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“WE DIE FOR *KULA*”—AN OBJECT-CENTRED VIEW OF MOTIVATIONS AND STRATEGIES IN GIFT EXCHANGE

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In 1993, during my doctoral field research on Dobu Island in southeastern Papua New Guinea, in a region often referred to as “The Massim”, I accompanied my local mentor from Dobu Island, Joseph,¹ on a *kula* expedition to Bwaiowa, on East Fergusson Island. We spent an afternoon on the veranda of his *kula* partner, while his wife was busy preparing our food. Since I was already into my second year of fieldwork, fluent in the Dobu language, and well aware that I was privileged to witness this confidential conversation, I listened attentively while chewing betel nuts and taking notes.

After some friendly exchange of standard information, about the state of gardening, the weather, and the valuable *mwali* ornament that our host was showing us, Joseph asked a question about their partner in the Trobriands. “How is Peter?” Our host responded “Ah, he is already getting weak”. “Oh, good!” said my mentor, and our host uttered an agreeing sound. I was perplexed. Why would it be “good” if a partner further up the chain was getting weak, probably on the verge of death? How could these friendly old men be so matter-of-fact, even seemingly pleased, about this? (Extract from field notes, 17 October 1993)

For almost a century, the Kula Exchange System, involving the exchange of valuables in Southeastern Papua New Guinea, has been famous in Anthropology as an example of gift exchange with delayed reciprocity, built on trusting relationships of partners between some 20 islands that are part of the of the Massim region (Malinowski 1920,1922; Mauss 1990 [1923–24]). Hundreds of texts and museum objects are documented (Macintyre 1983a). A recent internet search yielded thousands of sources based on a handful of ethnographies from the northern *kula* region, specifically research on Woodlark (Muyuw) Island by Frederick Damon, Gawa Island by Nancy Munn and the Trobriand Islands by Shirley Campbell, Bronislaw Malinowski and Annette Weiner.² Two conferences have contributed to a comparative perspective of *kula* (see Leach and Leach 1983, and subsequently Damon and Wagner 1989). Apart from these two volumes, the southeastern *kula* regions are under-represented in the comparative literature because Martha Macintyre’s (1983b) and Carl Thune’s (1980) excellent PhD theses remain unpublished (see Kuehling 2012: 23).



Figure 1. *Mwali* and *bagi*. Photos by the research team.

The aim of this paper is to offer new research material from the Dobu-speaking area of the southern *kula* region and Dobu language terms are used throughout unless otherwise indicated. My focus is on the two ornaments used for *kula* exchange today, *mwali* and *bagi*. *Mwali*, white sections cut from *Conus* shells, are often referred to as armbands.³ The necklaces, which are called *bagi* in the southern *kula* region, are made from strings of fine red discs crafted from the inside layer of *Chama*⁴ oyster shells. For *kula* exchange, both *bagi* and *mwali* are elaborately decorated with glass beads, shells, black banana seeds and other available materials.

The material side of *kula* exchange, *mwali* and *bagi* as a category of valuables (*'une* or *kune*; see Kuehling 2005: 98-113) provides an answer to the old anthropological question of how and why *kula* objects circulate—and continue to move today—in the Massim region. In this article I represent the voices, experiences, reflections and opinions of *kula* participants (or “players” as they say in English), which I was privileged to hear and share during fieldwork on Dobu Island and while on *kula* visits with neighbouring *kula* communities of East Fergusson Island (Bwaiowa) and North Normanby Island (Duau) (1992–94, 1997, 2009, 2012, 2015; see Kuehling 2005: 184).

Based on this research, I posit that it is the connection of *bagi* and *mwali* to life and death that causes the islanders of the *kula* network to be resilient in maintaining their unique and complex exchange system until now. The

special value of *kula* shells is constructed in emotional and personal terms and the desire for *bagi* and *mwali* is a morally appropriate opportunity for demonstrating *paisewa* ‘hard work’ (see Kuehling 2005: 27, 281-83). I have previously argued that the importance of *kula* ornaments goes beyond what Reo Fortune called a “love for exchange” which, as he argued in *Sorcerers of Dobu* (1932: 193, 205-06), drove the voyages and interactions of *kula* among Dobuans (Kuehling 2005: 87). To give Fortune some credit, *kula* relationships (between pairs of partners as well as between pairs of objects) are often likened to love relationships: they are delightful and desirable yet difficult to maintain, fraught with conflict and betrayal, requiring hard work and affected by the uncertainties of life and death (Kuehling 2005: 182-224, 2012).

I begin by briefly discussing previous *kula* analyses that address the importance of history, memory and names as markers of value. I will then focus on the current generation of *kula* masters and their pragmatic perspective that *kula* valuables are crucial for “solving problems”: in building, repairing and maintaining relationships both within island communities and between *kula* partners on different islands. Fred Damon (1983a) and Nancy Munn (1990) have published articles that use a single *kula* object for related arguments, although these accounts present *kula* exchange as causing rather than solving problems. I will refrain from deeper analysis of spatio-temporality (Munn 1986) and related concepts of personhood (Damon 2002), as my interlocutors were not thinking about their *kula* activities in these terms. While it is certainly possible that “through the stored bits of persons that are the ranked valuables, people convert their bodies into names realized in others’ knowledge of them” (Damon 2002: 130), none of the *kula* practitioners in the southern Massim region who I talked to would describe it this way. The literature on Massim valuables cannot be done justice in this short paper but most recently, John Liep’s (2007) monograph on Rossel Island valuables emphasised that personalised exchange does not mean partners are on equal footing and that transactions may be messy as “social obligation and personal pressure influence the decision of agents in exchange” (p. 18). While this is certainly the case in *kula* partnerships, the moral obligation of generosity and the mutual desire of *kula* partners to maintain a safe track for their valuables have strongly factored in, keeping the *kula* moving until this day.

