Carving the Spirits of the Wood
An Enquiry into Trobriand Materialisations

Sergio Jarillo de la Torre
Darwin College

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Social Anthropology
University of Cambridge
Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation, except where explicit reference is made to the work of others, is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration. I further state that no part of this dissertation has already been or is being concurrently submitted for any such degree or diploma or other qualification.

This dissertation does not exceed the required word limit set by the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology Degree Committee.
Abstract

This thesis is a study of the role of material forms as mediators of cross-cultural encounters in the Trobriand Islands. It is based on eighteen months of ethnographic research in Kiriwina and other parts of the Massim region, Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea. The dissertation analyses previously overlooked material expressions in the form of woodcarvings for sale (*tokwalu*) to outsiders. Throughout the thesis, I demonstrate how Trobrianders conceive *tokwalu* as symbolic and material tools for the apprehension of what is becoming an increasingly de-territorialised universe. Woodcarvings are deployed as instruments of indigenous analysis and native agency in an attempt to establish and control the local-translocal flows that shape social life in the Massim. Despite early contact and their ongoing engagement with the wider world, the Trobriand Islands are commonly portrayed as a place where cultural resilience and the continuity of traditional models of livelihood prevail over social change. Yet like elsewhere in Melanesia, Trobrianders face the transformations effected by dynamic processes of cultural, social and economic globalisation impinging upon their region. Overpopulation, food security issues and the partial collapse of traditional hierarchical structures have elicited the assemblage of new relational networks to negotiate these transformations. *Tokwalu* are not fixed signposts in a predefined system of meaning but changing materialisations of contrasting images and intentions within these networks. They bring together traditional symbols and modern elements in an effort to remain commensurate with what outsiders expect from local carvings and what local carvers expect from outsiders. Vehicles of desires and aspirations, woodcarvings project Trobriand personhood and appropriate alterity as an ideal, modern other. Ultimately, *towkalu* are empowering artefacts for locals. They allow them to buy food, get healthcare, obtain education, increase their social prestige, enhance their mobility and fulfil customary and new obligations. This research places this native view of *tokwalu* at its centre to posit the necessity of considering material assemblages as processes of indigenous analysis and action in Melanesia, without which our understanding of these processes remains severely curtailed.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation is more the result of the work of others than my own. I may have written it, but only after it was told to me by the people of the Trobriands. I walked down many paths in the islands and I tried to write what I heard. If some of it is not quite right, it is probably because I didn’t listen carefully enough. *Kagutoki sena kweveka yokwami minakilivila*, a big thank you to all Trobrianders for your patience and kindness and for sharing your lives with me. I am particularly grateful to my adoptive family in Kutoila, Kiriwina, for teaching me the right way to be in the Trobriand world and in the world in general and embracing me as one of them. Thank you to Camillus Mlabwema Mkiesipu and Claire Bomlabwaga, who called me their son and treated me like one; to my brother Bau, who never stopped guiding me since my arrival, and to the rest of my little brothers and sisters Alux, Pepaya, Kaimagu, Nauriwali, Karawata and Mugola. You all made my days in the islands seem too short, *sena ayobwerim veyagwa*. Thank you also to my extended family, *tovareta Uridoga, navareta Inaloguyau, Ibwedoga, Nauriwali e komwedona veyagwa, kagutoki mokwita pela sena bwenia lo ku yamategu*. I am indebted to many people in the Yalumgwa community. John and Mary Kasaipwalova and Vana, from whom I got my first taste of the unparalleled Massim hospitality I was to enjoy throughout my journeys all over the Milne Bay Province. Beona, Maurice, Dubiyayola, Okaulayagila, Nagia, Samson, Labagula Gai, Giyumkwumumkwu, Veronica and Matadoya, Satosai, Jerome and Gertrude, Paul Pulayasi, Mwaina, Valaosi, Vagai, Kalumamala, Nugulavua, Tokula, Tomdebi, Sawem e avela sta tuvela gumyalumgwa, *sena ula mwamwasila pela bwenia tasisusa odavalusi*. Outside Yalumgwa, my gratitude spreads all over the rest of the Trobes and other parts of the Massim. Chief Pulayasi in Omarakana, *kamatokisi tomwaya pela m bunela mokwita bwenigaga, sena loku pilasegu*. Mwasalua and Monavaila in Obveria; Kuleleku, Yobwita and Toyalaka in Kwebwagga. The late Rodney, Gumkwaradu, Tolobua and Tonogwa in Okaiboma. The people in Bwetalu, Okaikoda, Wapipi, Liluta, Kuyawa, Munuwata, Okayaula and in all the other villages who never hesitated to share their house, their time and their food with me. John Maiwori, Lydia, Tomeuda, David, Abraham and Dickson Bebenai and their families in Losuia. Moses and Dorothy in Kaisiga, Sapera and his family and Frida and hers in Vakuta, Mokatubasi in Tuna, the Bagita and Kuwabu families in Muyuw, and Manu and his family in Budibudi. I am also thankful to Tony Kuwabu in Alotau for taking care of me like a brother, *kagutoki bwadagu, igau ave yam baketta talosa*.
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This dissertation started even before I went to PNG, essentially because of the interest of Giancarlo Scoditti, who first passed on to me his passion for the Massim and its people while I was in Italy. Thank you also to my supervisor in Cambridge Anita Herle for guiding me all these years. This work owes much to my faculty advisor Marilyn Strathern, who helped me craft this project when it was in its very early stages, and Mark Mosko, who warmly encouraged me to carry out my research. While still in Cambridge preparing my fieldwork, Andrew Moutu met with me and pointed me in the right direction; so much so, we managed to chew some betel nut together in Mosbi shortly after, when I first arrived in PNG.

Writing up has been as long a process as fieldwork, and almost as rich in encounters. The paths I have been following since then keep on unfolding today, even after I finished writing. One of these paths gave me the opportunity to meet and work with Joshua Bell, who shared with me his profound knowledge of PNG and its people at the Smithsonian Institution. Jay Crain and Allan Darrah, who have dedicated many years to study things-Trobriand with enthusiasm, were altruistic enough to let me participate in their enlightening conversations. It was thanks to Allan’s Trobriand-like hospitality and generosity that we were able to exchange our respective insights during my stay in California. All of them, together with Chloe, Michelle and Liz, provided useful comments on chapter drafts at varying stages of the dissertation. I am also indebted to Evelyn and Daniel, my Venezuelan family in Washington DC, Maria Teresa and Anton and Justin and Vika in Charlottesville, all of whom made my journey such an enjoyable one. I am most grateful to Anamar and Pierre, Pi, Serena, Kamila, Andy, Patrick, Lisa, Mylène, Leo, Alard, Arlen, Paula, Laura, Tom, Carlos and Marina, some of the dear friends who hosted me at some point on the way to completing this thesis. And thanks to Ivana Sekol, of course, for showing me how fighting against all odds is done. I am afraid in this caffeine-infused retracing of my steps over the past few years in reverse I am most likely forgetting some people. To you I offer my most sincere apologies in the hope that our paths will cross again soon.
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And speaking of paths: this thesis was written in Cambridge, Madrid, Washington DC, Sacramento, Mexico City, Málaga, Frankfurt and a few other places in between.

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List of abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout this thesis:

ARBNG: Annual Report on British New Guinea
AUD: Australian Dollar
ARM: Assistant Resident Magistrate
K: PNG Kina
MAA: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge
MBP: Milne Bay Province
NGV: National Gallery of Victoria, Australia
SDA: Seventh-Day Adventist
TK: Tonenei Kamokwita

Note on spelling and pronunciation

Kilivila, the language spoken in the Trobriand Islands, remains an oral language. As such, there are no conventions on spelling; people transcribe it in different ways trying to follow a more or less phonetic rendition. The sounds “I” and “r” are interchangeable in speech and are thus spelled correspondingly in writing, hence “Nalubutau” and “Narubutau.” Otherwise transcriptions of Kiriwina use the latin alphabet with a vowel and consonant pronunciation that resembles notably that of Spanish or Italian.
# Table of Contents

## Abstract

## Acknowledgements

## List of abbreviations

## Note on spelling and pronunciation

### Chapter 1  |  A culture of carving is the carving of culture: introducing the Trobriand Islands

1.1. Writing anthropology, carving culture  
1.2. Fields  
1.3. Thesis outline  
1.4. Myths and the transmission of knowledge  
1.5. Social change and cultural transformation  
1.6. *Ekasewa simla* (the island is full): overpopulation, religion and new power balances  
1.7. “Money is not our garden”  
1.8. Trobriand time  
1.9. The ways of *tokwalu*  
1.10. Trobriand multividuals  
1.11. Culture materialisations

### Chapter 2  |  An axe, an ethnographer and a book: reversing anthropology and making culture in the Trobriand Islands

2.1. “This is not an axe, and it needs filing  
2.2. Art and artefacts  
2.3. Revelations: to see, to know, to understand and to explain (material) culture  
2.4. Straight understanding = reversing anthropology?  
2.5. From the symbolic to the material: agency and Melanesian personhood  
2.6. Transforming western objects into Trobriand knowledge
Chapter 3 | Dragons, mermaids and seahorses:
the carving of desire in the Massim

3.1. Carving (for) the other
3.2. The art and meaning of traditional carvings
3.3. From meaning to relations: patrons and carvers
3.4. What is (in) a dragon? Performing the other
3.5. Representing the invisible: the call of the mermaid and the multiplicity of outsiders
3.6. Carving with a story
3.7. The walking stones: spirits and agency
3.8. Capturing the spirits
3.9. The seahorse and the communal imagination

Chapter 4 | Magic, rice and carved saints:
knowing, assembling and consuming personhood
in the “times of change”

4.1. The fame of carvers
4.2. Magic airport art
4.3. Knowing the Trobriand modern
4.4. The light of the new
4.5. Magic comes from God: Christian integrations
4.6. Trobriand saints: Christian transformations
4.7. A carved torch pierces the night: success without magic
4.8. Tokwalu, education and modern identities: when money becomes our garden
4.9. Rising rice
4.10. Trobriand roots, Trobriand routes
Chapter 5 | Necklaces, crucifixes and the fame of God: moving things, people and words in the kula ring

5.1. How is the kula today? 167
5.2. Kula carvings: creation as mobility 169
5.3. Carving the kula: mobility as creation 174
5.4. Kula and beyond: the theory and practice of Trobriand exchange 177
5.5. Circulation as appropriation 181
5.6. The fame of cash and commodities 186
5.7. Playing the life game with the magic of new paths 190
5.8. New paths of magic: gender and the fame of God 197
5.9. Materialising circulations 204

Chapter 6 | Materialising the spirits of an encompassed world: conclusions 210

Bibliography 219

Appendix A 233

Appendix B 264

Appendix C 279
### List of Maps and Figures

**Front page:** Carving a walking stick in Bwetalu village, Kiriwina  

**Map A:** The Trobriand Islands and the Massim  

**Map B:** Detail of northern Kiriwina  

**Figure 1.1:** *Tokwalu* in Kiriwina and at Ela Beach craft market in Port Moresby  

**Figure 1.2:** Carvers in Obwera village, Kiriwina  

**Figure 1.3:** Trobriand war shield (*vayola*) in Kwebwaga village, Kiriwina  

**Figure 1.4:** Canoes and a boat moored to the wharf and the market in Losuia, Kiriwina  

**Figure 1.5:** The main road in Kiriwina and a trade store next to it  

**Figure 1.6:** Carving a table in Bwetalu village, Kiriwina  

**Figure 1.7:** Two carvers working on their *tokwalu* with their pocketknives  

**Figure 1.8:** Old *tokwalu* and kula shells spread on a mat in Bawai hamlet, Kiriwina and lime spatulas from the Black Collection at the Buffalo Museum of Science  

**Figure 1.9:** A series of *tokwalu*: bowls and vessels for sale at Ela Beach craft market, a sculpture of Virgin Mary, walking sticks, a model yam house and a model canoe  

**Figure 2.1:** A yam heap in a garden in Yalumgwa village, Kiriwina and a drawing of a lime spatula evidencing the *doka*  

**Figure 3.1:** A carved wooden axe at the Black Collection, Buffalo Museum of Science  

**Figure 3.2:** Carved wooden knives at MAA, Cambridge and carved cutlass at NGA, Canberra  

**Figure 3.3:** Three *tokwalu* carved by Lasaro from Wasiya village, Unovek Island, in the Budibudi archipelago  

**Figure 3.4:** *Tokwalu* portraying a female Trobriand dancer  

**Figure 3.5:** A Chinese-made thermos with a dragon design  

**Figure 3.6:** *Tokwalu* carved by Patrick Maganeti, Alotau  

**Figure 3.7:** *Tokwalu* caved by Toreyawa Towayola from Bwetalu village, Kiriwina
Table of Figures

Figure 3.8: Series of anthropomorphic tokwalu

Figure 3.9: Detail of a representation of a flying witch in a tokwalu

Figure 4.1: A shop window at an ethnic crafts shop in San Francisco displaying carved sculptures

Figure 4.2: A mortuary distribution in Liluta village, Kiriwina

Figure 4.3: Old and new tokwalu evidence aesthetic changes

Figure 4.4: A wooden torch carved by David Moiluvasi from Bwetalu village, Kiriwina

Figure 4.5: A sculpture of Virgin Mary carved by Samson Kwenama from Bawai hamlet, Kiriwina

Figure 4.6: David Moiluvasi’s kaidawaga board used by women in Kiriwina to make nununiga bundles (banana leaf currency)

Figure 4.7: Examples of ginigini (carving, drawing, writing) in Kiriwina

Figure 4.8: Mortuary distributions in Kiriwina displaying traditional valuables and western consumer’s goods

Figure 4.9: A mortuary distribution of rice and yams in Kaisiga village, Kaileuna Island

Figure 5.1: Detail of a lagim splashboard in a kula canoe at Mweuya beach, Kiriwina

Figure 5.2: The mwali Segusegu fitted in a tokwalu in Port Moresby

Figure 5.3: The mwali Gudara

Figure 5.4: The mwali Ugwabwena fitted in a lagim carved by Paul Giyumkwumumkwu from Yalumgwa, Kiriwina

Figure 5.5: Two kuwa necklaces, Kiriwina

Figure 5.6: A lagim and tabuya carved by Paul Giyumkwumumkwu from Yalumgwa, Kiriwina, fitted with a crucifix
Chapter 1
A culture of carving is the carving of culture: introducing the Trobriand Islands

1.1 Writing anthropology, carving culture

A quintessential case study since the very beginning of social anthropology’s quest for scientific knowledge, the Trobriand Islands need no introduction. Trobriand Islanders are already “ours,” a well-studied alterity that bears the patina of a long-lasting familiar example. For social scientists, that the Trobriand Islands “exist” at all is largely a consequence of Bronislaw Malinowski’s fabrication and immediate conquest for the discipline. “Feeling of ownership: it is I who will describe them or create them” (1967: 140). Through his writing, Malinowski put Kiriwina on the map. He also put people in his books, together with seagoing canoes, magic spells, myths, conch shells, spirits, yam heaps and decorated storehouses. He made a Trobriand universe for a non-Trobriand audience. Since the “mythical” times of Malinowski, anthropologists have never ceased apportioning that universe. They have been pitching their metaphorical or real tents in Kiriwina to uncover or recover intrinsically-Trobriand paradigms having a worldly range. Thus the particularities of kula have helped shape economic theories of exchange and value (Mauss 1990; Sahlins 1960: 404 ff), Trobriand magic has prompted discourses on ritual meanings and actions (Breton 1980; Bever 2012) and the practices of the Tabalu matrilineage in Kiriwina have elicited reflections on chieftaincy and hierarchical frameworks across the Pacific (Uheroi 1962; Mosko 1995). The immensity of the Trobriand corpus is witness to this epistemological occupation of native categories by western scholars.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Although Michael Young has pointed out that this thought was in fact aimed at the Amphlett Islands (2004), the entry in Malinowski’s diary was made en route to Kiriwina and his phrasing may lead to consider he was in fact thinking about the Trobriands (“I hear the word ‘Kiriwina.’” Malinowski 1967: 140). In any case, the observation has acquired a mythical dimension of its own in its correct or incorrect association by extension with Kiriwina.

\(^2\) That the “west” is as arbitrary and unacceptable a category as any other generalisation that compounds distinctive characteristics as defining elements of a given community (in this case a “western” tradition, whatever that may be) is one of anthropology’s most tiresome debates.
The appropriative impetus of things-Trobriand runs along a path of mutual endorsement: a place and its discipline, or vice versa. As Malinowski’s pupil Edmund Leach put it, “A whole generation of his [Malinowski’s] followers were brought up to believe that social anthropology began in the Trobriand Islands in 1914” (Leach 1957: 124) and, one might add, for a selected European public only. Extrapolating from the local to the global seems to be the outsider’s task. And “his followers” have always been westerners, so that the “creation” of a Trobriand world has amounted to collecting and displaying Trobriandness by a bunch of white dimdim3 for other dimdim. Once appropriated in books, articles, film and other material supports – the common repositories of knowledge of that more or less uniform western tropology called culture – Trobrianders and their activities become fixed structures for comparative purposes within the academic establishment. The flow is reputedly unidirectional, as Trobrianders are – apparently – prevented from gleaning useful insights about their own world from those outsiders who have studied it. Anthropological tools of conceptualisation yield similar tools, allegedly for the use of anthropologists only. David Graeber has eloquently put it, using what else but a Trobriand example:

When Malinowski was trying to figure out what Trobriand gardeners were trying to accomplish in acting as they did, it almost certainly never even occurred to him that whatever that was, reading his book might make them better able to accomplish it. In fact,

Stating that something western (i.e. a philosophical theory, a homogenising mentality) is inherently different from something that is not is a straw man argument. It not only presupposes that the west is a uniform and unified ethos across space and time – which is utterly false – but it also does so by marking a seemingly impossible-to-overcome opposition with that what is not (see Lloyd 2010 for a pithy discussion on the universality – or not – of human cognition and how science tackles the problem). Disclaimer aside and lacking a better expression, I use the west (uncapitalised) as a metaphorical category lumping together capitalist modes of production and consumption, European classic philosophy, Australian popular culture or American mass-media. What I call the west my Trobriand friends would probably refer to as the dimdim, another equally undetermined, malleable category (see below).

3 A dimdim in the Massim is – generally speaking – a white person, although Trobrianders will call dimdim any stranger that does not have dark skin. Asian people, for instance, are also dimdim. White people are sometimes called to/napwakau (“him/her white”). Hutchins claims dimdim is a term borrowed from Motu (Hutchins and Hutchins n.d.). In the past, the term gumanuma was used to designate European outsiders (Malinowski 1967: 244, 308. 1995: 81). Gum or guma (plural: mina) in Kilivila is a prefix used to refer to the origin of a person (thus, gumyalumgwa is a person from Yalumgwa). Numa or luma (“n” and “l” are interchangeable sounds in Kilivila language) is the open, deep blue sea on the east coast of Kiriwina Island (as opposed to the lagoon, dom). Gumanuma therefore can translate as “the person that comes from the eastern seas.” As for the etymology of dimdim, it is possible to link it to gumanuma if we follow Battaglia: the first white people came from the east, where the “mythical Dimdim reefs” are located (1990: 19).
when an anthropologist discovers that anyone is using anthropological texts in this way — say, as a guide for how to perform their own rituals — they are usually quite disturbed (2001: 7).

