The disregarded weight of the ancestors: Honouring the complexities and cultural subtleties of islandscape

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Abstract: Starting from a comparison between the Belep Islands (Kanaky New Caledonia) and O'ahu (Hawai'i), this paper aims to contribute to the debates about islands and the Anthropocene, highlighting the relevance of the social and ecological responsibilities deriving from genealogical connections to the islands: 'the weight of the ancestors'. Considering the implications of these kinds of responsibilities can help to understand human and non-human relational entanglements better so as to value the agentive role of other-than-human perspectives.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Ecological Indigenous Knowledge Systems, intergenerational transmission, islands, Oceania

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Introduction

In this paper, we weave a deep connection between two Pacific histories and cultures, one from the Belep Islands in Kanaky New Caledonia and the other from the island of O'ahu in the archipelago of Hawai'i. This connection is based upon the authors' experiences gained during their extensive ethnographic research (Belep Islands: Lara Giordana; O'ahu: Emanuela Borgnino), the comparison between their field data, and an analytical and place-based methodology.

We, as the authors, are aware of numerous differences between Belep and O'ahu, but we argue that, despite these differences, 'islandness' (Baldacchino, 2004; Grydehøj, 2017; Baldacchino, 2018) establishes a similar dialogue between past, present and future on the centrality of the long-term consequences of current environmental choices and actions. Ancestors are the protagonists of these dialogues thanks to their

deep entanglement in the *islandscape*. They establish common values that reverberate between Kanaky New Caledonia and Hawai'i: a deep sense of belonging to the land, a firm genealogical connection to places, both marine and terrestrial, to animals, plants, rocks, ranging over time and space. We are referring to these genealogical connections as ongoing social and ecological responsibilities that we call the 'weight of the ancestors'. We advocate for the contribution that this particular 'weight' might give to the debate about islands and the Anthropocene.

In the second section of this paper, we illustrate our analytical methodology that draws from different scholars inspired by insular, Indigenous and Western theories. In the third section we give a brief information to the geographical, cultural-historical, and socio-political contexts of Belep and O'ahu, highlighting the differences and similarities between them. In the fourth section, we describe in depth what we refer to as 'the weight of the ancestors', taking into consideration three aspects of Indigenous Islanders' cultural practices that are particularly relevant in our comparison. In the last section, we suggest that the weight of the ancestors can help to provide a deeper understanding of the islands' relational entanglement (Pugh & Chandler, 2021).

Methodology

On a warm Autumn day, sitting in our office, embraced by the beautiful mountain range visible from our window and the waters of the nearby Dora river, we were working on a joint paper for a coming seminar. Discussing the title, we were plan to use a term in either *Pulum Belep* or in *'Olelo Hawai'i*, the respective native languages of Belep and Hawai'i. That was the day we discovered that 'ancestors' and 'elders' in both languages are referred to with just one word: *ulayama* in Pulum Belep and *kupuna* in 'Olelo Hawai'i. We began to speculate, to wonder if there could be a connection and what it could be.

We finally realized that we were not lost in translation but in spatial and temporal dimensions. As a matter of fact, *ulayama* and *kupuna* inhabit the same temporal/spatial position, conveying the continuity between life and death and the coexistence of the living and the departed. In both cultures, the presence of the elders-ancestors *continuum* holds an important space in conversations, in formal speeches, in ceremonies, gestures, chants, as well as in the landscape. Indeed, *ulayama* and *kupuna* are active actors in the meshwork (Ingold, 2011) that formed and still shapes the islandscape. The implications that sprout from their presence, expressed through cultural practices and storytelling, crowd our ethnographies. Recently, islands have become key laboratories for philosophical, political, and ethical innovative approaches toward the Anthropocene (Pugh & Chandler, 2021), but the presence and the political role of the elders and the entanglement with the ancestors, that pervade our ethnographies, are rarely taken into consideration.

Our hypothesis is that paying attention to the disregarded 'weight of the ancestors' could not only strengthen the possibility of an inter-cultural dialogue

between Belep and Oʻahu but might also contribute to the debates about the Anthropocene and islands.

When referring to islands, we deal with several culturally specific epistemologies. In this non-homogeneity some islands, Belep and Oʻahu among them, express similar epistemological approaches to time in terms of a geological and genealogical intertwine. This is where the 'place' of islands in the temporality of the Anthropocene comes into play. When talking about futurity in those societies, the ancestors/elders are the protagonists in the political, environmental, and social decision-making processes. Their unavoidable role was a methodological challenge for us. We realized that our ethnographic data and other scientific data about the Anthropocene needed to be synchronized. Indeed, we had to find a way to introduce the presence of the ancestors/elders into contemporary discourses about the Anthropocene. If the role of the elders is easily accepted, the involvement and presence of the ancestors need to be processed. We had to put different insular and Anthropocene epistemologies into dialogue in order to return substance to the ancestors. To achieve this, we shaped a methodology that draws from different scholars inspired by insular, Indigenous and Western theories.

The first step was to question what we take for granted and then, as Tim Ingold (2018, p. 38) postulates, to "pay attention to things – to watch for their movements and listen to their sounds – […] to catch the world in the act, […] to be there, present and alert, at the very moment of its taking shape." To us, "being there, present and alert" means to be culturally grounded and to understand the world through the Indigenous Belep and Oʻahu island-based approaches. This requires approaching life as the being and becoming of things, as a continuous vital movement accessible through the ability of connecting and relating with the landscape. If modern science has mainly understood the phenomenal world as steady, already given, and thus objectively knowable, in the last century natural sciences acknowledged more and more the vital entanglements of all forms of life, thus eroding the boundaries between subject and object, nature and culture that they themselves had contributed to building (Whitehead, 1967; Whitehead, 1978; Latour, 1993; Mesle, 2008).