I was told many times that the value of all *kula* objects as a category, together with the other two major items of exchange (pigs and yams), stems from their symbolic power to compensate a person’s work and commitment, suffering and grief, in short, their capacity to solve local conflicts, fulfil obligations and to provide food in times of need. This is why the most capable islanders are involved in *kula*, distributing large amounts of their garden

produce, providing a shelter for relative strangers in the hopes of receiving *kula* objects in the future, braving the seas on their travels to visit partners, teaching their smartest children the rules and magic, names and tricks of the trade, enduring the envy of their neighbours, and dealing with the demands of their elders. *Kula* is a valuable activity because its objects are endowed with the “spirit of generosity and hospitality” (Trevor Timoti, from Dobu, pers. comm. March 2016). For more junior participants in *kula*, its capacity to provide quality time away from the village, and to give an extra purpose to life are a bonus, but the main incentive to engage in *kula* is the knowledge that *bagi* and *mwali* are needed because “we love, marry, fight, get sick, and, ultimately, die” (Kaibado Joel, from Dobu, pers. comm. December 1993).

HEIRLOOMS AND THE QUESTION OF NAMES

The famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski told us in his classic study of *kula* exchange, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, that the value of *kula* objects is based on their history, much like European heirlooms:

The analogy between the European and the Trobriand *vaygu'a* (valuables) must be delimited with more precision. The Crown Jewels, in fact, any heirlooms too valuable and too cumbersome to be worn, represent the same type as *vaygu'a* in that they are merely possessed for the sake of possession itself, and the ownership of them with the ensuing renown is the main source of their value. Also both heirlooms and *vaygu'a* are cherished because of the historical sentiment which surrounds them. (Malinowski 1922: 89)

Ever since, most anthropologists have accepted this statement. Fred Damon, however, based on his field research on Woodlark (Muyuw) Island, learned that physical size, rather than transactional histories creates the value:

[...] in the legacy of Bronislaw Malinowski, which the most recent ethnographers reproduced (e.g., Campbell 1983a, 1983b), *kula* valuables gained in stature or prestige as they accumulated history, through their travels around the islands. But this is not what my informants said. For them the ranks for valuables were more or less fixed by the sizes they had when they were produced. (Damon 2002: 114)

Indeed, according to my informants from Dobu, size matters. The transactional history however determines the highest ranks of valuables, those with a well-known name. About 100 famous names would be in the repertoire of most *kula* masters, and of these only 30 or so are regarded as the highest-ranking ornaments of *kula* exchange, paired in “married couples” of *bagi* and *mwali*⁵, passed around on relatively stable routes between people

of the same, or matching clans. While their value is based on more than “historic sentiment”, details of their journeys around the exchange system are fragmentary and vague, as Damon learned on Woodlark. Similarly, Dobu *kula* players look at size and patina if they are not clear about the rank of a valuable. They count the circles (*ulai*) that *bagi* and *mwali* have successfully completed around the system and they recount the pairings that have successfully been made on these journeys, the persons and places that have seen the objects, as well as the errors and conflicts that affected their moves. For the top-ranking *bagi* named Teleiponi, for example, I learned that “at the first round it came to halfway and it hit Nanowana, the second hit it made was Atuidamana. So when it went around, it came to Wale-ana-duudu, it met Youya, it met Bwaluwada, and it came back to Atuidamana and is with Atuidamana now” (Synod Timoti, from Normanby Island, pers. comm., February 2016).

Knowing such “histories” (*tetela*) is like knowing the story (also *tetela*) of a plot of land or the ancestresses of a matrilineage—it counts as proof of legitimate ownership. *Tetela* are consequently not told in public settings unless required in a mediation or court case, and only by authorised members of such an object’s route around their ring of partners. I was nevertheless privileged to record Mr. Synod Timoti’s *tetela* of the *bagi* Teleiponi, which begins as follows:

This is the story about Teleiponi, where it comes from and why it came. The original name of Teleiponi [telephone] is Waialesi [wireless]. One of our *bubus* [grandparents], his name is “KW” [pseudonym, here and below]. He lives at Ware Island and he got married there, a village called “G”. He had many children, about twelve, so when he was there and he grew old, the children decided to give us that *bagi* for their *pwaoli* [compensatory gift to the father’s matrilineage], and we call it *pwaoli kalakalawa* because the old man is still alive but they want to pay *pwaoli*. So, our *bubu*, mother’s father, by the name of “LK” and our mother, “SP”, from our place went to Ware to visit the family there, that’s where they presented the *bagi* to our *bubu* and brought it to Duau to our place at “M” [on the Duau coast of Normanby Island]. So when it was there, our *bubu* was still keeping the *bagi*, in the *kula* ring they heard that *mwali* Nanowana is with “M” at “D” [Woodlark Island]. And that was his *kitomwa* [free-of-debt *kula* valuable]. So our old people from Dobu decided to come to our *bubu* and get this *bagi* so they can get Nanowana.

To understand such stories, a complex set of background knowledge is needed: of persons, places, and the top-ranking *mwali* and *bagi*. Most *kula* masters would generally agree on the list below that features some of the best-known *kula* objects.

Table 1. Names of highest-ranking *bagi* and their *mwali* “spouses”, as known in Dobu. Italics indicate undisputed partnerships.

<i>Bagi</i>	<i>Mwali</i>
Dilimeya Tubetube	Tukava (or Tamagwali)
<i>Dilimeyana 40</i>	<i>Tomanuboi</i>
<i>Kasabwaibwaileta</i>	<i>Kepou</i>
<i>Kasanaibeubeu</i>	<i>Manuatasopi</i>
Likudomdom	Waleya ana duu (or Nanowana)
Senibeta	Bwaluwada
<i>Teleiponi</i>	<i>Atuidamana</i> (but according to <i>tetela</i> cited above, it should be Nanowana, its first “marriage partner”)
Tukanibwalala	Bwaluwada
Tukawa	Kabwaku Tamagwali
<i>Bagiduudu</i>	<i>Kepou</i>
Dokanikani	Inimoa (or Tomanugwali Tumanuboi, also Wabaleki)
Gomalakedakeda	?
Kibutokunuwesi	No specific “spouse” yet
<i>Lepoyata 1</i>	<i>Youya</i>
Malalana	Tomanugwali Tomanuboi
<i>Meiya</i>	<i>Tokulasi</i>
Senibeta 2	Kebulubulu (or Bwaluwada)

Table 2. Names of some second-ranked *bagi* and their *mwali* “spouses”.

