, he is powerful, evil, not worshiped, and best avoided, although he may be involuntarily encountered. Such encounters are described as very frightening. One was related to me in the following terms:

Shortly after the death of Pu Oroniki, two young men who were looking in a mirror that had been set up near the grave site³ saw Satan approach the grave. Before he got there, the grave opened up and a column of smoke descended from the sky. The Devil had come to bear off Pu Oroniki's soul to hell, but God rescued it

and carried it to heaven before Satan could fulfill his plan. The two men ran back in a panic to St. John village at the opposite end of the island.

Finally, the Christian God is designated by a variety of descriptive terms. These include: *Te Tupua i te Vaerangi*, "The Tupua in the Heavens"; *Te Tupua Tapu*, "The Sacred Tupua"; and *Te Tupua Rai*, "The Great Tupua." The (Anglican) Melanesian Mission introduced Christianity during the second decade of this century, and conversion was swift and complete. This, however, did not mean denial of the older gods and spirits. Rather, the community was introduced to a more powerful God who demanded precedence in its system of worship but shared major characteristics of the more familiar numinals. Although Anutans have abandoned formal worship of pre-Christian gods, they occasionally invoke their assistance (see below and Feinberg In Press b), and the bush continues to be haunted by spirits of the *atua vare* and *tupua penua* varieties.

A MATTER OF BELIEF

This leads to the question of belief. Howard (Chapter 6), addressing a precipitous decline in spirit encounters over the past three decades, questions whether belief is a meaningful category in terms of which to discuss Rotuman thinking about spirits. By contrast, I can speak with little hesitation of Anutan spirit beliefs.

The word *pakatonu*, literally "make straight," is used in almost precisely the manner of the English "to believe." Anutans are very much concerned with truth and falsity. After relating a story or an incident, they ask each other whether they "believe" (*pakatonu*) the narrative's assertions. They debate the evidence and attempt to evaluate, as systematically as possible, the likelihood of the story's truth.

Their approach to spirits is similar. They regularly ask each other about spirit encounters, attempt to determine whether strange experiences are best explained in terms of spirits or a mundane cause, and propose alternative explanations and evaluate their plausibility. They have asked me many times about my possible encounters with Anutan spirits and whether I "believe" in them. They have observed that Europeans generally do not experience spirits when visiting Anuua, a fact which they explain by noting that most European visitors do not "believe" in local spirits.

Anutans have emphasized to me repeatedly their certainty that gods of old played an important role in the community's affairs. They display equal certainty of the activity of "undistinguished spirits" (*atua vare*) and commonly are fearful about walking through the bush alone at night. Carechists and other leaders of the island's church are as convinced as anyone of the existence and activities of local spirits. Nor are such convictions questioned by the one Anutan who has an advanced degree from Kohimarama Theological College on Guadalcanal.

POSSESSION AND SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP

Anutans explain their belief in the existence and activity of spiritual beings in terms of a variety of observations and experiences (see Feinberg 1979, In Press b). Prominent among these are possession and spirit mediumship.

By possession I mean the phenomenon of a spirit entering one's body and taking it over, so that the person's words and actions are interpreted to be those of the spirit. When this is done under relatively controlled circumstances for the express purpose of having spirits communicate messages of concern to the community, it is spirit mediumship (Firth 1967:296), and the session is a seance. Those spirits that possess and communicate through a particular medium are that medium's spirit familiars. Mediumship in this sense requires possession, but possession does not necessarily entail mediumship. This distinction has a number of implications.

Mediumship involves reciprocal communication between the spirit and the human community, whereas other forms of possession are taken to involve one-way communication emanating from the spirit. Since spiritlike beings are less bound than their godlike counterparts, it is relatively easy to conceive of them entering and possessing human beings. On the other hand, two-way communication is most apt to occur with beings concerned with the community's welfare who have important information and are inclined to share it if properly approached. A medium's spirit familiars, therefore, tend to be godlike while ordinary possession most often is attributed to spiritlike beings.

The context for mediumship is likely to be a formal seance in which the spirit familiar speaks through the medium to an interested audience. The messages are, therefore, relatively explicit, albeit open to a degree of interpretation. Other forms of possession are likely to occur in private; persons other than the victim learn about the episodes secondhand, and the messages tend to be implicit, somewhat cryptic, and subject to speculation.