The second step required the introduction of the concept of 'sensitivity', following Bruno Latour's (2017, p. 141) footsteps when he states that to live in the Anthropocene means to pay attention to *sensitivity* as "a term that is applied to all the actors capable of spreading their sensors a little farther and making others feel that the consequences of their actions are going to fall back on them, come to haunt them." Various Pacific Islander scholars, such as Kapāʼanaokalāokeola Nākoa Oliveira (2015, p. 75), refer to a specific ability of the islanders' process of knowing called *sense-ability* toward the environment. "In this context, a 'sense-ability' is the capacity to receive and perceive stimuli from our oceanscapes, landscapes, and heavenscapes and to respond to these sensory stimuli in ways that contribute to our overall understanding of our world."

This capacity to sense and respond is one of the main reasons why "islands are being brought into play, for the development of relational ontologies and epistemologies associated with Anthropocene thinking" (Pugh & Chandler, 2021, p. xii).

In particular, Chandler and Pugh (2021, p. 42) highlight how "islands and island cultures have become important symbols of [resilience and] hope in debates about the Anthropocene for the wider world to learn from." However, we suggest that the ability of local and Indigenous actors to sense the islandscape meshwork and to respond to the environmental 'stimuli' challenges the understanding of relational entanglement (De Souza et al., 2015; Kueffer & Kinney, 2017). The ontologies of the islands we refer to are based on a relational dynamic, an interdependence with the environment highlighted by several Indigenous academics and scholars (Aluli-Meyer, 2014; Māhina, 2001, 2010) that natural and social sciences are discovering as a new and frightening intimacy with the planet in the form of the Anthropocene.

If the interdependence is something that both natural and social sciences are increasingly familiarizing with, the concept of intimacy is still embarrassing, irrational, uncomfortable and troublesome (Haraway, 2016). *Ulayama* and *kupuna* are part of it, and the reason for it, because 'the weight of the ancestors' is an expression of this intimacy. In the Indigenous way of knowing, three aspects of nature that are usually analytically divided "physical, mental, and spiritual" (Aluli Meyer, 2013), "*monde visible-sujet-monde invisible*" (Enoka Camoui & Waixen Wayewol, 2018) are integrated. The spiritual dimension, the 'invisible world' is not linked to any religious dogma, but rather expresses an inherent propensity to relations with all things.

The Indigenous Kanaka Maoli thinker Manulani Aluli Meyer introduces the hologram as a tool to explain this wholeness. The hologram is composed of three laser beams, if one laser is the mind, the other the body, and the spirit is "the animating third beam […] that popped images into three-dimensional holograms surprising the world with its implicate wholeness" (Aluli Meyer, 2013, p. 97). In this sense, ancestors are indivisible from reality and from life itself. Ancestors are the landscape and act as constant reminders of the vulnerability of life. Death is perceived as a familiar presence; in this sense the ancestors are a crisis-reminder tool in contemporary Indigenous societies.

Navigating between differences and similarities

To weave a connection between Belep and Oʻahu we must navigate between their differences and similarities. The main differences concern the geographical distance (more than 6000 km), geological history and scale dimension, in terms of age, size and demography, as well as cultural distinctiveness.

The Belep islands are less than 70 km^2 with a population of 867, of which 98% are Indigenous Kanak and speak *Pulum Belep*, a variety of Nyêlâyu, which is just one of the 29 languages spoken by the Indigenous people of Kanaky New Caledonia (Insee/Isee, 2019). On the other hand, the island of Oʻahu covers an area of 1,545 km^2 with a population of 980,080; Kanaka Maoli or Kanaka 'Oiwi (Indigenous inhabitants of the islands) count for 10% of the population, while Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders count for 25%.

Fragments of continental crust displaced eastwards from Gondwana, Kanaky New Caledonia was populated more than 3000 years ago by Austronesian-speaking seafarers originally from Taiwan (Sand, 2010; Hermann et al, 2020). Their descendants gave rise to a way of life so tightly tied to land and cultivation that the Kanak culture is also known as the 'yam civilization' (Haudricourt, 1964). The mineral richness of the archipelago has been an appeal for European colonization since the 19th Century, and today, more than ever, is crucial for the Indigenous Kanak people's struggle for independence (Gentilucci, 2022; Le Meur & Levacher, 2022).

Hawai'i is a volcanic island chain resulting from the upwelling of molten rock, known as a 'hot spot'. From the southwest Pacific, Indigenous ancestors dispersed to northern and eastern Oceania in several waves over thousands of years and reached Hawai'i around 800 years ago. These settlers, descendants of the first voyagers who had departed from the southwest Pacific "voyaging nursery," embarked:

> on a series of intentional voyages carrying with them food crops, language, architectural designs, oral and performative traditions, navigational knowledge, artistic and spiritual traditions, beliefs about land, gender, and power and other aspects of culture that retained some foundational features even as they shifted and adapted to new social and geographic landscapes across time and space. (Mawyer et al., 2020, pp. 27-28)

Nowadays, both Kanaky New Caledonia and Hawai'i can be seen as national 'Overseas Territories' of France and the USA with Indigenous Peoples strongly claiming for their sovereignty. However, they have been marked by different historical and political dynamics. New Caledonia is a French Collectivity of Special Status. The decades' long struggles that started at the end of the 1960s for the recognition of the Kanak people and for independence from France has led to the present situation of shared sovereignty. A 'negotiated decolonization' process led to the progressive transfer of sovereign powers from the French State to local administrations, represented by three Provinces and the New Caledonian Government (Prinsen & Blaise, 2017; Favole & Giordana, 2018). From an administrative point of view, Belep is a commune in the Northern Province. The main social and political organization is represented by the chiefdom of Belep, which is an ancient and long-lasting one in Kanaky New Caledonia (Dubois, 1985).