Yet untroubled by the anthropologists’ distress at finding their publications turn into guidebooks for locals, Trobrianders do try to derive knowledge about their world from Malinowski’s volumes. Knowledge – it is important to clarify – not in the sense of an accumulation of conventional givens but rather as creative, ever-changing improvisations endowing those who enact them with the capacity to impinge upon their world (see Wagner 1981: 89). In that sense, anthropology manuals are, for those Trobrianders who can lay their hands on them, dialectic artefacts containing those past and present connections that are actively shaping their future lives. Books, like myths, magic stones or carved figures for tourists are fabricated tools resulting from interpersonal relations and engagements with the surroundings. If their relevance for scholars remains discursive, Trobriand Islanders instead experience these artefacts as embodied practice. Things are the dynamic devices that assist them in the everyday performance of living through their continuous synchronisation with the world they inhabit. It is indeed through all these objects that the Trobriand universe is constantly re-created and re-possessed.

What follows is a succinct study of some of these tools of translation, mediation and generation and the ways in which they are instrumental for locals in reversing anthropology’s analytical flow. In tracing their biographies I expect to illustrate how they are devised mentally, fabricated materially and operated daily. Because the chosen examples highlight the circulation of socio-cultural expressions in and out of Kiriwina, this work is an exploration of native ways of comprehending an increasingly networked, de-territorialised world. This dissertation looks at the creative flux of interactions between people and things in Kiriwina and beyond and asks what are the terms of our understanding of indigenous engagements with pervasive translocal realities in that “inventive sequence” that constitutes life (ibid.).

Of all the things discussed, one emerges as having a more central place in this thesis: woodcarvings (tokwalu in the vernacular language). Their centrality in this work mirrors only partially their position in Trobriand society. Although conspicuous in the islands as part of a tradition recognised worldwide since first contact, their predominance is to be located in the gaze of those whose engagements with tokwalu are more meaningful, more regular or more rewarding. Clearly the anthropologist, the carver or the artefact dealer
would underscore the importance of *tokwalu* more than, say, the fisherman or the gardener. Yet Trobriand woodcarvings possess at least two characteristics that make them – more than other things – worthwhile objects of observation. Firstly, *tokwalu* are generative tools of mediation par excellence. They are made for an “outsider other” (*matosine* or “them”) that Trobrianders construct partly through the woodcarvings themselves, hence their instrumentality in creating and representing alterity as people in Kiriwina imagine it. And secondly and owing to the former, *tokwalu* are unbounded objects in constant motion. Because their job is also to generate new ties with a potential, undefined consumer, they need not only to circulate but also to adapt, to “cross over,” to constantly undo reference points and redo new relationships, establishing along the way new contexts for the apprehension of those modern worlds from which Trobrianders do not want to be excluded (see Figure 1.1). Objects of desire and vehicles for aspirations, *tokwalu* are, simultaneously, indexes of how local things are and how locals want things to be.

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**Figure 1.1:** *Tokwalu* for the other and carvings in motion. (a) Joseph Toyalaka shows his storyboard, with traditional Trobriand motifs and a colour portrait of then Milne Bay Province Governor John Luke Critton. Joseph intended to present the Governor with his carving so as to establish an ongoing relationship with him and get commissions in the future. (b) A *tokwalu* in the making in Kiriwina. (c) A similar carving finds its way to Ela Beach craft market in Port Moresby.
1.2 Fields

This dissertation is based on eighteen months (December 2008-June 2010) of intensive fieldwork in Papua New Guinea. During that time, I lived in the hamlet of Kutoila ("turn around"), Yalumgwa village, in the central part of northern Kiriwina (the main island in the Trobriand group, see Maps A & B).

Map A: Above: The Trobriand Islands include Kiriwina, Kitava, Vakuta, Kaileuna, Tuma and several smaller islands. Below: Malinowski’s sketch of the Massim (1922). Malinowski’s Nada Islands (Laughlan), east of Muyuw (Woodlark) are known as Budibudi to the locals.
Map B: Detail of the northern part of Kiriwina Island. Some of the places mentioned in the present work are spelled slightly differently on the map. Map spelling is followed by my spelling between brackets: Ialumgwa (Yalumgwa), Obwelia (Obweria), Boitalu (Bwetalu) and Kwaibwaga (Kwebwaga). The main roads are indicated in red, island paths in black.
In the first six months I learned the vernacular language – Kilivila – and acquainted myself with my new environment and its people. Doing fieldwork is a type of apprenticeship characterised by learning and unlearning where one needs to discard not only previous knowledge but also ways of acquiring it, even to the most basic level. You learn how to walk anew in the sharp paths of a coral island or how to “understand” what’s happening around you “sensorially” (Taussig 2004: 31-32, 129-130; see also Stoller 1989: 115). In what is (still) an eminently oral culture, you also learn how to assimilate things by relying more on your memory than on your notes, allowing the conversations to flow uninterruptedly and piecing them together afterwards in ways that are reminiscent of the fragmentary synchronicité with which locals assemble their things of knowledge (see Chapter 2). Throughout my stay in the islands I spent a great deal of time sitting with carvers, sometimes asking questions, at other times quietly observing their work or listening to their conversations. I was often joined by other villagers, curious bystanders like me that expected to learn more about carvers and carvings, sometimes participating in the conversations, adding their opinions or attempting to subtract from those of others.

Before establishing myself in the field, I studied Trobriand carvings in museum and private collections in Oceania, the U.S. and Europe, gaining a degree of familiarity with numerous samples of Trobriand material culture. In 2005 I wrote a B.A. thesis analysing Malinowski’s collection commissioned by Baldwin Spencer for the Melbourne Museum (Jarillo de la Torre 2005). Indeed, as with many other things, Malinowski also provided the entry point to Trobriand material culture, in this case through his collecting practices. Throughout his stay in the Trobriands, Malinowski collected 2,473 catalogued objects (see Young 2000: 190). For the present work I have looked at Trobriand objects in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge, the de Young Museum in San Francisco, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC, the Buffalo Museum of Science (NY), the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome and the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby.

_Tokwalu_ are heterogeneous in their forms and unpredictable in their intentions. Far from being inert objects, they are dynamic metaphors with changing significance. Highly mobile objects, carvings respond to varying needs and attending to those means one has to map out the practices that surround them in many different settings, from museums to

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4 For a list of museums with a significant number of Massim objects in their collections see Macintyre (1983: 77-84). Despite repeated attempts, I found it impossible to access Malinowski’s sizeable Trobriand collection at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum in Berkeley.
villages to artefact shops; from ebony-growing forests in remote islands to trade stores and craft markets in urban centres. Conducting this “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus 1995) took me to museums and galleries, and also to communities around the Trobriand Islands and beyond, including Vakuta, Kaileuna and Kitava islands and the smaller outliers Kuyawa, Munuwata, Tuma and the very isolated Simsimlas in the north-western Massim (where people also carve despite being completely cut off from any contact with tourists), as well as Woodlark and Budibudi islands to the far east of the Milne Bay Province. The sizeable Trobriand community in Alotau, the provincial capital, also warranted research among carvers and traders living there.

Overall, fieldwork developed into the tracking of a series of connections that had woodcarving as the common agent setting these connections in motion. Other than collections and catalogues, this network included archives in PNG (Losuia Archives, see Appendix B) and outside (Jerry W. Leach Trobriand Folklore Collection at the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, see Appendix A). The extension of “the field” and the related relevance of Trobriand woodcarvings became evident to me as I was waiting for my research visa to come through in Cairns, Australia. There, I found tokwalu for sale in souvenir boutiques in upmarket Clifton Beach or as decorative pieces of furniture in the lobbies of hotels, bars and restaurants. Local yachties who knew nothing about the Trobriand Islands other than their geographic coordinates were nonetheless familiar with the “very elegant” woodcarvings of the natives there. Although still unsure about the importance of tokwalu for Trobrianders, their conspicuousness – and the broadening of the field(s) in which they were located – indexed an almost-universal geography of Trobriand carvings as the epitome of the projection of Trobriandness into the world.

1.3 Thesis outline

Each chapter in the thesis follows a similar pattern: several “things” are introduced at the beginning to set the topics of the discussion. Axes, books, real and imagined animals, magic substances and utterances, myths, rice, crucifixes, people and tokwalu have, despite their ontological disparity, a common “Trobriand” core. Locals conceive them as familiar materialisations, things that are continuously networked by natives in an attempt to keep them related, meaningful and useful. The reconceptualisation of these material and immaterial artefacts unveils alternative local understandings and highlights the
creative agency deployed by Trobrianders when they engage with the flow of translocal factors impinging on their lives.

I have purposefully decided to avoid lumping together items that may seem to belong to the same category. Some keep coming up in different chapters, albeit their implications for the whole (or, rather, my understanding of them) becomes clearer as the thesis proceeds. To some extent, this aims to mirror the halo of revelation things acquire when doing fieldwork, a progressive disclosure of the alternative understandings mentioned above. Thus Trobriand magic at the beginning of my stay appeared to be one thing (undoubtedly based on prior readings) and invariably became another as my perception grew attuned to the local world.

The following sections of this introductory chapter give an ethnographic outline that serves a contextual and theoretical purpose. They introduce those aspects of Trobriand life that throughout my research surfaced as being most significant in comparative terms with previous anthropological knowledge of the Trobriands. That is, how institutions, practices and beliefs are either similar or different in the “nowadays” experience and the “then” literature. Trobriand paradigms are built upon superimposed layers of established axioms. As a result, the “essence” of Trobriandness is often already packed in bound units fitted in larger exegetical mechanisms that culminate in the replication of yet more idiosyncratic models. The workings of kula exchange, the polarity of gendered domains of influence or the hierarchical structuring of Trobriand society are three examples of givens I took with me to the field, only to realise that things were not always as clear-cut and neat as I had assumed they would be. In 2010 the kula was no longer the orderly trade system found in anthropology books, nor was it central to people’s lives. Women and men’s spheres were often conjoined by common interests that went beyond those of their respective matriclans in the name of that new aggregate to which the literature gives almost no space, the nuclear family. And belonging to a chiefly or a commoner’s sub-clan did not matter as much in terms of social organisation as did the affiliation to one of the many Christian denominations present in the islands.

Highlighting the discrepancies between prior anthropological assumptions and my observations in the field gives a sense of what a present-day Trobriand ethos looks like. Commenting on those aspects of their lives that Trobrianders themselves see as crucial, it becomes possible to couple them to the anthropological tenets that are purported to be most suitable to contextualise native complexities. To better underscore this integration
of theoretical concepts and ethnographic findings, I am not providing a summary of each chapter at the end of this introductory one. Instead, I outline the chapters of the thesis throughout the different sections that pair anthropological precedents to the reality evinced by the data collected. Hence, in Section 1.5 the shaping of the Trobriand environment through the interplay of old and new narratives introduces the theme of socio-cultural transformation and how Trobrianders make sense of the changes brought about by external elements. This is developed in Chapter 2 (local transformations of the global) and Chapter 3 (local transformations for the global). Section 1.6 presents some of the contemporary practical quandaries of life in the islands resulting from local-global interactions, such as overpopulation and new religious and political balances. Section 1.7 uses the increasing ubiquitousness of cash as a background to discuss consumption in relation to present-day constructions of social status as they are elaborated in Chapter 4. Section 1.8 examines Trobriand perceptions and conceptions of temporality and how these are instrumental in mediating novelty and encompassing elements of modernity\(^5\) within known referential frames. Section 1.9 looks at the expectations embedded in the traffic of tokwalu and how carvers put into practice strategies to maximise the potential outcomes of their trade. In Section 1.10, tracing the flows of people and things provides a cue to scrutinize contemporary enactments of distributed personhood in the Massim. Drawing on representations of the kula as an idiom for exchange, Chapter 5 reflects upon the insights obtained by addressing these circulations as creative performances. Finally, Section 1.11 brings forward the problematic categorisation of Trobriand crafts as tourist art and/or material culture and proposes instead an analysis of tokwalu in terms of “materialisations,” a concept that best conveys the intertwining of people and objects in the Trobriand universe.

For all their appeal and their resilience to extinction, tokwalu have never been the object of any extended inquiry. Annette Weiner had set to carry out research on tokwalu shortly after independence when the carving business was booming, although in the end she abandoned her initial project to focus on the previously-overlooked key role of women in Trobriand society (1994: 391). Two other anthropologists, Giancarlo Scoditti and Shirley Campbell, in Kitava and Vakuta islands respectively, have studied the form

\(^5\) A certainly most-abused term, modernity and its associated idioms (globalisation, circulation, de-territorialization) loosely connote a series of varied material and ideal fluxes that converge – allegedly – towards homologous models of western-based capitalist consumerism and socio-cultural uniformity across the world (see below).
and meaning of woodcarvings in the 1970s, albeit concentrating their analyses on the aesthetic and communicative functions of the highly-stylised prowboards and splashboards of kula canoes (Scoditti 1977, 1990a, 2012; Campbell 1978, 2002). Otherwise, Trobriand-made crafts have been only incidentally mentioned as part of other studies (e.g. Weiner 1982; Leach 1978). To date, nobody has seen the opportunity of using artefacts as analytical instruments to explore how local-translocal relations are constructed in the increasingly-globalised world of the Trobriands. What the lived realities of communities shows is that Trobrianders are actively involved in creating a series of networks that cannot be held within the pre-scripted givens of a self-contained systemic Trobriandness as articulated in ethnographies. *Tokwalu* epitomise those Trobriand material and immaterial transformations geared towards the construction of an artefact of mediation between locals and outsiders. Embedded within this carved artefact are a series of contrasting aspirations, those of Trobrianders and foreigners, lending to this long-lived object of encounter the dynamic tensions that keep its signification unfixed and tied to variable backgrounds.

1.4 Myths and the transmission of knowledge

Big in anthropology yet hard to pin on a map, the Trobriand Islands (or “Trobes,” as locals often call them) are, geographically speaking, a small archipelago of raised coral atolls situated 200kms to the east of mainland Papua New Guinea, in the Milne Bay Province (MBP, provincial capital Alotau). The main island’s name in the Trobriand group is Boyowa, although natives commonly refer to their place as Kiriwina after the geo-cultural area of the same name that occupies the northern part of it. The islands are part of an Austronesian-speaking region known to anthropologists as the Massim. Largely an explanatory cultural construct issuing from the colonial period (see Seligman 1910), the Massim encompasses a series of similar customary practices across the islands, including mortuary and other ceremonial exchanges, intra- and inter-island trade networks, and matrilineal descent (see Leach & Leach 1983; Young 1983; Damon & Wagner 1989).

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6 The language spoken in the Trobriands is known as Kilivila or *biga Boyowa* (the word of Boyowa). A language isolate, the Yele language of Rossel Island (Yela) is the only exception to the Austronesian languages spoken in the area (see Leach & Leach 1983).
Like other inhabitants of the Massim, Trobrianders too belong to one of four exogamous matrilineal clans (kumila) with their associated totemic animals. Each clan has a number of sub-clan filiations (dala) that trace their origins to a mythical ancestor. The foundation myths (liliu) for each dala are transmitted intergenerationally within the matriclan as a series of genealogies and undertakings. The names and performances of ancestors are orally recounted and their acting upon the environment is mapped out as evidence of how things came to be and entitlements awarded. Consequently, some dala have a historically-recognised right of residence, exploitation and burial to those parts of the Trobriand territory considered to be the matriclan’s. Unless this right has been reverted – through the infringement of a taboo (bomala), or transferred – via alienation using cash, pigs, shells, polished stone axes and other valuables, members of the dala have exclusive access to a series of land and sea resources such as garden plots or fishing reefs (Malinowski 1935: 17). Likewise, liliu bestow on some chiefly matriclans (gweguya) the entitlement to sport body and house decorations (koni) that are a mark of their privileges and their higher status. The strategic importance of liliu myths becomes evident at village court cases when some of these rights are contested, particularly in relation to rights over land for gardening (Hutchins 1990). The parties relate their liliu to support their claims, the final decision falling on the Paramount Chief (the head of the highest-ranked dala, the Tabalu), as the most authoritative repository of the island’s lore. Yet notwithstanding this position of decisional pre-eminence, concentrated as it is in one person for practical reasons, the public nature of court cases typifies a key aspect of Trobriand society, namely that knowledge is a dynamic performance and an open-ended communal assemblage negotiated in a continuous dialogue between contrasting positions. Harmonizing these positions becomes, in this setting, an imaginative social endeavour carried out through the establishment of speculative connections.

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7 This is a constant in other parts of PNG. The crucial importance for survival that is embedded in this type of knowledge is recognised in the PNG constitution and has recently come under particular scrutiny from scholars other than anthropologists (e.g. Kalinoe 2004: 42).

8 This capitalised title is the result of the local reception of a colonial construct. The primacy of the Tabalu (at least nominally) over other sub-clans in Kiriwina was endorsed by Governor General MacGregor in his first visit to the islands at the end of the 19th century and has, since then, pervaded in all the official records, to the point where today Trobrianders refer to the head of the Tabalu as “His Excellency the Paramount Chief.” This notwithstanding the existence of accounts that accord the privilege of being primus inter pares to the Tabalu, who are said to have toppled the former rulers of Kiriwina when they showed up in Kasanai with their decorations, causing others to step down from their verandas and recognise them as the chieflains.
In fact, despite being the backbone of territorial rights and socio-cultural arrangements, *liliu* can also be highly conjectural and are subject to creative manipulations. One of these ancestral myths, obtained by anthropologist Jerry Leach in 1971 from the famed storyteller Tolosi from Labai (the place of origin of all the ancestors of Kiriwina), accounts for the source of material wealth of *dimdim*. In it, two brothers quarrel and after chasing him around the Massim, the elder ends up killing the younger and feeding him to the thenceforth man-eating inhabitants of Dobu Island. Later on, he scatters some crops over the land (yams, betel nut and sago) and they spread all the way to America and Great Britain, after which the culture hero – named Dovana – builds two vessels, a dugout canoe and a steamboat. On the way back to Kiriwina though the steamboat sinks with all the cargo onboard whereas the canoe makes it safely back to the Trobes. This, Tolosi proclaims, is the reason why Trobrianders have dugout canoes and *dimdim* have steamboats, nails, hammers, saws and iron.

Similar myths are found elsewhere in the Massim (e.g. Lepowsky 1983: 489) and in other parts of PNG (Williams 1940; Kirsch 2006; Bell in press). They are witness to the native adoption and adaption of the magic of modernity as a hidden potential already incorporated, at the origin, in Trobriand tradition. Provided one finds the right path, it becomes possible to carve out and develop this potential from its embryonic form. In their more syncretic recountings, *liliu* present a template to understand how variation can be encompassed within tradition. Conceiving myths as malleable artefacts embodying relations among people and their environment poses the most immediate problem of how Trobrianders imagine and shape their habitat. In that sense, I subscribe to Paige West’s observation that “environments are both materially and symbolically created” (2005: 632, after Zerner 2003: 2–6). But if this interplay of symbolic and tangible creative acts is subject to constant re-arrangements it still needs, nevertheless, to stay meaningful for those living in that world. How, then, do variations in the environment affect narratives and vice versa? How do people make sense of these changes? And how do they integrate them in their cosmologies?
1.5 Social change and cultural transformation

Even though the tool of Trobriand mythology still serves the key purpose of giving order and coherence to everyday life practices, narratives do not always stay the same. They often go from familiar, predictable objects to disputed, discontinuous composites. The challenges in the Trobriand Islands are similar to those found elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. As empowering to some as they may be, the intrusive presence of the English language and an increasing degree of alphabetization are pushing forward the transcendental switch from oral to written, altering the Trobriand cognitive framework along the way (see Senft 2010 for the Trobriand Islands; Makihara & Schieffelin 2007 for a pan-Pacific view of the phenomenon and Havelock 1986 and Ong 2002 for a historically-grounded and more general discussion). Nowadays, people in Kiriwina rely

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9 Malinowski’s well-known proposition that language in oral cultures is a form of action more than it is a form of intellection and reflexion needs to be approached with caution. Although not entirely untrue (the mimetic agency Trobrianders place on magic spells is a good example, see
on written accounts to organise ceremonial distributions of food and goods (see Figure 4.7), to understand and explain the traditional symbols carved in kula canoes or to learn the magic spells from their ancestors. Language and literacy are but two constituents of a complex phenomenon of worldwide socio-cultural homogenization characterised by a hyperbolic space-time compression and the ensuing estrangement from one’s own referential coordinates. Super-, post-, hyper- and other prefixed modernities (Augé 1992; Harvey 1989; Lippens 1998) accelerate the processes of relativisation, shrinking the traditional ground where Massim actors usually enact their meaningful differentiations. The “reflexive process” triggered by globalisation in Melanesia forces Trobriand actors to experiment with new ways of translocality (Foster 1999: 148, 151-152). Living in an environment shaped largely through trade and circulation, Trobrianders – like other Melanesians – are indeed used to testing their innovative transformations on old paths, if not directly proficient in creating new ones altogether (Chapter 5).