<i>Bagi</i>	<i>Mwali</i>
<i>Magisubu</i>	<i>Kabisawali</i>
Tokanibwalala	Maikala (or Tokana)
Anoibutuna	Ulilaba
<i>Bagidudu</i>	No specific “spouse”
Siga	No specific “spouse”
Mwalubikina	No specific “spouse”
Lala	No specific “spouse”

These lists are neither complete nor do they represent total consensus; only the pairs in italics are undisputed as far as I know. The names have been spelled in different ways by locals and by anthropologists, adding to the complexity and occasional confusion. Yet whenever the ranking of *kula* objects was discussed, fragments of this list were reiterated by senior men, sometimes in the form of a rhetoric quiz: “Who is the spouse of Teleiponi? Atuidamana, of course!” As in a marriage, people say, things may go in wrong directions but “we try to bring them back to normal”. Life cycle exchanges are an opportunity to readjust the tracks of *kula* valuables; mortuary rituals especially intersect with *kula* in complex ways (Damon and Wagner 1989). The top-ranking *bagi* and *mwali* are well-known and their ideal tracks are linked to a complementary one that moves into the opposite direction—until one of them is taken off its route and instead given to someone from a different matrilineage. This happens frequently, through patrilineal inheritance or as a gift for exceptional service, causing the partners on its ideal track to scheme and plot until the circulations are correctly realigned. This may take decades, as in the case of Kibutokunuwesi, a large *mwali* that has never completed a tour around the chain of partners.

The case of this *mwali* shows that value can be independent of a long history of exchange. In 1975, Kibutokunuwesi was found on a reef near Kiriwina named Kibu (which is also the name of a star) by a man named Tokunuwesi. He cut, named and decorated it before passing it on to his partner in the Amphlett Islands. The late maternal uncle of its current owner, from Bwaiowa (Fergusson Island), received it there and he has held onto it ever since, for 37 years now, waiting for a Dobu man to offer the appropriate *bagi*. Many have tried to lure Kibutokunuwesi into their hands, but so far no-one has achieved this goal. Some complain that their “begging” gifts of *bagi* that were supposed to “loosen” Kibutokunuwesi were not returned with matching *mwali* at all, so they suspect that the current owner is using the *mwali* to attract *bagi* by using Kibutokunuwesi as a lure, or bait. The man himself, on the other hand, complains that Dobu men are not capable of “hitting” his *mwali* properly. In spite of being blocked and even hidden, as only a few people have actually seen it, the *mwali* was being talked about in the 1990s when I was doing my doctoral fieldwork; it was still a topic of discussion in 2017 and many men’s dream is to lay their hands on it. It has only been exchanged twice, the shell is scarred with rough grey marks, and yet it has a high value based on its physical qualities: the size of the *Conus* ring indicating its age. Kibu, its nickname, demonstrates Damon’s (2002: 12) point that “the significance of these valuables is not that they carry sums of human memory”.

High-profile *bagi* and *mwali* attract the most attention of *kula* masters and anthropologists, but there are hundreds of unnamed valuables that nevertheless fully qualify as *kula* wealth, in current circulation or in the hands of outsiders (individuals, art dealers and museums). These objects, mainly



Figure 2. The *mwali* Kibutokunuwesi. Photo by the author. N.B. an older picture by Jutta Malnic (1998: 82) shows a different decoration.

smallish *mwali*, typically give no indication of names in the documenting files. Over 2000 valuables are named but not famous, their names known only to a few individuals. One medium-ranked *mwali* stored in the National Museum and Art Gallery of Papua New Guinea is exceptional because its name is documented. It was recently identified by a man from Dobu called Jones, who recognised it as his missing *kitomwa* (debt-free *kula* valuable). He claimed that he himself had written its name, Lepaudi, on the shell with a carpenter pencil, sent it on a *kula* track many years ago and had not seen it since. According to rumours, it was sold on Gawa Island, intended as a gift for Prime Minister Michael Somare. Being from the Sepik, however, and not sharing *kula* notions of value, he was not interested in it and it ended up in the National Museum in Port Moresby. If the name had not been written on the *mwali*, it is unlikely that this story would have emerged, but somebody had remembered the name and passed word on to Mr. Jones who then came to see the photograph I had taken of it. He cried when he recognised Lepaudi and asked me to help him get it back. So far, the Museum has not responded to my request.



Figure 3. The *mwali* known as Lepaudi (Papua New Guinea National Museum & Art Gallery accession number M401). Photo by the author.

The carefully crafted decorations, seen as the “face” of the objects, are not important for the ranking of *kula* objects. Damon states that “although intentionally and repeatedly adorned and redecorated, and momentary objects of fancied gaze wherever they alight, *kula* valuables do not become famous by these names and decorations” (2002: 125). Yet, while the meaning of a name is irrelevant for its value, they are convenient to identify and to recognise a valuable. When I showed images of old and obviously well-travelled *kula* valuables to Dobu *kula* men, their first question was always “What is its name?” If I did not know, people’s interest in the object seemed to fade, as names serve as a mnemonic device, making it possible to talk about individual objects. Knowing these names is part of the specialist knowledge of *kula* as they distinguish specific *bagi* or *mwali*. The decorations can change without affecting the value and, except for famous ones, even a *kula* master cannot routinely tell one from another. Frequently, names are written on, or scratched into, *mwali* shells and the pearl-shell that is attached to a *bagi* string. However, these names do not necessarily refer to the object itself but temporary owners, serving as nametags that facilitate the valuables’ redistribution. In the Dobu-speaking part of the *kula* network, this ceremony, called *tanaleleya* ‘all the baskets are equal’, should take place at the end of a group’s *kula* expedition. The leader of the trip collects all the *kula* valuables and during a large and sumptuous meal that he sponsors, the valuables are hung up in a row (*sola*) and sorted according to rank. The most valuable ones are usually on the right-hand side and their value decreases until the least valuable one is on the far left (the order may also be reversed but the principle remains the same).