Belema's livelihood is primarily based on small family horticulture and fishing. Despite the impact of colonization and politico-economic globalization on Kanak society, access to the land and the sea in the Belep Islands is managed in accordance with local Indigenous knowledge and principles.

The island of O'ahu was part of the Kingdom of Hawai'i (1794-1893) a constitutional monarchy (until 1893) with treaties of commerce and friendship with most of the international powers and more than 90 consulates and embassies around the world (Borgnino, 2022). In 1893, a coup d'état hatched by naturalized and foreign landowners with the support of the U.S. army transformed the internationally

recognized Kingdom of Hawaiʻi into a Republic. Despite not having the support of the population, this 'puppet state' handed the archipelago over to the United States in 1898 (Beamer, 2014).

The Kingdom of Hawaiʻi never willingly joined the United States. Moreover, the subjects of the Kingdom, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, succeeded in stopping the unlawful annexation with a collection of signatures, the Kūʻē Petitions, in 1897. In 1898 "the United States went to war with Spain, and it needed a support base in the Pacific, after two failed attempts to annex Hawai'i by a treaty of cession" (Sai, 2011: 94). On July 6, 1898, a Joint Resolution was passed in the U.S. Congress, and Hawaiʻi was seized for military necessity. The former Kingdom of Hawai'i became the Territory of Hawaii, an organized incorporated territory of the United States, that existed from April 30, 1900, until August 21, 1959, when Hawaiʻi became the 50th state of United States through a referendum mainly opposed by the native population.

Based upon these historical events and facts, many sovereignty movements today consider Hawaiʻi as being under US occupation (Goodyear-Ka'opua, 2014) and reclaim the Hawaiian territory under the authority of international law, since the legality of the annexation to the United States and the subsequent federal recognition are questioned.

From an anthropological understanding of cosmology and politics, the Kanak society and culture could be described as polycentric and horizontal, while the Kanaka Maoli traditional structure is hierarchical and vertical, thus apparently confirming the usual division between Melanesian and Polynesian societies (Sahlins, 1963; Sand, 2002; Tcherkézoff, 2003). However, the cultural heterogeneity of Oceanian societies is too rich to be reduced to this contested dichotomy. Instead, "common characteristics can be identified […] in the way in which Pacific Island societies view their worlds and base their relationships" (Tilot et al., 2021, p. 7). We join Virginie Tilot and her co-authors in identifying some of these common characteristics. First, both:

> Polynesian and Melanesian cosmogonies are polytheistic and ancestors-oriented. […] Secondly, [myths] establish a principle of continuity between human and non-human entities between mineral, vegetal, animal, gods, and humans. […] Myths, like social organization, are conceived as a vast kinship network. […] Finally, the pluralism founded by Oceanic cosmogonies is maintained by incessant interactions between human, deified and non-human entities. (Tilot et al., 2021, p. 7-8)

While being different, Belep and Oʻahu are both part of Oceania or, as often referred to by Pacific Islanders, the Blue Continent (AA.VV., 2017; AA.VV., 2018; Borgnino & Giordana, 2021). According to the major Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (1994), 'Oceania' better describes the world of this region's inhabitants because it acknowledges the ocean as the shared road of the ancestors connecting places and peoples across the Pacific rather than dividing them. A shared regional consciousness is sustaining Pacific Islanders in raising their voices in contemporary political and ecological claims.

Ancestorship

In the next sections of this paper, we describe what we have referred to as 'the weight of the ancestors'. To this aim, we consider three aspects of Kanak and Kanaka Maoli cultures that are particularly relevant in our comparison between the Belep Islands and Oʻahu. Firstly, we examine the ongoing vibrancy – despite colonization and Christianisation - of *cexeen* places in Belep and the *kapu* places in Oʻahu. In doing this, we emphasise the indivisibility of the visible and the invisible. Then, we investigate the role of the ancestors in the transmission of *pulu* (the word) in Belep and the spirit of *aloha* in Oʻahu. Finally, we describe the values of *tu pwalu* ('respect' in Belep) and *kuleana* ('responsibility' in 'Olelo Hawai'i) that give impetus to personal and collective acts, while simultaneously representing a heavy individual burden to carry. *Tu pwalu* and *kuleana* help us to better understand the intimacy of socio-ecological responsibility. These three aspects – sacred relationship, vital force, and responsibility – are all interconnected.

Indivisibility of ancestors and land: Kapu *and* Cexeen *places*

Why are *kupuna* and *ulayama* so important in order to understand the contemporary relationship of Belema and Kanaka Maoli with the environment and the islandscape? Because it is in the impossible separation between ancestors/elders and land that the indivisibility of the visible and the invisible is shaped. This indivisibility is conveyed through special and multiple connections with places.