Whether they use traditional exchange channels or establish different ones, Trobrianders still need to engage with the pervading western world that is impinging upon them. Melanesian scholars have proposed a number of analytical cues to explain how people in PNG deal with socio-cultural change. The colonial encounter marked the reflections framing these interactions by either stressing the preponderance of western hegemony (“acculturation”) or, to a much lesser extent, by deploying examples about the locals’ cultural resilience (“the maintenance of tradition,” Gosden & Knowles 2001: 5). In the ensuing postcolonial backdrop a “dialectic of the modern” (LiPuma 2000: 7) developed, suggesting a blending of mutual cultural influences. The idioms of “hybridization” or “creolization,” though, are prone to conceal the hierarchic structuring that still informs the flow of exchanges (see Foster 1999: 150). Melanesians – lest we forget – did not choose to be colonised and their creative hybridization may be, more than a free interpretive choice, a survival strategy in the face of cultural subjugation.

Of all the methodological sources that strive to make sense of the mediations between the global and the local in Melanesia, those that confer an active role to native actors in the processes of transformation are particularly fitting to the Trobriand milieu. Sahlins’ notion of humiliation (1992), critically expanded by Robbins and others (Robbins & Wardlow 2005), proposes that Melanesians, once confronted with western culture, registered the inferiority of their own and subsequently rushed to embrace the

Chapter 3), there is a highly sophisticated component of analysis in the Kilivila language that has been left mostly unexplored (with the notable exception of Scoditti, see 1996).
Euroamerican model, eventually dropping their traditions. Although Melanesian scholars have introduced a degree of gradation in Sahlins’ otherwise-too-sequential master narrative (your culture is good and right, ours is bad and shameful so let’s dump it), its application to the Trobriand world is nonetheless problematic. Trobrianders – as we shall see – do not contemplate any profound fractures or even discontinuities with their past while adapting the modern future to it. What is salvageable in Sahlins’s perspective instead (and applicable to the Massim) is the function of analytical comparison that Melanesians enact when confronted with a radical alterity. Implicit in his idea is a type of reflexive agency, the observation of a systematic assessment of an extraneous culture of difference on the part of natives. People in Kiriwina do notice these differences and act upon them. Yet instead of uncritically assuming the diversity and deriving it into an instance of their inferiority, Trobrianders piece it up into positives and negatives, discarding or transforming the latter and co-opting the former into their own cultural frameworks.

The mechanisms of this symbolic appropriation are best understood in light of Roy Wagner’s affirmation that one “cannot easily apprehend the other without turning it into their own” (1981: 34), which is, precisely, what Trobrianders attempt. The concept of reverse anthropology, as enunciated by Wagner (ibid. pp. 31-34), is remarkably befitting to understand the actions of transformation and assimilation carried out by Trobrianders in coping with socio-cultural change. Put concisely, Wagner’s theory advances that meaning is a way of perceiving the world that requires the creation of symbols. Exposed to the sustained presence of westerners and their culture, people in Kiriwina are forced to make sense of a new reality. They do so by transforming the outsiders’ symbols into theirs, eventually modifying the larger framework into which those symbols are integrated.

Drawing on Wagner’s insights, in Chapter 2 I look at how Trobrianders switch around anthropology’s analytic flow, moving from conventional western theory to conventionalising local praxis. I use an axe and a book as two idiosyncratic objects, especially apt as examples of modern changes in Papua New Guinea. Following the actions taking place around these two objects, I argue that the Trobriand take on modernity and social change can be seen as an inventive effort from a Melanesian perspective, acting as a bridge between seemingly incommensurate categories often resolved in the domain of material production and circulation. In Kiriwina books are
“modifable things,” not only in the sense they can be changed but – mostly – in the sense that things can be modified through them. For Trobrianders that the past is already written does not necessarily mean that the future cannot be carved, and, if necessary, appropriated, by twisting that past. The re-making of western goods into Trobriand artefacts is a factual way of understanding and co-opting the global when creating the local.

In Chapter 3 the reverse is explored. Looking at non-traditional, western-influenced woodcarvings made for sale to tourists, I examine how Trobriand objects are crafted so as to transcend local taxonomies, conforming to globalized, western categories as they are conceived by Trobrianders. The re-making of Trobriand artefacts into objects for Europeans is an operation that allows objects to shift across ontologies. Furthermore, in its residual potentialities (the indirect reverberations objects trigger with their mere existence), carving is also a way of altering the conceptual frames into which the artefacts are inscribed at their origin. Trobrianders’ fabrication of items is seen as an indigenous technique – in its most ample sense – of engagement with and appropriation of an increasingly-present western culture and some of its most pervasive elements and ideas. If a tokwalu is a composite of tropes, it does not encompass only Trobriand narratives but also incorporates discourses of mass-culture as Trobrianders visualise them. Carvings, thus, are repositories of aspirations and the material agents that facilitate the deployment of social relations beyond Kiriwina to achieve these aspirations.

1.6 Ekasewa simla (the island is full): overpopulation, religion and new power balances

The main readjustments effected by the inflow of modernity in Kiriwina have given rise to new practices and social configurations. These are particularly evident in the management of land and the transfer of power from traditional Trobriand chiefs to Christian missionaries.

If land in the Trobriand Islands is the “root of power and success” (Hutchins 1990: 413), nowadays it is also the contested arena – quite literally – where many of the present-day predicaments of Trobrianders are materialised. Just as the number of new households and hamlets has skyrocketed in Kiriwina over the past years, the proportion of available plots for gardening and housing has shrunk. A decline in infant mortality rates and the failure of family planning, coupled with the partial abandonment of
traditional social practices of reclusion and sexual abstinence for new mothers has brought the population in Kiriwina up to forty thousand people circa (unofficial estimate based on the 2010 National PNG Census). There are more families now and the families are also much younger, meaning that the workforce has not grown in proportion with the total population. More people living in Kiriwina means less land available for gardening. The fallow period in the traditional slash-and-burn cultivation pattern has dropped from the customary six to twelve years to barely two, resulting in impoverished soil fertility and lower yields (Risimeri 2000: 769; O’Sullivan 2008). As a result, Trobrianders have been forced to find new ways to keep their gardens productive. When the yam-planting season begins, many people in Kiriwina are caught out of seeds (yagogu) and are driven to look for them elsewhere, often in places like Kaileuna or Vakuta islands. In the past, searching for yams in outer islands would have embarrassed many a Kiriwinan but today some people go as far as Dobu or Fergusson to look for their yagogu. There is, nonetheless, no sense of shame in a practice that has been reconfigured in positive terms by embedding it in a familiar narrative of trade, circulation and even cunning, so that the fame of kula players is now carried by their prowess in exploiting their networks to obtain food.

Despite crafty measures to alleviate the problem, food security remains a key issue. Some Trobrianders complain that growing school attendance also takes away potential labourers from the gardens, yet the amount of food needed for consumption in the household stays the same (or even increases, with people aiming at having three meals a day as opposed to the customary one at sunset). Parents in Kiriwina toil in their gardens to feed their children and go out of their way to procure for them western foodstuffs and “person-building substance” or “protein” (posa, literally “fat”) while the kids are at school. There is, presently, a larger dependence on processed food, a reliance that arises from necessity but also from choice. Trobrianders alternatively claim that because

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10 It is hard to find accurate numbers for the total population in the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski’s figure of approximately ten thousand inhabitants (1922: 477) seems to have remained magically steady if we believe the accounts of those anthropologists that came after him. Sixty years later, Weiner gives the same number, citing the 1970 census (1982: 74). Lepani (2010: 306) instead talks of thirty thousand people, meaning that despite emigration Trobrianders would have tripled their population in just forty years. Part of the confusion may derive from what exactly is considered to be the Trobriand Islands, with some data including also Kitava Island. Whatever the figures, the Trobriands have always been more densely populated than other islands with similar characteristics (see Malinowski 1921: 2).

11 See Battaglia 1990: 38 ff for similar views on the role of grease in thickening and strengthening the person.
gardens are less productive they need to buy more food at the store, or else that because they are buying more food at the store they are neglecting their gardens, which are becoming indeed less productive. The result is that previous obligations of food donations and exchange (between relatives and affines or between hamlet leaders and chiefs and villagers) are now dropped in the face of necessity. When it comes to garden crops, Trobrianders make a clear-cut distinction between food for the family’s everyday consumption (okaukuweda, in the veranda) and “food for payment” (ovalu, in the village, or paisewa, work, food for work), used in exchanges and ceremonial consumption. The customary exchanges described by Malinowski and endorsed by the anthropologists who worked in Kiriwina subsequently have undergone transformations, in some cases disappearing altogether. Fewer and fewer people in the Trobes have the capacity to garden for anybody else other than themselves and their nuclear family. Although prescribed by rank and custom, payments of yams to chiefs, sisters, maternal uncles and other relatives (as observed by Malinowski 1922: 60-61; see also Powell 1960) are seldom carried out currently. Provided a good harvest grants a surplus of yams that can be saved past direct consumption, it is more likely that it will only allow for punctual contributions to mortuary feasts if and when they arise.

The intricate, customary systems of traditional exchange leave place to less onerous safety nets where people are more reliant on other means to obtain resources or cash. Christian missionaries and churches are instrumental in weaving these new transactional webs in conjunction with Trobrianders on the base of conventional models (e.g. the kula), redefining the community’s identity in the process. Most Trobrianders rely on their church for those things for which the government and the chiefs are no longer able to provide. The two main denominations in the Trobriand Islands are the Methodist United Church Mission12 (first arrived from Australia in 1894 as the Methodist Overseas Mission and still the most represented throughout the Massim) and the Roman Catholic (settled in Gusaweta in 1935 as the Sacred Heart Catholic Mission, now PIME).13 In more recent times, there has been a surge in Evangelical and Pentecostal movements with the arrival of the Rhema Bible Church and the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

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12 Not to be confused with the United Church of Christ or the United Reformed Church (the latter linked to the London Missionary Society, present in other parts of Papua since the beginning of the 19th century). Any mention of the United Church in this thesis refers to the Wesleyan Methodist tradition first brought to the Massim by William Bromilow, the Australian missionary that made his headquarters in Dobu Island in 1891 (see Young 1989).
13 “Pontificio Instituto Missioni Estere” (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions).
Evangelical communities are particularly empowering for women, encouraging them to occupy leading roles within the parish. There are only two Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) churches in the Trobriands, one of which (Kaisiga in Kaileuna Island) oversees a very prosperous community, mostly through the sale of surplus betel nut (which SDAs are banned from chewing) to the rest of the villages in the Trobes.

In any of their denominations, churches coordinate much of the social life in the islands, where almost everybody is a practising Christian and participates actively in the functions that take place in the parishes. Churches finance and manage many activities and projects throughout Kiriwina, including the building and maintenance of water pumps and village birth attendance centres or aid posts, as well as running a number of schools and organising community work and social activities like film screenings and sports tournaments. In some occasions they also have a degree of control over communal resources like coconuts or food crops, decreeing when and how these can be collected, exchanged or consumed.

Christian religion, though, is not seen as an authoritarian imposition from the outside. Rather, Trobrianders consider this participation as a constructive endeavour. Their church is their community and building it up is everybody’s task. For instance, in the Catholic villages of Kiriwina each day of the week is dedicated to a communal activity around the church: women, men and youths all have their respective fellowships. Celebrations for Easter, Christmas and other special occasions (like periodic spiritual retreats or mother’s day) are prepared well in advance. Even though they take up time and resources – prompting some Trobrianders’ objection that “all this keeps people away from the gardens” – participation in “church work” remains high. Locals investing energy in these activities readily admit that their efforts are geared towards building a communitas that can, in return, look after its members. This has resulted in Trobrianders giving over land to Christian confessions for churches, schools or even as burial grounds, so people can be buried there instead of the customary plots of their dala. At present, religious membership is more likely to determine one’s position in Trobriand society than belonging to a given matriclan, and that is why church affiliation becomes such a strategic pick. For instance, in 2009 and 2010, the Catholic Diocese paid half of the school fees for those kids in Catholic families that wished to attend school in Kiriwina. Before that, Catholic churches used to hand out foodstuffs from trade stores to its
members to lure people into their sphere. Similarly, the Foursquare church still has periodical handouts of second hand clothes and other goods to reward its acolytes.

Unlike pre-established kinship ties, allegiance to a church is a matter of making a series of choices that can, however, also be undone. Trobrianders are pleased with this new type of social mobility and the potential relations that stem from it. The missionaries’ much-praised exercises of proselytism echo the generous behaviour of Trobriand chiefs and with time have been instrumental in consummating a substitution. Malinowski’s affirmation “the main symptom of being powerful is to be wealthy, and of wealth is to be generous” (1922: 97) is still valid in the Trobriand Islands, save for nowadays it is more truthful when connected to missionaries than to traditional chiefs. The new flows of material wealth and moral influence have altered the traditional structural organisation in the islands, offering, at the same time, a novel array of possibilities to those who can master the “tool of Christianity.” People participating in these new communal aggregates as pastors, catechists, preachers or simply as salient members of the various fellowships and communities that constitute the Christian order have found new avenues of empowerment irrespective of their wealth or the social ranking linked to their dala. Christianity has become a new type of knowledge and those who can command it are able to derive a great degree of authority from it.  

The rise of Christianity is a key element in the reshuffle of traditional hierarchies in the Trobes, although not the only one. The role of chiefs (gumgweguya) in Trobriand society has changed significantly over the past century. In the past, high-ranked Trobriand leaders drew power from the customary contributions in work and wealth from relatives and affines. Part of their role was the redistribution of this wealth within their constituency. Historically, Trobriand chiefs were more than the political leaders of villages and hamlets. They organised communal work in the gardens, commissioned the building and decoration of yam houses and kula canoes and sponsored cultural events and competitions. Gumgweguya could be rightly seen as “metaphorical fathers” who fulfilled paternal functions at a higher and more encompassing level than that of the household (Mosko 1995). In the present, though, their effective capacity to “feed” and “form” (ibid.)

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14 A good case in point is Augustine, a very charismatic individual from Kiriwina with a sound command of the scriptures and a large number of followers who, according to the Catholic Bishop of Alotau-Sideia (personal communication 2010), came very close to starting his own religious movement, had it not been for the Bishop’s personal intervention (see Figure 4.5).
their subjects through reciprocal relations is very limited and their authority is more nominal than real.

The creation of new socio-political aggregates in the pre-independence years of colonial Kiriwina posed the first threat to the chiefs’ already-shrinking power. This trend was already observed by Malinowski who noted “the lack of concentration of wealth and power in the chief’s hands” back in the early 20th century (1922: 465), despite Paramount Chief To’uluwa having “a couple of dozen” wives, down from the eighty or so the Tabalu chiefs had in the past (Malinowski 1935: 191). Today, the Paramount Chief has “only” three wives and limited access to wealth through the contributions of his wives’ brothers.

The authority exercised by the colonial government through its different administrations impinged upon the capacity of traditional chiefs to organise communal work in their favour. The pre- and post-independence political upheaval saw an attempt on the part of the chiefs to regain their power by situating themselves as keepers of traditional authority, advocating to further the political, social and economic development of the Trobrianders through the fostering of dynamic cultural endeavours that were to co-opt traditional values (Kasaipwalova 1975a). In 1972 the Kabisawali Movement was created with the help of Chief Narubutau and later endorsed by then Paramount Chief Vanoi. Its aim was, firstly, to channel this creativity in order to establish an indigenous cultural identity (ibid. p. 4) aside from the colonial domination of western powers, and secondly, to self-support increasing development by drawing in more resources from local, regional and national councils. Ultimately, the Kabisawali Movement was an attempt to counterbalance the rising power of central and southern Kiriwina, perceived as “the greater receivers of the non traditional benefits and services of colonial institutions past and present” (Leach 1982: 280) and somehow seen as a threat to the prestige of traditionally dominant sub-clans and individuals. Through the institution of self-help movements, the chiefs strived to agglutinate popular support by pitching themselves as alternatives to a colonial administration which they depicted as exploitative. First the Kabisawali movement and after its rival Tonenei Kamokwita (TK) sought to institute a series of development projects that looked at customary Trobriand values as sources of political and economic affirmation. Tourism and the selling of carvings were targeted as means for bringing a degree of financial and political autonomy to the inhabitants of the islands. Alliances formed around several chiefs, splitting their local supporters into rival factions. Ultimately, the failure of both movements to bring development to Kiriwina
resulted in their collapse and the Trobrianders’ ongoing disillusionment with their leaders. In the 1980s a new Local Council was established, with rather poor results in directing any significant projects up until now.

Aware of the influence the missionaries have, most chiefs and traditional leaders try to align themselves with one of the Christian churches in ways that are reminiscent of alliances with the political power at the time of the micro-independence and self-help movements of the 1970s. The main difference, though, is that traditional chiefs then encompassed the government’s power whereas nowadays the opposite is the case, with religious authority circumscribing traditional chieftaincy. Today, affines and allies are no longer able to uphold the chiefs’ leadership with the support and material contributions needed to dominate communal aspects of Trobriand life. As a result, chiefs have not only lost the capacity to accumulate assets but also the moral authority to concentrate social life around their figure.15

1.7 “Money is not our garden”

Despite overpopulation and the lower productivity of the land, nearly all in Kiriwina are still subsistence horticulturalists. As of 2010, the tending of yam gardens remains the fulcrum of the Trobriand social life and much effort and resources are put into it. Trobrianders still pride themselves on their superior capacity to make beautiful garden plots. But if “in olden days” the tubers were “allowed to rot” to signify abundance (Malinowski 1922: 58, 169-173), that luxury is seldom seen nowadays. Yet whenever possible, yams are still displayed and good gardeners (tokwaibagula) earn the respect of their peers through their gardening skills. The relevance of these tubers goes beyond their nutritious properties. More than a food staple, yams are wealth (Weiner 1988: 86), a type of currency that keeps its value – symbolic and economic – even in urban and periurban settings, where wage-earning Trobrianders still toil the soil to conform to their reputation as agricultural masters (Battaglia 1992, 1994). Traditionally, proficiency in gardening has always been a means of acquiring social status and fame, investing Trobrianders with a sense of self-sufficiency and self-worth and ensconcing them in the dignified position of those who, owing to their prowess and magical knowledge, can always rely on their gardens to make a living. By opposition, this stance leads many Trobrianders to admit

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15 The current loss of power in traditional chiefdoms is by no means an issue circumscribed to the Massim but rather a pan-Pacific occurrence. See White & Lindstrom 1997.
that “money is not our garden,” highlighting their extraneousness to cash and to the ways it can be produced, reproduced and used. Villagers complain they don’t know how to “make more money with money, something you *dimdim* are good at.” Money, indeed, is considered to be the white man’s garden. Yet this reliance in their crops and their distrust of money has not prevented Trobrianders from having to deal with the forcible intrusion of cash transactions in their lifeworld. At first glance, people in Kiriwina seem to be caught in between these two fronts: their traditional way of life based on subsistence gardening and fishing or the always-tempting “ways of money” (*mani/wens la keda*, the path of money). Money has become both a source of problems and possibilities, hence an ambivalent attitude towards it in the islands, where it can be despised and praised in the same statement, simultaneously repudiated and coveted, but ultimately more and more used in the everyday.