Mediumship, unlike other forms of possession, involves a degree of voluntarism, and in that respect is similar to witchcraft (Chapter 1). But unlike the witch, the medium uses possession for positive social purposes. Finally, a medium's unusual behavior is attributed to the spirit inhabiting his or her body and is expected to abate after the seance. Nonmediumship possession, by contrast, tends to be associated with psychological derangement or an illness of significant duration, requiring human action to alleviate.

The common Anutan term for "spirit medium" is *vakaatua*, "spirit vessel" or "spirit vehicle." Little detail is remembered about *vakaatua*. Pu Nukumare, my one informant in 1972 to have witnessed seances during his childhood, described them follows:

When spirit mediums (*vakaatua*) existed, an *atua* rushed hither to enter the medium. The spirit announced that he wished a betel chew. The medium chewed his betel. Then his body shook violently.

When he was done chewing his betel, the spirit fell from the medium and fled. Then another entered. He would also come and chew. This was another spirit. Then his body shook again. Thus, he also chewed. When his chew was finished, he would also exit and depart. These were the spirits.

The spirits who entered mediums were our grandparents and ancestors. One's deceased father might also enter the medium. Even a child who predeceased his father might return and enter his father's body.

According to Moses Purianga, Anuta's acknowledged expert in oral tradition and ancient custom,⁴ the major gods were more selective than their lesser counterparts in choosing mediums. In particular, Tearakura and Pu Tauraro, the *ariki pakatomo*, approached only certain individuals. The great gods *kairo e rere vare*, "do not run about aimlessly." Mediums entered by the leading deities were not termed *vakaatua* but *tauraatua*, "spirit anchors." Two men are especially remembered as *tauraatua*. One was Pu Maatopa, the son of Pu Pangatau, founding ancestor of the Kainanga i Pangatau; the other was Pu Taneanu, an important figure in the Kainanga i Mua.

Possession, whether involving mediumship or not, seems commonly to have been a positive phenomenon before the church. Although mediumship is no longer positively valued, spirits are still thought capable of entering a person and radically altering his/her personality and behavior. I heard reference to several such events during my field research.

One case occurred in the Russell Islands of the Central Solomons. Pu Nukuioika (Misak Taukoroa) became involved in a dispute with a man from Malaita. One day, as he was on his way to work, he found himself surrounded by a group of Malaitans, all armed with bush knives. Frightened, he called on the spirit of his uncle and former chief, Pu Teukumarae, for assistance. Suddenly, he felt Pu Teuku enter his body. All fear vanished. He grasped his knife and proclaimed that he was leaving and would kill anyone who tried to stop him. The circle parted, and he walked away without a fight.

The case about which I have the most information occurred during my first visit to Anuta in 1972-73. It is described at length in earlier publications (Feinberg 1979, 1980). Here I summarize the highlights.

The story involves a woman I have called Nau Tetupua (Feinberg 1979) who suffered from considerable psychosocial stress. She was from the leading "clan," the Kainanga i Mua, and married into the lower-ranking Kainanga i Pangatau. Her husband separated from the extended-family domestic unit (*patongia*) that he had shared with his two brothers. Shortly after that, he died. Her eldest son had already left Anuta to attend school overseas.

The elder of the two remaining sons was responsible and energetic in helping his mother; within a few years, he was appointed assistant catechist in recognition of his industry and good nature. From his mother's point of view, however, this meant that he spent more time away from home and less

discharging his domestic duties. During this period, she had a dream in which a man instructed her to have her son step down from his position in the church. The boy, supported by public opinion, resisted this advice.

Shortly thereafter, Nau Tetupua's eldest son visited Anuta and left the following day, thus inadvertently reminding her of her isolation. Almost immediately, she experienced a severe change of personality. She became withdrawn and refused to attend church. She ceased all social intercourse and spent her time alone inside her house. The catechist paid her a visit and suggested that they pray together, but Nau Tetupua refused. She proclaimed that she had been possessed by God, to whom others pray but who does not pray Himself. In a later conversation, the catechist affirmed that she was very likely possessed, but by Satan rather than Jehovah.

These two cases make implicit statements about the social, moral, and religious order. Neither case involved spirit mediumship, since neither involved purposeful reciprocal communication between the community and a spiritual being. Pu Nukuika's experience, however, was positively evaluated both by him and by the general community. Far from a parody of orthodox religion (Lambek 1989:53–54), it was an affirmation of and appeal to (an earlier) orthodox religion in the interest of personal and social preservation.

Nau Tetupua, by contrast, was universally condemned. Her possession could perhaps be characterized as a parody of orthodox religion and a protest against the established order. She was described as having "lost her mind" (*na atamai ku reku*) and was asserted to have been possessed by *te tupua kovi*, "an evil spirit," probably as punishment for some misdeed.