In Hawaiʻi and Belep, starting from the planting of the umbilical cord or the placenta of the newborn in a particular place by the parents or a close relative, the infant is connected with a place, and in a broader sense with all the ecological elements of the landscape. While connecting the child with the island, the umbilical cord becomes simultaneously the root of his or her descendants. Through the cultural practice of planting the umbilical cord, past, present and future mingle, losing their singularity. The newborn is alive in the present as an infant but is already part of the future as a potential ancestor whose place of belonging is already selected.

In both Kanaka Maoli (Hawaiʻi) and Kanak (New Caledonia) cultures, certain places in the islandscapes are approached with special caution and are defined by the word *kapu* in 'Olelo Hawaii and *cexeen* in Pulum Belep. Kapu is a Pan-Polynesian term (in its various forms, Tapu, Tabu) mostly translated as 'sacred' or 'forbidden'. However, if *kapu* refers to the sanctity of the land (Kame'eleihiwa, 1992, p. 323) the term 'sacred' does not fully translate the relationality and the richness of the layers of meaning of the word *kapu*.

Kapu indicates a place or a person that should be approached carefully, sometimes avoided: in reference to the environment (mountains, forest, animals), *kapu* is an eco-cultural environmental concept. It is the awareness of the fragility of the relationship with the environment and of life itself; it indicates places and beings that must be handled with care and responsibility.

As a matter of fact, if we look at the Belep Islands, a *cexeen* place is not forbidden and totally inaccessible. Rather, it is somehow set apart from everyday human activities and must be approached with caution. As with churches, to which the term *cexeen* is also applied, these places must be entered following a special procedure and a set of prohibitions regulates the correct attitude. Disrespectful behaviour will result in negative consequences for the person committing the infraction and for his/her family.

On the other hand, in Hawaiʻi, the *kapu system* was the central force stabilizing the political and social systems. It consisted of a strict set of laws regulating what Hawaiians could and could not do, affecting every part of life up until 1819 when it was abolished by King Liholiho. This system was partially reinstated with the advent of what has been called the Hawaiian Renaissance in the late 1970s as an instrument of decolonization and an ecological practice, to manage culturally, environmentally, and politically relevant sites. What makes a place *kapu* today may be different from the past. Traditionally, "a chief could place a *kapu* on a person, place or thing at any time" (Stewart Williams, 1997, pp. 41-42). Today, burial sites and places of *mana* (life force) can be *kapu* (Tomlinson & Tengan, 2016; Mills, 2016), but also fish that are spawning, a mountain reservoir of fresh water, or a forest in a particular season.

In Belep, *cexeen* places are located in the inlets and bays inhabited by the Belep clans before colonization and the arrival of the Catholic mission, as well as in the forest and in the lagoon. Single elements of the landscape are also considered *cexeen*, such as a tree, a rock or a reef platform.

Cexeen and *kapu* places are always inhabited, even if this presence is not easily visible. The invisible inhabitants are spirits, entities and, of course, ancestors. Numerous ancestors are non-human: animals, plants, weather manifestations and rocks. A particular lizard or a particular shark, for example, is the 'elder', the first ancestor of a specific clan. The place where he spawned or arrived for the first time is a *cexeen* place, being his home and the birthplace of the descending clan. Thereby, each clan maintains a genealogical relation to one or more *cexeen* places and holds an intimate historical and ecological knowledge of them. Accessing a *cexeen* place is like entering a person's home. When visiting someone it is customary to bring a gift to the elderly person to request permission to enter. This act allows the possibility of mutual recognition. Similarly, entering a *cexeen* place, be it on land or under the sea, requires people to pay that same respect through a particular kind of offer to the spirits of the ancestors that inhabit that place.

The islandscape in Hawaiʻi as well as in Belep is inhabited by spirits and ancestors. Memories of the ancestors' past actions and life force (*mana*) and their involvement with the daily life of the living are inscribed in the landscape. That is why, also in the Kanaka Maoli tradition, there are numerous protocols to access 'sacred' places, inhabited by a multitude of living and non-living organisms, by a collective composed of atmospheric, marine and terrestrial agents, animals, plants, stones, human beings, elders/ancestors and spirits. This multitude of subjects weave countless inter-species

relationships and hierarchies, making it necessary to seek authorization to access a certain place.

A great deal of fieldwork time was spent in the Valley of Mākua, a valley located on the Leeward coast of the island of Oʻahu, recognized by the Native population to be a storied place, a sacred place of procreation and rebirth. The Valley of Mākua is currently occupied by the US Army, which considers it the perfect place to test their weapons and for live fire training. However, after a 20-year lawsuit the Mālama Mākua Association was authorized two monthly cultural accesses (Borgnino, 2020).

One day, during a cultural access, Emanuela Borgnino asked one of the *kupuna* (elders) a question: "Why do you come to Mākua at every access, with all the difficulties you have?" She answered "because I know that someone is waiting for me, because I know that *they* are in Mākua, I can feel *them*." 'They-them' - that multitude of living and non-living that inhabit the landscape both in Hawaiʻi and in Belep - are felt, and at the same time feel the human presence. Members of the Mālama Mākua Association who are visiting monthly Mākua 'feel' the responsibility to learn from the *kupuna*, to visit them, to listen and to follow their leadership and footsteps. The relationship with the *kupuna* is one based on reciprocity.