Carving has become a transcendental activity willingly elevated by some locals to the category of a necessary endeavour. Without carving it is hard to buy clothes, kerosene and rice, go to hospital or pay for the children’s school fees. Taken up by an increasing number of Trobrianders, carving is seen as a compromise solution. Money may not be a familiar garden yet but making wooden sculptures definitely is, and when *tokwalu* get sold cash enters customary circuits of exchange and assists the creation of new ones. Subsistence gardening, therefore, is complemented with subsistence carving. In Yalumgwa village an estimated 53% of adult men make carvings on a regular basis, although many more know how to carve and can make *tokwalu* if and when necessity arises. A daughter going to school in Alotau or the organisation of a forthcoming funeral distribution call for the mobilisation of resources. Under those circumstances, the “act of carving” (making/appropriating/circulating *tokwalu*) becomes an opportunity for Trobrianders to prove their worth.

Indeed, carving is not only a way to earn money. Like gardening, it is also a form of reaching prestige and personal affirmation. It affords the possibility to expand relations and engage with western culture at the periphery of the Trobriand world. Besides, cash is – like elsewhere in Melanesia (see Akin & Robbins 1999) – ontologically unstable. Proficient Trobriand carvers are unable to gain status only through financial wealth. Even though carving has become the most extended cash yielding activity in the islands, Trobrianders are well aware that money is something they do not always understand.

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16 Remittances from relatives living and working in urban centres may be the first source of cash for many Trobrianders, although there are no studies to ascertain the fact.
Money is hard to manipulate and distribute. Yet it still cohabits with yams and other traditional valuables in integrative ways that do not deny each other. Chapter 4 examines more closely the modes of this cohabitation in a setting that sees locals increasingly more dependent on money and store wares. The need for cash prompts new expressive idioms that are analytic in defining current social situations but also experimental in the search for new strategies seen as crucial to keep up with the pace of cultural change. This search has resulted in a series of reversals in categories previously seen as customary, like that of the master carver endowed with magic capacity (known in the literature as *tokabitam*) and his lesser counterpart, the magic-less craftsman (formerly known as *tokataraki*, see Chapter 4 pp. 140-148 for a thorough discussion). The conventionalisation of new forms of relating to the advancing industrialised west reveals the hopeful likelihood of partaking of a wealth of consumer goods. It also offers a chance to experience with new modes of empowerment and through these, develop novel ideas about the person and society. In exploring these markers of success (an all-encompassing understanding and command of Trobriand know-how and “*dimdim* customs,” innovative creativity and the capacity to obtain cash through the circulation of *tokwalu*), I show how Trobrianders redefine their perception of their lifeworld in dialectic terms, confronting a limited (yet not limiting) past with a future that announces itself full of possibilities. Education, Christianity and the circulation and consumption of consumer’s goods are integrated in Trobriand socio-cultural models to fulfil these aspirations and define new identity templates in the process. The chapter shows how forty years later, Annette Weiner’s affirmation still holds: “When Trobrianders try something new, they do not give up the old – for the old is a lifeline for each generation.” (1982: 70). People in Kiriwina strive to co-opt something new (cash) in traditional regimes of value. Like the example of Tolosi’s story evinces, novelty is encompassed as latent seed within the old. I now turn to the modes by which this potential is imagined, rendered visible and realised.

1.8 Trobriand time

Historical precedents are not only contextual cues assisting the positioning of Trobrianders in the comprehensible spatiotemporal coordinates of a historiographical succession. For the locals, the dialogue between past and present is the daily performance

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17 See Foster 1995 for similar strategies of integration between *bisnis* and *kastom* in Tanga Islands.
of a flow of fluctuating re-enactments that shape the future. Trobriand time is no linear narrative. Events admit a series of variations contained as “potential” in things-past. Mythical or real, the time of ancestors, the “time already finished” (*tuta omitibogwa, tokunabogwa*) is a constant recurrence that carries, nevertheless, the seeds of innovation, turning it into “unfinished” time. When people in the Massim circumscribe the past into the present and project it into the future they include former experiences from ancestors that notwithstanding their preterit condition are not to be considered as concluded (Munn 1990). In following this pattern, social replication is included in variation. The continuous incorporation of events from long ago into “this moment” (*besa tuta*) gives guidance for what lies ahead, like Weiner suggests (1982). Appealing to the old leaves open a series of possibilities that follow the past yet do not necessarily repeat it to the letter. As a result, variation gets included in social replication.

Trobrianders have a visual model for this cosmological perception that, understandably, resembles a spiral. This cosmovision is represented by the chambered nautilus shell (*nautilus pompilius*). The nautilus (lit. *yamila*, but called *goragora* when used symbolically) grows into a logarithmic spiral expanding from its own preceding chambers by following the principle of the golden section (Scoditti 1990a). It incorporates “the magnitude of the previous loop/performance” into the body of the shell (Scoditti 2012: 88) and anticipates what will come next as replication and expansion of the past. Giancarlo Scoditti has been most attentive to the uses of this metaphor in Trobriand culture, from its visual and material representations to its immaterial conceptions in the poetic compositions in the island of Kitava (1996: 226, 232-233). Scoditti elaborates: “One version/performance is not denied by the next version/performance, which…can manipulate a new event by inserting it in the plot of the narrative – so that the previous version/performance is adapted to the historical contingency.” Thus, “all the elements that are present in the current phase of an event were already identifiable, albeit in a smaller and different dimension, in a previous phase of the same event.” (2012: 88. Also see Munn 1986 for similar space-time contractions and protractions in Gawa).

The complexity of this metaphor of fractality whereby new symbols add up to old ones without denying their validity is by no means an anthropological construct. This allegory of encompassed potential is widespread in Kiriwina. It can be found in the popular tale of the snail and the sky. The snail throws in a challenge by telling the sky that it can reach it
and even outgrow it. At first, the sky is sceptical and patronising, dismissing the unabashed arrogance of the snail. But the latter is undeterred: “everything is already in here,” the snail contends, pointing to the origin of the coil in its shell. Potentially, nothing prevents the spiral from growing ad infinitum and become bigger than anything else, even the sky. In the end, the flawless logic of the snail’s argument forces the sky to yield (see Malnic & Kasaipwalova 2000).

In this practical philosophy of life, knowing how to move within the Trobriand universe means mastering Trobriand temporality and being able to adapt it to one’s needs. The inherent possibilities encompassed within the spiral symbol also inform Trobriand conceptions of knowledge. Making sense of the foreign in local terms is the artful operation that uncovers novelty and change as “things from before” by metaphorising them into familiar relations “from now.” The future – the unknown – is subsumed into the past and transformed into that known possibility that was “already there” in the time of the ancestors, ready to be developed when needed. As I elaborate throughout this dissertation, this conception of time and knowledge is embedded in many Trobriand quotidian practices. Thus understanding and mastering things (be they carving skills or carved symbols) is an infinite pursuit of those new constituents which keep on unfolding from the known ones (Chapters 2 and 3). Christianity was foreseen as a potential growth stemming from traditional magic (and completing it, see Chapter 4). And new exchange practices were already embedded in old forms of trade (Chapter 5). The material objectification of the nautilus shell provides an open-ended interpretive cue that is readily adaptable to the comprehension of tokwalu as perceptual metaphors, especially of those carvings that, at first sight, are not grounded in what anthropologists would identify as belonging to a Trobriand iconological tradition. This is why old carvers can dream new animals like dragons and mermaids. New tokwalu do not break up with the old but harmonise it instead by relating it to the modern in consequential terms.

1.9 The ways of tokwalu

Many other things and the shapes they take may be novel, but the act of making objects for outsiders is not new in Kiriwina. Trobriand woodcarvings caught the attention of

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18 The spiral is also visually reproduced in the classic Trobriand circular dances. In a more material way, the yamila is used as the source of mother-of-pearl (ginenepu) decorations in carvings.
Europeans quite early on, probably as early as the 18th century, although the first written records we have are from the late 19th century. In his study of Trobriand war shields (vayola), Glass notes that the German naturalist/ethnographer Otto Finsch reported how some of these shields were made for sale to westerners as early as 1884 (Glass 1986). And even though tribal warfare had long been eradicated by the time of Malinowski’s arrival in the islands (1915), the Polish anthropologist was nonetheless able to find and purchase some specimens of a type of object that had no local use at the time other than its exchange value (e.g. X26678 at the Melbourne Museum). The production of vayola for sale was never discontinued, with Trobrianders carving these types of shields presently.

In his first visit to the Trobriand Islands on 14th July 1890, Governor General MacGregor came ashore “on a small island close to Kitava” – probably Nuratu Island – and reported the following in his despatch to the Governor of Queensland: “…it is clear

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19 The first recorded sighting of the islands took place by Rear Admiral Bruni D’Entrecasteaux from the ships Recherche and Espérance while he was searching the lost expedition of La Pérouse in 1793. D’Entrecasteaux named the group after one of his officers, Denis de Trobriand. The first documented interaction between Europeans and locals took place in 1836 when the British whaler Marshall Bennett sent some of its crew near shore, trading iron for yams (Hunter 1839: 38). Exchanges of this type may have been taking place before. The Trobriand word for “knife” is kuto, a phonetic rendition of the French “couteau,” suggesting that exchanging iron for yams or other Trobriand things must have been a more or less regular occurrence even before it was documented.
that they and all other natives of the Trobriands have a great aptitude for carving in wood. They have some ebony which is well adapted for this kind of work.” (ARBNG 1891-92: 11). Like most of the Trobriand carvings’ enthusiasts that followed him since then, MacGregor, who “unusually…visited the Trobriands on ten occasions” (Quinnell 2000: 88), also complained about how prices had “risen some 300 percent” since his last visit (ARBNG 1893-4: 19). The Governor also voiced a concern that, with time, has become as irksome as it is inexact and even laughable: Trobriand artefacts are in decline and “disappearing fast” (ibid.). An apprehensiveness that has been echoing down up until today (see Silas 1926: 208; Austen 1936: 20; Senft 1994: 71 to name but three). Carvings instead have never ceased to be produced in the Trobes in one way or another (see Figure 1.3), and evidence of their appeal can be traced almost uninterruptedly from Webster’s catalogues from the 1890s20 through a number of museum and private collections, to Sotheby’s and Christie’s auctions of old and new artefacts.21 Tokwalu from the Massim are also regularly sold on eBay.

Rather than disappearing fast, Trobriand artefacts are proliferating. Although to a lesser extent than other parts of PNG, the Trobriand Islands are also subject to the dialectic tensions and contradictions of capitalist production and consumption that develop within the nation-state. There is, however, a perception entrenched in the common imaginary — anthropological and popular — that the Trobriand Islands are a world of frozen traditions and homeostatic practices untouched by modernity. This perhaps has to do with the lack of large and medium scale extractive operations or development projects in Kiriwina, as opposed to other parts of PNG or even the Massim (i.e. logging and gold mining in Woodlark and Misima islands, see Damon 1997; Gerritsen & Macintyre 1991). With the exception of the government-backed experiments of the two self-help movements that met with a brief success in the late 1970s (Kabisawali and TK), socio-economic development in the Trobriands has always been left in the hands of individual investors (Weiner 1982). There were, in the past, short-lived projects that exploited some marine

resources (prawns, bêche-de-mer, live fish, see Williamson 1989; Tom’tavala 2000) but in the long run they all failed to provide a sustained source of income. With no cash-crops in the islands, no logging, no mineral resources and no significant industry providing paid jobs, tourism and tourist art seem to be the most marketable assets left to Trobrianders. The reification of Trobriand culture for outsiders’ consumption is no novelty. It reached its apex around independence in 1975 (see Leach 1979) and has undergone, since then, many ups and downs. Today, the two local businesswomen (Rebecca Young and Serah Clark) who run the two guesthouses in Kiriwina are making efforts to use the island’s distinct cultural features and natural appeal to draw tourists and provide a steady flux of visitors. So far, though, their efforts have proved insufficient to generate a regular flow of cash. Yet as the high number of Trobriand artefacts found in and out of the islands evidences, carving is still a widespread practice in Kiriwina. As an artefact made for a changing (and often “absent”) outsider, carvings need to move, ontologically and physically, hence their suitability as markers of social change. Here circulation becomes the keyword. To begin with, carvers place expectations on traffic to increase sale opportunities. Tourism is perhaps the most significant of these traffic flows. The late 1960s and early 1970s are remembered in Kiriwina as the golden age of tourism, with charter planes full of expats that granted, according to some estimates, an average income of some AUD70 per carver a year (Wilson & Menzies 1967: 63 in Campbell 2002: 46).

22 The situation today is not as rosy. Tourists come in a trickle and they do not always buy tokwalu. With few chances to close a transaction, carvers are always alert to maximise sale opportunities. Because of this, circulation remains key. Customary exchange networks are exploited, where possible, to find outlets for artefacts. Trobriand carvers not only need to make objects for sale, they also need to carve out a market for their crafts. They do so by deploying their objects through varied networks that include relatives, acquaintances or entrepreneurs. These networks need to be considered as an intrinsic part of the inventiveness of Trobriand carvers, paired with the objects with which they are indeed intertwinied. The tokwalu and the avenues along which they circulate are both tools of intermediation. The expression keda (literally “path”) carries a heavy symbolic load in Kiriwina. As in English, it signifies a way (such as a track), but also a manner of

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22 Once again, the figures are hard to determine with exactitude. Weiner (1982: 66) claimed an average of AUD62 per week in 1972 for a whole unspecified village in northern Kiriwina (most likely Kwebwaga), that is to say a total of AUD3,224 approximately a year. Assuming there were forty to fifty carvers in Kwebwaga at the time (a plausible figure) the yearly income per person is very similar to that calculated by Wilson & Menzies.
Carvers try to exploit both the physical avenues and the allegoric connections to make their objects circulate, and wherever there are no existing *kedā* they also attempt to create new ones. Living near a road in Kiriwina, for instance, is a way of multiplying the chances for trade. People, things and information circulate more fluidly along main roads. For this reason, a growing number of people are moving out from those inland villages that are cut out from the road network built by the Allies during WWII and along which the few vehicles left in the island circulate today. Dwelling by the road means ease of transport. People can get faster and more comfortably to Losuia, the District’s station, where the aid post, the market, the school and the government offices are situated. Losuia offers opportunities for commerce: fresh fish, betel nut, tobacco or second hand clothes are bought, sold or exchanged in Losuia among other products like kerosene or western food. All the boats and most canoes arriving in Kiriwina call at the dilapidated wharf bringing goods, passengers and information from other centres around the Massim (Figure 1.4).

**Figure 1.4:** (a) The wharf at Losuia, Kiriwina. A merchant vessel coming from Alotau calls at the station, bringing passengers and cargo for a trade store. Canoes and fibreglass boats (dinghies) from neighbouring and distant islands moor to the sides of the pier, bringing betel nut, tobacco, fresh and smoked fish, coconuts, and earthenware cooking pots (*kwelamola*, see Chapter 5) among other things. A pile of yellow Trukai rice bales can be seen to the right of the picture. (b) The corrugated-iron shed next to the wharf in Losuia hosts the market, where fresh produce from Kiriwina and neighbouring islands is sold daily, catering mostly for the public servants stationed at Losuia. Here tobacco is sold loose, in sticks or coils.
News and gossip disseminate faster around the main paths. Carvers looking for sale prospects or commissions to make *tokwalu* capitalise on this knowledge whenever possible. There are also gambling posts or canteens strategically situated at crossroads where sometimes people gather in large numbers somewhat spontaneously. Trade stores too tend to be situated next to the most trafficked paths. Rex Monavilla’s store (see Figure 1.5) relocated from the village of Obweria, inland, right to the edge of the main thoroughfare that runs from north to south in Kiriwina. As we shall see below, Rex constantly buys *tokwalu* and his position facilitates both his trade and that of carvers willing to find a buyer for their crafts.

![Figure 1.4: (c) Canoes moored at Losuia wharf bring passengers, goods and news from neighbouring and distant islands.](image)
This has meant that the customary village patterns tend to be abandoned in favour of more suitable locations by the *kedā*. New ground is occupied and villages sprout
overnight, sometimes triggering bitter disputes among new settlers and old landowners. The *kedā* thus is not only an allegory of circulation or a metaphor for exchanges. It is also a real hub of possibilities that is increasingly altering the spatial organisation and the balances between the customary spaces of the village, the hamlet and the garden and the social hierarchies associated with them. Those who focus their attention and energies on the road and the business possibilities it offers tend to stay away from the gardens. Peer pressure from fellow villagers disappears when a group splinters from the village and settles elsewhere in very reduced clusters (sometimes only consisting of a nuclear family or two), away from extended kin groups and clan obligations. In the new location, it becomes more difficult for others to tell whether you are a hard-working gardener or if you spend the whole day sleeping, as many Trobrianders put it to me. Moral considerations aside, the freedom that comes with this increased mobility also puts people beyond the reach of village leaders, further undermining the already-impaired authority of the chiefs.

The metaphor of circulation (see *taina*, Chapter 5) is remarkably apt to encompass Trobriand practices old and new. It evokes flows of exchange that are equally applicable to regional and global settings. Yet even though Trobrianders associate these practices with the idioms of freedom and modernity, these need not be understood in terms of western individualism but under the Melanesian concept of divedualism instead.

### 1.10 Trobriand multividuals

In Kiriwina, people are not individuals in the western sense of bound, unique personal entities. They are fragments of a bigger “thing,” the *lifeworld*. The term is Ingold’s (2000). I use it here in lieu of its cognate and more divulged expression, cosmologies. Lifeworld connotes a more inclusive view rooted in the everyday, less systemic and more improvisational, and without the metaphysical overtones of the former.23 The idiom is particularly suitable to understand something akin to a Trobriand ethos. As I elaborate below in more detail (Chapter 3), Trobrianders believe in a live substance shared by all things they call *momova*, the vital spirit (or breath). As the vital spirit is in all, all are the

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23 Inspired by Gibson (see Chapter 2), Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Ingold’s term expresses the impossibility of isolating objects and subjects, stressing the phenomenological dimension of existence (“dwelling” or “being-in-the-world” in his own words). See James Weiner’s own attempt to deconstruct the “Cartesian schism” in his phenomenologically-grounded analysis of the Foi (2001: 62).
vital spirit. People and objects are part of this continuum of relations. According to Scoditti, Trobrianders are aware that this “vital breath” is “subdivided into faculties” or fragments of which the person’s soul (baloma) is one, “similar to the wind…which spreads through man, putting him in contact with the other elements of nature” (2012: 69). Trobrianders, Scoditti continues, “delimit” or cut-up the vital breath “by constructing artefacts (figures, poetic images, objects, ideas). The ancestors contributed to this delimitation with their artefacts in exactly the same way” (ibid.). Nothing is ever created anew in the Trobes but is the result instead of a series of exchanges and transformations. People try to manipulate this essence by accumulating, distributing or restricting it depending on the occasions. What we call individuals, thus, is better understood in the Massim as dividuals (Strathern 1988) or multiduals, relational aggregates of people and things that get endlessly re-composed in new configurations of the vital spirit as a way of cutting up the continuum that makes up the lifeworld (like the momentary individuation of a newly deceased person on her journey to the underworld of Tuma). Some of these recent re-configurations can be seen in practices like the above-mentioned one by which some people break away from the customary obligations implicit in village life to form new aggregates (or even temporary disaggregates, see Chapter 2).