Figure 4. *Tanaleleya* with *mwali* at Sawa'edi, Fergusson Island, August 2015. Photo by author.



Figure 5. A row of *bagi*, not yet sorted by size at Asagamwana, Fergusson Island, August 2015. Photo by author.

Those *mwali* and *bagi* of lower value, without an individual name, are used for exchanges of the highest order within island communities (mortuary feasting, bride wealth, compensation, purchase of pigs, etc.) as well as being passed on in *kula* exchange. Such *kula* valuables may be “low-ranking” in comparison to others, but all of them are nevertheless regarded as “Big Gifts” (Kuehling 2017; see also Kuehling, 2005: Chapter 4), to be used for special transactions, admired and treasured, in short, as objects “to die for” (Damon 1983a: 54; Kuehling 2005: 113; Munn 1990). Together with pigs and large yams, they are the most precious things worth striving for as they “solve problems” related to life and death. Sometimes the transactions do not turn out as expected and my informants claim that nowadays misunderstandings and “bad” choices are frequent, deeply aggravating the concerned parties and often triggering sorcery retaliations, causing a chain of deaths. Even if there is no intentional cheating, difficulties of assessment are common. As Damon has pointed out, names can be misleading. He mentions cases in which valuables are talked about so much that people expect them to be very large:

I also heard people tell what they thought were funny stories about certain valuables over which there was a lot of dispute. They imagined these disputes going off down projected paths, the peoples there hearing the stories, and then imagining that the valuables must really be big if they generated so much talk. (Damon 2002:114)

In addition to such stories, there are other challenges to the use of names as identifiers. Sometimes, a famous name tempts a *kula* trader to tinker with its value by removing the decorations and attaching them to a different object. In this way, two valuables are created, one is “old” but newly decorated, the other one is “new” but adorned with a famous “face” (see Kuehling 2005: 205).

A widely practiced form of deception is to name a low-value *kula* object after a famous one. In Dobu this is called *esabala* or literally ‘passing a name across’ (or the English-derived word *beptais* in the northern Massim). While documenting *kula* objects as part of our current research project, the local research team from Dobu Island was surprised to find so many cases of this practice. *Mwali* namesakes include those named Masisi (11 examples), Taba (six), Lala (six) and Gudala Ikaya (six); among the *bagi*, Kenoliya (ten), Wayau (eight) and Weibitu (nine) are circulating and causing confusion. Only one of each has the value of *dagula*, the highest ranking category, or *bulubulu*, the second grade category. The others are of lower value. Thus when discussing future exchanges, a *kula* player may promise to pass on the *mwali* Masisi, and keep his promise, while upsetting the recipient who expected a high-ranking valuable and only received a mediocre one.



Figure 6. All six of these *mwali* are named Gudala Ikaya. Photos by research team, 2015 and 2016.

DEATH

The statement that “people die for *kula* ornaments” was familiar to me when I undertook my fieldwork, as I had read the anthropological literature on *kula* prior to my departure. And yet, the conversation paraphrased at the beginning of this article was an eye-opener, as it helped me understand that death affects *kula* in complex ways. I initially believed the statement referred only to the fact that desire for the ornaments is so intense that people risk their lives on overseas journeys, and face the jealousy of their peers after achieving their goal of obtaining a specific *bagi* or *mwali*. Any senior *kula* participant will confirm that death guides *kula* exchange, a fact that is somewhat at variance with the more publicly voiced role of *kula* to “promote respect, love and friendship, hospitality, status and adventure” (Hon. Michael Wapanapa, Bwaiowa ward member, September 2015). By enquiring further, I began to realise that death and life are at the heart of *kula* and that the health status of partners is highly relevant in various ways.

The question “How is Peter?” in the conversation I quoted at the beginning, referred to the flow of *mwali*. Since Peter was a senior *kula* man, his death was going to halt *kula* exchange in one direction for a while. This blocking of exchange, called *alau* on Dobu, begins a few days after a death, when local elders decide on the direction that will be blocked (*gatu* or *bubuli*). Either *mwali* or *bagi* may reach but not leave the location, so they accumulate over a period of some months. Only when the neighbouring *kula* community on the other side of the blocked zone organises a group expedition (*yawala*) (further details in Kuehling 2005: Chapter 7), bringing gifts and assembling for a meeting where meals are consumed and speeches are made, is *kula* traffic opened again. As a consequence, a great number of valuables flood to the visitors. In Dobu this movement around the network is called *ulai*; one circle around the chain of partners, one *ulai*, takes at least three to five years. The blockage, usually represented by a pole in the sea near the shore with a broken conch shell or an unhusked coconut on top, is removed at this event and *kula* exchange is open again for individual visitors and small groups. During the opening ceremony, the heir of the dead *kula* player, ideally his sister’s son, introduces himself and begins an exchange relationship, ideally with the orphaned partner, by passing a valuable. This is a good time to voice discontent about previous exchanges, to remind the new partner of the ethics of reciprocity, and to apologise if the deceased had left debts behind. Since these blockings occur all the way around the exchange system, a death can seriously affect the strategies of *kula* players.