As in many cases of possession, Nau Tetupua's body was seen as the site of contention between two fully formed, autonomous selves, and this provided a context in which socially suppressed feelings could be given voice, at least indirectly. However, while it might be viewed as "culturally crafted . . . coping behavior," it is difficult to see Nau Tetupua's behavior as "highly skillful" and avoid interpreting it as "pathology," incompetence or breakdown" (Chapter 1). Indeed, because of its clear pathological dimensions, Anutans were able to dismiss her claims as groundless and attribute her behavior to her own misdeeds or self-inflicted contact with the Devil.

ANUTAN POSSESSION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Who is likely to become possessed? What do patterns of possession indicate about Anutan personality and culture? Why have possession and mediumship on Anuta declined so precipitously since the introduction of Christianity when they have, in other communities, persisted largely intact? If possession served important functions on pre-Christian Anuta, have such functions become unimportant in recent decades? Or are they performed by some other mechanism? In this section, I explore these comparative questions.

In many communities (e.g., Samoa, Chapter 2; Tonga, Chapter 3; Chuuk,

Chapter 9; Toraja, Chapter 10), possession is a tool through which the powerless and downtrodden are able to become centers of attention, bring their concerns to the awareness of their relatives and neighbors, and exercise some influence over those around them. Victims are largely women, adolescents, young adults, and others occupying low positions in the social hierarchy.

Anutans distinguish mediumship (*vakatua* and *tauratu*) from other types of spirit encounter. *Tauratu*, mediums for the high gods, included only men of special prominence. *Vakatua* apparently included men and women representing a variety of social statuses. Nonmediumship possession includes both positively and negatively evaluated forms. Positive instances often involve men under conditions of physical threat. The negative case described above—that of Nau Tetupua—conforms more closely to the common pattern, involving the disadvantaged and socially isolated, or those under unusual stress. It appears, however, that such possession no longer occurs with any frequency. This raises the question: what does possession do, and as it diminishes in prominence, is it supplanted by other phenomena?

Spirit mediumship and possession may serve several purposes. In addition to empowering the disenfranchised, it can provide explanations for otherwise apparently inexplicable events (e.g., Malinowski 1954; Spiro 1952); yield information not accessible through ordinary sense experience; and achieve consensus on controversial issues facing the community (Firth 1967). The medium is in some sense a locus of power (Chapter 1; Glick 1967), particularly power to acquire esoteric knowledge. As Hanson (1987:425) observes, "Gods had knowledge superior to that of humans—knowledge of what was happening far away, or would happen in the future." And people, when controlled by gods, acquire some of that power. Hanson also notes, however, that intercourse with gods can have negative consequences, and it is these negative consequences that Anutans presently associate most often with possession.

In discussions leading to this volume, some suggested that possession, under conditions of cultural stress and social change, might cease to serve a communicative purpose and so disappear, replaced by more clearly pathological phenomena. On Anuta, mediumship and possession appear to no longer serve the communicative purpose they once did, and they have been largely discontinued. Fortunately for Anutans, nonpathological alternatives exist.

Information not readily available to the senses can be obtained through dreams or visions in which spirits "speak" (*karanga*) to the recipient, "revealing" (*pakari*) what is hidden from the view of others (Feinberg In Press a, In Press b). Furthermore, there may be fewer imperponderables of the type that mediums used to address. With better transportation and communication, the fortunes of distant travelers can more readily be monitored. And the availability of Western medicine makes many illnesses less problematic than they were a century ago. Consensus about the proper course of social action sometimes is achieved through proclamations by the chiefs and their advisers, or by the

catechist. In other instances, however, it is not achieved and conflicts fester, perhaps creating a kind of social pathology. This is a point to which I return below.

Nor is possession essential to empowering disenfranchised individuals. Those who feel denied the opportunity to realize their aspirations often can emigrate to urban centers and advance their goals through education or wage employment. Even on Anuta, those lacking the genealogical qualifications for prominent status in the political and ritual systems can gain respect by demonstrating strength, wisdom, competence at crafts, or skill in storytelling, sailing, fishing, gardening, and navigation. To these traditional avenues to social mobility one now can add the church, which carries no genealogical requirements for assumption of leadership positions. This is not to say that opportunities for gaining prominence are adequate to preempt all conflict. Occasionally, fights, suicide attempts, and psychological disturbances occur. Still, many outlets are available to relieve frustration even in the absence of possession.