The distributed person effects changes in the lifeworld through her innovative actions. Rightly conceptualised as “nodes in a matrix of relations” (Foster 2011: 50), Melanesians act to influence others so as to stretch or constrict those relations and the things they bring. In the Trobriand Islands, the exchanges and transformations performed daily get encompassed in familiar practices, bringing new re-configurations that expand the referential frames that constitute the Massim lifeworld. Personhood in Melanesia is constantly reified. The self can become a fractal entity embedded in material representations, the person being a container of the relations that make her, extending her influence over space and time through objects (see Mosko 1995; Strathern 1988: 131, 171; Munn 1977, 1990). A good example is the classic treatment of the seashell valuables exchanged in the kula (see Malinowski 1922, Leach & Leach 1983). Embedded personhood and reified social relations are contained in the kula shells. Shells have names as people do, and “act” as people (rather than on behalf of them) because they contain

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24 Sandra Revolon (2007) describes a similar concept – “figona” – for the Austronesian-speaking Owa people of Aorigi in the Eastern Solomon Islands. Figona is a “vital principle,” the “immaterial principle that lies at the origin of the life of humans animals and plants, and of the earth” (ibid. p. 60).
some of the personal qualities of people. In fact, they contain parts of people who are themselves made of parts of other people. The capacity to influence somebody’s will (to momentarily appropriate people) can also be applied to objects inasmuch as they are extensions of the person, therefore keeping the connection person-object always open and susceptible of affecting ongoing relations.

The penultimate chapter, Chapter 5, deals with circulation as creative performance. Talks of mobility and exchange in the Massim immediately evoke one word: kula. When living in Kiriwina, though, one sees very little of it, notwithstanding an almost compulsive itch to travel readily detectable in both women and men. Despite its legendary pre-eminence in anthropology as the quintessential form of choice to piece together male personhood in the Massim and project it across time and space, the kula does not exhaust meaningful acts of lifeworld creation in the Trobriand Islands anymore, nor can it be circumscribed to a gendered sphere. Men and women in the Massim generate and interpret their world beyond that immanent set of apparently ceremonial rules we term as kula. On the other hand, the idiom kula still affords a symbolic blueprint for motion (kula literally means “you go”) and exchange that has been successfully worked upon through varying circulation practices encompassing Christian religion, western commodities and traditional kula valuables. At present, this flow of transactions is enacted in ways that stress its changing (no given structure or fluid structure), innovative (open to variation at multividual level) and inclusive nature (more democratic participation). Kula narratives are dispelled in non-kula actions (acts that do not look like kula) and trade-like actions are identified with old kula narratives. Thus, the chapter interprets current Trobriand circulation and exchange practices as creative acts loaded with a type of potential that is neutral at the outcome, acquiring different significations as the actors shape this potential according to their needs. Like the new ways of tokvalu, the keda of the contemporary Massim are more flexible than those described by the kula literature and respond to rapidly-changing social, economic and cultural necessities.

As part of the continuum of the Trobriand lifeworld, “fragments” of people travel in things along these paths and operate as agents of change, influencing other people along

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25 The inherent personhood of some objects (such as stones) and substances (magic philtres and other potions) will be dealt with in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say that it is a constant in the Trobriand Islands that non-human things should have the capacity to act upon other things and people and that this is due to said things having parts of persons (or of entities with personhood) within them.
the way. A final word on the distributed person and its transformative agency as it is enacted in relation to tokwalu is needed to conclude this introductory chapter.

1.11 Culture materialisations

At the end of the 1990s, Alfred Gell’s influential work on the anthropology of art (1998) sparked a series of ongoing debates on the fruitfulness of extending the anthropological research of artistic expressions to the analysis of the social links set in motion by art objects (e.g. Pinney & Thomas 2001; Morphy 2009). Art, Gell argued, is not a detached form of representation/interpretation (or even a distinctive judgement) of the world. It is, mostly, a dynamic, ever-changing and collective engagement with the social enactment of our worlds, an open-ended process of intersubjective participation. Gell questioned what was, until then, anthropology’s understanding of art as a delimited unit of study centred in aesthetics, semantics and symbolic interpretation. Instead of focusing on the iconological meaning of art as a system of cultural communication, Gell proposed to study art as a system of action aimed at shaping the world. Provided we consider tokwalu as (visual) artistic expressions, Gell’s model is well-suited for the analysis of woodcarvings as social agents, i.e. as performers of acts of mediation and transformation of the Massim universe. The problem, thus, is one of categorisation. What to do with objects that are not “art?” And who should decide on this pigeonholing? So far I have included tokwalu within the reach of what we would call tourist (or airport) art quite straightforwardly, without questioning local considerations of the term and its repercussions. Deploying art as an ontological category in the Massim, though, is problematic. There is no word for “art” in Kilivila. Zeroing in on the aesthetic domain, the closest would be the glossing of an object or a person in terms of its “beauty” (-manabweta, preceded by a qualifying preposition depending on the nature of the qualified). Alternatively, a carving (or an action, like decorating oneself) can be “good” (bwena) or “very good” (sena bwena). These positive qualities, as they are singled out in an artefact, are considered to derive from the maker of the object. Artefacts are personal fragments of their authors who are, in turn, products of other relations involving other entities (e.g. kin, ancestral spirits). Thus an object encompasses the elements that make it. These include material and immaterial substances, the techniques needed to work the object, the knowledge necessary to apply those techniques, the methods used to receive and interiorise that knowledge and the personal capacities to choose, transform and
exteriorise all of that into something tangible. Most importantly, carvings are relations between people and things that have come to be concretised at some point into a temporary form that, nevertheless, is open enough to accommodate further changes (cf. Revolon 2006 for a similar instance of ontological changes in woodcarvings in the Solomon Islands, from ritual objects to artefacts for sale). Tokwalu are a coalescence of links between ancestors, magic substances, poetic spells, dreams, patrons and buyers. One of the merits of Gell’s proposal was to integrate objects and subjects as the agentive elements enabling a distributed apprehension of the world, a perspective much in view with the Melanesian fluid treatment of people and things. Yet if the aesthetically pleasant, rightful and enchanting things created in the Trobriand Islands are (or are not) “art,” it is so from a traditional western perspective that has, after more than one hundred years of continuous contact, been received and incorporated by some Trobrianders as an appropriate idiom for the display and exchange of objects made in Kiriwina for outsiders. From a native stance, this vocabulary serves the purpose of making Trobriand things intelligible – and therefore appropriatable – for white people. If and when Trobrianders use the term “art” to refer to their objects they do not invest it with innovative connotations. In this context “people” [e.g. Trobrianders], Strathern argues, “may claim that they are replicating what Euro-Americans would call ‘tradition’” (2010: 296). The problem arises when terms like art, artist or artisan are uncritically used in the literature as “artificial translations,” renditions of terms and concepts that do not exist originally in the Massim. Such terms reduce the all-encompassing complexity of the creative phenomenon of the circulation of objects in the Trobriands to simplified operations of hierarchical ordering following received western values (i.e art, material culture).

What is more, imported labels can confuse, reduce or altogether deny native categories. Thus, the world of Trobriand things – tokwalu included – cannot be subsumed into the material culture trope either without curtailing its reach, for objects in the Trobriands are not necessarily material-only aggregates.26 Trobriand artefacts are, as we shall see in more detail, transient articulations of the corporeal and the immaterial. They are assembled communally through the coming together of concepts, narratives and

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26 See Bolton 2001 on the analytical (in)validity of “material culture” when uncritically assuming it as a bound ontological classification of things as they are perceived from a western perspective only. In her example, the people of Ambae in north Vanuatu link textiles to ritual food, altering commonplace views of the “material culture” category. “Materialisation” as an analytic concept can be put to use beyond the category of “material culture.” Coupaye for instance applies it to garden technology and the relational entanglements between people, tools, behaviours, gestures and materials involved in yam-growing among the Abelam (2009, 2009a, 2013).
interpersonal bonds that Trobrianders themselves would not always define as being “material.” The western tradition is not entirely unacquainted with this protean representation of the world. There is indeed, after Heraclitus, an ontological perspective that sees things as processes being subject to constant transformations (see for example Radcliffe-Brown 1957: 12 in Ingold 2011: 234; Graeber 2001: 49-54; see also Bell 2006: 7). Scholarship has gleaned insights from this tradition to suggest interpretations of the world that do not slice it up into the separate realms of the physical and the intangible (see for instance Ingold 2007), proposing instead a fluid continuity among what ought to be the oneness of the lifeworld and its inhabitants, between the material and the immaterial. A felicitous terminology of these patterns of change and integration has been proposed by Bell and Geismar’s expression *materialisation* (2009). The idiom conveys “the interweaving of words, materials and human action” (p. 3) in a more compelling way than the more static expression “material culture,” and is particularly fitting to understand the fluidity of things in the highly-changing world of the Massim. Throughout the thesis, the Heracleitian notion of the “dynamic potentials” of objects (Graeber 2001: 53) will be expanded through some examples drawn from Trobriand artefacts but also from western goods as these are (re)conceived from a Trobriand perspective.

Some of the types of woodcarvings I came across in Kiriwina I had previously seen in museum collections. They are refined examples of inventiveness, technique and skill that have been enchanting Trobrianders and foreigners for over a century. Graceful lime containers, surprisingly symmetric, rounded bowls and striking walking sticks with convoluted designs that feature in display cases and books, but also in the communal, stereotypical media representations of Trobriand and Papua New Guinean imagery. Interrogated, analysed and explained, or equally taken for granted, they are seen as the reified subjects of a continued Trobriand tradition and ongoing cultural encounters. Abstract and figurative motifs, stylised symbols, expressive animals and anthropomorphic figures engraved in precious ebony wood, corporeal witnesses of the uninterrupted tradition of Trobriand carving. The perfection and symmetry of some of the carvings becomes even more surprising given the tools of the carvers: axes, adzes and pocketknives are the only implements most Trobrianders use in their trade. During my fieldwork I knew only a handful of carvers that could afford to use chisels and hammers,

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27 To the best of my knowledge there are no terms in Kilivila for “material” and “immaterial.”
yet their crafts were not more perfect than those of others working with a pocketknife only (see Figures 1.6 and 1.7).

**Figure 1.6:** A carver works on a table in Bwetalu village, Kuboma district, Kiriwina. *Meku* trees (*intsia bijuga*) from the nearby swamp are cut in blocks with iron axes and worked upon with wooden adzes with sharp metal heads called *ligogu*. Some carvers in Bwetalu also use chisels to carve the scrollwork patterns found on their tables and stools (see below). Many people now also draw the patterns on the wood before carving them (see Chapter 4).
Some of these items were used by locals throughout the Massim at the time they were collected, ranging from the ceremonial to the utilitarian and the ornamental. Chiefly staffs with evil powers, head combs impregnated with protective magic, enchanted lime spatulas that keep away flying witches. Trobriand carvings empowered, protected and beautified their owners and sparked desire in others,\(^28\) acting as mediating connectors of peoples’ relations in the Massim and beyond (Haddon 1893; Seligman 1910, Austen 1945).

\(^{28}\) The use of carvings as opening gifts to lure partners in the kula exchange (pari) was first observed by Malinowski (1922: 200, 268; see Chapter 4).
The typology of Trobriand carvings can be divided in numerous ways. For the purposes of this thesis, it is most useful to do so in terms of tokwalu and those carvings that are not tokwalu (see Appendix C). Tokwalu originally indicated freestanding carvings depicting anthropomorphic figures only, the male prefix to- (him) denoting human or human-like traits (Baldwin n. d. gives “carved image” in his dictionary; Lawton 2002 translates it as “carved figure” or “statue”). Scoditti put forward the hypothesis that the term may be “linked to the tokwai, the spirit[s] of the wood” (1980: 43). Tokwai live in trees and can also dwell in woodcarvings or be woodcarvings (see Chapter 3). With time and through the interaction with European traders, missionaries, colonial officers and travellers who seemed to privilege anthropomorphic carvings over other types, tokwalu has come to indicate any type of carving made for (non-Massim) outsiders (see Austen 1945: 193). Except for sailing canoes (masawa) and their prowboards (tabuya) and splashboards (lagim), and the carved and painted decorations of traditional yam houses (liku) and chiefly resting houses (ligsa), almost any carving produced in the Trobriand Islands today is referred to as a tokwalu by locals, including non-representational items. The contemporary use of the term tokwalu is way more inclusive than Campbell’s restrictive description of a human-like figure in the canoe splashboard (2002: 106-107, 140, n5 p. 199; see also Malinowski 1922: 246), precisely identified by people in Kiriwina as a type of tokwalu (carved figure) specifically known as bwalai (see Chapter 5). The ductility of the term and its almost indiscriminate use in the current parlance of the locals can be best understood from a Trobriand viewpoint if we think of tokwalu as wooden artefacts carved for sale, nowadays potentially any item (even a kula canoe), although Trobrianders would not call a canoe or a yam house a tokwalu.

Many tokwalu follow a formal tradition that goes back to the utilitarian items carvers used to make for local and regional consumption and exchange, chief among which are lime spatulas and vessels (mostly bowls and plates) but also drums, walking sticks, clubs, dance and stirring paddles, mortars and pestles for betel nut, combs and head rests. More recent examples of these utilitarian objects made for sale would also include the famous stools and tables produced exclusively in Bwetalu (see above). Representational carvings take the semblances of anthropomorphic figures or animals. Men and women, including saints and Madonnas (see Chapter 4), fish, octopuses, squid, wallabies, grasshoppers, lobsters, dogs, pigs, crocodiles, birds and many more creatures indexed from the Massim environment (see Appendix C for a sample of types of tokwalu). The shape of carvings is
determined by the amount and the type of wood available, the skilfulness of the carver and his personal choices as to what to carve. The examples chosen for the present work are those deemed most suitable to exemplify the dynamic potential of objects in the Massim. They are representative of the Trobriand impetus to appropriate a modern identity and thus reflect how locals see, understand and consume globalisation flows in Melanesia, symbolically and materially. Westerners may object to some of these choices on the basis of the contested “authenticity” or originality of the proposed examples. Carvings of mermaids, dragons and axes or reproductions of saints are not very Massim-like and you seldom see them in museum exhibitions or at art auctions. However, these types of *tokwalu* are agents of indigenous analysis. They remain the tools with which Trobrianders materialise their current aspirations and as such, they deserve careful observation.

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**Figure 1.8:** (a) Some old *tokwalu* belonging to Tomdebi, Bawai hamlet, Yalumgwa village, Kiriwina. From right to left can be seen a ceremonial axe handle (*kailavala*), two wooden plates (*kaboma, kaidadodiga*), a stirring paddle (*kaineva*) and three hourglass-shaped drums (*kaisosau, katunenia*). Two *mwali* armshells and two *soulava* necklaces can also be seen in the background, together with a decorated lime spatula (*kena*).

Tomdebi, a carver and a kula man, explained how in former times these *tokwalu* were made in Kiriwina and circulated all over the Massim. (b) And beyond, like the lime spatulas (*kena*) from the Black Collection at the Buffalo Museum of Science (see Chapter 3). *Kena* are probably the most conspicuous *tokwalu* in and out of the Massim since first contact (see Beran 1999).
Figure 1.9: (a), (c): Tokwalu for sale at Ela Beach craft market in Moresby: meku bowls (fish, turtles, seashells), ebony walking sticks and kapwagega (fish with open mouths). (b) A Virgin Mary sculpture carved by Samson, Bawai hamlet (see Chapter 4). (d) A model yam-house (liku), a popular carving among tourists. (e) An ebony model canoe carved by Labagula Gai from Moligilagi hamlet, Yalumgwa. “A canoe where nobody paddles doesn’t go anywhere. Let it be a warning to our leaders,” was Labagula Gai’s comment on his tokwalu (see Appendix C).
Chapter 2
An axe, an ethnographer and a book: reversing anthropology and making culture in the Trobriand Islands

While in the one hand these agencies [missionaries, colonial administration and traders] constituted an attack upon the traditional society, they were, on the other hand, major factors acting as catalysts in providing a new set of relationships with the outside world (...) new goods and services from outside have all become factors providing environmental means of interrelatedness for new sets of social relations.” (Kasaipwalova 1975a: 16)

This chapter presents Roy Wagner’s notion of “reverse anthropology” as a particularly suitable interpretive framework for understanding certain instances of present-day life in the Trobriand Islands from a local standpoint. The chapter looks at how Trobriand practices switch around anthropology’s analytic flow, moving from conventional western theory to conventionalising local praxis. I use an axe and a book, two idiosyncratic objects which serve as apt examples of modern change in Papua New Guinea. The actions taking place around these two objects illustrate how Trobrianders interpret their lifeworld through the adoption and adaption of elements from the industrialised west. I argue that the Trobriand take on modernity and social change can be seen as an inventive effort from a Melanesian perspective, acting as a bridge between seemingly incommensurate categories often resolved in the domain of material production and circulation. Demographic pressure and the expansion of capitalism have made Trobrianders more dependent on cash and store goods. Intruding exogenous elements have also called for creative acts validating the recent assemblages resulting from increased social mobility.

Departing from Euroamerican assumptions that subsume Trobriand objects into compartmentalised familiar categories (art, culture), this section turns to a more inclusive Melanesian perspective based on the relational attributes of local knowledge practices. Grounded in an effort to experience the field from the Trobriand side and convey a sense
of what fieldwork was like in the Trobes, the chapter explores present-day materialisations in Kiriwina, not as Eurocentric theoretical contextualisation but as a native ongoing project concerned with the redefinition of new tropes through local practice.

2.1 “This is not an axe, and it needs filing”

At the very beginning of my fieldwork in the island of Kiriwina I bought an axe for my adoptive father Camillus. It was a steel axe with a yellow-and-blue plastic and rubber handle. I am no lumberjack but to me this was a beautiful object, its beauty also a sign of its excellence. Indeed, when I bought it at the hardware store in Alotau, the dusty capital of the Milne Bay Province, Steven Milamala, a Trobriander I had just met on board of the MV Warren, confirmed how fine a tool this was: “You should get it, this is a good axe.” Incidentally, and while talking of getting the axe for my dad, Steven also asked me if I could get him one of Malinowski’s books.29

Back in the village of Kutoila, Camillus agreed: “A good axe, it’s very beautiful.” Maybe this is why I could not make sense of what I saw next. A couple of days later I surprised Camillus as he was intent on splitting the brand-new axe handle in two with a screwdriver and a rock.

- Why?
He too surprised me: “The axe needs filing.”

I sat next to Camillus and tried to learn why a “beautiful axe” needed to be broken in order to get sharpened. “You dimdims are very clever. You invented plenty good things, extraordinary things like airplanes and trucks and so. And steel axes too. It’s very good.”
- If it’s so good why are you breaking it, I asked him. So you can file it better?
“You see, you are very good at making axe-heads but you don’t know how to make handles. Maybe because you don’t use the axes yourselves, you just sell them to other people.”

Camillus carried on with his explanation: “When we get some dimdim objects sometimes we make them better, Trobriand style. This handle is no good. It doesn’t fit my hands

29 Steven’s was not the only request to “repatriate” Malinowski’s ethnographies. During my fieldwork, several other Trobrianders asked me if I could bring back his books.
nicely. If I use it like it is now, it doesn’t ‘know’ if I’m right or left-handed. I won’t work well with it. I will get tired very soon.”

- That makes sense, I said.

“I’m going to carve a wooden handle like the one I have in my old axe,” Camillus continued. “You see, when you hold the axe it feels right, it has a good grip; when you swing the axe its weight stays well-balanced and if you’re right-handed like me you’ll see how well it cuts, you will not get tired.”

- I see. And that was literally all I could do. Because I normally do not use axes, I could not “know.” I therefore tried to move away from the phenomenological experience of axe wielding and dig more into the aesthetic-symbolic realm of the things that “mean” something and can therefore be described, talked and written about. The realm of anthropology, that is.