Another event resulting from death in Dobu is the reintroduction of a principal mourner to *kula* exchange, the *kwausa* ritual. After the death of a

kula master, a group of close relatives is kept in a state of passivity that is step-wise removed in a series of mortuary rituals (*bwabwale*) until finally they can resume their ordinary lives (see Kuehling 2005: Chapter 8). *Kula* is one of the activities that requires formal reintroduction and the heir of the deceased is taken on a *kula* expedition (see Kuehling 2005: Chapter 7). In the past, the passive state of mourning often took several months, but nowadays people like to speed up the process, especially when the expedition is expected to move many valuables.

I witnessed such an event in September 2015. The Dobu man who came to Bwaiowa for the re-opening of *kula*, only ten days after the death of his maternal uncle, stood up and exclaimed: “My uncle did not tell me what had happened. He only told me I was his heir/replacement (*loepaelu*), so I am sorry but I don’t know what went wrong between you two.” Everyone in the audience had a good idea of what had actually happened; the dead man had failed to return at least one valuable in spite of his promise. Yet the hosting partner stood up and said “Let the old stories rest now, just make sure that we will have a good *kula* partnership. I will give you this *mwali* now, and next week we will come to you for *bagi*.” He could have scolded or reprimanded the heir by recounting the flaws in his uncle’s *kula* exchanges, because he was giving a *mwali* and such a “Big Gift” opens a window for accusing speeches. Yet by letting the opportunity pass, the partner signalled his benevolence and only hinted that when he was paying a return visit he did expect an appropriate counter-gift, preferably more than one, to compensate for the loss that had occurred in the past.

The question about Peter’s health, therefore, related directly to the future of *kula* exchange in general—will there be a group expedition on the horizon? Will his designated heir take over soon? How will it affect our chain of partnerships? Will there be a blockage and subsequent flood of *mwali* in the near future? Damon (1983a) describes the art of plotting and scheming in his brilliant article on the history of Woodlark (Muyuw) Island.

The inquiry about Peter’s health could also have referred to his conduct. Any death, as some people pointed out to me in private, may well have been directly caused by fraudulent *kula* practice, as sorcery attacks are still regarded as appropriate sanctions. Such suspicions are never expressed in public, however, and remain the subject of private conversations. When Peter’s health status was discussed, it could have been an allusion to his punishment for previous mistakes in *kula*, inflicted by an angry *kula* partner, in this case, quite likely, our host. In the past, I was told, *kula* was much more seriously sanctioned: “six feet” (the metaphor for a grave) was the expected outcome of cheating, procrastinating or wrongful exchange of any kind.

Nowadays, there are committees (*komitis*) in many southern *kula* regions (on Sanalowa, Fergusson, Dobu and Normanby Islands) that are aimed at

preventing such dire consequences. Based on the European model, *komitis* are elected by *kula* players of the locality, complete with a chairman, a secretary, a treasurer and a vice president. On Dobu Island, there are six such *komitis* (in Edugaula, Mwanomwanona, Enaiya, Egadoi, Wabuna and Balabala). They are supposed to mediate when wrongful exchanges cause anger, mistrust and envy. I witnessed a case in which the *komiti* on Dobu ordered a person to pass on a *mwali* to a specific partner, although he had planned on keeping the valuable as “village wealth”, as it was free of debt. *Komitis* have succeeded in moving valuables between men within their jurisdiction; they have stopped and reversed exchanges and imposed fines as punishment, although in some cases they are unable to find out the “true” story and cannot come to a decision. The trust in *komiti* mediation is therefore limited and an aggravated *kula* partner may well take the law into his own hands and apply pressure. The first level of showing anger is usually to refuse any food prepared by the partner. If that does not yield results, he may secretly use a curse that causes sickness, disease or even death, depending on the degree of rage and the capabilities of both partners for either effectively cursing or successfully protecting oneself from a curse. Nancy Munn (1990) shows the difficulties of being involved in the exchange of high-ranking *kula* objects like the *mwali* Manutasopi on Gawa Island. I have heard comparable stories but prefer not to publish them here as they are regarded as confidential, upsetting and even offensive to participants and, sometimes, for bystanders.

In the present case, certain major *kula* men, speaking about their shell transactions, asserted their lack of interest in obtaining a well-known, highly valued armshell called Manutasopi that the patient had transacted in an irregular manner that year. These speakers could have been in competition for Manutasopi because each had a separate partnership with John, the Boagis islander who had decided to give the much desired shell to Silas and to the latter’s exceptionally influential northern Kitavan partner. For instance, Thomas, a senior *kula* man and the most important witchfinder and curer on the island, pointed out that his own *kula* path (*ked*) with John was not one along which he could expect such high-standard shells as this one. Furthermore, he had warned Silas and the Kitavan not to make the irregular arrangement with John that allowed the shell both to bypass the Muyuw partner on their (Silas’s, the Kitavan’s and John’s) common path and, in addition, to be taken immediately to Kitava without coming first to Gawa. People felt that Gawans might be angry, since having Manutasopi on the island would have contributed to the Gawan name in *kula*. (Munn 1990: 4)

In this way, the brief statement that “Peter is already weak” and the response “Good” did not indicate a lack of compassion *per se*, but needs to be understood as part of the scheming, planning and anticipating of *kula*

exchanges of the future. The two Dobu-speaking men were working together on a long-term plan to strengthen their exchange relationship, as good *kula* players ought to do. A *kula* man’s death, as we have seen so far, can be interpreted as justified punishment, as the result of his *kula* malpractices and can open the way for his heir to straighten out the route and create better relationships. Death, it follows, can take “crooks” out of the game and give others the chance for a new beginning.

As the death of a “big man” may result in a series of feasting events, the response that “Peter is already weak” could also have meant that his lineage would be likely to receive many valuables in due course. These would effectively enable Peter’s heir to pay the debts that Peter had accumulated. This could also require Peter’s *kula* partners to bring a valuable, but they could provide either type (*bagi* or *mwali*) for the purpose, as local exchanges do not follow the clockwise-anticlockwise routes that are an essential part of inter-island *kula* gifting practices.