Levy et al. (Chapter 1) cite two conditions necessary for the occurrence of spirit possession. These are: inclusion in a community of people predisposed to dissociation; and a cultural environment that attributes special meaning and utility to possession episodes. Anuta offers the first of these conditions, as the following section will show. The second has drastically diminished. With a few exceptions, possession is no longer positively valued. The Christian God is most unlikely to possess an ordinary mortal. Local spirits are still present and sometimes possess Anutans, but in the modern era they are defined predominantly in negative terms.⁵

SPIRIT AND SELF

Anutans have a strong sense of themselves as historically situated. Their view of personal identity grows out of a past that is marked by the island's ancient customs (*nga tikutukunga mai mui*) and their personal genealogies. They are intimately concerned with questions of where they came from and what places their forebears visited in the course of their travels. Identification of the self with grandparents and ancestors is observable in the Anutan naming system (see Feinberg 1982b, 1983) and in Anutan spirit beliefs.

The presumed existence of ancestral spirits serves as affirmation that the past has been incorporated into the present. Parents, grandparents, and prominent ancestors may be long dead, but they are still present as spirits. Their personalities remain, and they continue to take interest in the world of mortal human beings. They are concerned about the welfare of their children and descendants and use their powers to ensure their progeny's prosperity and health. Moreover, human beings, by having spirits enter and possess them, are in some sense merged with spirits, who are at the same time historical personalities.

Hanson makes much of the Polynesian continuity between gods and people. As he puts the matter:

Humans, arriving at birth from the supernatural realm, apparently were thought to have a spiritual existence before birth, and they definitely were thought to return to the spiritual realm as ghosts and ancestral gods after death. (Hanson 1987:431; see also Kaepler 1987:432).

Similarly, on Anuta the ability of people to experience possession blurs the notion of the individual. The same person is at once a spirit and the human being whom others know in ordinary life. Thus, the Western notion of the person as a clearly bounded, mutually exclusive self (Geertz 1976:225) is compromised in the Anutan scheme.

Transcendence of the separation between human and spirit also may be seen in the process of adding new gods to the pantheon and is well illustrated by the case of Dr. C. E. Fox, an Anglican missionary from New Zealand who lived for decades in the Solomons. Over several generations, Fox influenced thousands of Solomon Islanders, shaping their perceptions of and relations to the church; by the time he left in 1973, he was revered throughout the archipelago.

Fox (1985) says that he visited Anuta once. Anutans claim, however, that he secretly appeared among them several times after crossing the ocean on foot. In addition, he had occasional contacts with Anutans who had emigrated to the central Solomons. He corresponded with Anutans (as with other Solomon Islanders), answering questions and giving advice. More importantly, perhaps, his reputation as a wise and powerful church leader preceded him throughout the islands and was well established in Anutan minds. When I asked if Dr. Fox was a man or a spirit, I was told that he was clearly not an *ordinary* man. Very likely, he was an *atua*—someone perhaps like John the Baptist. Anutans rejected my suggestion that he was the second coming of Jesus but acknowledged that he had performed many Christ-like miracles (see Feinberg In Press b).

Anutans are apparently more god-oriented than some other Oceanic peoples (cf. Shore 1982; White and Kirkpatrick 1985), but they seem to have a similarly situational view of the person. Thus, the senior chief could tell me in the most deprecating terms about a major disagreement he had with his junior colleague, the Ariki Tepuko, yet a few days later, in a different context, extol the latter's chiefly virtue with comparable eloquence.

Elsewhere, I have argued that a kind of relativism permeates Anutan culture (see particularly Feinberg 1988a:92-100, 1988b). What is good in one situation is bad in another. What is appropriate for a person of high rank may be wholly inappropriate for a commoner (Feinberg In Press a). Someone may be chiefly (*ariki*) in comparison with one person and "commoner" (*pakaropa*) in relation to another. Something may be *tea*, "white," in comparison with a dark object and *uri*, "black," when compared with a lighter one. Directions tend to be characterized in terms of *ngatai*, "seaward," and *ngauta*, "toward the center of the nearest island," so that the same location may be *ngatai* in relation to one object and *ngauta* in relation to another. Anutans tend to speak of

"upward" (*unga*) and "downward" (*raro*) rather than top and bottom. And wind compass directions are defined in relation to each other rather than in terms of absolute positions.