- And what are these carved designs in the handle, Camillus? What do they mean?

“Oh these ones? They don’t mean anything, it’s just a decoration, like my signature, so I know it’s my axe and people don’t steal it. If somebody borrows my axe I can always claim it back, because it says it’s mine.”

- Right. So why did you tell me you were filing it when you are actually just replacing the handle? Do you also need a new handle to sharpen the axe?

“Oh no, you can file it even with this handle on. Or later. But the axe will need filing anyway. I will do that as well, because you dimdins sell them blunt at the store, they are useless.”

As a matter of fact, the blade-sharpening was done later on, not by Camillus but by another villager, Terrence. One afternoon, Terrence spent a few hours filing the axe. He then took it to the eastern coral cliffs, where the last remaining big trees on deforested central Kiriwina are, and came back with two posts for the new hut he was building in the nearby village of Karidakula.

“It’s a good axe,” Terrence said. Incidentally, I never saw the axe again, but one of Terrence’s posts ended up being used for the house we were struggling to build for me in Kutoila.
2.2 Art and artefacts

Having come to Kiriwina to study the famed Trobriand tokwalu, I caught myself musing over this metal axe, its deconstruction and subsequent re-assemblage, its apparent dematerialisation and its final transformation, from axe to post. Yet the Trobriand carvings I saw in my first weeks in the islands were still as eye-catching as the ones I had seen in museum collections. Or even more. According to Trobrianders, the forms of contemporary tokwalu are ever more captivating, original and well-executed (see Chapter 4). Besides, once in the field, the centrality of the tokwalu trade remained evident. Objects produced in Kiriwina still circulate around the Massim and beyond, nationally and internationally, via a heterogeneous network made of the temporary aggregation of local carvers, tourists, collectors, public servants, art galleries, missionaries and anthropologists. Why, then, start with a mere, hardly-decorated axe handle? I offer two reasons.

Firstly, because “tourist art” and “airport art” do not define a clear-cut domain of society other than in the academic vacuum established by a syllabus in social anthropology or art history. As it became evident to me, in (Trobriand) real life the western idioms of “art” and “the material” do not exhaust the density of the social framework of which they are an active part (cf. De Largy Healy 2008; Denner 2010). If this presumption is true – that tourist art is not a separate and isolating sphere of cognition, but rather one more element in the fluid network of social relations spreading beyond Kiriwina – then I have to assume that any object (an axe) and any body (Camillus, a non-carver) are as relevant contributions to that network as the extraordinary carvings and their extraordinary authors. In other words, branding an object “art” or “artefact” is just a methodological parsing that does not necessarily reflect inherently-Trobriand compartmentalisations. As an arbitrary and excluding operation it can be countered both conceptually (with contrasting ideas and opinions) and materially (through objects and their manipulation). Eurocentric intellectual categorisations are therefore reversible through local processes of intellectual and material analysis, as we shall see next. Secondly – lest we forget – the axe is the primary tool with which to obtain wood for carvings and with which every carving begins to take shape. Whatever it is we might be tempted to put under the tag of “Trobriand art,” it is invariably the result of chopping a tree with an axe, an act that has consequences beyond the traffic of artefacts. This axe was a beginning which also marked the very beginning of my fieldwork. It was
the most familiar object I had thus far seen, and one that signalled the most mysterious action I had witnessed so far.

2.3 Revelations: to see, to know, to understand and to explain (material) culture

My work in the field – I had assumed – was to register data and to make sense of unfamiliar situations involving Trobriand objects. I had to understand how the interplay of people and things gave shape to social landscapes that were intrinsically Trobriand and, for that reason, needed anthropological elucidation. This undertaking included asking questions, taking notes and, eventually, distilling the whole concoction of data into articles, perhaps even books, as my Trobriand family expected me to do. In fact, for many Trobrianders a book on Kiriwina is the compulsory outcome of this interplay of people and things. Visiting *dimdim* anthropologists need to live among Trobrianders and put part of that life in their books. That is the anthropologist’s job. Trobrianders have seen a number of anthropology books and they know some of the *dimdims* who wrote them. They know the books sometimes contain forgotten myths and coveted magic formulas. In fact, Steven Milamala – as I learned a long time after our trip on the MV Warren – was after the “old magic spells. It’s for my garden,” he confided to me. Malinowski’s books contain these things. Trobrianders know books also contain fellow Trobrianders: ancestors, relatives, friends, people from their village or from other places and times. In the eyes of many locals, the books are simultaneously an index of *dimdim* knowledge about Trobrianders and a repository of people. Indeed, Trobrianders often asked me if I was going to “put them in my book” (*sitana yegu olopola m’buki*, literally “[will there be] a little bit of me inside your book”).

But before I could put a little bit of anybody inside a book, I had to learn about the unfamiliar Trobriands. Ordering and normalising the extraordinary is a return-trip to inspiration. Departing from the well-known, it presupposes labelling things as non-ordinary first and then grounding them in familiar spaces. A bit like Camillus taking an “extraordinary” *dimdim* axe and giving it a recognisable shape, suitable to his purposes. In my case, this course of action implied an epistemological colonisation of categories. Indeed, could the familiar categories of “the aesthetic” and “the symbolic” within the material be used to translate Trobriand tropes, much like explanatory tools adapt themselves to new situations through the expansion of contextual/conceptual frames? Asking about the designs on the handle was my way of making my interpretive axe
sharper to cut through concepts, metaphors and images in search of meaning. It was also a move imposed by academic necessity, since I needed to “know” and to “understand” – and ultimately also to “define” and to “explain” – processes and products in the vicinity of Trobriand material culture, rather than “to feel” and “to use” these material objects myself. Hence, I first focused on the carved designs of the handle. This choice betray a western concern with what are believed to be two universal categories susceptible to cross-cultural referencing. Generally speaking, aesthetics allegedly hold the key to understanding how authors and interpreters perceive and conceive their world (the measure of what is “right,” “beautiful” or “better”).\textsuperscript{30} And the realm of symbolism heralds powerful insights for anthropologists, as symbols are part of the ductile stuff that constitutes culture. For instance, the signs and symbols carved in kula canoes are said to be visual and material interpretations and renditions of Trobriand myths upon which the Trobriand ethos stands (Scoditti 1977, 1980, Campbell 2002). One of these symbols, a stylised representation of a butterfly called \textit{beba}, features prominently in Trobriand lore. The \textit{beba} is part of the kula founding myth of the flying canoe of Kudayuri (Malinowski 1922: 311-321) and its metamorphosis denotes the cyclical nature of life, death and resurrection in the Massim, as well as the generation of knowledge through different transformations or performances (Scoditti 1983: 268-269, 1980: 78-81, 109).

Yet the extraction of meaning from symbols is a much more complicated operation than the use of the term “insight” – with its connotations of an automatically-accessed revelation – might lead us to think. In his long-term endeavour to develop a universal principle of signification, Roy Wagner proposes to look at meaning as a particular type of perception (1986: 13). With symbols as the necessary mediators we use to perceive the world, the act of understanding is achieved through a dialectic enacted between two spaces: that of microcosmic, individual perception and its expanded, conventionalised collectivity. The object we perceive – or image, in Wagner’s terms – is a “point metaphor” that needs to be apprehended in its relation to the interpretation we make of it – the “frame metaphor” or the elements that make up the object/image (ibid. pp. 29-31). This dialectic lays its own tracks, so to speak, when it is resolved in what Wagner calls “obviation” by incorporating newly invented symbols into the all-binding conventionalised frame we refer to as “culture,” the ethos of a society. Obviation is the “dialectic resolution of mediation” (ibid. p. xx). In short, understanding Trobriand

\textsuperscript{30} See Ingold 1996 for a critical debate of the universality of aesthetics.
symbols is useful because Trobriand symbols condense Trobriandness – the essence of the Trobriand world.

Or do they? In this case the wooden axe handle apparently did not, for it was devoid of an intrinsically-Trobriand symbolic and iconographic meaning, despite the designs being essentially Trobriand (made by a Trobriander in the Trobriand Islands). How to attribute (symbolic) meaning to a design that has none, according to its author? Revealing the mystery of meaning is one of anthropology’s most problematic traits. The quest for an exegetical authority centred in meaning risks wrapping discussions about materialisations in abstract commentaries, taking the focus away from the “thing” itself and leaving the foundations of any analytic project inattentive to many other aspects of images or objects that go beyond significance. On a more epistemological plane it also entails a deceptively heuristic appropriation of knowledge. It presupposes that the explanation of a symbol (its translation) and my understanding of it is the same as that symbol, putting the three (the symbol, its explanation and my understanding) at the same qualitative level. A reputedly straightforward equivalence that flattens out the nuances of allegory and the creative force of alternative interpretations. Not to mention the process of perceiving, often reduced to an unequivocal final product.

In Kiriwina, master carvers are creators of images who need to “acquire” designs/symbols (mauna, bird, bug, also “animal” in general) in order to be able to understand their full implications and to make them “work.” As we shall see below in more detail, a carved design is not just a symbol that means something. It can also represent the special relationship between a master and his pupil or a patron and a craftsman. In fact, a symbol is also a matter of hard-earned rights. Mauna are first visualised in magically-induced dreams and then apprehended, constituting a material link between what we westerners would call the imagined and the real. Trobrianders would say “he holds magic, he drank (magic) water” (e yosi megwa, e mom sopi) or “he knows carving” (i nukwali tatai tokwalu), alluding to the esoteric knowledge required to master mauna. The right to carve a given symbol is determined by a lengthy initiation

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31 To this date, carvers in the Trobriand Islands are exclusively male.
32 Megwa indicates magic spells in general whereas sopi is a specific corpus of magic that facilitates the acquisition of the esoteric knowledge and the capacity required to carve. Sopi suggests something akin to a state of mind, some sort of magical inspiration that guides the carvers to produce the “right” carving. Sopi means literally “water” or any other liquid substance for which there is not a local name (like petrol or beer). The association is effected by the fact that initiation to this type of knowledge involves the drinking of “medicated” or be-spelled water (see Scoditti 1982, Campbell 1978).
process that in some cases can also imply a particular type of continued payment (*pokala*)
the initiate gives to his master. The process also requires that alimentary restrictions and
other taboos be respected (see Scoditti 1990: 52-53). Adopting a symbol and executing its
representation in a woodcarving is a long journey into conceptual and material
cognizance. A symbol is therefore first dreamed and then visualised and tentatively
executed over an extended period of time, until the carver “knows” (*kateta*) the symbol.

Yet the *mauna* are also linked to the ancestors that first appropriated and transmitted
them, signifying ways of relating to an environment inclusive of past, present and future
associations. Throughout their existence, carved emblems draw in not only those who
appropriate them but also those who comment on them, interpret them, and those upon
which the symbol acts its efficacy (or lack of it). The designs have an ongoing life of
which many entities participate. The relational fabric of symbols in Kiriwina mirrors the
communal nature of perception as a process of creation and exchange. Assuming that a
symbol equals a meaning or stands for something else folds up this whole process and
negates the hardships endured (in terms of innovative efforts, physical deprivations or
social removal) and the personal qualities required to produce the symbol. And “form”
and “meaning” certainly do not use up all the potential of the design.

This reduction not only lessens emblems, personal merits and interpersonal dealings, it
also reduces the dynamic relations between people and materials. Carving a motif or a
shape, even when performed by a non-expert carver like Camillus, can also be an act that
denotes a particularly sound *feeling* of the wood on a phenomenological level (the visible
trace of the unmediated relation between the body and a material); a type of tactile
knowledge hard to understand through words, let alone convey in a book.\(^{33}\) Revealing the
mystery behind a form is also a way of reducing and containing the potency of the
emblem and of the act of craftsmanship, captured in exegetical comments, packed away
in photographic reproductions or drawings and reductively interpreted in the pages of
anthropology books.

What happens when the anthropologist presents this translation as a given (Scoditti
1977; Campbell 2002)? Or when the relations surrounding the symbol (relations in the
broadest sense) are collapsed into uncritical assumptions about the other’s knowledge?

\(^{33}\) A point cogently made by Marchand in his ethnographic study of embodied cognition among
British woodworkers. Bodily understandings and practices (such as that enacted in woodcarving)
are not “amenable to description or explanation in propositional thought or language…without
being impoverished in the ‘translation’ between one cognitive domain and the other” (2010: 104).
And to what extent does this enterprise conceal a one-way appropriation of alterity, a “resymbolization,” an operation that “has effectively vivisected the native meanings in the attempt to understand them…transforming their symbols into ours” (Wagner 1981: 30; also see Bell & Geismar 2009: 13)? Indeed, is a symbol explained (by me) still “Trobriand” or has it become *dimdim*? Wagner’s dialectic between the individual perception of the world and its collective conventionalisation accounts for how new meaning is established, but it calls for further elucidation when trying to substantiate whose world it is – theirs or ours – and who is conventionalising it. In other words, making Trobriand material culture familiar might as well involve misrepresenting it. As an anthropologist writing about carvings this seems inescapable. As locals who make things for themselves and for westerners (and “thing” here can also be Camillus’s responses to my questions, things-answers), the Trobriand Islanders’ predicament is similar to that of the anthropologist – albeit not willingly so. Aletta Biersack’s acute observation, that “foreign meanings can acquire local significance only in relation to prior understandings” (2005: 152) underscores the indispensability of the taxonomic precedent. Her statement acknowledges the absorption of novelty within conventional schemes, intertwining meanings, relations and objects from local and translocal socio-cultural contexts. The islanders stretch the past to comprehend the future. Theirs, though, is an imposed choice due to the “political and economic expansion of European society in the nineteenth century” (the “sustained, cumulative culture shock” effected by colonialism, Wagner 1981: 31). More or less attenuated, cultural, economic and religious homogenisation forces its way into Kiriwina and Trobrianders, too, are compelled to make sense of alterity in their own terms. How, then, do we assess the symmetry of these engagements? Or to put it otherwise, given that I can translate, appropriate and ultimately invent my by-now-distorted subject when writing about it, the question is not so much how “Trobriand” Trobriand material culture is but rather how Trobrianders transform the western world into their own. Unravelling these patterns of interaction between Kiriwina and the industrialised west will show that carving and writing might not be such different ways of making culture after all.

2.4 Straight understanding = reversing anthropology?

Having read about Trobriand symbols made me think I knew the indisputable values they conveyed because I had learned Trobriandness in books. In fact, I *had* Trobriandness in
books. I could interpret the designs in the axe handle not according to what Camillus thought they were but in relation to what I had seen and learned in those books. Yet beyond symbolic interpretations and the western intellectual appropriation of Trobriand categories, I was still confronted by the conceptual and material transformation of an object into something I could not quite fathom. Like meaning, actions too can be considered as ways of perceiving the world (Ingold 2000). The carved designs in the haft were not Trobriand emblems. Neither did the Swedish-made blade represent Trobriandness. Yet the act of making a wooden haft and fitting it with a brand new steel axe-head was, in itself, an allusive event denoting a legendary Trobriand propensity for skilful ingenuity and creativity. Much like the act of adopting and adapting cricket was, at the time, “An Ingenious Response to Colonialism” (see Leach & Kildea 1973), a creative act of appropriation of otherness (and resistance to appropriation). An appropriation not unlike that performed by us anthropologists during fieldwork, deploying our “frame metaphors” to understand and explain unfamiliar things. And, in the process, making them “our” things and therefore more familiar. Following that logic, a woodcarving is not a finite product laden with meaningful signs. Rather, it is a substantial and symbolic process loaded with meaningful intentions: a cultural agenda of sorts concerned with defining a type of Trobriandness in connection with the western world as it is understood in Kiriwina. In fact, Camillus had stressed how what “you dimdims” do is the opposite of what “we Trobrianders” do, seemingly drawing a line between two differentiated worlds.

To me, this axe was the material embodiment of a local analytical tool by which to explore Trobrianders’ relations with the capitalist west, a solid witness of Trobriand performance and practice, also part of the stuff that constitutes culture. As such, Camillus’ answers were particularly telling. He first replied: “The axe needs filing.” His answer was indeed a non-answer, a way of explaining to me that my question was not the right one. What truly matters here is that the axe is blunt because dimdims did not bother filing it; they do not use the axes themselves and are not in touch with the people that do. Was he offering me a parable, an anthropological explanation of sorts about dimdims and their ignorance in axe matters? If Camillus’ action was a material and intellectual appropriation of a consumer good made in Europe, his answer to my question could be seen as an attempt at making dimdim culture intelligible in Trobriand terms. That the axe needs filing would be obvious to anybody living in a place where the producers of an object are still attached to the results of their labour to the point of “becoming” the object
in some cases, and immune to the fetishistic qualities of the priced commodity. If you make an axe that is no good for cutting, it is not an axe – yet. Furthermore, Camillus “assembles” a new axe by bringing together other persons and other things: now the object cannot be understood without Terrence, the posts, the building of huts and the relations that unfolded from Camillus’ action. As Marilyn Strathern has pointed out (1988), objects in Melanesia can exist only within relationships (and are, sometimes, relationships) and cannot be conceived of as freestanding artefacts outside these relationships. For me instead, the Swedish axe was a store-bought commodity. I knew nothing about the people who made it, but its price was an index of its quality notwithstanding the fact that it was blunt.

A Trobriand axe like the one that was fabricated in Kutoila is not a demarcated object. It is rather an occasion to spread relations past the confines of products and production and *dimdim* and Trobrianders. As these relations are deployed, new balances in their categorisations can also be achieved. Undoubtedly, labelling Trobriand interactions with Euroamericans as “ingenious” is too simplistic. It does not account for the modes of evaluative reversibility locals possess in their relations with Euroamerican anthropologists in particular and with western culture in general. Crafting a “real” axe out of a *dimdim* one is a Trobriand way of “making” Trobriand (material) culture, not so much because it is culture made in the Trobriands, but because it is culture that becomes meaningful for Trobrianders. They can do it and they can do something with it.

In a seminal chapter in *The Invention of Culture*, Roy Wagner coined a much-overlooked theoretical construct that challenges western conceptual determinism on alterity. Wagner called this type of Melanesian engagement with “modern industrial civilisation” *reverse anthropology* (1981: 31-34, my emphasis).34 Forced to make sense of the practices of the invading colonial powers, the people of Melanesia reduced (metaphorised) concepts such as *capitalist modes of production, labour, commodities or surplus value* into the symbol “cargo.” Obviously “cargo” is a metaphor Melanesians use to represent life, just as we anthropologists reduce Melanesians’ complex relationships – their life – to “culture” and its paradigmatic subparts (kinship, politics, art, etc.). Far from the heyday of colonial occupation, but perhaps not too far from a colonialist mindset, we

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34 Kirsch (2006) has engaged – only to some extent though – with Wagner’s concept of reverse anthropology and its theoretical and methodological repercussions in modern-day PNG. In his study, Kirsch reports instances of indigenous analysis and their creative interactions with Europeans in redefining their environment in the Fly River area.
still occupy native categories by labelling some of their practices with slightly patronising nouns like “ingeniousness”. This reduction is in itself a transformation we consider necessary to make sense. Not surprisingly, it is all about making sense. I was trying to apprehend the meaning of things-Trobriand by conceptualising symbols, in my view, the epitome of culture. In doing so, I was “creating” my own view of Trobriandness. I based this view on the superimposition of western referential frames upon the elements I had singled out as those that make up society in Kiriwina (the acts of Trobrianders like Camillus). Looking for a symbol that stands for a myth or a ritual practice is, in anthropological terms, a reasonable way of establishing cross-cultural comparisons and building universally valid paradigms. Camillus instead was, to some extent, doing the same from the opposite standpoint: he was trying to create his object by materialising his own interpretation of western culture in Trobriand terms and adapting it to its new trajectory in Kiriwina (see Appadurai 1986).

