MYTHIC ORIGINS OF MORAL EVIL:
MORAL FATALISM AND THE TRAGIC SELF-CONCEPTION
OF THE MEKEO

ALAN JONES

Macquarie University and Australian National University

It was A'aia who threw down our bad ways, he flung them down, he caused them to come into being. (Anonymous Mekeo speaker)

Creation myths of New Guinea societies typically describe the origins of human beings and of the different clans, tribes or language groups; they often explain the origin of salient geographical features, of the animals and food plants that people depend on, and of key elements of a group's material culture. Sometimes too, linked to these origin myths, are accounts of the origin of death—typically through some human failing or fault. However in the present article I focus on mythic accounts of the origins of moral evil and, more specifically, on myths of that type that were widely told among the Mekeo of Papua New Guinea's Central Province[1] in the second half of the 20th century. In these myths the origin of death is associated with the origins of the types of antisocial behaviour that traditionally bedevilled Mekeo society, instruments symbolic of such behaviours, and the motives that underlie and drive them.

Moral philosophy in the West has traditionally made a distinction between natural evil and moral evil. The types of human suffering that are inherent in human existence are classed as natural evils, while the types of suffering that result from voluntary acts of other human beings are described as moral evils. In a cosmos so-conceived, natural evils such as sickness and death arise from what we call "natural causes"; moral evils on the other hand are brought about by human action. However, the term "morally evil" is perhaps most often used to categorise *the actions and motives that bring about such suffering*, firmly linking evil as suffering to evil as wrongdoing (Ricoeur 1995). Violent attacks on the person or well-being of others are the most obvious forms of morally evil action, but actions like lying, theft and adultery, while not intrinsically or immediately injurious, typically lead on to conflict, aggression and injury, and can thus also be classed as morally evil. However, within the lived universe of the Mekeo, death itself (along with sickness, pain, etc.) is firmly held to be an outcome of intended actions and deliberately initiated cosmo-ontological processes (Mosko 1985: 151), specifically various types of magic (*menga*) and sorcery (*ungaunga*).[2] And if

death and suffering are not accidental but are brought about by the actions of conscious agents—in Burridge's phrase, all evil stems from "the evil in men" (1988 [1960]: 59)—then all evil is moral evil. I will argue below, based on the evidence of two pivotal Mekeo myths, that moral evil is a category of Mekeo thought and that, moreover, Mekeo thinkers have gone to some considerable imaginative lengths to account for their own recognised propensity to behave in antisocial and ultimately self-defeating ways.

Myths accounting for the origins of human-initiated evil are relatively rare across New Guinea.[3] I would argue that, where such myths exist, they can be seen as evidence for an evolving moral consciousness in which a sense of guilt, based on the internalisation of a sense of socio-moral wrongness, is entwined with more elemental feelings such as shame and loss of face. Such sentiments point to a rational mind troubled by discrepancies between the rules and ideals of conduct that are publically espoused and the often rule-trampling reality of everyday human transgressions. Paradoxically, in Mekeo society, transgressions against the idealised socio-moral order—such as theft and illegitimate sexual relations—are not always deplored or sanctioned, even when they lead to conflict and aggression; they are regarded as inevitable.[4] Yet on some level they give rise to a profound moral unease and call for some kind of causal explanation. Such explanations are supplied in the form of myths, which can be seen as part-justification and part-excuse. That is to say, the myths in question can be regarded as socio-moral *accounts*, to use the term introduced into sociology by Scott and Lyman (1968). But more than that, the two myths reported below construct a complex collective self-consciousness and explicit self-representations that combine moral fatalism with a very tragic sense of human destiny (compare Stephen 1995: 308). This self-concept and the associated moral ethos constitute what Lévi-Strauss termed the "operational value" of myth (1963: 209): an essentially ideological meaning-making function that renders the world and the social-existential status quo in some sense more acceptable.

As a widely circulated technology of understanding and knowing, these myths open a direct window onto traditional Mekeo conceptions of moral and, more especially, immoral conduct. In the picture that emerges from these narratives, a weft of immorality is embedded in a warp of taken-for-granted values and emotions. The picture is complicated, but regularities can be identified, with some major categories of Mekeo morality corresponding to categories set up by Zigon (2007, 2010). And in the end it has been possible to devise *a generative model* (see Bourdieu 1990: 101-2) which, while not being predictive, can *account for* most of the choices made by individual Mekeo—actual choices documented in the rich ethnographic literature as well as, more paradigmatically, in the myths.

Zigon has developed a comprehensive conceptual framework for an explicit "anthropology of moralities" (2007: 132). Zigon (2007, 2010) distinguishes between an institutional morality, a public discourse of morality, and certain embodied socio-moral dispositions, or (as I would say) predominantly tacit *principles of action*. Institutional moralities are typically underwritten by powerful if sometimes loosely defined groups within a society. Distinct from this, Zigon suggests there will generally be a non-institutionalised public discourse of moral expectations and norms. And underlying these two more or less visible and explicit moralities are a set of embodied and enacted principles of action. (Although Zigon explicitly formulates this last type of morality in Heideggerian rather than Bourdieuian terms [2007: 135-36], insisting that dispositions are *enacted* rather than *embodied*, I would maintain that these concepts are not mutually exclusive.)

Within the Mekeo schema being developed here, the overarching institutional morality will be referred to as *kangakanga 1* and the public discourse of social-behavioural appropriateness referred to as *kangakanga 2*. The powers behind *kangakanga 1* are vested in various categories of hereditary chief and in the elders of localised sub-clans. This sphere of rightness versus wrongness is focused on customary emblems, actions and procedures. Operating simultaneously with *kangakanga 1*, there is an informal public moral discourse, *kangakanga 2*; this is mainly concerned with traditional ideals and norms of pro-social behaviour. The two embodied and enacted moral-behavioural dispositions that have been identified—competition and reciprocation—powerful as they are, are as we shall see fundamentally in conflict (something foreseen by Zigon 2010: 7).

Infringements of *kangakanga 1* are never explicitly made known to the perpetrator, who must infer their transgressions from any misfortunes—that is, punishments—that they might encounter. Their transgressions were often inadvertent and are even in retrospect often difficult to determine, a circumstance that produces much forensic and inherently speculative reasoning (a second, subsidiary public discourse of indeterminable rightness and wrongness). Infringements of *kangakanga 2* are typically carried out consciously and deliberately. However, Zigon's framework fails to account for further aspects of Mekeo moral discourse and behaviour. Infringements of the social-behavioural order do not constitute "problems" (in the Foucauldian sense) or cases of "moral breakdown" (Zigon's term, borrowed from Heidegger) because the discourse and principle of *kafa,* or expected immorality—when this is invoked—tends to normalise them. The "ethical moment" in which a moral dilemma is verbalised and negotiated (Zigon 2010) thus never arrives.

A proposed generative model of the Mekeo moral order is presented further below, as Table 2 (p. 343), indicating linkages between the categories

outlined above and various mythic models. What this model suggests (but of course fails to capture in all its lived complexity) is the morally fraught experiential matrix and the dark emotional tone of the Mekeo life-world. And what the model does not capture, of course, the myths themselves do—albeit in imagistic and narrative terms. They are irreducible sense-giving projections and validations of lived experience, conflating past and present, memory and desire, in self-conscious celebration of who Mekeo collectively are, their collective way of being. The life-world they project and articulate and reaffirm is one in which individuals are, prototypically, impelled towards their own self-destruction by virtue of a tragic character flaw that they fatalistically and almost vaingloriously accept as an emblem of who they are—*lai, Mekeo au'i* ('we, Mekeo men/people').[5]

In the main body of this paper I compare variants of two myths in both of which a semi-divine hero named A'aisa figures as the protagonist. The different versions given are taken either from the ethnographic literature or from data I collected in the 1980s. These two internally complex myths—each consisting of two distinct episodes—have themselves usually been represented in the literature as episodes or segments of a single narrative (Bergendorff 2009, Mosko 1985, Stephen 1995). Indeed the Mekeo themselves conceptualise them in this way, encouraged by the fact that they both centre on the figure of a character named A'aisa. However, they tend to be recited separately, and clearly constitute stand-alone narratives. Moreover, internal evidence supports their analysis as independent myths. They offer quite distinct if, in the event, complementary accounts of (among other things) the origin of moral evil and its role and status in everyday village life. Comparative analysis supports the evidence of internal structural analyses, indicating that the vast "common pool of narrative events" that links so many cultures of New Guinea reflects two important but quite distinct story-lines or "themes" (Harding, Counts and Pomponio 1994: 6). The first is the tale of the male culture hero—the snake-man of northeastern New Guinea, the travelling creator of the south-west—who is "both a creator and moral arbiter" (Harding, Counts and Pomponio 1994: 6). He appears without antecedents, is shamed, insulted or abused, and—in consequence—bestows death upon humans who until then have been immortal. The second is a myth of primordial social conflict—typically, as here, distrust and conflict between two brothers—that prefigures or threatens the breakdown of social structure in its entirety (see Counts 1994: 120).

In each myth A'aisa is a shape-changer and a trickster. In the first myth (which I will refer to as A'aisa 1) the divine hero appears initially as a parentless child who is adopted by an old woman. As a boy, he uses his magic to outdo the village men in hunting wallabies and pigs; for his impertinence he is abused and beaten, and the men steal his game. In brief, A'aisa reacts to

the blows and insults of the village men by condemning humanity to a newly mortal existence. He 'throws down' death along with the instruments and practices that bring it about. In the second myth (A'aisa 2), A'aisa is the eldest of two brothers. He is a great chief but as the story opens he has for unknown reasons taken on the outward appearance of a small child. Because of this humble disguise A'aisa is misrecognised and insulted by his younger brother's wife, or wives. This leads to a feud with his brother that escalates thanks to a succession of further misunderstandings and deceptions. The feud only ends when each brother has brought about the death of his own nephew, a child who is also his namesake (having been named in his honour). This second myth is traditionally cited to explain the existence of *pikupa*, a deep-seated propensity to mistrust, to resent and (when the occasion arises) to harm one's neighbour. *Pikupa* is regarded by the Mekeo themselves, with a mixture of pride, regret and sad self-irony, as one of their most characteristic traits.

It is noteworthy that in the first myth A'aisa condemns humanity to embody and endure moral evil by fiat. In this it evokes a series of myths from other New Guinea contexts that can best be exemplified by the Daribi myth of Souw (see Wagner 1967, *The Curse of Souw*). In the second tale, A'aisa propagates moral evil by example—providing a moral template that still inspires, warrants and excuses various types of wrongdoing. This myth-type is widespread in the form of stories about two disaffected brothers. The popular north New Guinea tale of Kilibob and Manup (Lawrence 1964), in which these brothers' quarrel over the infidelity of one of their wives, with its drawn-out consequences for language and culture, is an exemplar of this type, though lacking the peculiarly Mekeo dénouement of A'aisa 2.[6]

A fundamental claim in what follows is that attributing both myths to the semi-divine hero A'aisa irrevocably sacralises and validates them as true accounts. Subsequently I discuss some interactional *uses* made by the Mekeo of these myths, particularly in explaining or justifying behaviours and emotions that are otherwise considered generally inadmissible in oneself and unacceptable in others. However, before proceeding to the myths and their analysis I present a discussion of discursively versus tacitly recognised categories of moral evil within Mekeo society. I then attempt to situate moral evil within a larger picture of the socio-moral order that takes account of both prevailing public moralities and embodied dispositions. Here, following Zigon (2007, 2009, 2010) and Bourdieu (1977, 1990), I show how consciously espoused behavioural norms, along with embodied dispositions, traditionally implicated powerful emotions and typically entailed ritual practices and sorcery-oriented transactions. This model (see Table 2) foregrounds the ontologically diverse cognitive and affective grounds of the Mekeo moral conscience and an almost institutionalised fatalism in regard to breaches of espoused socio-moral norms.

LINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL MANIFESTATIONS OF THE MEKEO MORAL ORDER

In Mekeo society a range of specific types of action or behaviour are labelled *apala* 'bad', and it is clear that this term is being used in a socio-moral sense when the actions or behaviours so described merit censure and/or potential retribution (cf. Barker 1984). The kinds of action or behaviour that are likely to be followed by censure and/or retribution (in whatever form that might take) are referred to as *kelele* (sometimes *kerere*), a noun that is often translated into English as 'mistake' (English-speaking Maisin use the same word to translate the indigenous term *da* [see Barker 1984: 222-24]).[7] These actions and behaviours can be divided into a number of categories based on their circumstances and motives, although the term itself is profoundly polysemous, conflating these widely divergent types of breach or fault under the one essentially non-judgemental rubric.

Kangakanga is the very general term for 'custom' or 'customary law'. However, in actual usage it is ambiguous, describing two quite different sets of conventional behaviour. I label these *kangakanga 1* and *kangakanga 2*. *Kangakanga 1* refers to the correct performance of public ceremonies or rituals, and respect for customary rights and privileges, such as the institutionalised rights and privileges of chiefs and sorcerers, of partner-clans (*ufuapie*) or of affines (*ipa-ngava*). In the past, clan badges, songs and dances constituted an important part of a body of distinctive emblems and behaviours. Actions or behaviours that seemed to the senior men to contravene these inherited ways of doing things would often be punished, albeit tacitly and indirectly, by a chief, who would employ his official sorcerers—often described by Mekeo as his "policemen"—for this task. Such punishments often took the form of apparent "accidents" like snakebite or a sudden sickness.

Kangakanga 2 refers to the body of idealised socio-moral attitudes and behaviours that ethnographers have tended to describe almost in passing. These are behavioural expectations that can be formulated as rules of the form "we always do—or feel—like that" and they typically pertain to specific social relationships. These norms often remain tacit until breached but, importantly, they can be articulated when necessary. Transgressions against these types of *kangakanga* often lead to open conflict; revenge can be exacted on the spot by an impulsive resort to physical violence or, more secretively, by employing a sorcerer to inflict more indirect punishments (note that both official and unofficial sorcery practices among the Mekeo are the preserve of males). However, there is a countervailing tendency, especially on the part of bystanders, to deprecate the gravity of such transgressions and, if not condone them, suggest that they are in some sense inevitable. Moreover, the propensity to breach social norms has been normalised as *kafa*, a term for expected misbehaviours that is attributed to the norm flouting models provided by A'aisa in key myths.

Finally here we must note a type of *kelele* that was originally perhaps most characteristic of peace chiefs, i.e., those who had the keenest sense of having a public face to maintain. The Mekeo term *oa* can be translated as either 'face' or 'honour' but I shall prefer the latter term. *Oa* refers to the fact that these chiefs in particular have internalised a demanding moral code based on selflessness and service. In fact their behaviour is stringently monitored by their official sorcerers (Hau'ofa 1981: 279), to whom they also owe their mystical powers, i.e. their *isapu* or mystical "heat" (Hau'ofa 1981: 281). That *oa* is something that can be lost is evident in everyday phrases like *oa e-ngea* '(his/her) honour disappears' and *oa e-pa-ngea* 's/he makes (his/her) *oa* disappear' (in the everyday usage of commoners, 's/he causes X to be ashamed'). Possession of *oa*—not *isapu*—is what lends the peace chief both authority and moral dominance. This dominance is reflected in the fearlessness with which chiefs intervene in violent confrontations, as appears in numerous incidents (historical or quasi-historical) recounted by Hau'ofa (for examples, see 1981: 188-9, 192, 204). Ideally at least, the moral superiority of a peace chief can be damaged by any failure to maintain the integrity of his moral role, to which his *oa* is firmly attached. One frequently told and largely apocryphal tale (p. 204) exemplifies the consequences of a moral breach for the peace chief. A peace chief's wife secretes, for her own use, a portion of meat intended for general consumption; her dishonesty is accidentally made public; the chief is profoundly shamed; his sense of guilt leads him to resign immediately and, in some versions, flee the village. This sense of what one owes to others *and oneself* by virtue of one's position in society, so characteristic of the peace chief, thus has its own myth which also functions to reproduce a moral ideal by dwelling on the consequences of its breach, the *kelele* in question. *Oa* has been translated by Mosko (2005a) as 'authority' and 'law' (he links it to *oaoa* meaning 'custom' when in fact, historically, *oa* meant 'head'). However, even in everyday usage it clearly refers to an intangible quality that is lost when an individual (or some close associate, like a wife) acts in such a way as to betray their public persona.

Underpinning all of the values mentioned above are two powerful albeit largely implicit *principles of action* that can be labelled (i) competition (based on egoism) and (ii) reciprocation (based on envy). As principles, they are the theoretical correlates of embodied dispositions and practices (Bourdieu 1977). The former grounds competition in the individual will to self aggrandisement. It is a kind of egoism that is inherently anti-social. This is what Hau'ofa (1981: 289) refers to as a "principle of inequality". In Mekeo society, Hau'ofa points out, inequality is institutionalised and ascribed to specific role relations. Reciprocation (i.e., the principle of equal returns) is realised as a deep-seated disposition to balance every transitive action,

whether of a visible or invisible nature and whether positive or negative in effect. As abstract principle, it is on a par with the principle of "equality in honour" which Bourdieu extrapolated from Kabyle male behaviour (1977: 11-15); but reciprocation reflects rather a sense—essentially calculative—of what one is due as a result of real or imagined injuries to one's ego (i.e., pride) or in compensation for symbolic objects of which one has been deprived. Implementation of this principle is, however, constantly framed and hedged by the competitive nature and hubristic machinations of egoistic individuals. Thus each principle is in opposition to the other, as *kafa* is to *kangakanga 2*— but in this case it is two deeply internalised dispositions that are potentially at war with one another. And indeed both principles rest firmly on a deeper assumption—that there is affixed quantum of good and that "[t]he man who succeeds does so at the expense of others" (Hau'ofa 1981: 216).

Bourdieu, in his analysis of the Kabyle *habitus*, introduced the concept of generative principles (1977: 11, 1990: 100), theoretical constructs capable of accounting for—not predicting—the choices made by social actors, based on their embodied dispositions, in specific situations. It corresponds perhaps to what Ricoeur (1966) meant by structures of possibility. The generative principles are, as previously noted, largely implicit. They provide an unspoken rationale for action, and are enacted rather than invoked, debated or advocated. As the most fundamental components of a generative model they account for most of the situated actions and events that make up the lived reality of the Mekeo lifeworld.

On the basis of the above, *kelele* is divisible analytically into a number of distinct categories. I give the most salient of these below:

1. Breaches of the unspoken/unwritten principles of competition and reciprocation: the non-sharing of food (*ani-vake*, *ani-onge*), the non-donation of labour when required by custom. These moral failings can lead to *pikupa*, and *ungaunga* or revenge sorcery (*u'u*; *'ava*).

2. Breaches of customary law or rights (*kangakanga 1*). The chief can ask the *ungaunga* sorcerers to punish offenders (who may not be aware they have committed an offence).

3. Ambivalently condemned/condoned anti-social behaviours (*kangakanga 2*).

    i)   *Pi-paini*—fighting, especially with close agnates, and fighting within the ward, and especially in the clan-house (*'ufu*).

    ii) *Pi-kafa*—swearing at or insulting someone, and also laughing at (i.e., mocking) someone (*a'a-laina*).

iii) *Painao*—theft of such things as pigs (*'uma*), areca nuts (*mave*) or garden food (*fo'ama*), and also nowadays money (*moni*) or items of transferable property (*amuamu*).

iv) *Lapau/pafau*—promiscuous sexual behaviour, up to and including adultery. *Pafau* (*pa-fau*) specifically refers to a form of vainglory or self-display regarded as potentially leading to sexual intercourse (*pi-ai*).[8]

There is no doubt that sorcery and sorcerers are believed by Mekeo to embody a very extreme degree of malice, and to cause great suffering, and for such reasons might well be called evil. The Tangu, for example, viewed sorcerers as the epitome of evil (see Burridge 1988 [1960]: 38, 68). Baumeister (1999) has identified seemingly universal categories of human evil that are reflected in Mekeo sorcery practices and the motives underlying them. Yet, like most facets of the Mekeo lifeworld, sorcery is evaluated somewhat differently in different contexts of use. Sorcerers in their traditional role, as enforcers of traditional law, are respected and their practices in this role are regarded as legitimate. However, sorcery is often used for the furtherance of personal spites and resentments, especially by representatives of the newer sorcery lines (Hau'ofa 1981: 229), who are more open to the use of their powers for personal ends. And in such uses it is widely deemed to be evil or "criminal" (Hau'ofa 1981: 277). As Hau'ofa puts it, this criminality "arises not merely out of [the sorcerers'] own venality but also (and perhaps mainly) from the evil within ordinary members of society who hire them to do what they themselves cannot do" (Hau'ofa 1981: 278-79). That said, even the official sorcerer is viewed with considerable ambivalence, both by chiefs and commoners, both of whom who fear him as much as they regard him as a necessary pillar of the social order. (Barker [1984] documented a similar ambivalence towards sorcery among the Maisin, something which suggests that sorcery might often play such a dual role in New Guinea societies). There are thus grounds for using the English term "evil" in Mekeo contexts for the kinds of malevolent magic and the sufferings attributed to it that are described above—at least when referring to unofficial uses of sorcery. Meanwhile I will persist in using 'moral evil' in a broader sense, a sense that encompasses all the deliberate breaches of the generally espoused moral code—the discursively reproduced behavioural ideals—that I have termed *kangakanga 2*. Moral evil is thus objectively defined as the cover term for all those kinds of action, however motivated, that result in suffering, hatred or conflict.

HOW MORAL VALUES IMPLICATE EMOTIONS AND PRACTICES

Before moving on to a consideration of the myths, it is necessary to say something about the ways in which, in the Mekeo context, anti-social emotions and certain ritual practices are implicated by negative moral-value judgements. The latter arise in the presence of any unexplained misfortune that might befall someone, such as an accident or illness, up to and including death. In the Mekeo cosmos, such misfortune is a sign of moral culpability or blame. That is, some unknown agent has deemed one guilty of an offence or insult—two concepts that merge in Mekeo thought—and the suffering now experienced is the outcome of their deliberate ritual manipulations. Perpetrators of such breaches may be completely ignorant of what it is they are being punished for, or by whom. Mekeo have a well developed "vocabulary of motives"[9] and this is typically mobilised in widespread gossip involving speculation as to the causes and of a person's misfortunes and the possible courses of action they might take based on hypothetical identifications of the perpetrator. Numerous transactions, involving payments to ritual specialists, may be initiated in the pursuit of magical remedies.