The same reciprocity is at the core of the notion of *cexeen*, which is thereby assigned two main functions. First, *cexeen* limits the access to a place and its inhabitants by selecting who can enter a relationship with them. Second, it marks the presence of the invisible. *Cexeen* places are spaces for interaction with the ancestors and, more generally, among humans and non-humans. They are spaces where the invisible comes to be. As in the case of black holes, ancestors are not directly observable, but their presence can be demonstrated and documented through their effects. *Ulayama* and *kupuna* can be perceived and seen through the effects of the positive and negative forces that they exercise. In the same way, as attractive and repulsive forces act simultaneously in chemical bonds between atoms, positive and negative forces exercised by the ancestors shape ecological and social bonds and constantly impact individual and group behaviour.

While properly entering into a relationship with the ancestors favours wellness, fertility and success, misdoing has severe and even fatal consequences. Hence, accessing *cexeen* places entails a genealogical responsibility, the infraction of which dramatically makes visible the role of the *ulayama*. It is argued that to neglect the required acts of reciprocity while going to the gardens, fishing or looking for wood and medical plants in the forest, will certainly produce poor crops and fishing, illness or even death in the concerned clans. The subsequent healing procedures aim to restore the disregarded reciprocity with non-human ancestors.

Therefore, all these changes in individual and group acts make the presence of the *ulayama* measurable in the same way as in Hawai'i disregarding the need to follow a cultural protocol to approach a powerful person or enter a special place. Because *kapu* and *cexeen* are actors that incorporate a relationship, this connection is revealed by the formal recognition of the sacredness of a place, a person, or a thing; it is a sacred

relationship not a relationship with the sacred, a relationship that involves protocols, behavioural prescriptions and can, at times, be burdensome to bear.

To be in the presence of: Aloha *and* Pulu *(*la parole*)*

As we have just explained, the presence of the ancestors reveals how deeply the visible and the invisible are entangled. In Hawaiʻi, as well as in Belep Islands, life and the visible world is inseparable from death and the invisible world. This life perception is conveyed with the word *aloha* which means 'love, relationship, to be connected' in Hawaiʻi and with the word *pulu*, which means 'word, language, to speak' in Belep. *Aloha* is a reciprocity agreement, giving and receiving. *Aloha* means to be connected to the essence of life. According to native Hawaiian epistemologist Manulani Aluli Meyer, *aloha* is the daily practice of feeling and relating with others. Those others are the elements and places visited and inhabited:

> *Aloha* has been a synonym for Hawaiian epistemology, or Hawaiian philosophy of knowledge, because *aloha* is the center of our culture. It's not even a philosophy. It's not a religion. It's our centre. It's our cultural norm. When you make love the normative expression of a culture, those principles are shaped by your geography, by the energy of your location in the world. Hawai'i allows us to have that understanding because of our geography, of our location. But it's connected to old principles around the planet. (Manulani Aluli Meyer, interviewed by Emanuela Borgnino, May 2017)

Pulu in Belep, or *la parole* as it is known in local French (used as the *lingua franca* by the Kanak people speaking different languages), is similar to the concept of *aloha*. It is described as the 'vital blow':

> It's by the blow that I came to the world. A blow of life that has been transmitted from mouth to ear since the dawn of time. A blow that emerged from the sensational tumult of my birth when my ancestors set me free from my mother's womb. I was born naked like you and like you I will leave again naked in the silence of a blow that will release my remains from this flame that my ancestors, who gave birth to my identity, lighted here 3500 years ago. (Tjibaou, 2020, 00:01:32-00:02:14; translation from French by the authors).

Pulu (la parole) is the flow of life that has been transmitted by the ancestors from one generation to the next and in which the whole life of a person thrives. A baby is not considered alive until his/her maternal uncles blow this vital force on his/her face. Conversely, a person is regarded as dead only when his/her final whisper leaves the corpse without spirit and his/her maternal family recovers that same animating blow that was transmitted by the ancestors.

This is also the same vital force that animates every inhabitant of the environment with which humans have a genealogical link, such as weather

manifestations, rocks, animals, plants, and other entities acknowledged as ancestors. Life itself is regulated by encounter and exchange, which are fundamental ecological and social principles. Indeed, in Kanak socio-cosmic systems, interactions between humans and non-humans are understood as continuous and open-ended flows of exchanges between a receiving party and an arriving party. This dyadic mutuality is at the basis of the body and the human being, society and the cosmos, and it reveals that life is not a matter of being. Rather, life is about becoming.

In Hawaiʻi this mutuality includes also the relationship with the air and with the atmosphere. According to anthropologist Mauro Van Aken (2020, p. 9) "cultures have always been atmospheric and also rooted in the air through ritual forms, symbolic structures, systems of production and local knowledges."

> When we (Kānaka) *honi* we share the same air that connects us with everything, we cannot keep it in, we cannot steal it away, we need always to give it back. We cannot keep it out! It is a relationship, it is in you; you are in it. We forgot that what connects us is the air, the common air that we all share common to human and to animal, this is *aloha*. (Kumu Ramsay Mailani Taum, interviewed by Emanuela Borgnino, April 2018)

The Kanaka Maoli traditional greeting (*honi*) requires sharing the same breath by leaning forehead to forehead. This practice acknowledges the role of relations and interconnections. According to Kumu Taum, humans have forgotten that they are connected by the air that humans and non-humans breathe, exchange and use, which has favoured the development of an economy based on the extraction of resources (mining, agricultural, energy) and not on attraction, on dialogue and negotiation with the other elements that inhabit the environment and share the same atmosphere.