In fact, I argue that Camillus was “interpreting” the axe by creating a new object, drawing on his personal experience of how things are done in Kiriwina. Because production in Melanesia is the symbolisation of personal relationships, as Wagner has it (1981: 24-25), this required that he complete the axe adjusting its characteristics and shifting its position from a commodity to a personally re-invented object. He first appropriated it (by fitting-in his handle and attuning the axe to his bodily performance), then he “signed” it, and finally he rooted the new artefact in a network that included Terrence, allowing the axe to move along this network and engender new relational possibilities along the way. The new axe entered the Trobriand world and helped to remake it at the same time. Admittedly, when Camillus said “we make it better” it was not a figure of speech: Terrence was the one who filed the axe. Despite having Camillus’ signature on it (or maybe because it had the signature), the new object was circulated and re-appropriated in Kiriwina. Did this act perpetuate new obligations, new relations? Is transforming an object also transforming the ways of understanding and relating to things? I now turn to notions of personhood and agency in order to elucidate how relations between people and between people and objects become meaningful for those involved when new objects are generated.
2.5 From the symbolic to the material: agency and Melanesian personhood

In my first months in Kiriwina the world of meanings remained more peripheral than the world of the material: objects were there to be grasped, held and traced. Meanwhile, the language barrier kept concepts, metaphors or casual conversations in darkness. Save, of course, for the knowledge compiled by anthropological ancestors like Malinowski et al., carvers of cultural frame metaphors stored away in books. To my amusement, Trobrianders desired my anthropology books. I, on the other hand, often found myself dissatisfied with them, incapable as they were of unravelling practical, everyday issues like that of the Swedish axe. Trobrianders though were not in search of meanings in the books. Unlike me, they didn’t need textual explanations for apparently-contradictory actions (“Books are things to which we can relate, things with people in them” was a recurrent explanation).

In the Trobes, seemingly discrepant concepts (like “Trobriandness” vs. “dimdimness”) were often resolved within our daily engagement with corporeal things (see Miller 1998: 19). Even more so when these engagements were immediate and the corporeal things were “meaningful.” In the academic context of exegetical unpacking, bringing together symbolic translation and material accountability as interpretive keys to carving in Kiriwina promised to uncover key aspects of the changing present-day Trobriand lifeworld. At first I had thought I could begin to learn more about Trobriand culture by “cracking” the “secret” meaning of carved designs in a wooden handle. Yet, Camillus declared with disarming sincerity that the abstract pattern of the handle meant nothing in itself. What if the corporeal thing in question was an assemblage of non-meaningful elements (a steel blade, a carved wooden handle)? If the axe did not want to mean something, rather than forcing conjectural hypotheses about its aesthetic, iconological or semantic values, I thought it more convenient to let the object do something instead. In anthropology this is achieved with a most fitting ontological concept, that of agency. Seemingly inert objects have the capacity to do “stuff” by virtue of a continuous feed between the cognitive and the material, the separation of which is not a given but a dualistic European construct rooted in Cartesian metaphysics. This feed is in fact a

35 Geismar reports a comparable concern with the ethnographic oeuvre of John Layard in Malakula (2009). Similarly to my Trobriand example, Geismar points at the materiality of Layard’s monograph and claims that the potency of the artefact-book lays in its capacity to “materialize[s] the past into the present” (ibid. p. 200). As Graeber rightly argues (see quote Chapter 1), Trobrianders share their interest for their own things (books on Trobriand stuff included) with those who study them. See Riles 2006.
relational capacity that ascribes agency to non-human entities, either directly (in Latour’s popular model, see Latour 1993) or indirectly (as posited by Gell 1998). Lack of “meaning” in an object, therefore, should be no hindrance to the anthropological project of comprehension and explanation as long as agency can be inferred from the object. Furthermore, non-representational decorative patterns are always functional: Camillus “acquires” the axe by decorating the handle, his acquisition being a temporal possession (or “unfinished business,” Gell 1998: 80) achieved through a partial apprehension of the object. The residual power of the object remains thus unbound potential, subject to new interpretations and appropriations, furthering the renewal of relations enacted through exchange and communal actions of elucidation, as we shall see next (ibid. p. 74-75, 79-81).

These are the concepts I had read in anthropology books. In the wake of Euroamerican creative exegesis (or ingeniousness), the continuous, complex and “promiscuous” relations (Thomas 1991: 208) established between people, ideas and corporeal things seemed theoretically and methodologically appropriate in Melanesia, where artefacts are extensions of the person as they embody social relations at their origin (Battaglia 1983). This view adheres to the principles outlined in the New Melanesian Ethnography (NME, see Josephides 1991), claiming that detached personhood and relational interaction are paradigmatic traits of all Melanesian societies past and present. However, the latter temporal clause can seem questionable when we extrapolate it from the theoretical context of the book and we relocate it in Kiriwina in 2010. Do people in the Trobriand Islands still act as if part of a person could travel in a conch shell exchanged in the kula, or is this another Euroamerican frame metaphor, obviated in the academic space of the ethnographic present? Even if we admit this position unquestionably, old shell valuables with names and ancient trajectories that link them to ancestors and founding myths are not Swedish axe-heads on a Trobriand wooden haft. Agency – the capacity of an agent to influence others – can be a general property of any type of object. But the extended and partible personhood embedded in artefacts advocated by the New Melanesian Ethnography becomes problematic if we try to apply it to just any type of object, even more so if it is a western commodity in the Trobriand Islands. Melanesian objects embody social relations at their origin, but Euroamerican artefacts might not.

Mark Mosko reasonably points to a possible shortcoming of this paradigm, namely that it essentialises Melanesians as dividuals in opposition to western individuals, making it
difficult to introduce variables that account for social change without clashing with the prescribed model of antithetical personhood (Mosko 2010: 215; see also Foster 1995). What the New Melanesian Ethnography proposes is a rigid divide that would not allow the coterminous existence of dimdimness and Trobriandness. Not so much because of the incommensurability of cultural symbols (re-symbolisation would always be a possible solution to that) but because of the impossibility of establishing continuing, meaningful relations through objects with no subjectivity. Yet the dimdim axe lived corporally in the Trobriand relational network, allegedly appropriated by Camillus, in fact gone missing after Terrence used it but only after it had “generated” a pill for my house. Now, that the western ethos is not universally ingrained in some sort of excluding individualism and that the reality of personhood is de facto lived through interactions with the other is not entirely unfamiliar to Euroamericans. Before Mosko and others contemplated the issue, any reader of Pirandello’s novel One, No one and One Hundred Thousand (2007) could have observed that for themselves. Ultimately, we are all made of the hundred thousand (more or less) visions people have of us through our common interactions. Thus, the relational fragmentation of the self is no Melanesian exclusive. It is not even a postmodern creation as much as it is a post-humanist realisation (LiPuma 1998).

Likewise, constraining Melanesian personhood into a continuous negation of the bounded individual is a straw man argument. The Trobrianders’s dividuality encompasses the individual as one of the potential actors in a relational network. This individual is only so as part of a connected nexus; when operating her/his choices, s/he can decide to exclude others so as to concentrate in a fraction of this relationality. This operation sanctions a practice of individuation as opposed to a status of bound individuality. The former denotes the temporary pre-eminence of a person or an object placed at the junction of two or more paths of exchange over the relational possibilities (involving people and objects) present at that intersection. A restricting provisional choice, in sum, that momentarily compacts the otherwise extendable network of personal interactions. Individuation becomes a type of materialisation. Individuality, instead, would imply an unrealistic segregation from the consequences effected by the acts and choices of

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36 Ingold puts forward the very evocative suggestion that people and things are equally made of lines, thus advocating that we are all networked via common threads– albeit in different ways (2007a).
others. Part of the classic literature on the Massim conceives individual spheres of action working in competitive opposing pairs, like the gendered domains of kula (male individuals acting for themselves) and women’s mortuary exchanges (female individuals acting for the matriclan). Individuation enhances the self’s perspective by choosing one link over a set of possibilities and therefore momentarily keeping other relations out of their path. This is noticeable in the Trobriand penchant for competition, staged at many levels beyond the specific context of exchange. In these instances, individuation becomes an index of the temporary pre-eminence of one fraction of the dividual (the individual) taking over the rest. There are some calculated cases when the dividual reduces her/his relational personhood to the minimum, searching the exclusive benefit of the self. One could argue that competition enhances relationality, yet it does so by intensifying the qualities of one “temporary individual” against another. The Trobriand dancer who “puts” magic (kaimwasila) on their body to attract those of the opposite sex is purposefully cutting out – although only momentarily – all other potential relations from their perspective, as an eventual triumph over the rest will be only theirs. Paradoxically, this triumph will have as an immediate consequence the interaction with the seduced other and the establishment of another network of relations with another set of people and things. The temporary attempt to contain individuals and objects is not an absolute, continuous quality but rather a potential for relationality played out differently in different times and places and from different perspectives (see also Viveiros de Castro 1998). Yet, even then Trobrianders do not become bounded, impermeable individuals as much as they try to restrict their porosity in their relations with people and objects in a given situation.

Some essentialising viewpoints of the NME might be seen as impassable barriers by scholars, but they are less so when faced with the reality of everyday practice. In fact, what is essentialising is the elevation of such a divide to a cultural convention without considering the potential of further transformations: people create and invent precisely to knock down these conventions to make what we call culture (or life), as Wagner (1981) rightly argues. Trobrianders move between permeable categories by resolving contradictions in their own terms through transformative acts and the (re)creation of

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37 Mosko and Damon (2005) have articulated this partibility in terms of fractality, where the dividual as a whole encompasses the individual who also and irremediably carries within her/himself a fraction of the whole as a smaller-scale version of it.

38 The kula has often been portrayed as a domain of male individual freedom (see Weiner 1983; Scoditti 1983), something that may not be entirely accurate (see Chapter 5).
objects. Despite not claiming directly any sort of “artefactual” personhood for his axe, Camillus stated that he had to make the haft “know” that he is right-handed, synchronising an alien object with his body. In conceiving appropriation as re-creation, it is not only the object itself that undergoes changes. Its properties are attached to those of the person, thus affecting the whole relational chain that constitutes the referential frame. I now move on to explore the particularities of these relations and how they inform Trobriand ways of knowing.

2.6 Transforming western objects into Trobriand knowledge

It was Annette Weiner’s insightful contention that Trobrianders adopt and adapt foreign things and make them theirs: “The resiliency and spirit of Trobrianders to non-traditional elements in their lives and their ability to take what they want from these elements and to reshape them into what becomes uniquely ‘theirs’” (Weiner 1982: 73). My question is whether what we identify as a “type” of personhood (western individualism) is one of the elements Weiner mentions, and if so, how do Trobrianders reshape it (if at all). Following Wagner’s logic of “re-symbolization” (see above), one wonders how much of the partible personhood tenet can be considered the recurrent western projection of ontological constructs cast upon changing (and changed) realities, as once observed in Melanesia. If taken uncritically, the (not-so) New Melanesian Ethnography can become an abstract contextualisation that will end up being applied unselectively to any situation taking place in Melanesia, becoming some sort of geographic metanarrative. Thomas (1991) partly circumvents the problem by grounding Melanesian relational creativity on the social relations produced through the ongoing narratives and practices effected by contact with the colonial and postcolonial other (what Foster has dubbed as New Melanesian History, see Foster 1995). Other than Thomas and Foster (ibid.), alternative criticisms of the essentialism of the NME model include those of LiPuma 1998 and Scott 2007. For my part, in place of the binary opposition “individual-dividual” I propose to tackle the issue by considering different degrees of partibility of the self. From a contemporary Melanesian perspective, individualism is an epiphenomenon of the fractal person: it is the latter that has the potential to contain the former. Personhood is always bounded to some extent, but it is so within the larger frame of the extendable and partible self. The measure of how permeable personhood can be in its associations with other things and other people is given by changing contexts. People (or the circumstances) sanction the intensity
of the relations and the timing of the transactions. The individual is much less so when s/he goes to live on her/his own, away from the village, and decides to reduce his interactions with others; or when s/he refuses to accept a gift. My friend Paul Pulayasi, a recently appointed young pastor in an evangelical church in the neighbouring village of Mwadaosi, calculatedly declined some prestigious presents offered by a dying old man so as to avoid furthering personal obligations: “I am now not interested in the consequences these things can bring about, I am focused on my family at the moment,” he said to me. As part of a younger generation, Paul admits to being lured by some western moral and material values as he conceives them (a model Christian family and the possibilities offered by cash, see Chapter 4). Because relations are changing and changeable it is inappropriate to impose indiviudality as a Melanesian constant, especially in instances when doing so would work against the locals’ momentary interests. People in Kiriwina operate within the variables they themselves create, adjusting their perception (the faculty of making sense or knowing) to their necessities as they go.

In acknowledging that meaning and action are forms of perception I have glossed over the media used to perceive. Symbols are images we think about, triggering creative interpretations, allegories and the production of other symbols. Yet they can also be objects we interact with. The nature of this interaction presupposes a detachment between the symbol-object on the one hand and the thinking-subject on the other. When dealing with wooden objects Camillus or the carvers establish a relation with the matter through their feeling of the wood. But is this bodily performance only made possible through the separation of matter and mind? From a Trobriand practical perspective, not quite so. To make this point clear I borrow Tim Ingold’s understanding of the world as “environment:” the world is not an accomplished juxtaposition of two separate arenas – the material and the immaterial. Instead, the world forms a dynamic continuum of spaces with its inhabitants, continually unfolding in relation to them. Ingold distinguishes three components in this lifeworld: substance, surface and medium. Substance is “more or less solid stuff,” the core of the materials that constitute part of the environment (like wood). Surfaces instead are the interfaces or contact zones between materials. The medium is the necessary element that “affords movement and perception” (Ingold 2007: 4-5). The air

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39 Ingold himself draws on James Gibson’s study *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1986). The landscape, living organisms, humans and artefacts are not made in the world but grow with it instead. I believe this is not too far away from Wagner’s perceptual dialectic of individual invention and collective convention informing each other.
we breathe is our medium and through it we hear, we touch, we see. Substances are subject to a flux of continuous transformations while the surface gives the illusion of an immobile material substance. From this perspective, there is no need to attribute a type of external agency derived from personhood to objects, as the transformative potential of objects is intrinsic in their substance. Accordingly, “the surface of every solid is but a crust, the more or less ephemeral congelate of a generative moment” (ibid. p. 7). In a world where all is material there is no question of the engagement of the mind with the matter. Reshaping a commodity is not the action (symbolic or corporeal) of a subject upon an object but the interaction of two subjects. By contending that “things are in life rather than life is in things” (ibid. p. 12), Ingold cuts the Gordian knot of bound human individuality as opposed to extended personhood in artefacts. As far as this ontology can also be applied to humans, the body and the person are “one and the same” (ibid. p. 4) and things are not the incarnation of mental representations but the generative rearrangement of changing substances. The substance of the human body is also ever-changing (while the surface appears to tend to fixity). Its fluctuations are the consequence of the many relations and exchanges that shape it up (like the gendered fluids that contribute to the formation of the body in the Massim and in other parts of mainland Papua New Guinea, see Battaglia 1990, Mosko 1985). This does not depart from the “relationalist” properties of Melanesian sociality. To the contrary, it reinforces the importance of relational networks while asserting the possibility of innovation within and with them.  

The designs in Camillus’ carved wooden handle might not have been the butterfly (beba) symbolising the transformation and circulation of people and knowledge in the Massim (Scoditti 1983, see above). “They don’t mean anything, they are just my signature, so I know this is my axe. Some people just write their names,” my Trobriand father had said. Yet Camillus’s transformation of the axe was a substantially creative endeavour in at least two ways: (1) the act of carving a new haft consonant with his body was a way of appropriating the axe as an extension of his body. Not as the reification of the self in an object, but as generative movement transmitting the flux of material knowledge into another substance and back. If there is a continued harmony between the new axe and Camillus’ body it is so because he has informed the shape of the handle as

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40 Back then I had an unconfirmed feeling that meaning and verbal exegesis were not as relevant as the material elements themselves and their agency. Yet the predominance of agency over meaning – if so – does not preclude any interpretive efforts, also from Trobrianders.
much as the shape of the handle has informed him while using it. Ingold would say that “this is a knowledge born of sensory perception and practical engagement, not of the mind with the material world” (ibid. pp. 13-14). And (2) Camillus has brought to the surface (quite literally) the object’s agency. The recesses carved on the new wooden handle sanction the mutability of the changing substance. The carved designs render visible two things: Camillus’s physical intervention and his knowledge of carving. And, lest we forget, his knowledge of Trobriand symbols or, plainly, his capacity to create. It is because the axe incorporated in its substance the potential to change that it has effectively changed. Now that the intrinsic agency of the new axe has been revealed it can do things. This makes possible the circulation of the artefact in Trobriand terms. Even if the design is no butterfly, it still works as a butterfly. The act of carving has transformed the axe, and its filing and use by a third person has put it into circulation, reinforcing existing links between Camillus and Terrence and also creating a new relation between Terrence and me.

Transforming a western commodity in the Trobriand Islands is an anthropological construction of alterity, a way to make sense of the other in your own local terms. Western objects too have a capacity to change and be changed. The metamorphosis of the axe also prompted variations in the way people relate to things. Trobrianders – like us – “know” something by (re)creating and (re)appropriating it, inserting it in a different referential network. Network here is short for Trobriand lifeworld, that continuum of space-in-the-making with its not-so-differentiated inhabitants. Clearly, the making of what we call knowledge in the west has a marked relational essence in Kiriwina. Knowledge in the Trobriand Islands is a lived practice that cannot be segregated from the act of knowing and from the people that know (or don’t know), just like the object of knowledge cannot be segregated from the relations that exist around it. This is why knowledge is so hard to pin down in terms of a bounded, definable object.\footnote{The same occurs when trying to analyse any type of narrative in Kiriwina. A story – like an event or an object – is not a finite item. It is changing, unbounded, open-ended and susceptible to collective appropriation. In fact, every narration is a movement towards appropriation, stressing the importance of the act of narrating over the essence or the object of the narrative, almost as if a story could not be a thing in itself, separated from a narrator and an audience. The potential power of the story resides in the performance. The act of narrating is a strategic deployment of some of the potential implications of telling a story in a particular way in front of a given audience at some specific moment. The essence of the story or even its accuracy are only secondary.} Interpretation is not simply a matter of translation, nor is it exclusively the anthropologist’s active task exercised upon a passive set of observed facts, more or less automatically subsumed into
her/his elucidation. Interpretation in Kiriwina is a creative act of communal proportions. People and things are entangled in the process of knowledge-creation. In this particular case, “people” – Trobrianders and anthropologists – and “things” like carved objects and written concepts. It is this relational, interpretive/creative key involving carving, writing, artefacts and books that I want to consider in more detail in the following sections.

### 2.7 Making things Trobriand through books

After several people asked me if I was going to “put some of them in my book,” I realised more clearly how inseparable knowledge is from the subjects that know and from the acts that prompt sense-making. Far from being the individual enterprise of the anthropologist or the local expert, knowing the world of the Massim is a collective undertaking, in the sense that it is validated by people acting as a group. Going back to my previous question, this realisation led me to reflect on carving and writing as ways of making culture. From a Melanesian perspective, is putting people in a book the same as putting personhood in a carving? I had Trobriandness in books and I expected the locals to have Trobriandness in Trobriand-made objects. What I did not suspect was that Trobrianders too have Trobriandness in books.