In the discourse on misfortune, the ritual practices assumed to be involved are chiefly sorcery (*ungaunga*) and other forms of injurious magic (*menga*), all of which are known (in terms of techniques and symptoms) and specifically named (Hau'ofa 1981). However the main focus of such discourse tends to fall

Table 1. From judgements to emotions, ritual practices, and intended outcomes.

Negative moral judgement	*Anti-social emotion*	*Harmful ritual practice*	*Intended harm, outcome*
Equilibrium lost, *'ava* is due	Harm-focused agency, secret ritual practice; inferred feelings and actions		Equilibrium restored, *'ava* paid
Offence is given but it is not known how or to whom (may be an ancestor, as proxy for a person)	Offended person feels shame-rage (*ofuenge*), plus the intention to inflict harm (as *'ava,* here 'payback')	Offended person initiates harmful ritual (sorcery, other types of magic) that will implement 'payback'	Offending person suffers some harm, misfortune; this may be illness or death or the death of loved ones
kelele (*oa e-ngea*, honour is lost)	*pikupa* (envy, resentment): *ofuenge* ('anger')	*ungaunga, menga, mefu* etc.	*'ava* is paid; honour is restored

Table 2.   Moralities, anti-moralities and embodied/enacted dispositions.

Espoused Norms		Aberrant Practices			Principles of Action	
Institutional and public–discourse moralities		**Semi-institutionalised, semi-public anti-morality**			**Embodied /enacted dispositions**	
I'a a 'a kangakanga		*I'a kafa - 'a*			*I'a a 'a laomai*	
Social function: Legitimates proper action/ behaviour; reproduces socio-political status-quo (*kangakanga 1* & *kangakanga 2*)		Social function: Accounts for untoward action/behaviour; challenges socio-political status-quo (i.e. *kangakanga 1* & *kangakanga 2*)			Social function: "embodied morality is about acceptable existential comfort" (Zigon 2010)	
Institutional morality enshrined in signs and customs and enforced by chiefs and sorcerers: *kangakanga 1*	Public/social morality: behavioural ideals that are only inconsistently enforced: *kangakanga 2*	*pipaini*: fighting, especially among close kin or affines; driven by *ngua-kupu* (anger, resentment)	*ungaunga*: sorcery, driven by *ofuenge* (shame-anger) or *pikupa* (envy, jealous resentment)	*lapau*: sexual promiscuity (disregard for ordinary norms of sexual behaviour)	*aina 'au, pafau :* pride, egoism, individual will (radical competitiveness)	*'ava*: price, due, recompense (reciprocation – the balanced distribution of good and evil)
Principle: "A'aisa laid it down, told us to do it like this."	Principle: "We always/never do X; X is our *kangakanga* "	Principle/Logic: "Individuals have rights, they know their due"	Principle/Logic: "Justified malice is good; revenge is good"	Principle/Logic: 'We are inherently weak/bad; we can't help doing bad things"	Principle/Logic: "My gain is all that matters; your loss increases my gain"	Principle/Logic: Life is a zero-sum game: balance is all
		Warrants: mythic precedents and principles of action				
Mythic legitimation: A'aisa 1	Ancestral precedent, remembered folk-ways; "policed" by sorcerers	Mythic legitimation: A'aisa 1 (Divine Culture Hero) (Also: trickster, deceiver)	Mythic legitimation: A'aisa 2 (Trickster, deceiver; threatened ego)	Mythic legitimation: Old A'aisa (Trickster, deceiver, sexual predator)	Commonsense knowledge and practical reason; cf. Zigon's "unreflective, non-intentional dispositions" (2007:135)	
		Informally glossed principles/logics				
How we should proceed in our customary life-ways; how we should behave in our social relationships		*What we know we shouldn't do but can't help doing*			*Why we really think/act as we do*	

on the specific emotions that accompany and motivate the ritual practices—
to whom may these be attributed and, plausibly, for what cause. Prominent
among the feelings that figure in these conversations are emotions we can
gloss here as envy, resentment, jealousy and shame-anger.

It is possible to discern a causal chain linking untoward incidents, or
trigger events, with evil/malicious emotions, practices and outcomes (see
Table 1 above). So it is not after all so surprising to find Mekeo myths in
which the origins of moral evil are linked to the origins of natural evil. What
remains surprising is that this link is so rarely explicitly made in the New
Guinea context.

A'AISA—SEMI-DIVINE CULTURE HERO

A'aisa is often referred to by Hau'ofa as a deity (1981), and by Stephen
(1995: 3) as "mythic hero and founder of Mekeo culture", but he is perhaps
best described by Mosko (1985, 1992), using a category drawn from Mekeo
languacultures itself, as a spirit (North Mekeo *tsiange*, East Mekeo *isange,*
earlier *iange*).[10] However, A'aisa is like men in many ways and is in some
contexts identified as an ancestor (Mosko 1992).[11] As either spirit or deity
A'aisa possesses supernatural powers, including especially the ability to
change his outer shape or form. He often appears, for example, in the guise
of the deadly Papuan Black snake (*aungama*). However, a feature that sets
A'aisa apart from other culture heroes and shape-shifters is his propensity to
appear as a young boy and even in some myths as a small bird or marsupial,
i.e., a small and insignificant being.[12] A'aisa often assumes these forms
deliberately, in order to deceive or 'trick' people (EMek *pa'au*, NMek *bakau*
[see Mosko 1985: 89, Stephen 1995: 136-37])[13] who are then punished for
failing to recognise and afford him due respect and veneration.

In myths of the Kuni (Egidi 1913), speakers of a closely related Austronesian
language who inhabit the foothills of the Owen-Stanley Range, there appears
an anarchic and homicidal young warrior called Akaea, who wreaks havoc
on the surrounding villages. This leads me to postulate an archaic Akaia in
early Mekeo lore, lying behind and informing the later narratives. There
was, moreover, a hill known as Akaea-faka a short distance to the southeast
of Rarai and north-east of Veifa'a (see the map in Egidi 1914). The earliest
reconstructable form of the Mekeo hero's name is Akaia (corresponding to
the contemporary West Mekeo form). It is probable that Akaea-faka is the
hill known nowadays as O'opo, which Desnoës (1941: 865) described as
Inaufokoa's *colline des morts* (hill of the dead).[14] This is the hill upon which,
in one of the myths (A'aisa 1, see below), the divine hero raises up the stolen
wives and from the top of which he 'throws down' (*e-ngoaleia, e-pioleia*)
his "gifts" (to borrow Michelle Stephen's perceptive trope).

THE "GIFTS" OF A'AISA

It has not been sufficiently recognised till now that the A'aisa stories contain two conflicting accounts of the origin of moral evil. These accounts are embedded in otherwise unconnected narratives centred on a spirit or spirits called A'aisa.[15] Not only is the character of this personage quite distinct in each narrative, both narratives conclude with his departure from the world of men. In the first story (which I am referring to as A'aisa 1) the origin of death is linked to the origin of key social institutions such as chieftainship and, of more central interest to me here, perennial human evils like lying, theft and fighting. In the second story (A'aisa 2), an ontologically disparate type of evil appears—namely *pikupa*. *Pikupa* is an emotional and moral disposition—a disposition to envy and resent the good fortune of others— and it is foreshadowed, prefigured and, as it were, institutionalised by the character, motives and actions of this mythical A'aisa. The type of moral evil at issue here is an embodied inclination or tendency to feel and act in a certain way. A'aisa 2 addresses the motivational grounds of moral evil.

In order to be able to disentangle the complex motifs and underlying themes present in these two key myths, I shall in recounting them try to capture the variation that appears across tellings. In all this variation there is a consistency and coherence that is self-validating and that brings us significantly closer to understanding the peculiar existential quality of this (to us) alien life-world and in particular the tragic self-conceptualisation of the Mekeo."

A'aisa 1
Numerous versions of this myth begin with the story of how A'aisa , in the shape of a very small child, was discovered by an old woman in her firewood (Hau'ofa 1981, Mosko 1985, Seligman 1910, Stephen 1995). I here reproduce a version collected and written down for me by a young man from Piunga (West Mekeo) in 1981.

> One day an old woman named Amete went to the garden. She collected some firewood and then went to get some bananas. She came back with the bananas and placed the firewood on top and went off home. She left it in the kitchen and went down to the river to fetch water. When she was gone, A'aisa came out as a small child. When the old woman returned she saw the child and asked it: 'Who are you?' The child said: 'You brought me in the firewood.' So she said: 'Well I have no children, so I'll look after you and you will be my son.'

In a very similar account by Stephen (1995: 3), A'aisa is found (also in firewood) by a childless old woman called Epuke. The story continues with the growing boy's mistreatment at the hands of the village men, who are jealous of his hunting prowess.

The boy soon grew big enough to go hunting. One day a crowd of men were going hunting and A'aisa wanted to join them. He asked his mother to give him a net of the kind called *nge*.[16] She could only find a short one, but he told her it would be alright. He went with the men to the place where the nets were to be set. The men all set long ones. Then they went and beat the bush to drive the wallabies, pigs and other animals towards the nets. All the animals went into A'aisa's net. The men found their own traps empty when they got back. Then they heard the sounds of A'aisa killing his game. They were jealous so they beat him and took all his game except for two baby wallabies that he managed to hide. The men left him and returned to the village.

A'aisa then performs a peculiar trick that is included in most versions of the story:

A'aisa then took the wallabies and, by blowing into their anuses, he made them very large. He set off back to the village. When the men saw him approaching with his two wallabies they were amazed.