While we are fully aware that there is no a single or unique concept of Indigenous epistemology, we are nevertheless convinced that many concepts underlying various Indigenous epistemologies resonate with and recall each other. One of the assumptions at the core of many Indigenous epistemologies is that humans are neither the pinnacle nor the centre of creation. This concept "underpins ways of knowing and speaking that acknowledge kinship networks that extend to animals and plants, wind and rocks, mountains and oceans" (Lewis et al., 2018). Scientific arguments have also reduced the role of the human being, starting from the theories of Charles Darwin, who rewrote the role of the human species in the living kingdom, to the universality of the genetic code and the dynamics of the nervous system. Indeed, from the Romantic period onward, there has been a clear evolution of an explicitly anti-anthropocentric tradition and nowadays Western scientific academia is slowly recognizing the human environmental interdependence and relationality: living beings on the planet are related to each other, from mammals to algae, from bacteria to plants. For the Hawaiian way of knowing, the spirit of this biological connection resides in the concept of aloha.

As we have previously mentioned, the Kanak way of knowing and being in New Caledonia is understood as a spatial and temporal becoming, achieved in continuous

and open-ended flows of exchanges between humans and non-humans. Those exchanges are expressed by the term *la coutume* (the custom), which encompasses a wide array of interrelated cultural practices that always envisage the exchange of gifts (*le geste* in French) and words (*la parole*). The ancestors play a central role in this mutuality, as countless formal and informal acts testify. All the main ceremonies in the Belep Islands, for instance, are governed by arriving and receiving procedures that guide the movements of people (both the visible and the invisible, both the living and the ancestors), the circulation of words and the exchange of gifts. These gifts given to the elders while visiting a home and to the ancestors while entering a *cexeen* place, follow analogous procedures as well.

Pulu (*la* parole), as an all-encompassing vital flow, has a fundamental role in nurturing and continuously revitalizing the cosmological and eco-social connections. One of the places that are *cexeen* to every Belema is 'the house of the word' (*mwa pulu*). This is where the clans' council, formerly referred to as the '*ulayama* council', meets the chief (*teâmaa*) and discusses the main issues and concerns in the community, thus reviving the internal relationships in Belema society (Giordana, 2020). On the other hand, the open space in front of *mwa pulu* is a space for encounters. Here is where the groups arriving from other islands present their gifts to the *teâmaa,* explain the reasons of their visit, and proclaim the genealogical or alliance connections established by their ancestors with the Belema. The *teâmaa* welcomes the visitors in return and acknowledges their relationship to the Belep Islands. This mutual recognition, based on the exchange of speeches, establishes peace and acceptance. However, if it is true that every encounter revives the possibility of a reciprocal acknowledgement, this is not taken for granted and a refusal is always possible. Hence, the dynamic of encounters is open-ended and risky. Once again, the exchanges of gifts and words constitute the space of reciprocity, a space which is dangerous and sacred. For all these reasons, the words that are pronounced during ceremonial exchanges are carefully chosen to produce an emotional impact on the audience. They are directly inspired by the *ulayama* and they are always pronounced at the very presence of the ancestors.

Intimacy and Responsibility: Tu pwalu *and* kuleana

Genealogical ties with places, together with non-human ancestors, lend privileges and rights to humans. In the Belep Islands this is the case for rights of access to the land and the sea, as well as food, material and spiritual resources that come from there. However, those rights and privileges cannot exist without responsibilities and burdens. This idea is precisely depicted by an idiomatic expression in *Pulum Belep* and is embodied in gestures. *Tu pwalu* means to accord customary respect, but a literal translation would be 'I make like heavy [things are on my back]' (McCracken, 2019, brackets in the original). It refers to the respect of the custom (*la coutume*) that comes from the ancestors and regulates all interactions between person and person, people and their environment, society, and the cosmos. It is also used for the act of bowing your head during customary speeches or when entering a home. In New Caledonia, traditional Kanak houses have lower doors, thus designed to force the incoming person to bow.

This is intended to pay respect because a home is never empty. In this sense, paying respect is equivalent to acknowledging the presence and the precedence of someone else, and thus being aware that you should negotiate your place on the island as well as in the cosmos-world.

In Hawaiʻi, genealogical ties with places and non-human ancestors are conveyed through the term *kuleana* often translated as 'responsibility', though very similarly to *tu pwalu* it also carries the meaning of 'right', 'privilege' and 'duty'. The *kuleana* reflects the responsibility towards oneself, others, the natural elements, and the community, it also means being the relationship with a place, living the traditions, knowing the characteristics of the environment (natural resources, climate, etc.) and transmitting this knowledge to future generations. *Kuleana* is an integral part of being connected with a place. In Hawaiʻi nowadays the term *kuleana* has gained popularity. Standing in one's own *kuleana* means simultaneously maintaining and nurturing the relationship with the past and with the present through interactions with humans and other-than-humans. To extend to the environment and to the other-than-human world, the recognition that it is in the relationship with these other collectives that human beings shape their world is the key to understanding the interactions with the islandscape in Hawaiian eco-cosmology. As *Tu pwalu* implies mutual recognition but also asymmetry, *kuleana* requires humility and prudence.