The statement also could have indicated that there was a chance to secure *mwali* from his affinal relatives and his children before his actual death. *Kula* is an opportunity for hiding valuables from lineage obligations, especially for the more junior members. The senior lineage members of a man’s in-laws and children are obliged to contribute to his mortuary feast, so when a death is likely to occur, younger *kula* participants of these lineages may be tempted to pass their valuables onto a *kula* path, rather than risk losing them to their seniors’ pressing demands to contribute them to the mortuary gift. In *kula*, a counter-gift can be expected within a short period of time; a mortuary gift is not returned until the next death requires it. In addition, the lineage seniors who manage mortuary gifts may or may not return a valuable to its donor; they may simply keep it as their “village wealth”, thereby depriving a junior *kula* player of opportunities for travel and adventure, complicating his aspirations and schemes, and even ruining his reputation if he is incapable of providing a return gift. It is disrespectful to demand such a gift back from one’s lineage elder and I have heard many times how people lost their *kula* valuables due to local exchange obligations following the death of a father or in-law. “I could not ask for another valuable, it is too embarrassing” was the typical response when I asked why they did not claim a *bagi* or *mwali* when it arrived after a death in their own family. To complicate such a situation further, mortuary gifts require either *bagi* or *mwali*, while *kula* partners can only receive one kind, depending on their location (positioned either clockwise or anticlockwise).

So, as Joseph and his partner were exchanging information about their partner Peter’s health status, and uttering satisfaction about his decline, they were really commenting on his qualities as a *kula* player (not very



Figure 7. A mortuary gift (*talo*) on Dobu, June 1983. Photo by author.

satisfactory), the prospect of his heir's qualities (likely more positive), the expected consequences of his death for major *kula* events (*bubuli ana so'o*—always exciting), and the resulting pulse that mortuary feasting triggers (which they could perhaps benefit from by avoiding the gift of a valuable or by luring *mwali* from his in-laws' or children's lineages). If Peter had been sick for a longer period of time, the woman who took care of him, typically his wife or one of her relatives, might have received a *kula* object to compensate her for her work. In this way, even highly valuable *mwali* and *bagi* can change their routes, crossing over to a different clan and complicating future exchanges.

Death, it follows, may impact the island community's exchange practice as a whole, by halting and then releasing the flow of valuables. This causes a pulse-like movement of valuables, brings about much excitement associated with group travel, feasting, oratory, reconciliation and re-creation of *kula* routes. The conversation between the two *kula* masters, as I have shown, was brief but highly relevant for their future exchanges.

LIFE

Mortuary gifts are also about life as they reconnect lateral relatives, reinforce kinship networks and represent the lifetime of work, love and care of a deceased (see Damon and Wagner 1989; Kuehling 2005). The contingencies of death are not the only risk to the plans of *kula* partners; the value of *kula* objects is also closely associated with life and love between affinal relatives. These gifts often occur between clans within an island community. Such gifts, as in the mortuary rituals mentioned above, are not bound by any clockwise/anticlockwise movements but by the idea of “Big Gifts”—assemblages of items such as *bagi*, *mwali*, large yams of specific types (cultivars known as *uma* in Dobu), pigs and decorative items, such as betel nuts, sugar cane, taro, banana bunches and store goods (Kuehling 2017: 231; see also Kuehling 2005: Chapter 4). A man’s gift to his bride’s matrilineage should contain at least one *bagi* or *mwali*, especially when the bride is beautiful, has no children as yet, and has demonstrated her skills in gardening and household duties. Today, a bride with an education (i.e., a nurse, school teacher or clerk) is regarded as a valuable asset and her parents can ask for a larger gift to acknowledge the money spent on her education, their sacrifice in raising the funds, and their loss of a worker in daily subsistence activities. Once she gives birth for the first time, the father of the child should give a *bagi* or *mwali* to her in a gift called *gwama ana loduwaduwa*, to acknowledge her pain and the risk she took in giving birth, “because blood was dripping”. These gifts are a token of love and respect, and are evidence that the lives of the bride and baby are appreciated. Similarly, the gift for a deceased father, mentioned above, is an acknowledgement of his love and work for his children, for his wife’s matrilineage and for her village in general.

Kula valuables can be given to “ask for” a plot of gardening land or permission to settle in a specific hamlet. They can pay for a canoe and, most importantly, they can acknowledge a gift of life-saving food. The story of the famous *bagi* named Dilimeyana may serve as an example. This is what I learned from Mr. Trevor Timoti, a Duau man and *kula* master, who currently lives on Dobu. The story begins sometime after World War II, when a severe drought challenged the people living on many low islands in the Massim. Kwaudi, a man from Tubetube Island, travelled by canoe to Duau to meet his *kula* partner, Trevor’s maternal grandfather. He asked him for help with food, as Duau (the *kula* region on Normanby Island) has mountains and rivers and did not suffer from a lack of rain. So a large gift of food was prepared, baskets of yams and a large pig, and Trevor’s grandfather brought it to Tubetube. This gift of food, called *atugalala* (literally ‘noise made with the lime pot’), was the reason why the *bagi* named Dilimeyana moved to him. Kwaudi had not yet finished its decorations, but brought it to Duau at a later time. The

bagi was named after Kwaudi's sister's daughter, Dilimeyana, at his request, as the food had saved the girl's life. In the 1970s, the *bagi* was halved by a Dobu man and so Dilimeyana 1 and 2, much shorter now, were circulating separately. Dilimeyana 2 is currently hidden and will not be discussed here, but Dilimeyana 1 had an interesting fate, that I was told about in 2015.

