The organisers of this workshop wish to gather contributions which consider Pacific rituals that accompany the course of life (birth, initiation, marriage, death) as moments when relational transformations occur. This is a hypothesis that P. Bonnemère and S. Revolon have both put forward, the first when analysing the Ankave male initiations in Papua New Guinea (2008, nd), the other when interpreting the mortuary rituals of the Owa of Aorigi in the Solomon Islands (2006, 2007, 2012). Such transformations may affect relations between persons or between persons and supernatural entities. Objects frequently need to be present for the ritual transformative process to take place.

For the Ankave male initiations, such a perspective offers an alternative to the analyses that focused on the reproduction of male domination as the main goal of the rituals. The Owa case in turn helps go beyond the functionalist conception of objects as mimetic representations towards a view where they become subjects of certain social relations.

Such an approach entails a secondary hypothesis, that a relationship cannot be transformed if the terms that compose it are not present, either directly, as in initiations, or mediated through objects that materialise it, as in mortuary rituals, where the dead cannot of course be there in person. Underlying the necessity of this presence, we think, is the idea that, for a relation to be transformed, its previous state must be first ritually enacted.

We would like to propose that in Melanesia the course of life is conceptualised as an ordered series of relational transformations. Such an idea implies viewing rituals that mark out life as a set and not as moments that can be analysed independently of each other.

References