Similarly, Anutans seem to find untenable a rigid opposition between self and other or of "man" (*tangata*) and "spirit" (*atua*). Rather, they blend into one another, so that the same entity can be human in one context (e.g., before death, or a medium while not under the control of a spirit familiar) and spirit in another (e.g., after death or while possessed by a spirit familiar). A few individuals, like Dr. Fox, are spoken of as simultaneously man and spirit (*ko te tangata pe ko te atua*). Nor do Anutans draw a clear line between gods and spirits. This form of relativism, I further suggest, is common in Polynesia and present in associative views of the self.

DISCOURSE AND BELIEF: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Historical documentation for Anuta is sparse, and prior to this century was almost non-existent. Therefore, it is difficult to reconstruct historical events, beliefs, and practices with any certainty. However, several strands of evidence are, at the very least, suggestive. These include: oral traditions; the memories of most elderly informants; statements by Anutans on Tikopia to Sir Raymond Firth during his periods of field work, especially in 1928–29 and 1952; and comparative material from Tikopia, which Firth has richly documented. Over the past century, the apparent constancy of Anutan discourse and belief regarding spirits is impressive, particularly considering that this period includes the introduction of Christianity and conversion of the entire community. Despite such consistency, however, noteworthy shifts occurred in perspective and emphasis.

Changing Modes of Discourse

Although Anutans now evince few misgivings about their pre-Christian past, this was not the case in 1972. At that time they often spoke disparagingly of their traditional religion. The island *ne nopo poouri*, "dwelt in darkness," until the church brought them *te maarama*, "the light." They spoke of the morally questionable behavior of their ancestors, who often failed to show *aropa*, "love" or "compassion," and killed uninvited visitors. Nonetheless, embarrassment was tinged with ambivalence. Anutans value strength and fighting prowess, and they like the image of themselves as strong and aggressive. They take pride in stories of their ancestors repelling invasions from much larger islands. More than once I heard such comments as: "Before the arrival of the church, we killed anyone who came to this island. We were *bad* then, weren't we!" But this was always followed by a chuckle, suggesting a degree of pleasure in the image of their "badness."

Perhaps more importantly, most Europeans whom Anutans had encountered were Christians who neither believed in nor respected non-Western religions.

Therefore, Anutans' claims to have accepted Christianity almost immediately when it was introduced can be understood at least in part as a strategy for projecting what they imagined would be a positive image to a Western audience.

As on Tikopia, structural parallels between the old and new religions made Christianity a less radical departure from tradition than might seem obvious (Firth 1970:313–15). Still, some changes are inevitable in perceptions of, approaches to, and discourse about gods and spirits. If nothing else, the old gods were demoted in importance. Less attention is paid to them, and significant resources no longer are put into winning their assistance.

This is apparent in abandonment of separate sets of names by which the old gods used to be addressed in contexts secular and sacred. To invoke a god's assistance in pre-Christian times, one called him by his sacred name (*inga pakaepa* or *inga pakatapu*). If one should speak a sacred name in profane contexts, the god would hear that he was being called upon for trivial concerns, grow annoyed, and offer punishment (see Feinberg In Press b). Today, Anutans often call gods by their sacred names regardless of context, and in many instances secular names have long been forgotten.

As Anutans spend less time discussing local gods, the relative attention paid to the more spiritlike of numinals increases. And as Anutans look toward the Christian God for positive intervention in their lives, other numinals take on an increasingly negative aspect. There have, however, been marked oscillations in discourse about local gods and spirits.

Missionization was followed by a period of uncertainty, during which many people went back to reliance on spirit mediums, local deities, and abbreviated kava ceremonies in times of stress or sickness. The period seems to have been characterized by some polarization, where advocates of the new religion actively disparaged the old gods as malignant and their supporters as reactionary or worse. Yet even during the time between missionization and my first field research, people felt indebted to the ancient deities for helping their forbears survive a precarious existence. Moreover, Anutans' historical consciousness led them to maintain an interest in older spiritual beings' activities, identities, and personalities. They were grateful to the ancient deities for their creation of, and support for, major features of Anuta's social structure, including their chiefly system. The most important gods were valued ancestors and former chiefs. Through oral traditions, Anutans preserved some memory of the old gods and their most basic attributes. Still, many details were forever lost, and those who did have information hesitated to divulge it to whomever they believed might view the old religion critically. They were reluctant to discuss with Europeans their pre-Christian past, and in 1972–73, I was on Anuta for almost a year before people would confide in me about spirit encounters (see Feinberg In Press b).