Tu pwalu means to accept that human place is among other visible and invisible beings, that human and non-human life are interdependent, and finally that human existence is vulnerable. *Tu pwalu* forces the Belema to pay attention and to take care of the ties that link all the inhabitants of their islands. These ties are at the same time genealogical and sacred. Being genealogical bonds, they entail intimacy, while being sacred, they entail respect. Respect avoids confusion, keeps a certain degree of distance and differentiation, a separation between the parties involved. Relationships are tremendously dense, being cosmological, ecological, and social at the same time. As already mentioned in regard to the concept of *cexeen*, relationships need space to flow, and separation allows that very space. Indeed, separation is simultaneously the condition and the effect of those dynamics of dyadic mutuality, encounter and exchange that we addressed in the previous section dedicated to *pulu (la parole)*. This is because separation implies the willingness to establish, continue and maintain a relationship. For all these reasons, *tu pwalu* gives impetus to personal and collective acts, while simultaneously representing a heavy burden to carry. Following the ancestors and complying with the ecological and social guidelines they traced is a heavy task, a commitment that many would prefer to escape.

This commitment takes the form of specific eco-cultural practices in Hawaiʻi. Today Oʻahu is an overpopulated and ecologically stressed island due to the impact of tourism and militarism. An average of 6 million tourists a year visit Oʻahu and more than 50,000 military personnel are deployed on the island. In this complex and evolving island, *kuleana* became, from the end of the 1970s, one of the ethical values guiding the activities of sovereignty and environmental groups. To clean a beach, to reconstruct a fishpond, to visit a sacred site now transformed into a golf course or a

live-fire training facility means acting upon or responding to one's own *kuleana*. Today a clean-up gathering, or a historical re-enactment is considered culture in action. Culture in action is not a performance, it is a practice in the making, it is transformative, it means claiming a territory as an element of a relationship. Through participation in these eco-cultural actions, "we [Kanaka Maoli] become our ancestors. We are the relationships that we hold and are part of" (Lynette Cruz, interviewed by Emanuela Borgnino, April 2019). Working in a taro field or visiting a sacred site does not only mean to experience those relationships, to weave bonds, but to be the relationship itself.

Kuleana makes it possible to continue to exercise forms and practices of responsibility that derive from being part of a place. And in doing so, places are recognized as being custodians of memories. Through the culture in action (cultural tours, clean-up days and taro planting) the connection with places that could no longer be accessed is maintained and perpetuated. The Kanaka Maoli and local Hawaiians involved in these practices turn into gardeners, guardians, re-learning to create stories to share. This allows the presence of the ancestors who walk the land to be acknowledged. "*Kuleana* has to do with practice, like cleaning, it is doing what that particular place needs, and in doing so we built our *kuleana*. Those places are calling, they are awakening the memory, our *kuleana*" (Lynette Cruz, interviewed by Emanuela Borgnino, April 2019). A place does not call, literally, the individual or the family, but awakens the *kuleana*, the memory of some people. It is interesting to see how the term *kuleana* refers simultaneously to a responsibility and a right, but also to memories in the landscape. The interaction with the natural environment awakens memories that translate into ecological responsibility.

Based upon our field experience we affirm that the weight of the ancestors is a pressure felt on the shoulders, a constant reminder that living in the insular socio-ecosystem comes with heavy responsibilities. *Tu pwalu* as well as *kuleana* are truly embodying the weight of humans' and non-humans' intimacy and interdependence. Assuming one's responsibility, as well as acts of misdoing, produce consequences on the health and wellbeing, which reveal the true and hefty weight of the ancestors. As Kanak thinker and independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou (2005, p. 80) explained:

> The *vital flow* […] does not belong to me. It is blood, it is life, but it is the life which comes to me from the totem [first ancestor] of my mother, from the maternal clan which flows in me. And I do not have the right to damage it. I should bless it and honour it because it is mine, yet it does not belong to me. I am in a way the tenant. We have the use of many things, without being the owner. If I have behaved badly, if I have not respected the law, the right way to do things, I am punished and my punishment comes from the watching ancestors.

We would like to propose as an analytical perspective the concept that this intimacy with the other-than-humans is conveyed and governed by the sense of responsibility, thus joining the production of academic knowledge that over the last

thirty years has laid the foundations for a new interpretative paradigm. According to Vine Deloria Jr., this 'sense of responsibility' is at the basis of two attitudes:

> One attitude is the acceptance of self-discipline by humans and their communities to act responsibly toward other forms of life. The other attitude is to seek to establish communications and covenants with other forms of life on a mutually agreeable basis. (Deloria, 1999, pp. 50–51)

The Ancestors and the Anthropocene

In this paper, we advocate for the contribution that the weight of the ancestors might give to the debate about islands and the Anthropocene. Island studies has repeatedly stressed several key points in their critique of Anthropocene thinking and approaches. Scale is one of these major issues. The interference of incommensurable scales, such as geological and human ones, is difficult to grasp. Indeed, one of the primary contradictions of the Anthropocene is precisely that it appears separate from the concrete experience of daily life. Consequently, the scientific discourse, being based on impersonal data that are far from the embodied experience, is hardly meaningful on a local scale (DeLoughrey, 2019).

We are aware that the island cultures we refer to are able to juggle between the human and the geological scale. However, scales are not the focus of our paper, responsibility is. In fact, we argue that, in both Kanaky New Caledonia and Hawai'i, the presence of the ancestors is a crisis-reminder entailing a familiarity with vulnerability, a habit and ability of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016). In our analysis, this troubling intimacy with the ancestors engenders a preparedness to deal with the disturbances and unpredictability that contribute to the islands' resilience. This troubling intimacy limits human action through the ecological, political, and customary weight exerted by the ancestors through local responsibility practices.