This *bagi*, of the highest rank, was held for 39 years by a man named Austin (now-deceased) on Woodlark Island. The tusk of the large pig that had been part of Trevor's grandfather's gift of food, played a significant role in moving it much later (in December 1994), reminding Austin of the original reason for the *bagi*'s route and justifying Trevor's demand to let it continue its *kula* travel on its original track. After almost 40 years with Austin, the *bagi* has now moved on and was on Dobu Island in September 2015, now travelling under the name Dilimeyana 40, held in Mwemweyala Village, waiting for the right *mwali*, named Tomanuboi, so that it can continue on its path. Dilimeyana 40 and Tomanuboi are regarded as a married couple, longing for each other, wanting to meet on the same route but in travelling in opposite directions (see Kuehling 2012). In fact, it was through Trevor's effort to bring Tomanuboi to Austin that Dilimeyana moved again. Austin died soon after passing Dilimeyana on, and many people told me that this



Figure 8. Dilimeyana 40 (front) and Lepoyata 1, two of the highest-ranked *bagi*. September 2015. Photo by author.

was his just punishment for holding onto it for so long. As an aside, Damon (2002: 124) writes that the name Dalmeyon is his Woodlark tutor’s name, very likely referring to the same *bagi*. I suspect that this is an example of alternative stories, a very common feature in the histories of *kula* valuables.

The detailed scheming and complex exchanges required to move Dilimeyana 40 are only known to some people, but the lives that were saved with the original gift of food certainly indicate and justify the high value of this *bagi*. The large pig (its tusks formed a perfect circle I was told, such as those which used to circulate in *kula* as *doga* or *dona*; see Malinowski 1922: 375), together with baskets of yams were a token of solidarity, of *kula* partnership at its best. As Dilimeyana 40 moves on, it reminds *kula* players of the obligations and opportunities that are open only to those who nurture their relationships by visiting, hosting, passing on *kula* valuables and keeping their promises for future exchanges. Such partnerships are inherited and are among a man’s greatest assets. These high-ranking *dagula*, literally ‘feather used as head decoration’, are supposed to be inherited within the matrilineage or at least within the clan, but in some cases they are passed on from father to son. If this happens, it causes ripples in the entire circle, as partners mourn the loss of their valuable and work on retrieving it, as Trevor did for Dilimeyana 40. The other half of Dilimeyana is likely hidden because of such a move into a different clan. “The *bagi* is sick” (*bagi i le’oasaya*), as Dobu people say in such a situation.

THE PULSE OF *KULA*

As I have outlined above, the movement of *bagi* and *mwali* is affected by death, distracted by local events, and halted for decades if a temporary owner decides to wait for the “right” counter-gift. *Kula* valuables do not move steadily and local events derail even high-ranking *bagi* and *mwali*, complicating the future routes that they are supposed to follow. Such “sick” objects can get stuck, as currently is the case with the *mwali* named Kabisawali that was passed on by a man to his own son, thereby changing its clan-based track. Recently, in 2016, that man died, adding to the long chain of dead bodies related to holding this particular “witchcraft” *mwali* (Malnic 1998: 47; Annette Weiner in Myers and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2001: 299).

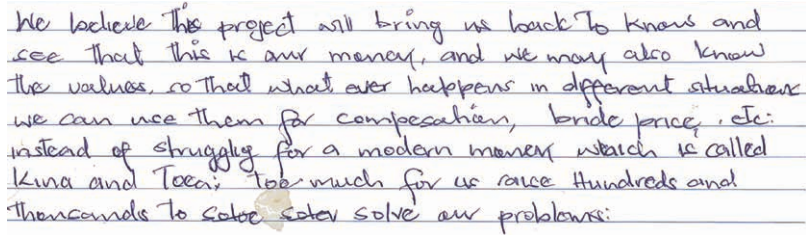
There is always a great risk involved in passing on one’s *kula* valuables, as the contingencies of life and death counter the scheming, planning, organising and persuasion work of *kula* masters. Return gifts may take so many years that two generations are left waiting, deprived of their valuable counter-gift. Today, there are at least 2000 valuables moving in and out of *kula* exchange, and in and out of local exchanges. The large number of objects in circulation calls for some general remarks, I believe, as from a distance they do form a pattern that can be observed and to some extent anticipated.



Figure 9. Kabisawali; the *mwali* shell at the centre is named Teganiu. September 2015. Photo by the author.

High-ranking objects move slowly as a series of preparatory exchanges are required before they change hands (Kuehling 2005: Diagram 13). These gifts are all reciprocated and so it often takes a number of expeditions before a high-ranking *bagi* or *mwali* moves. *Kula* dynamics are driven by the thousands of small objects that attract partners to visit each other, to re-open a *kula* province after death, to aspire and plan, provide hospitality, and practice magic and rhetoric. The partnerships of most *kula* participants are not aiming at moving an ornament of the highest rank, yet *kula* remains one of the most exciting, dangerous and manly things to do. I have argued elsewhere that *kula* is the only way to go on a vacation (2005: 220), and it is one of the most complex mental exercises. It is not only the desire to compete, to achieve, to gain a name, as Munn (1986) has famously argued, it is also the need for *kula* objects to deal with the tensions and emotions resulting not only from death, but also from the problems of everyday life. *Kula* ornaments “solve

our problems”, as a *kula* master from Duau (Normanby Island) wrote to me in a letter (Fig. 10). Their relevance for today’s life in the island region is characterised by his statement that it is “our money”.



We believe this project will bring us back to know and see that this is our money, and we may also know the values, so that what ever happens in different situations we can use them for compensation, bride price, etc. instead of struggling for a modern money which is called Kina and Toga. Too much for us raise hundreds and thousands to solve solve solve our problems:

Figure 10. Extract of letter from *kula* master to the author, March 2013.

The pulse of smaller *bagi* and *mwali* rushes through the veins of the *kula* networks, *ulai* by *ulai*, expedition by expedition, moving between 100 and 500 *mwali* or *bagi*. Occasionally it pushes the high-ranking objects along, creating fame for the few lucky ones who succeed, who are links in the right chains of partnerships, who are cunning and ruthless enough to attract them, and resilient enough to sustain the competitive reactions of their peers who may enviously plot revenge. To be one of these few is certainly a motivation for the ambitious, risk-taking individual—but most *kula* participants do not feel competent or courageous enough to go for the “jackpot” and are satisfied with moderate gains. Without these average exchanges, I would argue, *kula* could not have survived the last century.