However, the hero subsequently sets out to take revenge in a more systematic fashion, and with more permanent consequences for people in general. The 1981 version from Piunga is typical of most public versions of the story, portraying A'aisa as a great trickster and emphasising the comic aspect of his tricks. The story at this point takes on a sexual dimension that is perhaps somewhat unusual in the context of Mekeo culture (see Stephen on the "seemingly puritanical streak" of Mekeo men [1995:13]; I note that Mosko [1985] gives a more detailed account of A'aisa's interference with the women's vaginas and interprets this at length in symbolic and structuralist terms). The story goes as follows:

[A'aisa told his mother:] 'I will go fishing.' He went until he came to a lagoon (*afunga*). He caught plenty of fish (*ma'a*) called *angama* and *pou'u* and went back home to the village. He gave the fish to his mother and old her to distribute him to all the women in the village. The women asked his mother where he had got such a lot of fish. His mother told them that A'aisa had caught them and said that he would go fishing again the next day, and that they might accompany him if they so wished. The women agreed to this and next day off they all went with A'aisa to the lagoon. When they arrived at the place the women started to fish, but A'aisa went some distance away and turned into a fish. He swam under the water and played many tricks on the women, pulling their lines and grabbing their vagina. When it was time to come home he changed back and asked the women if they had caught any fish. The women, of course, said 'No.' The women were very cold, so A'aisa made a fire and they warmed themselves around it. A'aisa went to the end

of the lagoon and beat the surface of the water. This caused a big storm to arise with lots of rain. The lagoon was soon turned into a river. The women asked A'aisa how they might cross the river. A'aisa next produced a canoe and said that he would divide the women into two groups. Those with large vaginas would go across first, followed by those with small vaginas. While the second group was going across A'aisa broke the paddle and stranded them on a little hill. Night fell and A'aisa changed the hill into a high mountain while the women were sleeping.[17] One woman awoke in order to urinate and the noise of her urine falling into the water alerted her to the transformation. She woke up the other women and they waited for morning to come. When it was light they were astonished to see their husbands working in the village far below. They said: 'A'aisa, you tricked us but now our husbands will come and kill you.' A'aisa didn't say a word. Meanwhile, the men were preparing their weapons. Next day they came up the hill and were about to surprise A'aisa from behind. But the women [stupidly?] shouted out: 'A'aisa, you are sitting there but our husbands are about to kill you.' He jumped up and said: 'What do you want?' And they all fell down dead! He told them to get up again, and they did. He told them to fight one another, and they did. He told them to go home, and they did.

Bergendorff (2003: 74) tells the story of the fateful dénouement in much more detail, albeit without discussing the events that led up to it:

At one time, A'aisa gathered all the people, telling them he wanted to introduce them to death. A'aisa needed a volunteer, but all refused because they did not know about death. He then told the people that death was like sleeping. Finally, a man agreed, and A'aisa told him to lie down and sleep. After a while, A'aisa woke him up and they sat together. Then, A'aisa asked the man to sleep again. This time he was dead. A'aisa wrapped the body in a piece of tapa cloth and carried it to the top of the mountain O'opo. From there, he told all the people to gather at the bottom and be ready to catch Imala, the dead man, when he threw him down. But the people became afraid when they saw the falling body and stepped back. A'aisa then informed them that if they had caught the falling body they would have had eternal lives, but since they had mistrusted him, they would be gone for good when they died. Imala can still be found at the bottom of O'opo in the shape of a big stone.

An expanded version of the myth (Bergendorff 2009: 229) contains an additional episode (I have italicised the Mekeo terms in Bergendorff's text):

After having introduced death, A'aisa cast down the institutional powers, making one man responsible for each. These men then became *iso* ('the war-chief'), *faia* ('the war-magician'), *lopia* ('the peace-chief') and *ungaunga* ('the sorcerer').

Stephen (1995: 3-4) gives a summary version of this important episode, which I reproduce below. Stephen argues that 'man of kindness' is a literal translation of the Mekeo term *lopia* or, more specifically, *lopia aunga* (but see Jones 2007 for a contrary view). In her summary Stephen focuses on the ritual knowledge and institutional roles that were bestowed on men along with death (again, I have italicised Mekeo words):

> Having demonstrated his superior powers and having punished men..., A'aisa [Mekeo culture hero] now gives them some of his special knowledge. He confers upon humankind ritual knowledge, and then creates the roles of the man of kindness (*lopia auga*), of the spear (*iso auga*), of cinnamon bark (*faia auga*), and of sorrow (*ugauga auga*). Along with these gifts he also bestows death upon human beings.

Mosko collected two alternative endings to this episode (Mosko 1992: 707). In one A'aisa kills the women so that their husbands are left without the means of producing sons and heirs. In the other it is implied that the wives of the chiefs and sorcerers are not killed but are returned to their husbands. They thus later give birth to children of A'aisa.

A'aisa was also known as Oa Love (Oa Rove among the Roro) and the following account of A'aisa's legacy was collected by Seligman (1910). Death comes here in the form of fighting, sorcerers (shorthand, we might suppose, for sorcery), and the types of antisocial behaviour that produce conflict and lead to the use of weapons and sorcery techniques:

> Then Oa Rove called together all the inhabitants of the Roro and Mekeo villages... and told them that the Arabure people had treated him badly, but if they had treated him well, everyone would have been happy and always have had plenty of food. Then he gave them spears and black palm-wood clubs, *and he sent battle, theft, and adultery among them, and sorcerers who kill people*. Thus death came to these villages. (1910: 306, *emphasis mine*)

Seligman (1910) also provides a variant collected by Romilly and possibly from a Roro source:[18]

> [W]hen the injured husbands came to get their wives back, they found Oa Rove sitting on an inaccessible rock from which he threw into their midst a spear, a bow and arrow, and a club successively, killing a man each time. *Finally he threw them a stone with which people could be killed without external marks of violence. He told the men they were to copy the weapons he had thrown among them and instructed them in the use of each, so that they might be able to kill each other easily, and he taught them how to use the charm stone.* Oa Rove next threw a dead body into their midst, and told them

that had they caught it in their arms, and so prevented it from touching the ground, the weapons he had previously given them would have been useless for they would have been immortal, as he was. (1910: 307-8, *emphasis mine*)

In this latter version the deity 'throws' the sorcerer's stone at the husbands, just as he later 'throws' them a dead body. Mekeo versions of these stories make it clear that this is a more or less literal translation of the Mekeo verbs *piu-lei-a* and *ngoa-lei-a*.[19] However, the cultural significance of the actions described is lost. Hau'ofa (1981: 178) analysed the symbolism involved in 'throwing down' gifts in the Mekeo socio-cultural context (without alas specifying the Mekeo verbs that were used), with special reference to the "hurling" (Hau'ofa's term) of large packets of food at *ufuapie* partners in the course of a ritual prestation where the inherent ambivalence of the *ufuapie* relationship of interdependence between clans takes on its clearest expression. Hau'ofa commented that "[t]his ritualised expression of extreme aggression in giving symbolised utmost contempt, for the throwing of food out and down from houses is done only for pigs and dogs" (p. 178). This mode of giving is suggestive not only of a very asymmetrical relationship between donor and recipient (eventually to be balanced in the case of *ufuapie* partners) but also of the reluctant acceptance of gifts that entail weighty future obligations. Moreover, the action of 'throwing down' a gift—itself an ambivalent concept in the Mekeo context—resonates with a wide spectrum of activities in Mekeo life and the verbs *ngoa-lei* and *piu-lei* also have connotations that are not strictly negative.

A'aisa 2

The story of the quarrel between the two brothers, A'aisa and Isapini, ranks alongside the story of the throwing down of death, along with key social practices and institutions, in terms of popularity and frequency of mention or retelling. It is said that, by his quarrel with his younger brother, A'aisa brought *pikupa* into the world. However, before we examine the nature of *pikupa* in more detail, its relation to lethal sorcery (*ungaunga*) and the socio-discursive uses made of this particular myth, let us review some of the symbolic oppositions and interactions represented in this powerful narrative, visible across changing and evolving versions of the core myth.

What seems to be the earliest version of the story is given in Fr Joseph Guis's (1936) book on Papua. It was told to him in 1898 by a man called Paiafu from Inauae, whom he describes as a knowledgeable man of middle age who possessed magic to control the rain and was, he thought, possibly a sorcerer. The two protagonists are called Afungo and Fuana, names that Guis translates as Eagle and Sparrow. Now this may be a disguised version of the later A'aisa-

and-Isapini myth, or else (and I favour this view) a precursor of it. The relevant fact is that Afungo is large bird, while Fuana is small. In this version of the story, the two are half brothers, with different fathers but the same mother; they live in their respective fathers' villages. Afungo, the junior brother, who is paradoxically the larger of the two, lives in Pioufa (i.e., Veifa'a); Fuana, the eldest, who is paradoxically much smaller than his brother, lives at Ve'e (the original Ve'e village was Ngangai, modern Rarai). In the later A'aisa myths, A'aisa is the elder brother and he also lives in Ve'e; while Isapini, the junior brother, lives in Pioufa (i.e., Veifa'a). A'aisa is the smaller of the two brothers, although the older, and Isapini is the larger. It is a salient feature of many Mekeo myths and folktales that the most important and the powerful figure is to all appearances the smallest and most insignificant. Size dimorphism here (as elsewhere in Mekeo myths and folktales) inverts the seniority relation that is so fundamental to the Mekeo social order, while hinting at a deeper cosmic, ontological and epistemic disparity between appearance and reality that for Mekeo ways of thinking constitutes simultaneously an incomprehensible paradox and a pragmatic resource.

There is an initial misunderstanding when the wives of Afungo mistake Fuana for a small boy and ask him to fetch his father Fuana. The first misunderstanding is glossed over, but the situation is reignited by confusion over a pig (which is taken to be a returned/rejected gift). Afungo and Fuana then lead their respective villages to war against one another, i.e., Ve'e (Rarai) against Pioufa (Veifa'a). They have four wives each, and the wives fight until all eight of them are killed. Then Afungo and Fuana, appalled at the slaughter, agree to fight one another in single combat to save further loss of life and to restore peace between the villages. They spear one another and die in one another's arms and they are buried where they fell. Their lime gourds remain where they were buried (this detail indicates that they were peace chiefs.)

A more recent version that was widespread in the 1970s is given at length in Hau'ofa (1981); I paraphrase this version here. A'aisa (who Hau'ofa refers to here as "the old deity") and his younger brother Isapini lived on two neighbouring hills. Each had an only son: A'aisa named his son Isapini, after his younger brother, and Isapini called his son A'aisa.[20] One day Isapini went to visit his brother.[21] When he arrived, A'aisa was sitting on his platform in the form of a very small child. Isapini assumed that the child was A'aisa's son, his own namesake, He addressed him, saying: "Child, where are your parents?" A'aisa replied: "They went to the garden." "Go and tell them that I am here," said Isapini. As Hau'ofa tells it (1981: 78): "A'aisa's face betrayed nothing of the seething anger he felt because of his younger brother's failure to recognise him." A'aisa went into the house, carefully wrapped up his chiefly insignia, and took them to the garden. The insignia consisted of a

boar's tusk necklace, a special lime gourd and spatula, and a special string bag. He told his wife what had happened, donned his regalia, and returned to the settlement, still in the guise of a child. When Isapini saw them coming he realised what a mistake he had made. However, A'aisa said nothing, and played the perfect host.

When Isapini was about to leave, A'aisa made him a present of a special pig he had raised. Then he told his wife to accompany Isapini and his party back to Isapini's village, but he also told her not to remain there overnight. However, on reaching the village A'aisa's wife yielded to pressure from her hosts and she stayed there overnight. Isapini feasted his guests that night and again the following morning and, as they were leaving, produced another special pig that he had raised for his brother. Hau'ofa describes the pig (p. 78): "It so happened that the pig was, in every characteristic, exactly the same as the one A'aisa had given him on the previous day. It even had the same name."

When his wife arrived home with the pig, A'aisa abused her roundly for disobeying his instructions. He also accused her of sleeping with Isapini[22] and would not listen to her protestations of innocence. When he saw the pig, he believed that his brother had rejected his gift, returning the pig he had given him. When others argued with him, he proved his point be calling the pig by name; of course it answered to the name since Isapini had given his pig the same name that A'aisa had given his.

