As Garry Trompf has recognized in *Melanesian Religion* (Trompf 2004), relationships with ancestors and the dead in general often remain a vital part of religious ideas and ritual practices long after forms of Christianity have been introduced into and adopted by local communities. In this essay we argue that persistence in this sphere is linked to the connections between the dead and specific places which carry memories of them for their living relatives. This connection with place further explains why in some contexts there are struggles over where the dead should be buried. Christian practices have in some cases altered the spatial disposition of the dead also but in general have not altered the fundamental importance accorded to their emplacement within the landscape. In his book *Placing the Dead* on the Merina people of Madagascar, Maurice Bloch argued that in the cognatic kinship universe of the Merina the final kinship affiliation of persons was ‘achieved’ or determined only by their placement in a particular tomb shared with others. The ‘achievement of kinship’ was thus seen as a lifelong process. This was a valuable insight, to which we can add the point that such an achievement is sometimes a result of the agency of the living, who seek to make political statements out of the placement of the remains of persons of prominence.

We look at materials from the Duna area of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea in order to explicate this point. In all cases placement of the dead is significant, and may be the focus of conflict. Such conflicts may involve the displacement of the dead from where they have been living to somewhere else; or a dis-placement of their stated wishes regarding their place of interment in order to make a political statement. Fundamentally, this is because the dead are seen as powerful, and their agency is thought of as capable of still affecting the living. The agencies of the living and the dead are thus conjoined symbiotically though attachment to places and the meanings that inhere in these places. ‘Place’ is thus revealed as a fundamental category of religious experience and ritual practice. We begin with a comparative exposition of Merina ideas as explained by Bloch (1971). We conclude our paper with an example from Taiwan which underlines the general significance of ‘placing the dead’.

*Bloch’s arguments about the achievement of kinship among the Merina of Madagascar emerged out of his analysis of the Merina system of...*
categories and practices in the spheres of kinship, descent, and locality, especially as these related to those Merina known as ‘white’, who are recognizably of the Malayo-Polynesian/Austronesian type in appearance and language affiliations (Bloch 1971, 3).

These Merina recognized a number of ancient central territories to which their ancestors were said to belong, and they built elaborate permanent tombs in these territories, within which the bodies of dead persons, wrapped in cloths, were buried, and from time to time taken out for further ritual treatments. The ancestral territories, linked to particular named categories of people, were ranked, so that where a person was buried would indicate what category they belonged to and what their ranked status was (Bloch 1971, 107). Bloch calls the social categories associated with these ancestral territories demes (1971, 46–56), and he notes that these demes were in-marrying (endogamous), so that a person would marry only someone of the same overall rank. Genealogies were not the final means of reckoning membership in a deme. Bloch explicitly notes that ‘burial in a tomb is the ultimate criterion of membership’ (1971, 45). In practice demes were defined by in-marrying and shared residence (1971, 50). At the time of Bloch’s initial fieldwork in 1964–5 the older system of residence no longer held. People moved around to find a living, access to land, economic opportunities, and the like. Networks of kinship, Bloch notes, ‘can be thought of as webs of unenforced claims to land’ (1971, 57). People had much choice about where they lived in practice. Yet the idea of the ancestral territory where tombs were placed remained powerful. Only in the ancestral area or tanindrazana could a man describe himself as tempo-tany or ‘owner of the land’ (Bloch 1971, 106). Tany as a term for one’s place or land is clearly cognate with Indonesian tana and the terms vanua/fanua/fenua found widely in the Pacific. Those who can trace themselves to the same tanindrazana are described as of the same extended family or fianakaviana.

After a woman had borne her husband three children, she had the right to be buried in his tomb. Arguments occurred about whether a man could be buried in his wife’s tomb (Bloch 1971, 115). Perhaps these ‘rules’ reflect arguments about the perceived rank of marital partners where the rule of endogamy was not followed. Bloch notes that in any case people had choices about where they could be buried: in general they could choose between their father’s and mother’s or in some cases a grandparent’s tomb; and they had to make a choice about this matter during their lifetime, because they had to help maintain the tomb (1971, 116–117), under the leadership of heads of tombs (1971, 118).