* * *

Kula value is based on the notion that *bagi* and *mwali* are moved by the flow of life-circle events and empowered by the social values of generosity, self-discipline and respect. Practicing *kula* provides opportunities to learn and to demonstrate one’s worthiness to receive precious knowledge, as only the best players are chosen to inherit the paths and objects. For aspiring leaders of matrilineages where top-ranked objects circulate, fame is a product of the object’s rank. The names of high-ranking *kula* objects, and of those persons who circulated them, become legends in local lore, increasing in value while being narrated in time and space, as Munn (1986) has demonstrated so well in *The Fame of Gawa*.

One of the *kula* masters from Dobu likened the ranking of *bagi* and *mwali* to the fruits of a betel nut palm. The infructescence or “branch” on top, with ripe nuts, is called *alana*. The ones below are, in descending order, almost ripe,

unripe, tiny, and at the bottom there are only the flowers. The lower “branches” (*pwehisina*) are distinguished from the top ones (*alana*) and it is the same with *kula* valuables. Their ranking takes place when many *kula* objects are displayed and sorted according to their value after a group has returned from a *kula* expedition (*tanaleleya*), as described above. Most lineages do not belong to the top level circles: “most men will never touch *dagula*” (Trevor Timoti pers. comm., 2015) and never reach the highest level of fame. He explained that holding those “ripe” *bagi* and *mwali* can generate hard feelings that are expected to cause death by sorcery, which only knowledgeable people can deflect. This is why a beginner needs a powerful mentor to survive and build a career as the heir of a top-ranking player. Ideally, the heir is the smartest and best-behaved sister’s son, but without a suitable candidate, a man’s sister is also a strong contestant to continue the inherited track that follows clan lines around the islands.

Fame, to my understanding, or what Trevor considers social “ripeness”, is the reward for being a regular participant in *kula* expeditions and an excellent host to *kula* partners, and building a reputation as someone who is trustworthy, generous, intelligent and resourceful. Senior men also find fame by organising successful *kula* journeys, bringing home a large number of *bagi* or *mwali* and losing no participants. Their investments of time and resources, the social skills necessary to see such a group enterprise through with all the required meals and speeches, and the communal memories of such a trip create the leader’s “big name” or *ale sinabwana*. It is through participation in such journeys that most of the skills of *kula* are transmitted; the prospect of joining such an exciting event works as a pedagogic tool for teenagers who compete for the honour. The aspiration to be picked as the “golden boy” of a *kula* master reportedly still motivates teenagers to display admirable attitudes, such as obedience, generosity and respect.

Recently netball competitions have been initiated between *kula* stations, with the aim of providing an introduction into *kula* during the visits of teams for tournaments. In September 2015, Sawa’edi youth from Ferguson Island visited Vakuta Island for such an event and brought back about two hundred *mwali*. Various speeches that I heard praised the teenagers for their respectful behavior (*alamai ita*) and explained it as a result of *kula* values of love and hospitality (*oboboma*). Methodist pastors in the Massim region strongly support *kula*, as Jenevieve Sailon, minister of Sanaloa Island, put it: “We can see these youths are better villagers when they engage in *kula*.”

To nurse teenagers’ interest in *kula*, by providing the first-hand experience of a group expedition, is regarded by local leaders as a strategy to ensure that they understand that at home, outside the inter-island *kula* track, all *kula* objects are highly valuable, comparable to pigs. On an intimately personal level, the emotional element of personal narratives contributes to their value

as *kitomwa* or ‘village wealth’ (*kitoum* in Kiriwina), not as official origin stories that list previous exchanges (*tetela*) but as relational accounts that explain a person’s reason for crying when seeing a specific *bagi* or *mwali*: “My son is named after this one”, “I gave this for my aunt’s funeral”, “This was used as an engagement gift for so-and-so”, etc. Such histories, like the ones concerning gifts of pigs, may be recounted in village courts at times, but they are used as evidence and not to rank the object. Pig skulls or tusks are often kept as mementos, as well as evidence for exchanges of the past, and can dramatically be held up publicly during a mediation; just mentioning the name of a *mwali* or *bagi* serves the same purpose, even if the object itself has already moved on. Their value empowers these objects’ capacity to bring peace and friendship, to demonstrate moral qualities, to provide travel opportunities and to rationalise death. According to my research, this makes them infinitely valuable to the islanders.

NOTES

1. Names in this initial story are pseudonyms.
2. These include publications by Damon (1980a, 1980b, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1990, 1993, 2000, 2002) for Woodlark (Muyuw) Island; Munn (1983, 1986, 1990) for Gawa Island; and Campbell (1978, 1983a, 1983b, 2002a, 2002b), Malinowski (1920, 1922, 1926, 1929, 1935) and Weiner (1976, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1992, 1994) for the Trobriand Islands.
3. These are often misidentified as *Spondylus* shell (see Liep 1983: 86).
4. I have never seen them worn on the upper arm as documented by Malinowski (1922, plate XVII) because, I was told, the inside of the shell “bites” the biceps when flexed. Moreover, both decoration and rope prevent their use as armbands. They are typically carried by the rope or in a basket.
5. See Kuehling 2012 for a critique of the supposed gender of *bagi* and *mwali*.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the value of *kula* objects by focusing on the perspectives of islanders from the southern *kula* region. By linking *kula* practice to death and life, I argue that the objects' value is complex: material, sentimental and personal, created by partnerships in time and space. *Kula* valuables are valuable because they are managed by the most respected elders, occupy the minds of the those considered the most intelligent people of the region, and serve to build relationships, as well as test the honesty and integrity of individuals. They are also valued for their capacity to provide hospitality and solidarity, to repair conflicts and to express love and grief.

Keywords: Kula Ring valuables, accumulated histories, *kula* exchange, material culture, Dobu Island, Papua New Guinea

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