Since my 1972 field study, Anutans have been more open with me about their experience with gods and spirits. To some degree, this may reflect a change in my relationship with them and their increasing confidence in me. At the same

time, Anutans' views of their religious history, and the way they speak of it among themselves, have also likely changed. With time, insecurities about commitment to the new religion have undoubtedly diminished. Thus, Anutans now feel more at liberty to acknowledge their emotional connections with deceased relatives and ancestors. Indeed, some people even voice regret that their parents and grandparents allowed so many details of the old religion to be lost.

Today, Anutans have still further reason to be interested in their traditional religion. As they spend longer periods away from their home island, attending school, working for wages, or visiting relatives, they come into more intensive contact with representatives of other cultures. Consequently, they have grown self-conscious about symbols of local identity. In this respect, their old religion is now emblematic. Even *atua vare* and *tupua pema*, although in some ways threatening, represent a common place and common experience. The major gods were, in addition, positively valued in their own right. Thus, pre-Christian gods and spirits have become shared symbols of identity, to be nurtured and protected—held and guarded against further loss or diminution.

Spirits, Moral Discourse, and Social Order

Levy et al. (Chapter 1) suggest an association of gods with control and spirits with situations in which control is in abeyance. If correct, then gods are likely to be most conspicuous in hierarchical societies with centralized authority, while spirits predominate in societies that emphasize local autonomy.

All Anutan numinals occupy positions between the extremes marked by these ideal types, so even the most spiritlike of them have godlike properties and vice versa. Anutans are about equally concerned with the more spiritlike and the more godlike beings. As the model would suggest, Anutans occupy a middle ground between commitment to hierarchy and centralization on the one hand and local autonomy on the other. They have, in theory, a rigid hierarchical system, based on genealogical seniority, and are led by a paramount chief who exercises both political authority and spiritual leadership. Yet because of the community's small size and isolation, the formality of sociopolitical relations breaks down and local autonomy becomes compatible with centralized authority. Furthermore, in accordance with the model, Anutan spirits tend to be most prominent when chiefly authority is challenged.

As in their social structure and concern with gods and spirits, Anutans take a middle ground in discourse about order and disorder. Their conversation reflects concern with social breakdown, and they speak a great deal about rules or laws, phrased in terms of "custom" (*nga tukutukunga*). This, in turn, leads to a major point of continuity between the old ways and the new: the role of religion as a forum for moral discourse.

The behavior of pre-Christian supernaturals was not always morally commendable. Tearakura, who eventually became the premier deity, led the slaughter of most of the island's population, intimidated his fellow islanders,

arranged for his younger brother's death in order to marry his widow, drove his daughter to suicide, and then hanged himself in a fit of shame for what he had done. Later, as a spiritual being, he assisted his descendants in slaying visitors from other islands. Still, he and his fellow deities were a moral force in the Durkheimian sense of providing collective representations that encouraged members of the community to identify with one another and with the community at large (cf. Durkheim 1965; Parsons 1968). They rewarded those who remained faithful to societal rules and who expressed allegiance through collective worship and respect for the existing hierarchy. They looked after the material well-being of their descendants so long as the living paid respect to their authority and power. And they enforced adherence to social norms by punishing all those who flouted the established social order.

I have never heard Anutans criticize the Christian God or suggest that He might be, in any way, morally deficient. They cite biblical passages referring to Him as a loving God, thereby reinforcing their cultural preoccupation with *aropa* (see Feinberg 1981, In Press a, and elsewhere). The church provides a center of social activity and moral guidance, and most of Anuta's ceremonial calendar is controlled by the church. Perhaps God's most frequently discussed attribute, however, is His wrath. Anyone who fails to attend church or follow religious dictates, who challenges the social order, or fails to respect and obey chiefs and others at the upper reaches of the social hierarchy is bound to suffer serious misfortune. Should people violate tradition or fail to care for their relatives, God, like the deities before Him, is thought to be offended and to punish the community with cyclones, drought, famine, or epidemic.

When social discord strikes the island, each side looks to heaven to visit misfortune on the other, thereby vindicating its own position. And when disaster hits, Anutans invest a great deal of energy trying to identify the culprit and misdeed responsible for bringing it about.

This inclination is illustrated by a series of conflicts that occurred among Anutans during the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁶ One faction was led by the senior chief. The other opposed the chief on a variety of issues centering around sale of locally-grown crops and organization of the church. At their height, the conflicts threatened to turn violent.