In Belep and O'ahu, *ulayama* and *kupuna* constantly testify to the indivisibility of life and death since they are at the end and at the beginning of life. This generates a non-linear approach to time, a circular concept to time, which is expressed in life-cycle rituals as well as in the use of kinship terms and personal names. For example, in several Kanak languages the same word refers to grandparents and grandchildren, and in both Kanak and Kanaka Maoli culture personal names can recur every three generations. However, in contemporary Hawaiian culture this is not a prescribed practice, especially in numerous families who identify as Kanaka Maoli but are not living with its cultural protocol. A cyclical approach to time encompasses crisis in its numerous aspects and acknowledges the potentiality of crisis. To experience the weight of the ancestors is to experience a non-linear time in which past, present and future are held together. *Ulayama* and *kupuna* come from the past, are contemporary to the living and will keep on inhabiting the land and the sea long after all their living descendants. Ancestors survived the descendants in both the Belep Islands and the Mākua Valley; when the colonial administrations forcefully displaced the living,

ulayama and *kupuna* could not be removed from their *homeland*. They are not only traces of the past, but they are part of the present shaping imaginable futures.

Talking about the ancestors can appear odd from a modernist perspective. Indeed, the presence of the ancestors accompanies us beyond linear time and beyond one single space toward synchronicity and *diatopia*. It profoundly questions modernist assumptions, such as temporal linearity, geometrical space, and causality. Similarly, anthropologists and other scholars are increasingly emphasizing analogous critical potentialities that are enshrined in numerous Indigenous and island epistemologies. These are nourishing "the rise of non-modern, relational, non-linear and more-than-human thinking across many academic disciplines and policy practices" (Pugh & Chandler, 2021, p. 51), especially those interested in exploring the relational entanglements among human and more-than-human forces of planetary changes, central to debates about the Anthropocene.

We believe that the neglected, but absolutely critical, and creative potential enclosed in the weight of the ancestors is high. Comparing the aforementioned cyclical approach to time as encompassing crisis and the modernist approach to time as a unilinear and teleologic flow strikingly reveals that in the latter there is no place for crisis. Focused on restless progress, modernist onto-epistemology is incapable of conceiving of any stop or any limit. Crisis proves to be the most frightful threat and must be averted by all means. Vulnerability, unpredictability, and precariousness must not only be reduced and controlled, but avoided and rejected.

As emphasized by many Anthropocene thinkers today (Latour, 2017; Stengers, 2015; Tsing, 2015; Watts, 2018), the humbling and increasingly unpredictable forces of planetary changes are revealing the hubris of this way of thinking. In the Belep Islands and O'ahu the entanglement between humans and more-than-human forces does not emerge from a critical reflection on recent changes, but it is at the very origin of the possibility of human life on these islands. *Ulayama* and *kupuna* are inseparable from the islandscape; living and dead, human and non-human ancestors are part of a same genealogical network that holds temporal, spatial and agential divides together. The troubling intimacy with the ancestors, researched and nourished on a daily basis, constantly reminds the Belema and Kanaka Maoli that vulnerability, precariousness and unpredictability are ecological and existential conditions at the same time. The Belema and Kanaka Maoli bear the weight of the ancestors and this burden helps them familiarize themselves with vulnerability.

The geographical and historical involvement of the ancestors in the islandscape can lead to a deeper understanding of the relational entanglement in the Anthropocene, not only in terms of resilience (the capacity of sensing and responding to environmental changes), but also in terms of responsibility (the duty of caring, the awareness of limits). Indeed, the interdependence of humans and more-than-humans constantly requires a careful and subtle reconfiguration of the relations among them in order to promptly respond to the smallest or the most powerful of the emergent effects.

The Earth is shaking. This is not a metaphorical expression, the Earth is literally shaking under the human footprint. However, the modernist onto-epistemological approach continues not to face the earthly agencies. Starting from a position of non-recognition of agencies outside the human world, it becomes unrealistic to think about a relationship with atmospheric gases or with minerals, because we lack the practice and also the terminology to think and refer to these relationships (Van Aken, 2020), terms and practices that, however, we often encounter in Indigenous cultures. One of the difficulties that both the authors encountered in processing the ethnographic data was the translation of Indigenous terms referring to the environment and ecological relations, as the counterpart was missing in English, French or Italian. This missing lexicon, caused by having forgotten to live in a world teeming with interconnections, translates into the lack of awareness of the role of limits.

Conclusions

Starting from a comparative approach, in this paper we have highlighted the relevance of the weight of the ancestors to the debate regarding islands and the Anthropocene debate. Despite deep differences, the Pacific Islands are home to seafarers and horticulturists' societies that have been facing vulnerability since the beginning of human peopling. Far from being isolated, these island societies were used to dealing with the risk that first encounters with human and other-than-human outsiders could generate environmental catastrophes, epidemics, social crises and cultural turmoil. Pacific societies were already equipped to cultivate the multiplicity and navigate the uncertainty that often could come from within (for instance, volcanic eruptions in Hawai'i), and "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) well before European colonization and the Anthropocene. Ancestors are the protagonists of this ongoing history of entanglement, interference, and disturbance between humans, environments, and other-than-humans. They play an essential role in the present and in futurescapes (Adam, 2008; Mawyer & Jacka, 2018; Emde, Dürr, & Schorch, 2020) because – and this is our key point – they remind humans of the limits of life and their responsibility to care for the environment. A responsibility that weighs upon and conditions the lives of future generations, who reluctantly at times are forced to establish bonds with other-than-human collectives. Those relationships, which constitute the island's relational entanglement (Pugh, 2018), develop that ability to feel and to sense (*sense-ability*), which allows humans to react to environmental and social changes in the awareness that death and instability are part of life.

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