In some accounts (e.g., Mosko 1985: 189-90), Isapini is portrayed as the obtuse pre-cultural mirror-image of the clever, skilled A'aisa. A'aisa alone knows how to hunt animals for meat; Isapini and his wives have no meat, only a very poor substitute like the skins of nuts or a kind of clay. A'aisa gets his game thanks to his hunting magic, or from a secret place in the bush; Isapini discovers this place and allows the game animals to escape—typically wild pigs, cassowaries and wallabies, or kangaroos. A'aisa then devises a plan to trick and humiliate Isapini. He gives his own people a great feast of village pig meat, but tells the guests to pass it on to Isapini that he had given them his own mother to eat. Unable to bear being outdone, Isapini actually kills his own mother and gives her flesh to his people to eat.

The end of the story is always the same. In his jealousy and anger (*pikupa*), A'aisa uses *ungaunga* sorcery to send a poisonous snake to bite Isapini's son, who is his namesake. Isapini's son—the young A'aisa—dies. Isapini decides to take revenge and uses his own sorcery (*mefu* sorcery in this case) to bring it about that A'aisa' son, *his* namesake, becomes violently ill and thus also dies. Here is a slightly more recent version, from Piunga, a West Mekeo village:[23]

A'aisa married one woman and founded a village there. One of his brothers, by the name of Isapini, who lived in the original village, had a son and called

him A'aisa. One of A'aisa's wives had a son and he called him Isapini. A'aisa got a black pig (called A'aisa) and gave it to Isapini ('for my namesake'). Isapini got another and named it Isapini ('for *his* namesake') and returned the gift. A'aisa thought it was the same pig (i.e., his gift was being returned; other versions of the story emphasise that the two pigs' size and markings were identical). He called it by name (A'aisa) and it responded. (Other versions of the story have it that the pig just grunted ambiguously.) So they untied it and it ran away into the bush. A'aisa next day sent a sorcerer called Moki, who killed Isapini's son by means of a Papuan Black snake [*aungama*]. Isapini got a small goanna [kind of lizard common in PNG and Australia] and used it to get a big *goanna* from under the ground. He had to keep his eyes closed while he ordered big *goanna* to kill A'aisa's son, using chewed sugar cane (i.e., chewed by the child). A'aisa and Isapini then both denied killing their namesakes.

A'aisa left his wife [sic] and went to Poukama [ancestral village] where he buried his son, but seeing Isapini's smoke he dug him up again and placed him on the body of a man who fell into the sea and became a crocodile. The crocodile kept saying Iso-iso-ngau (spear-spear-son) and Muki-muki-ngau (weed-weed-son) while it took the remains over the sea. Arrived at Faiafu, he went up Mount Kariko. There A'aisa buried his son since he couldn't see Isapini's smoke any longer. He held the mortuary feast at Faiafu. A'aisa killed a python [*okafu*] and fed it to the people of Nara (Vanuamai). He killed people and fed them to the Goilalas. He gave meat to the Mekeo, Roros and Gulfs. He gave *purpuri* (sorcery) to all the people.

In the above version, the two brothers deny killing their namesakes. In other versions of this myth (see e.g., Hau'ofa 1981: 79), Isapini begs A'aisa for medicine that will cure his son (the young A'aisa); A'aisa complies, but the child dies before his father can reach home. Then A'aisa begs his brother for medicine to heal the young Isapini; he is given it, but he too arrives too late to
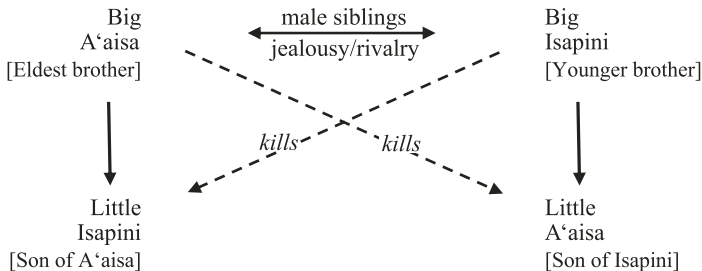

Figure 1. Schematic representation of episode 1 in A'aisa 2.

save his son. Thus (in these versions) we have hints of an ultimate or desired reconciliation in the midst of the mutual hostilities and mutual destruction.

Below I give the final episode of the A'aisa 2 myth according to Kavo, a Mekeo sorcerer of Eboa, as reported in Bergendorff (2003: 80):

> When the son of A'aisa died, A'aisa buried him at Afungofungo. Isapini's son is also buried there. A'aisa was distraught with sorrow, so he dug up the corpse and started travelling with it. He went to several different places, weeping all the way. He came to a stream where he washed his son. From there, he went to Ikonga, where the navel of the corpse burst open. He went on until he reached Ko'oko'o, where he found a place to bury his son's navel. Then he travelled on to Koana, then to Kekenina, and on to Kaliko. When he arrived there his son's corpse was almost completely rotten, and he buried him there. A'aisa then went to Bereina and threw a big feast, after which he went back to O'opo. The bones stayed where A'aisa buried his son, while he took his son's *laulau* and carried it to the mountain.

A'aisa finally decides to leave the world of the living for good and made his abode at Kaliko, or Kariko, "a hill on the coast toward the west, in the direction of the setting sun, where he still is believed to dwell with the shades of the dead" (Stephen 1995: 4; see also Stephen 1995: 306 and Hau'ofa 1981: 79). Bergendorff (2003: 80) remarks that

> One of the important but implicit elements in this story is that during A'aisa's travel, liquid was dripping from the rotting corpse of his son. When these drops touched the ground, they grew up as plants [*fu'a*] that represent, or rather share the substance of, the body parts they came from. The locations mentioned in the story are a form of mnemonic device indicating the places where transformed substances of A'aisa's son can be found in the form of different plants. The bones of A'aisa's son turned into stones. These are now called *ungaunga*, like the sorcerer.

Stephen, based on her long acquaintance with Mekeo sorcerers and indeed her apprenticeship with one of them (1995: 305-6), summarises this possibly esoteric episode[24] as follows:

> ... stricken with grief over the death of his son, A'aisa travels to the coast carrying the dead body with him. As it decays, the putrefying juices fall in various places, thus creating various powerful things used in the rituals of secret knowledge. Finally A'aisa decides to dispose of what is left of the body. He buries the remains, and at night they turn into wallabies that eat the plentiful grass growing over the grave. A'aisa then instructs the people who allowed him to bury his son's body on their land that they might kill and eat

    this meat sprung up from the corpse of the child. He then bids the human
    world farewell and travels west to Kariko, the village of the dead.

The things that grow up where the juices from the corpse had fallen are
known collectively as *fu'a* (NMek *fuka*, WMek *puka*), a generic term for
plants but more specifically for ritually potent plants (compare the Fijian use
of *drau* 'leaf'). As the "transformed substances" of A'aisa's son (Bergendorff
2003; see above) and thus, indirectly, of A'aisa himself, they are used to
powerful effect in sorcery and magic by those who possess the hidden
knowledge of them—the *ikifa au'i* or 'men of wisdom'.

THE MEKEO RESPONSE TO MORAL EVIL

I now want to focus on the social functions of the myths described above,
the uses made of them in the course of everyday social interactions. The
Mekeo have traditionally justified moral transgressions by appealing to one
or another of the main A'aisa stories (Hau'ofa 1981, Mosko 1985, Stephen
1995). The actions, assumed motives and character of A'aisa (as attested in
A'aisa 1 and 2) clearly play an important role in negotiating the gravity and
implications of a given fault (*kelele*). These myths, stories or *isonioni* thus
have great practical relevance, allowing individuals to "account for" (that
is, to excuse or justify) types of behaviour that are socially sanctioned or
forbidden by custom (see Scott and Lyman 1968 on the role of accounts in
everyday communication). Knowledge of the stories constitutes an important
socio-discursive resource.[25] It is noteworthy that they are invoked not so much
to excuse one's own misdeeds as to excuse other people's bad behaviour and
thus "shore up the timbers of fractured sociation" (as Scott and Lyman so
memorably put it) with minimal cost to existing structures and relationships.
    Each of the A'aisa myths is used to warrant (justify) or excuse a different
type of misdemeanour. A'aisa 1 is invoked, albeit indirectly, to excuse types
of untoward behaviours that are referred to as *kafa.* This is represented as one
of A'aisa's "gifts" ('thrown down' along with all the others). An entry in the
Mekeo-French dictionary compiled by Fr Desnoës in the 1930s and 1940s
but based on the notes of missionary priests working in the Mekeo area from
1896 onwards, has *kafa* referring to certain behaviours ('customs' in the local
idiom) that are considered untoward or bad.[26] An initial definition of *kafa* as
'custom' (the third entry under *kafa*) is followed by the comment: "It is not
customs in general but only certain ones, unpleasant or evil ones, that give
rise to quarrels" (Desnoës 1941: 436). Moreover, from texts and example
sentences included under this entry it appears likely that *kafa* referred more
specifically to types of sexual promiscuity (*pafau, lapau*), and particularly
to female sexual misbehaviour:

Ngava ke-ia, ke-lapau, ke-pa-fau, gaina aka: A'aia kafa-'a e-ngoalei-a, pau-kai a-la-pa-ngama, uaina.

They see the moon, they act in lewd ways, they parade themselves about, the meaning of this is: A'aisa gave us [literally, strewed down, threw down] our bad customs [*kafa-'a*], they didn't begin just now, they are ancient/of the beginning time.

After this unsourced fragment Desnoës (1941) presents the following example sentences:

1) *A'aia kafa-mai e-ngoa-lei-a (= e-piu-lei-a).*
   It is A'aia who gave us [literally, threw down] our bad ways (i.e., our customary disputes and quarrels...; 'our stupidities...'.

2) *A'aia kafa-'a e-ngoaleia, e-piuleia, e-pa-ngama-i'i.*
   It was A'aia who threw down our bad ways, he flung them down, he caused them to come into being (or 'caused them to develop, grow'—AJ).[27]

3) *Papie e-lapau aiama, pangua ke-pafala, a-inaka: Fo-lo-iva; A'aia kafa-'a e-piuleia; 'ifonga-mo e-kapa-ia pangu? Ma'o aufangai lo-anga, anga'o-mo a-lo-'e-ngia a-lo-'afu.*
   When a woman has behaved badly, and they gossip in the village, we say: You shouldn't talk/blame (people), it is A'aia who gave us our bad customs. Is she the only one who acts like that? Everyone received it, no one escaped.