Before long, the island was plunged into famine, epidemic, and a series of misfortunes, and the chief's opponents seemed to fare far worse than his supporters. One man came around to the *ariki's* side after his wife died in the epidemic. Another's wife and child became severely ill until he joined the chief's faction, at which point they recovered. Throughout this period, spirits roamed the island, causing havoc. People huddled in their houses, fearing to go out, especially at night. Occasionally, spirits were said, uncharacteristically, to have entered people's homes.

My informants were uncertain as to the immediate efficient cause of the misfortunes. Some attributed them to curses uttered by the chief. The chief

himself suggested that the misfortunes were the automatic consequence of disobedience to him and failure to respect the island's ancient customs. Still others held spirits responsible. But the final cause, in everyone's opinion, was God—creator of the universe and the laws by which it is governed.

All of my informants evaluated this period of unusual spirit activity in negative terms and took it as a sign of the community's moral defects. People disagreed as to who was to blame, but everyone agreed that local spirits and the Christian God alike objected to the conflicts that were tearing the society apart. Victor Turner, in a well-known essay, suggests that the Ndembu of Zambia interpret illness and misfortune as an indication from the spirit world that "something is rotten" in the body politic (Turner 1967:225). As among the Ndembu, the trauma of misfortune convinced Anutans that they had better mend their ways—at least for the time being. Thus, although "undistinguished spirits" and similar beings may be negatively valued and are most frequently encountered during times of social stress and moral breakdown, in another sense they are no less a force promoting order and control than Tearakura or Jehovah.

CONCLUSION

Anutans recognize a wide variety of superhuman beings, forming a continuum from "undistinguished spirits" to the island's premier gods. These beings are a major feature of Anutan life despite three-quarters of a century of Christianity; the shift toward naturalistic explanation, found in many communities, has not occurred on Anuta. Thus, the observation that "it is not just changes in cultural doctrines that affect the presence or absence of spirits" (Levy et al. Chapter 1) is borne out. Reasons for maintenance of spirit beliefs in their present form include the following:

The Anglican Church has not attempted to eradicate belief in local spirits so long as Anutans do not actively worship them. Anglican doctrine itself recognizes a variety of numinals; part of the dedication ceremony for a new church house constructed in 1972 involved the Bishop of Melanesia exorcising evil spirits from the premises.

Parallels exist between the structure of the old religious system and the new, making it possible for the Christian God to be incorporated as a new deity, greater in power but not fundamentally different in kind from those to whom Anutans once dedicated kava ceremonies. Anutan Christianity may have, in some ways, redefined and recontextualized local spirits and the old religion, but it has not decontextualized them.

Still, spirit encounters on Anuta, as in many other communities, ebb and flow with the course of events. Howard (Chapter 6) accounts for the decline in spirit activity on Rotuma partly in terms of changes in the island's physical environment that have removed much of the mystery of daily (or nightly) life. As Levy et al. note, "The more experience that takes place in well-illuminated settings, the less room there is for spirits" (Chapter 1).

For Anuta, what determines the frequency of spirit encounters seems to be social relations and the community's overall well-being rather than the physical environment *per se*. When life is proceeding smoothly, Anutans are reasonably cavalier in their meanderings even on the darkest nights. By contrast, when the community is torn asunder by social conflict and natural disaster, spirits are encountered even inside people's homes and in broad daylight. As Levy et al. suggest, "Numinals who touch upon personal experience tend to proliferate during periods of intense upheaval" (Chapter 1). External pressures generating social discord on Anuta have increased, creating a situation in which one might expect to encounter spirits, and nothing fundamental has changed to cast doubt on spirit presence and activity. Anutan spirits thus promote social and cultural stability, although not primarily through possession. The advent of flashlights and kerosene lanterns has not, any more than Christianity, meant the demise of Anutan spirits.

In addition to appearing at times of social discord, spirits tend to be encountered at times of personal stress. Many of the episodes related to me involved ghosts of recently deceased relatives, close friends, or other prominent community members. This is illustrated by Corinne's encounter with the spirit of her father, and by Satan's attempt to steal Pu Orioriki's soul.

Anutans, like other peoples discussed in this volume, draw a connection between spirit activity and dissociated states. The dissociation, however, often is within the social order rather than the individual. On the other hand, Anutans generally account for the uncanny, the unexplained, the peculiar disease, or unmerited accident, in terms of taboo violation rather than spirits. Spirits tend to explain sensory peculiarities rather than answer great metaphysical questions.

Interestingly, Anutans say that they encounter spirits less overseas than at home. Perhaps urban dwellers have fewer unlighted areas with which to contend, but I was told that children in school in the Central Solomons did not hesitate to hunt for birds or crabs alone on moonless nights—something they would not do on their home island. Possibly, Anutans staying overseas to attend school or work for wages live in a more rigidly controlled institutional setting than they do at home, and it is the relative certainty about social relations that keeps spirits at a distance.