A'aisa 2 (the story of A'iasa and Isapini) is used to account for *pikupa*, a category and a concept that is in many respects untranslatable. The term suggests a way of thinking and valuing, an associated emotion (*ofuenge*), and the kinds of action that spring from it (typically *ungaunga* sorcery), and it is widely held to be the root of most quarrels. Different authors have made different attempts at translating the term. Hau'ofa (1981: 77) wrote that it means "both envy and jealousy"—and the actions that spring from these emotions. He emphasises its effects (1981: 95), saying elsewhere that *pikupa* is "a vicious type of conflict". Mosko also emphasised the outward effects of *pikupa*, glossing it as 'quarrelsomeness' (1985: 190). Hau'ofa also emphasises the intensity of *pikupa* and notes that, leading as it does to *ungaunga* sorcery, it is an unavowable emotion (1981: 95; compare Jones 1992). Stephen (1995) generally glosses the term as 'jealousy', explaining (perspicaciously I believe) that *pikupa* "arises out of a sense that one has not been given one's due" (1995: 137).[28] As suggested above, the present author associates it with Kleinian envy (see Klein 1984). It can also be fruitfully compared with ancient Greek *phthoinos*.[29] In any case, Hau'ofa vividly

illustrates how the myth of A'aisa and Isapini was discursively invoked to excuse people's bad behaviour:

> Then in a grave tone [the chief] confided that this particular *pikupa* happened a long time ago between A'aisa, the old deity, and his younger brother, Isapini. The clear inference of the chief's statement is that people cannot help having *pikupa* among themselves, especially among close kinsmen, because of the bad example set by their deity. (Hau'ofa 1981: 77)

Stephen confirms that it is widely believed and often asserted that A'aisa "initiated" *pikupa* and the lethal *ungaunga* sorcery which is its typical outcome (1995: 41, 56). As she puts it: "It was A'aisa, who by his quarrel with his younger brother, Isapini, initiated jealousy (*pikupa*) in human relationships and the lethal rituals of *ugauga* to implement revenge" (1995: 56).

The example set by A'aisa in A'aisa 2 functions not simply to excuse but to warrant *pikupa* and *ungaunga*, operating as a divine precedent for these motives, emotions and ritual actions, but a precedent that possesses almost causal efficacy. For (again in Stephen's words) "this 'dark aspect of human relationships" is unavoidable "because it is inherent in the established order of things" (1995: 41). However, we miss the point if we interpret this story as a comedy of errors, driven by misunderstandings (Hau'ofa 1981: 79) and perhaps, at a deeper level, people's inability to know one another's thoughts (Hau'ofa 1981: 83). It is often made clear, at several points in these stories, that A'aisa is a trickster who knowingly deceives people in order to inveigle them into making 'mistakes' (*kelele*) for which they can then be made to suffer. For example in Mosko's version of A'aisa 2 (1985: 189), A'aisa 's wives tell Isapini's wives (who have mistaken A'aisa for a small boy) that "he is always playing tricks like that" (*bakau* in NMek, EMek *pa'au*). Indeed "tricks like that" were a staple genre of Mekeo social life in the 1980s. A'aisa "tricked" his brother's wives by taking on the form of a child, but he later tricks his brother more grotesquely when he manipulates him into believing that he has slain his own mother and given her body to his followers to eat. Isapini subsequently kills his own mother and gives her to his followers to eat. These last events undoubtedly have Oedipal overtones.

Traditional Mekeo men tend to be great tricksters, priding themselves on their skill in *fonge* 'deception' and *pifonge* 'lies' despite the quarrelling and aggression that this often leads to. In A'aisa 1, the culture hero tricked the village men in three important ways: (i) by appearing as a small boy, but one with magical powers, (ii) by stealing their wives, and (iii) by making the men fight against one another "friend against friend". This behaviour is regarded as a warrant for the practices of sorcerers, who are arch-deceivers. However, the warrant is also applied more widely, and A'aisa's deceptions

and sexual impudence are used to excuse many kinds of social misdemeanours that are otherwise heavily sanctioned. It is worth emphasising that in some versions of A'aisa 1, death is 'thrown down' in the form of a corpse or stone, which is always called *imala*; in failing to catch it people lose their chance of immortality and are condemned to die for ever. There is sometimes here the suggestion that A'aisa was to blame when people allowed the *imala* to fall to the ground. Somehow he tricked them or used magic to secure the result. Stephen notes that "people often remark that A'aisa tricked the people (*papiau e foge'i*) and *that is why* the men of sorrow and others who inherited his secret knowledge still do so" (Stephen 1995: 137, the emphasis here is mine; also see note 13 below). Indeed A'aisa's trickery—in the form of malevolent and seemingly gratuitous deceptions—is a frequent motif in many stories.

It is clear that both A'aisa myths were explicitly invoked to account for moral transgressions, whether one's own or those of others. By invoking A'aisa 1, various forms of moral delinquency (*painao*, *lapau*) were represented as having been 'thrown down' by the deity, which makes their incidence in daily life both inevitable and excusable. By invoking A'aisa 2, all types of malicious behaviour (which, it is broadly agreed, stem from *pikupa*) were represented as involuntary re-enactments of A'aisa's exploits.

THE EMERGENCE AND TRANSFORMATION OF KEY MOTIFS AND THEMES

The Afungo-Fuana story, collected in the 1930s, documents the inception of key themes that later, in the different versions of A'aisa 1 and A'aisa 2, appear in more fully developed and more nuanced form, giving a narrative shape to complex theories about human morality and nature. The relative complexity of these later myths possibly reflects the more complex social and cultural environment that arose in the middle years of the 20th century (from the 1940s to the 1980s, say), as contacts with Europeans became ever more intensive but also as the Central Mekeo population underwent a period of sustained growth (Hau'ofa 1981: 28, Table 1), and communication and interaction between the villages became safer, more frequent and, simultaneously in many ways, more fraught. Many of the social repercussions of pacification (e.g., the disruptive new emphasis on *pakai* or 'love magic' [*bakai* in NMEk] have been well described by Mosko, e.g., see Mosko 2001).

It is always possible that the story A'aisa and Isapini reflects and contains motifs from the biblical story of Cain and Abel, though I am personally sceptical of that. We will probably never be able to say for certain that any of the myths described above were not influenced by mission teaching (starting from 1890). But neither can it be argued that these societies have not thoroughly nativised the problems of moral action. It seems more likely in my view that they came to these profound concerns quite independently.

Regarding the historical and geographical provenance of the Mekeo A'aisa and his earlier putative manifestations as Akaia, it seems clear that this personage shares many traits with the wandering hero of Papuan myths or folktales (Busse 2005, Wagner 1972). As Stephen emphasises (1995: 136-37), the Mekeo hero even in his more recent guise has many of the characteristics of an archetypal Trickster (compare the Huli Trickster Iba Tiri in Goldman 1998). However, the evidence of certain Kuni myths alluded to above allows us to speculate more concretely. The destructive exploits of the dark figure there called Akaea (Egidi 1913, 1914) suggest that the original A'aisa may have been a similar type of anti-hero, sharing Akaea's characteristics as the wild, pre-cultural archetype of an unacculturated anti-social male, roaming the countryside and marauding and killing at random.[30] This is perhaps the source of 20th-century A'aisa's dark side. We know that in other parts of New Guinea a similar duality is ascribed to the ancestors. Newman noted that the Gururumba thought of the ancestors as having two quite distinct sets of characteristics. First, they are admirable beings, much like us, and in some sense contemporaneous with us as the source of our vital energy. Second, they inhabit a distant past when men "did not live within the bounds of society.... They raped, murdered and stole as whim directed them and ranged freely over the countryside without concern for boundaries" (Newman 1965: 86).

Stories of terrifying giants and dangerous wild men may sometimes be based on real people, violent men of great stature who were sometimes also cannibals (as in Young 1983), but it is clear that they also reflect a widely distributed archetype in pan-New Guinea myths. This archetype corresponds with the figure of Foikale in other myths, portrayed as an uncivilised and in many respects scarcely human counterpart of A'aisa. Foikale is ignorant of fire, hunting, planting, betel nut chewing and sexual reproduction. He lives in a cave and sometimes eats earth, sometimes plant food that has been "cooked" by the sun. Sometimes he lives in a village populated only by other men like himself. It is worth pointing out that in some versions of A'aisa 2, A'aisa's young brother Isapini is described along these lines. So these two siblings may represent two different sides of an original, ambivalent deity or hero. That said, the story of their disputes and their mutual symbolic self-destruction reflects a very sophisticated meditation on human nature and the origins of anti-social—and often deeply evil—dispositions and practices.

THE MEANING OF THE A'AISA MYTHS

As I have I hope established, there are two distinct Mekeo myths, both centred on the figure of A'aisa—and both purporting to account for humankind's moral failings. The first (A'aisa 1) is of the type that Ricoeur calls an Adamic myth. That is, it represents both natural evil and the practices that lead to or

exacerbate it as stemming in origin from a divine punishment for a primordial human failing or mistake (*kelele*). However, the second of the two myths (A'aisa 2) possesses a more modern psychological dimension insofar as it accounts for people's innate predisposition towards antisocial practices, describing the origins of *pikupa*, an emotion that is portrayed as being not just destructive of the social order but in most cases also self-destructive.[31]

In A'aisa 1, village men beat and verbally abuse the deity, who has taken on the form of a small boy, and then steal the animals he has captured in his net. They are subsequently punished for this behaviour when A'aisa, revealed in his true form, 'throws down' death—mortality—in the form of a dead body and a range of antisocial practices (practices that lead to conflict, retribution and thus to a range of natural evils). At the same time, however, A'aisa 'throws down' the four key social roles, the institutional pillars of Mekeo society: the peace chief, war chief, peace sorcerer and war magician.[32] Here, in contrast to the Daribi myth, we have a deserved retribution; the behaviour of the village men towards the young A'aisa cost them their wives, their ability to slough their skins like snakes and live forever, and brought down upon them a cultural order that inevitably leads to a wide variety of natural evils.

The second myth of origins (A'aisa 2) is very different. Here two brothers fall into a kind of jealous[33] madness in which they seem to almost wilfully misinterpret ambivalent actions and events. There is an element of wilful self-destruction in the way A'aisa brings about the initial misunderstanding, by taking on the form of a small boy. Stephen (1995: 137) wrote: "People point out that [...] A'aisa deceived his brother Isapini by appearing to him in the form of a small boy, but was insulted when his brother failed to recognise him and treated him as a child."[34] The chained misunderstandings, and retaliations for imagined slights, that follow on from this initial event all seem to be brought about in some sense accidentally-on-purpose. It is as if—as in the myth of Afungo and Fuana—the two protagonists are intent on destroying one another or, if not one another, then each his other in the form of his nephew and namesake. The result is that both sons are killed (despite last-minute efforts to save them). As we saw above, it is believed that humankind is condemned to emulate A'aisa by virtue of *kafa*—perhaps a kind of predisposition to evil or at least anti-social conflict-generating practices like *painao*, *piai*, *lapau* and so on.

According to the tale of the star-crossed brothers—this tragi-comedy of errors and wilful misunderstandings—humankind did not inherit the guilt of some original misdemeanour or fault, but it did inherit a capacity for and irresistible inclination towards evil, concretised as *pikupa*. Men in particular (it seems) are condemned forever to re-enact the primordial drama, which serves as a moral template for inherently tragic action. As Ricoeur put it (1969:

173), "the fault appears to be indistinguishable from the very existence of the tragic hero." A'aisa embodies evil—but he is also good—and he lives out the inevitable consequences of this paradox. Isapini is in many ways his mirror image—albeit his younger brother and hence junior in rank. Salvation, in this cosmic schema, can only consist in "a sort of aesthetic deliverance issuing from the tragic spectacle itself, internalised in the depths of existence and converted into pity with respect to oneself" (Ricoeur 1969: 173).

The import of one part of this narrative becomes much clearer if we schematise the relations and events in episode 1 of A'aisa 2 (Figure 2 below) according the fullest versions of that myth. In Table 3, I sequence the events portrayed in that episode to bring out the central theme of that episode, which dramatises and encapsulates the profound moral fatalism and tragic self-conception of the Mekeo.

Figure 2 highlights the often overlooked Oedipal dimension of this story.[35] Meanwhile, it becomes clear from the analytic array of events given in Table 3 that the core message of this particular story lies in the inevitable loss—the obviation—of reciprocity. The social relationships that are predicated on *asymmetric* giving and delayed reciprocity (Hau'ofa 1981: 82) are dramatically and tragically obviated by the (apparent!) precise and immediate equivalence of the return gift, which amounts to a rejection of the proffered social bond. But it is the malicious and ultimately self-destructive disposition of A'aisa, his ingrained *pikupa*, that ends the possibility of a harmonious relationship between brothers and threatens the very possibility of human of sociality.
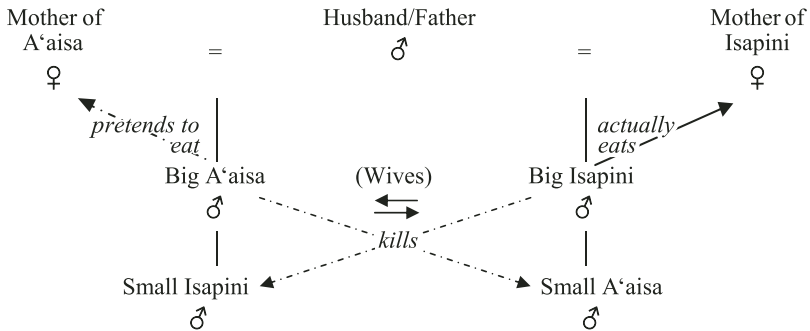

Figure 2. Schematic representation of relations and events in episode 1, A'aisa 2.

Table 3.   The obviation of delayed/asymmetric reciprocity and thus sociality itself in episode 1, A'aisa 2.

	Agent	Symbolic or Material Action/Emotion	Patient	
i)	A	experiences *pikupa* regarding [....]	I	(*pikupa*)
a)	A I A	gratuitously/maliciously deceives (as a result) inadvertently insults reacts with 'anger' against	I A I	(*fonge*) (*ia-ngea*) (*ofuenge*)
b)	A I A	gives self-raised pig to [attempt to reconcile?] gives 'the same' self-raised pig to reacts with 'anger' against	I A I	(*peni*) (*umaka*) (*ofuenge*)
ii)	A	deceives himself about his wife's adultery with	I	(*pikupa*)
	A I	pretends to I he has cooked his mother for a feast actually cooks his mother for a feast	I	(oedipal fantasy)
c)	A I A & I	kills the son of kills the son of both react with 'grief/regret'	I A	(*au-pungu*) (*au-pungu*) (EoS)

MYTHOPOEIA AS CONTINGENT SENSE-MAKING PROJECTS

Accounts of a fall from some primordial state of grace are remarkably widespread in world mythology, as Wagner remarked (1967: 41). This is especially the case across Melanesia. Dorothy Counts (1994) has documented myths of "paradise lost" across northwest New Britain, where the phenomenon is linked to the departure of an offended culture hero. Cargo cults have often recast this theme to address perceptions of racial inequality and inequity (Burridge 1988 [1960], Lawrence 1964, Lattas 1998). One of the most intransigent problems for theories of folklore or mythology resides in the fact that certain mythic themes and motifs are universal, or very nearly so. Are they shared aspects of a universal psyche as argued influentially by Freud, Jung, Campbell and numerous others? Or are they evidence for a diffusionist theory whereby core themes and motifs spread out from some forgotten mythpoeic centre or centres? Take, for instance, the myth of the ogre-killing child. This is the tale of an abandoned mother and her infant child (sometimes the abandoned woman is pregnant); the infant grows rapidly, turning into a formidable warrior; he (and occasionally she) slays a cannibal monster that has terrorised the village or the neighbourhood. Versions of this myth occur not just throughout New Guinea and Island Melanesia, but across Africa and the Americas.

Hence the most interesting questions for anthropologists are: How does a plot vary from place to place? What are its local manifestations? How do the protagonists differ? Do the sociocultural circumstances of its telling account for specific themes and motifs? Wagner emphasised the "appropriateness" of the myths he studied, their cultural rightness or "fit" (1967, 1972). As Young has it, each community will domesticate any given narrative in an attempt to "claim it as its own" (Young 1991: 388; see also Young 1983: 35 and Telban 1998: 142). Indeed, this has been something of a commonplace in anthropology for some time (see for example Firth 1967 [1960]). We must thus expect any collected version of any myth will have its unique, contextually appropriate and contextually motivated emphases, mediated perhaps by the personal interests of the teller. From Mekeo ethnography we have a concrete example of these processes at work in Bergendorff's (1998) account of the way in which A'aisa 1 had been modified to advance the socio-political purposes of a specific group, the so-called *isapu* people, who claimed to be in direct communication with the Christian God and "the Sky people". In the reworked version it was not death that A'aisa 'threw down' but a black skin and a white. The Papua New Guineans caught the black skin, not the white. "The meaning of this is that all ancestors are white" (Bergendorff 1998: 126). When the dead return, through the efforts of the *isapu* people, "they will return as white and the Papuans will also turn into whites" (p. 126). This leaves us in no doubt about the potential of myth, even one as entrenched as this had been, serving as the ideological ground of the traditional chiefly society, to be transformed and exploited in the service of new ideologies and new interest groups.

Some of Barth's (1987) comments on indigenous cosmologies are relevant here. Barth argued that, in local sense-making in small-scale communities, *meaning is conferred selectively on a chosen sector of the world*. Different communities select different aspects of their lifeworld to problematise and explain, typically using the tools of symbolism and myth. Hence some of the most useful questions the anthropologist can ask will focus on "which meanings, for which purposes, with claims of validity for which sector [of the world]" (Barth 1987: 69). Philosophical thinking in many smaller communities in the vast hinterland of PNG seems most often to focus on the mysteries of nature, for example, "the life forms that surround the Ok in their mountain slope environment" (1987: 69). In southwest Papua the main focus seems to be on fertility and the frustration of a hero's regenerative powers (Wagner 1972: 24). Elsewhere it is on sexual differentiation and gender roles. For the Mekeo, the most interesting questions are moral ones. Why is man drawn towards evil, so often knowing what is right but doing what is wrong? Here we recall the common self-description, as reported by

Hau'ofa (1981: 216) and heard often by myself in the 1980s: "we Mekeo, are very good people *but* we are also very bad." Such self-deprecatory remarks are typically delivered with great equanimity, even a wry pride, but an observer of Mekeo life-ways gets a strong sense that the Mekeo mind has been engaged in a long and tortuous struggle aimed at comprehending their seemingly insurmountable inclination towards envy, distrust and mystical enactments of malice.

Ricoeur (1969) has claimed that four powerful archetypal theories—or myths—underlie all attested accounts of the origins of moral evil. Two of these are particularly relevant here: the so-called Adamic myth, which describes an original fault and fall; and "the myth of the tragic vision" in which a morally ambivalent deity punishes humankind less for some failing or folly of its own than out of divine envy or jealousy (Greek *phthoinos*). The first theory resonates with the Mekeo myth I have called A'aisa 1, as noted above. The tragic aspect of both A'aisa stories lies in the tension between A'aisa's awareness that *pikupa* can lead to suffering and even death and his inability to resist it. However, A'aisa 1 contains a motif that does not appear in Ricoeur's systematisation. Here we have a deity who as it were *contrives* to be misrecognised, beaten and insulted—as if precisely to initiate a cycle of vengeance and counter-vengeance that will end in his own destruction. This is the myth of the self-inimical and (in some roundabout way) self-sacrificing deity. Thus in A'aisa 1 the deity as a small child provokes the village men by his paradoxical success as a hunter, bringing down upon himself insults and blows. But his revenge involves 'throwing down' all the essential elements of Mekeo being-in-the-world. This theme is echoed in A'aisa 2, where the deity kills his namesake and alter or surrogate, while from his own son's murdered corpse come the wallaby meat and magical substances that are the currency of social interactivity in Mekeo society. Through self-destruction, the divine hero brings social institutions and anti-social practices into the world—along with mortality itself, the defining condition of human existence with all its attendant ceremonial practices. The coherence and persistence of this fundamental theme—surviving more than a century of social, cultural and political changes—testifies to the remarkable integrity and resilience of the self-conception and complex moral character of the Mekeo.

<div align="center">SOME FINAL REMARKS</div>

Having spent nearly 30 years grappling with the otherness of the Mekeo lifeworld and Mekeo ways of knowing and reasoning and being, I have tried above to summarise insights gained and understandings. I have taken the A'aisa myths to be important vehicles of and (for this outsider) keys to the concealed/revealed knowledge that provides Mekeo thinkers with a

narratively articulated understanding of their own collective identity and character and an acceptable degree of existential (dis/)comfort (Zigon 2010). In these myths we are privy the "authentic self-constitution" (Mimica 2010) of a thoroughly alien universe and a lifeworld, revealed through a stubborn engagement with detailed ethnographic accounts, the stories themselves—the myths—that I and others have gathered from knowledgeable Mekeo, and vivid memories of my own often unsettling experiences in Mekeo villages in the early 1980s. My approach, adumbrated by Wagner (1967: 243) has been to present key cultural categories as expressed in Mekeo and to explicate them with reference to social discourses and practices. That is, I have tried to correlate pivotal categories of the language with what we know about the uses of these categories by traditional Mekeo speakers—both in accounting for their most authentic feelings and motives and in the construction of complex myths that, being simultaneously historical and timeless, can serve essentially ideological functions (Jones 2007). By focusing on language use in the context of the naturally occurring discourses and practices I hope to have succeeded in providing some useful insights into a profoundly different moral universe, some appreciation of an intricate moral self-conception so very different from our own, and some partial understanding of what is an intrinsically tragic way of being-in-the-world—a way of being that is jealous, stubborn and proud, but at the same time fearful, fatalistic and irremediably tragic.

NOTES

1. The Mekeo live in some 14 small, medium and large-sized villages situated along the banks of the Angapunge (also known as St Joseph's) and Biaru rivers and their various tributaries in the extreme west of Central Province. To the south and east their habitat consists of level kunai (*Imperata cylindrica*) grasslands bordered to the west and north by seasonal swamps and forest. They speak dialects of an Austronesian language closely related to Roro, Kuni and Motu, and represent the westernmost reach of Austronesian languacultures on the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea and the furthest point reached in a presumed westward expansion along this coast.

2. Hau'ofa (1981: 222-28) lists numerous types of sorcery practice that are referred to as *ungaunga*. All involve an attack on the spirit, or inner person, conceptualised here in terms of the inner organs of the body.