Finally, the Anutans' spiritual world, like other features of their cultural universe, resists classification in terms of rigid, mutually exclusive categories. Thus, as for other peoples discussed in this volume, there is no hard and fast distinction between God, gods, spirits, ghosts, and mortals.⁷ This aversion to rigid categories facilitates belief in possession, as it once did in spirit mediumship. Further, it allows spiritual beings to be a focus of moral discourse while leaving sufficient ambiguity to permit an ongoing debate as to who is wrong or right and who is responsible for spirit intercession in the world of human beings.

NOTES

Acknowledgments. This chapter grows out of a series of sessions at annual meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania. I am indebted to other participants and particularly the organizers, Jeannette Mageo and Alan Howard, for their encouragement and constructive criticism. I would also like to thank Jill McEldery-Maxwell for her careful reading and assistance in preparation of this manuscript.

- 1 They do dichotomize, as I have argued elsewhere (Feinberg 1980, 1982a, 1988b). However, they define their categories contextually, in relational rather than absolute terms. Indeed, a binary system implies conceptualization in terms of contrasts and comparisons. This issue is addressed further below.
- 2 *Tangata* has the same ambiguity as "man" in English. It may apply to all human beings, male human beings, or only adult males, the meaning in any utterance being inferred from context. For purposes of clarity, and in an attempt to avoid theoretical and political loading, in this chapter I gloss *tangata* as "people" or "human beings" when used in its generic sense.
- 3 This is the only reference I have heard to use of a mirror in such a context, and I was given no indication of why it was there. To my knowledge, Anutans do not normally use mirrors or other reflective devices for ritual purposes.
- 4 Moses has been, by consensus, Anuta's leading expert on such matters since Pu Nukumarere's death in the mid-1970s.
- 5 This, however, is changing. Particularly parents, grandparents, and ancestors are now thought by some Anutans to continue to be interested in their offspring's (or descendants') well-being, and they may be mobilized through proper invocation. Thus in a case described above, when Misak Tankoroa thought himself at risk of physical attack, he appealed to Pu Teukumarae for assistance. He staunchly resisted my suggestion that God or the church might object to such a request for support.

- 6 For a detailed account of these conflicts, see Feinberg (1986, In Press a).

- 7 As Hanson (1987:432) puts the matter:

In Polynesia gods and people are aspects of the same reality and form a continuum of the sacred and the profane. Even as, in relative terms, the gods are sacred and the people profane, so also are the chiefs sacred and the commoners profane. . . . High gods, demigods, ancestral gods, culture heroes, spirits, elves, and people were intertwined in different ways.

6 Speak of the Devils

Discourse and Belief in Spirits on Rotuma

Alan Howard

Rotuma is a small volcanic island located 465 km north of Fiji, on the western fringe of Polynesia. Physically, linguistically, and culturally, Rotumans reflect influences from Melanesia, Micronesia, and particularly the Polynesian islands to the east: Tonga, Samoa, Futuna, and Uvea.

Following first European contact in 1791, Rotuma was intensively intruded upon by whalers, renegade sailors, traders and missionaries. The first missionaries arrived in 1839, and reflecting a prior political cleavage, approximately two-thirds of the people converted to Wesleyanism, the remainder to Catholicism. Exacerbated by national rivalries between English ministers and French priests, a series of skirmishes between the sides led the chiefs to petition Great Britain for cession in 1879.

From 1881 to 1970 Rotuma was governed as part of the Colony of Fiji with a resident commissioner (later a district officer) acting as governor, magistrate, and, usually, medical officer. The chiefs of Rotuma's seven semi-autonomous districts met in council but were relegated to an advisory role. When Fiji gained independence in 1970, the Rotuman chiefs opted to remain part of the new nation and, not without controversy, affirmed their decision after the military coups of 1987. While the position of district officer has been retained, the powers of governance have been reallocated to the Rotuma Council, composed of district chiefs and elected district representatives.

The Rotuman population reached a low of around 2,000 following a devastating measles epidemic in 1911. From then on it steadily increased and presently numbers around 11,000. Only about 2,600 individuals now live on the 43-square-kilometer island, however, down from a peak of 3,235 in 1966. The bulk of Rotumans have settled in Fiji's urban centers, although substantial enclaves have formed in Australia and New Zealand as well.