3. The Daribi myth of Souw is one of a very few other examples to have been both reported and analysed (Wagner 1967). A relevant recent study of evil in myths of the Formosan aborigines is Chen 2013. Turning to non-Austronesian data, there is a reference in Burridge (1988 [1960]: 59) to a Tangu myth that associates the origin of evil with the coming into the world of the first sorcerer. Some versions

of the Kilibob and Manub story (reported in Lawrence 1964) have vaguely similar themes. But see the Orokolo-Toaripi myth of Oa Laea (given at length in Brown 1988) for a more detailed account of the origin of various moral evils, which is also linked to the emergence of sorcery and sorcerers. (The Toaripi inhabit a stretch of coast just a small distance to the west of the Mekeo area.)

4. The ethnographic present referred to throughout corresponds most narrowly to the early 1980s. I was a teacher at Mainohana High School from 1980 to 1981; I returned in 1983 as linguistic fieldworker, spending altogether 12 months in Mekeo villages. More broadly it refers to a fairly stable social and socio-cognitive situation that seems to have obtained throughout most of the 20th century (as documented by Bergendorff 1996, 1998; Desnoës 1941; Guis 1936; Hau'ofa 1971, 1981; Mosko 1985; Seligman 1910; Stephen 1995).

5. The presence of a reverse apostrophe ['] in a Mekeo term indicates a (weak or strong) glottal stop. This phoneme is peculiar to East Mekeo but is gradually being lost. (There are four phonologically defined dialects. In North Mekeo, West Mekeo and Northwest Mekeo it is represented by /k/ or /g/.)

6. In the Mekeo myth the theme of marital infidelity is introduced merely as a suspicion, a mental construct that aggravates the rapidly growing hostility and *pikupa* of A'aisa. In tales of Kilibob and Manup (Lawrence 1964) or Titikolo and Alu (Counts 1994), this theme is more prominent. The infidelity actually occurs, often at the instigation of the younger brother's wife, and is the prime cause of the brothers' conflict and separation.

7. Barker (1984), in an early work on Maison Christianity, defines evil in terms of those acts that are likely to be punished by sorcerers (*wea tamati*, or *yawu tamati*). As he puts it (1984: 222): "Maisin call the acts that attract the wrath of a sorcerer either *da* or *dinunu*. English-speaking informants translate *da* as 'mistake'. A better translation might be 'provocation', for acts are only recognised as *da* when they are marked by a sorcerer's retaliation."

8. Regarding *lapau*, Stephen (1995: 13-14) claims that there is something of a double standard in force, suggesting that women and girls are more chaste than men. She writes:

> Adultery is an expected male pastime, although such things are always kept out of the public eye for the sake of decorum. Women must be faithful to their husbands; moreover, they are said by males to be scarcely interested in sex. Unmarried girls are required to be chaste and are carefully watched over (see also Hau'ofa 1981:120-21).

But Hau'ofa, in the locus cited, also remarks that secret sexual relationships were engaged in widely by unmarried men and girls. Girls had multiple boyfriends. In fact: "It is one of the nightmares of husbands that their wives are conducting adulterous liaisons with 'old flames' among whose number are their own agnatic peers with whom they shared past amorous adventures" (1981: 121).

9. The phrase used here is actually from C. Wright Mills (Mills 1940: 904-13). But see also Robbins' discussion (2004: 184-86) of the Urapmin vocabulary of motives.

10. As suggested in note 5, there are four dialects of Mekeo, distinguishable mainly on phonological grounds (Jones 1998): East Mekeo, North Mekeo, West Mekeo and Northwest Mekeo (also known as Kovio). Unless otherwise indicated the Mekeo terms cited in this article are East Mekeo forms. In Mosko's publications East Mekeo A'aisa appears as Akaisa, and Isapini as Tsabini, which are North Mekeo forms of the names.

11. Stephen notes that A'aisa is mentioned in spells along with the names of other powerful ancestors (1995: 243-44), something I can verify from my own fieldwork. His relics are treated like those of an ancestor, being used in *ungaunga* sorcery (Stephen 1995).

12. See Bergendorff (1998: fn. 5) for the cuscus story; a European cat was also once believed to be a manifestation of A'aisa. See also the popular story of *Kinokino* ("Flying Squirrel"), which is almost certainly an exoteric version of A'aisa 2, told for entertainment.

13. Stephen (1995: 137) notes that "people often remark that A'aisa tricked the people (*papiau e foge'i*) and that is why the men of sorrow and others who inherited his secret knowledge still do so".

14. Inaufokoa is the clan, possibly of Kuni origin, which by most accounts founded Veifa'a (see Hau'ofa 1981).

15. The culture hero is known as Akaia in the West Mekeo dialect, Akaiza or Akaisa in North Mekeo, and A'aisa in East Mekeo (spoken in the area traditionally referred to as Central Mekeo). A'aisa appears as A'aia in older texts such as the Desnoës dictionary; the [s] is an intrusive or excrescent consonant with little phonemic value. The anarchic and homicidal figure referred to as Akaea in Kuni myths may represent an early version of this hero.

16. The young man who collected the story translated *nge* as 'trap'. The word *nge* actually refers to the long nets that were used to trap animals in the past. This young man might not have seen one. Small deadfall traps are normally referred to as *pa*, snares are *nio* (or *uve-nio*, where *uve* means vine).

17. In the esoteric version of the myth collected by Stephen (1995: 260) A'aisa himself became a huge tree, lifting the women up into the sky. It is interesting to note that A'aisa is also held to be commonly incarnated as the deadly Papuan Black snake known in Mekeo as *aungama*—i.e., *au-ngama*—which can be translated either as 'man grows' or 'tree grows' (it is cognate with the Motu place-name Taurama—i.e., *tau-rama*—the name of a hill near Port Moresby that is inhabited by a giant snake with supernatural powers).

18. Seligman (1910) also recorded a shorter version of the story, gathered by a Dr Strong, that provides a link with the Mekeo village of Eboa (which was originally a group of three villages grouped around the mythico-historically important hill called O'opo):

> Oa Rove went fishing in the Ethel or Ufafa River, he took his canoe to a place near Eboa and there made the hill appear on which Eboa folk expose their dead to the present day. All the inhabitants of all the villages of the Papuasian world, especially the people of Toaripi and the Motu, went to this hill to try to get their women from Oa Rove, who gave to

each tribe the special weapon in the use of which it excels, viz spears and wooden clubs to the Roro-speaking tribes and bows and arrows to the people of the Papuan Gulf. He also taught or gave the Mekeo tribes their sorcery which kills people.

19. See Mosko (2005b) and Jones (2007) on the potential problems involved in so-called "literal translations".

20. This situation is mirrored in one version of the Kilibob and Manub myth (Lawrence 1964) from Bogadjim. The two protagonists, referred to in Bogadjim as Kelibob and Mandumba, have nephews who are also namesakes. The relevant version of the myth was collated by Riesenfeld (1950: 368-69) from early German-language sources.

21. In the more extensive version given by Mosko (1985, 1992), it is not Isapini himself but his wives who visit Aʻaisa's village and give offence by failing to recognise the young boy as Aʻaisa the chief. This version is in accord with the story of Afungo and Fuana. Michelle Stephen's version of the story corresponds with Hauʻofa's in that it is Isapini himself who causes offence by failing to recognise his own brother.

22. Elsewhere in tales of warring brothers (e.g., those of Kilibob and Manub) adultery is the explicit cause of the brothers' falling out, their feud and their subsequent travels.

23. In the dialect of Piunga (West Mekeo) the names of the principal characters would have been Akaia (or Akaida) and Iabini (or Idabini). The story-teller has used the more widely familiar East Mekeo forms of the two names.

24. Stephen (1995: 56-57) confirms my own impression that, while some recognised 'men of knowledge' (*ikifa auʻi*)—effectively sorcerers (*ungaunga*)—claim to be in possession of special, secret versions of the myths, the same or very similar stories are recounted by men with no special qualifications to instruct or entertain listeners of all ages. Neither type of teller is inclined to offer interpretations of the myths, although sorcerers can and do supply exegeses, typically in secret and upon receipt of gifts.

25. Hauʻofa (1971) claimed that "[t]he origin myth of the people, the story of Aʻaisa the Creator, can only be told by an *ungaunga*" (or sorcerer). However, by the 1980s this myth was widely known and retold, albeit often in a much disguised form. Entries in the Desnoës dictionary (1941) indicate that the adventures and personality of Aʻaia (later Aʻaisa) were widely known and frequently referred to in the period before the Second World War.

26. Roro has a cognate term, *taba,* meaning 'custom' in a more general sense.

27. This seems to have been said to excuse actions that would otherwise be considered blameworthy.

28. The last formulations captures the essence of *pikupa*, and recalls incidentally the use of "jealousy" in translations of the Old Testament where it is used to describe Yahweh's "jealous" insistence on exclusive worship.

29. Typically defined as: 'Envy, jealousy, pain felt and malignantly conceived at the sight of excellence or happiness.'

30. Similar figures appear again in the Mekeo myths Olibe and of Angukabi (corresponding to the Kuni tale of Vanuabi). Angukabi, for example, is an infant abandoned with its mother while still unborn, who grows to young manhood in an underground cave ignorant of its paternity; however, the child teaches itself how to use its father's weapons and becomes a great killer. In the Kuni tale, Vanuabi eventually joins forces with his father and together they lay waste the countryside. Goilalan mythology is replete with such beings (compare Hallpike 1977, on the Tauade). This archetype appears as Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh (18th century BC).

31. One reviewer has suggested an interpretation of A'aisa 2 in particular in terms of social structures. It is certainly true that the seniority principle that underpins the Mekeo social order contains within itself the seeds of *pikupa* and social conflict. This inherent tension characterises the asymmetrical relation holding between an older brother and his younger siblings as well as that between a senior chief and his sub-clan (Hau'ofa 1981: 104-5).

32. There is no mention of food plants or animals. The Mekeo plains are very fertile and food has not been a major preoccupation for some generations at least, although there are terms for famine and famine foods.

33. The brothers (A'aisa and Isapini) are jealous in the Biblical sense—see note 27—i.e., easily slighted, and ever ready to take offence and punish those who offend.

34. It is a very grave insult among the Mekeo to treat any adult as a young child, whether deliberately or by mistake (the relevant verb is *pa-angu'a*). See Hau'ofa (1981: 248) for an example—in ritual contexts the sorcerer can be compared to a powerless child.

35. An Oedipal theme is also evident in various folktales, for example, in the story known as *Foe inā e-ani-a isonioni-na* (Egret's mother is eaten).

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ABSTRACT

The author documents and interprets versions of key Mekeo myths that tell of the origins of moral evil, suggesting that, where such myths exist, they may be seen as evidence of an evolving moral consciousness in which subjective awareness of guilt begins to displace feelings of shame and loss of face. He identifies the components of a complex socio-moral order with two distinct types of moral behaviour, a semi-institutionalised anti-morality, and two largely implicit principles of action that inform everyday actions and transactions. The author shows how these various components are grounded in the personalities, actions and interactions of mythic personages.

Keywords: Mekeo myths, moral awareness, moral fatalism, self-conception