Present-day Kiriwina can be viewed as the constructed stage – or frame metaphor – where the re-ordering of the world takes place for many Trobrianders. Throughout my fieldwork, I came to consider the island as a performance ground where the encounter with foreign others was enacted by means of creative appropriations. People in Kiriwina, as we have seen, are forced to mediate between their world and the western one as parts of the latter become more intrusive into the former. Anthropologists and manufactured commodities are only two examples of these intrusions. Living at the confluence of expanding relational networks promotes social change and Trobrianders take an active role in effecting these transformations. They are indeed active mediators of change and their mediation is often, but not always, a material intervention that will eventually come to be incorporated in the frame metaphor of their lifeworld. The complex operations leading to this potentially-unrestrained entanglement of transformative actions (or “materialisation” in Bell and Geismar’s suggestive conceptualisation) highlight the creative process of blending objectivity and subjectivity as lived practice (2009: 4-6).

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42 Carving and writing are rendered by the same term in Kilivila, ginigini (see Chapter 4).
distinctive characteristic of this assemblage is given by the position of the Trobriand Islands as a contact zone. “Contact zone” not in the narrow sense of the encounter of the west and the rest, or even as a determined physical space, but instead as the indefinite surface where the “lived” Trobriand Islands merge with the “imagined” ones, including the anthropological imaginary (Clifford 1997). There are no unequivocal Trobriand Islands but many tangible and envisioned lifeworlds co-existing together. This domain of intimate proximity includes the palpable and the imaginary, the real and the wished-for, the idealised past and the ideal future. This locus is continuously inhabited by people and things that are not exclusive in their adherence to any limiting category. Binary oppositions such as Trobriand vs. dimdim, or traditional vs. modern are renegotiated in terms that seldom posit them as ontological polarities at all. Superimposed descriptions, myths, narratives and desires depict “the” Trobriand Islands in the accounts of locals, anthropologists, missionaries and travellers, and these interpretations tend to go back and forth in a non-linear way, inspiring and characterising each other. The Trobriand Islands exist through all these perspectives. They are constantly “re-invented” by all these actors and re-apprehended by consumers of the exotic other through ethnographies, films, documentaries, novels, tales and even reality shows. They are also re-apprehended by the locals that come across these perspectives and discuss and re-elaborate them in alternative ways.

The concept of reverse anthropology – as I have postulated it so far – does not account for alternative types of creative engagement with alterity not necessarily involving the continuous and invading presence of a western colonial/post-colonial other. These adopted Euroamerican perspectives, ingrained in the ethos of the Massim world, inspire a particular type of local reflexivity. Many years after Malinowski, Trobrianders have become the best anthropologists of the Massim: not only can they “carve” the west into

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43 See Tsing 2005 for an original account of how conflicting images and understandings resulting from contrasting encounters (such as that of the industrialised west with the rest) can produce hybrid narratives that generate, with time, novel and unforeseen processes of action at the confines of local-translocal contact zones.

44 The number of more or less exoticised representations of the Trobriand Islands is exceedingly high. These are just three examples I have chosen because I came across them myself not in Europe but in the Trobriand Islands: the Australian film In a Savage Land, the British reality show “Tribal Wives” (shot in Kitava in 2009) and the novel King of Kiriwina by an American WWII soldier named Gordon Saville. I only learned about the latter when a man in Kiriwina showed me his copy and asked me if I knew it: Trobrianders, too, are consumers of their portrayals by westerners.

45 Murray Groves (1956: 164) reports how a Trobriander (Lepani Watson) once stopped him in a street of Port Moresby to inform him that Malinowski and other anthropologists had
Melanesia, they are also able to “write” Melanesia into the west. At the very least, they can actively enable the task and make sense of their lifeworld, be it the received narratives of pre-contact Kiriwina or a proposed vision of how things are now, in-the-making. From the Melanesian perspective that sees the world as a relational expanse, carving and writing are interchangeable with explaining and creating. All are acts of appropriation.

The complex, undefined and non-linear connections between all these experienced lifeworlds calls for a closer analysis of the ways they are put in place. Following Wagner’s dialectic of interpretation, the anthropologist uses familiar references or frame metaphors that pertain to her/his western background to elucidate what is new to her/him. Similarly, Trobriand locals may use their own context to make sense of the *dimdim* world in their own terms, effectively reversing anthropology. Alternatively, a reconfiguration of ethnographic practices has effected new methods of dealing with indigenous ontologies from *their* perspective (see Henare et al. 2007). Consequently, Wagner suggested we should understand native meaning without making it something intrinsically ours. The question is, if anthropology considers it possible to “experience [its] subject matter directly, as alternative meaning” (1981: 30), without translating alterity to its own binding idioms, can Trobrianders too experience the western other in more direct ways?

As we have already seen, Trobrianders make sense of westerners by subsuming Euroamerican categories under Melanesian tropes, in this particular case by adapting and adopting a commodity. The “Trobriandised” axe as mediator. But Trobrianders also experience the west’s industrial capitalism and consumerism as alternative meaning. If anthropologists can renounce Euroamerican tropes and “think through things” using native referential frames, Trobrianders too can use alternative mediators. The demiurgic potential of communal relations between people and things exemplified by the axe episode has an equivalent in the collective interpretation of the Massim world carried out by Trobrianders through a seemingly unfamiliar *dimdim* artefact, the book.

### 2.8 The master carver has a book

misunderstood the system of clans and chiefs. He then produced an account he himself had typewritten to correct Malinowski’s mistakes. While in Kiriwina several people approached me with similar reports, some of which were surprisingly polished.
Shortly after witnessing the Trobriandisation of the Swedish axe, I set off to Kwebwaga, in the northern part of Kiriwina, to talk to a prominent old master carver, Yobwita, about the carvers’ trade. In a nutshell, master carvers reunite two types of knowledge (kateta): one esoteric, the other one practical. If you possess only the latter, you can “imitate” (kavasaki) other people’s designs, but you can neither create new ones nor fully understand the implications of giving certain shapes to some objects. Inherited magic formulae (megwa) and initiation rites allow a carver’s mind to become “clear” (migileu) so that he can comprehend concepts and execute their material representations. Here magic equals a concentration of relations including ancestors, the living people from whom the magic was obtained, real or imagined beings as temporary repositories of the magical characteristics, etc.: if you have magic you can harness the generative potential these relations give you. If imitation teaches carvers the “how,” magic gives them the “why.” Through a lengthy and challenging initiation process that can last many years (in some cases throughout a man’s life), a master carver acquires “dreams” (ba mimi, literally “I shall dream”) or “dreamed symbols” that appear to him at first in magically-induced oneiric sequences. These are the “animals” or “bugs” (mauna, maunela, its animals), emblems that are associated with concepts deemed necessary to attach the required qualities to objects through mimetic appropriation (see Chapter 3). In short, knowing magic and the right emblems has the potential to make things work (see Coupaye 2009). Other anthropologists who have expanded on this idea using Melanesian examples other than the above-mentioned ones include Gell (1994) and Eves (1998).
mind,” capable of seeing and distinguishing the traces of the tides in the seabed through the water). Accordingly, swiftness and agility for the sea-going canoe can be achieved through the carving of the cat (*pusa*) and the grasshopper (*nipawa*) in the prow. Some other emblems are apotropaic and are said to ward off people with evil intentions. The *mwamwala* is a gargoyle-like figure with human features that guards the *liku* (the Trobriand yam-storage construction) and the house (*boala*).

“Food is ready. Let’s eat now,” Yobwita concluded.

Part of this Trobriand lore and iconographic interpretations I knew through the corpus of literature I had studied prior to my fieldwork (Scoditti 1977, 1990; Campbell 2002). When I started inquiring about Trobriand woodcarvings, beyond Camillus’s axe, it was with this acquired body of knowledge – which constituted my “frame metaphor,” in Wagner’s terms – that I set off to resolve the meaning and the implications of carvings that I took to encapsulate and define Trobriandness. I had Trobriandness in books. What I did not expect was for Yobwita to have Trobriandness in books too, the same books I had. The above analysis was the result of a communal interpretive effort involving Yobwita, an old book of his I recognised to be Giancarlo Scoditti’s – an anthropologist working on the neighbouring island of Kitava since the 1970s – several people from Kwebwaga and I. Together we assembled a plausible interpretation in accordance with the contextual frames with which we were most familiar.

2.9 The book has a master carver

Yobwita does not speak English and at the time I did not speak Kilivila, so our conversation was mediated by a group dialogue including many people and an anthropology book. Despite the language barrier, it was obvious that the translation of my questions to Yobwita and that of his answers to me was not a literal operation: all the participants seemed to be adding their own explanations, underlining the explicit

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47 The group debate leading to a communal explanation was not dictated by the language impediment; it was indeed a constant throughout my fieldwork. In a letter to Rivers dated 15 October 1915, Malinowski noted the importance of knowing the local language as it allowed him “to understand the natives talking among themselves, the old men discussing your questions,” much in the way things are still debated today (A.C. Haddon Collection, 12055, University Library, Cambridge).
relational nature of knowledge I have mentioned. Answers were more of a negotiated, communal construction than unquestionable, well-known hard facts. My questions were a problem with no univocal solution. Because they were incomplete, they involved re-phrasing and re-creation. And if I was my questions, my interlocutors were their answers. What I mean is that in this dialectic more was at stake than just words: it entailed the endorsement of how “valid” a person could be, valid being the measure of his/her position in a relational network. For instance, I asked about a graphic symbol found also in the canoe prowboard called doka. “Doka is the first “design” carved in the board; it is a foundation sign,” Yobwita’s nephew Joseph Toyalaka translated to me. “If the doka is good then the rest of the carving will be good,”48 he says. I asked why: is the doka one of the maunela? Does it stand for something? This time nobody answered. Yobwita looked at the plates in Scoditti’s book and followed two-dimensional photographed patterns in black and white with the tips of his fingers. “Do you see, this is how the doka is done, it starts here then it moves over here; this anthropologist has put it in his book.” To a Trobriander, that a dimdim has endorsed the work of a master carver at some point by putting a bit of him in a book may be evidence of the westerners’ understanding of personal partibility. The book is also an object that carries the interpretation of a Trobriand performance. It is a dimdim thing that explains Trobriand objects and it is being used by Trobrianders now to explain their world to a dimdim. Yobwita’s authority is emphasised by his status as a recognised master carver and his possession of a book containing another master carver. The book uplifts Yobwita’s position while Yobwita simultaneously endorses its content. Like Camillus and the axe, Yobwita and the book inform each other. No doubt the dimdim that wrote the book and Yobwita were both “valid” persons, linked by a material bond – the book – that served as the tangible approval or embodiment of a possibility: that of spreading new relations across the Trobriand and the dimdim worlds. But in that precise moment this was not enough to reveal the mystery of doka.

Not until this man, rather shyly, told me the following: “I think doka is big. I am not a carver, I don’t know how to carve. But me I am a very good gardener. You see, when we harvest yams and we pile them up in mounds for public display (tayoyuwa), we put the bigger ones at the base of the heap. Within this line of bigger yams you can see a pattern

48 See for instance Campbell quoting a villager in Vakuta on almost identical terms: “If the doka is carved correctly the rest of the ‘animals’ will fall into place. If not, the splashboard will be ruined (Ruguna, Kuweiwa hamlet, Vakuta village).”(2002: 97).
[the spaced, curving interstices between the yams that “stick” out visually at regular intervals as you look at the yam-heap] and that I call *doka*. It’s like something good, big, you see the shadow of plenty.” The correspondence between the *doka* emblem and the pattern seen in the lower levels of a yam-heap, where the bigger yams are put, was readily traceable.49 The black, empty spaces of the *doka* between the heaped yams displayed in the garden resonates with Malinowski’s observation on the abundance suggested by the effect of darkness inside a full yam house (Malinowski 1935: 313).

![Figure 2.1: (a) Toilamlaguyau’s yam harvest in 2009 was one of the most abundant ones in Yalumgwa. The dark spaces between yams at the base of the heap are indeed reminiscent of a “u” rotated to the side as seen on Labagula Gai’s drawing of a lime spatula (b). A famed carver from Yalumgwa, Labagula Gai stated to me that the element indicated as *doka* in the drawing of the *kena* is the foundation for the whole design. Much like the yams at the base constitute the support for the whole heap.

But more than the verisimilitude of the answer, what I found interesting at the time was its creativeness. No doubt this explanation obviated other possibilities. In a way, this man was trying to appropriate a carved symbol, to make it his own by exhausting all the possible meanings and collapsing them into (his) one. And he was doing so by using his own macrocosmic vision, that of the gardener, rather than that of the carver. His act

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49 Hutchins & Hutchins (n.d) report a similar definition for the expression *dokala*, indicating that it “could be the noun for the periphery of the yam pile” and that *doka* could mean “weight.”
brought a type of temporarily exclusive relation that linked the sign to him and to me (or rather to our relation), endorsing him as a good gardener capable of doing Trobriand life and also understanding *dimdim* culture and legitimating his production and interpretation in front of the other villagers. Incidentally he had also resolved this *dimdim*’s problem.

Carvers might not create the Trobriand world alone and neither is the Trobriand world created from local interpretations and reactions to exogenous phenomena only via forced assimilations of foreign tropes to native constructs. The frame metaphor of present-day Kiriwina is a disputed amalgamation of views that have no cumulative properties, but alternative potentialities instead. Prompting these views as one’s own exposes the need to make sense as a way of being in the world. The gardener’s answer is appropriate and “appropriable” as valid generative substance. The book is an authoritative object because it has part of a carver in it (Yobwita knew the carver might have been from Kitava only thanks to the style of the designs, since he could not read English and the book was missing the cover pages). The association carver-carvings-anthropologist-book does not flow in one direction only, from the Trobriands to the outside, as it were. The people of Kiriwina also invent their world and they often do so by re-arranging it, sometimes using a received Euroamerican perspective of their own lifeworld, as if it were a received commodity. The relationalist ontologies enacted and exemplified by the book and the axe are facilitators of this communal creativity. The fact that people and things are not bounded in Melanesia makes possible the acceptance of social change, but it also affirms the competitive situations of objects and subjects within this relational network. Fixity is not a possibility. For an oral society only recently acquainted with literacy, even the written words and the photographed emblems can be re-interpreted and re-invented. And seized too. Or as John Kasaipwalova – a Trobriander educated in Australia in the late 1960s – told me once, “[Malinowski’s] *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is an artefact of Trobriand culture that belongs to the Trobes.”

**2.10 Culture, “the very metaphor of ‘order’”**

In *The Invention of Culture* Roy Wagner denounces: “Our attempts to metaphorize tribal peoples as “Culture” have reduced them to technique and artifact” (Wagner 1981: 29). To de-metaphorise Kiriwina would entail taking the natives’ attempts at analysis at face value. “Reverse anthropology” is not a conceptual tool to understand the other’s viewpoint; it is a way of making life meaningful beyond technique and artefact.
Trobriand culture, one should assume, is not objects-and-ways-of-making-objects. Nor is it entirely and exclusively Trobriand for that matter. The Trobriand search for meaning transcends the material elaboration of objects and the spatial location of the community that makes them, since it encompasses people and actions across pre-established categories. The local act of making sense often implies going against such categories, associating the technical with the symbolic across different socio-cultural domains as Lemonnier (1992) argues. Yet anthropology’s obsession with signification is often at odds with understandings that are not reliant only on meaning. From our western angle material culture can be many things but it will always be “things with meanings.” If western capitalist ethos leads us to believe that “every fact or proposition is required to have a reason” (Wagner 1981: 29), the same can be said of every object (and of every design on it), perhaps also required to have a meaning in the anthropologist’s account. This poses two immediate problems.

One has to do with the often-noted “reluctance” of people “to give exegesis – to explain things by expanding frames verbally” in Melanesia (Strathern 1990: 39 apropos of Keesing), where things (and events) are “experienced” and “lived” more than they are explained. Asking a carver about the meaning of a symbol goes beyond visual exegesis. It implies (also) an exacting command to the carver that he should “explain” not only the significance of the symbol but also its qualities, the possible myths at the origin of it and its implications towards people or vis-à-vis a given matriclan, a group, a village, etc. Some of these narratives might have attached to them a substrate of shame that is painful or inappropriate to recount. A chief that has lost his privilege to display a given emblem because one of his ancestors was spotted breaking a taboo is a good example. Accounting for a symbol can also mean revealing its hidden power. In some cases asking carvers about symbols can be akin to asking magicians to reveal their tricks. Not only. Things may also have no reasons beyond the things themselves. An object is its significance, uncontained within itself (inasmuch as it is made of changing relations and performances), and any glossing upon it is a departure from the object, susceptible of becoming another – different – object. The answers Camillus gave me are a good example of this point: the axe needs to feel in a certain way in relation to the body – his body, by the way – rather than mean something. This can only be felt by Camillus and – to a much lesser extent – by others, including the anthropologist.

50 See Forge’s attempts at elucidating the painted boards of Abelam houses in the Sepik (1973).
The second problem is linked to the anthropologist’s need to make sense of alterity in its own, Euroamerican terms (or western “frame metaphors” in Wagner’s articulation).\(^51\) Thus, if the axe handle has no meaning, the anthropologist is confronted with the task of creating one for it, or at least of finding a justification for an event that escapes well-known categorisations so as to render it familiar.

In both cases this involves an all-embracing effort across categories, an exercise in creativity that calls upon the manipulation of “analogic ‘models’” that transcend translation and effect innovative allegories (Wagner 1981: 15-16). How, then is this axe like a recognisable axe, and what should I make of it and of the act that conceived it? Perhaps in this event there was nothing other than an autographed commodity, re-worked to suit a particular use. Or, alternatively, the axe made-in-Sweden could be considered a literal hybrid between the anthropomorphic and symbolic ceremonial axe once found in some parts of the Massim (Battaglia 1993: 294 ff) and the utilitarian object made in Europe and now well integrated all over the kula ring. Somehow this is the contemporary assemblage of a blurry local past and a not-so-clear translocal future, a symbol of present times in Kiriwina.

A book, like an axe, can be corrected, re-appropriated and re-invented, as it were. Books, axes, anthropologists and Trobrianders can contain the relations that make them. Old books for instance have old answers from old people.\(^52\) People that knew more about the Trobriand ways than their contemporary descendants, for now there are planes and trucks and “young people have lost interest in magic and other things our ancestors knew well.” Camillus also knows that old people, back in the day, ignored some dimdim things but they knew their own Trobriand stuff (“traditional culture,” Camillus calls it) so well they could tell it to dimdims. And dimdims noted it all down in their books. Old books

\(^{51}\) Among Massim scholars, Scoditti consistently uses categories drawn from western philosophy, art history and aesthetics to illustrate local particularities in Kitava. Making sense of native practices in his own terms does not necessarily clarify those points that risk, as Battaglia argues in her review of Scoditti’s monograph, “to lie buried in an alienating and Eurocentric discourse” (1992: 221).

\(^{52}\) There is not a direct equivalent for “ancestor” in the Kilivila language, the closest expression being *tomwayabogwa*, literally “old man-already-done,” the term indicating both “long-gone ancestors” and “very old men still alive.” Similarly, the past is called “the old moment already done” (*tuta omthibogwa*). The temporal dimension in the Trobriands is apprehended through the opposition of the “now” (*besa tuta*, literally “the moment here”) and the “then” or “that which is over” where the latter relates to any other time past that is not the “here and now” and therefore any event from a few weeks ago to the beginning of time. A more qualitative, Christian-inspired distinction opposing the “old dark times” (before the missionaries arrived) and the colonial and post-colonial “times of light” is discussed in Chapter 4.
“made” of old relations speak of “traditional” worlds. From his standpoint, Steven Milamala’s intuition was correct: the artefact-book of Malinowski had the potential for empowering him. It comprised fragments of ancestors and therefore the same sort of privileged connection to another lifeworld that the Swedish axe had once it was adapted to life in Kiriwina, linking the foreign anthropologist to his new family. Camillus knows that the *dimdim* world and the Trobriand one are only incommensurate at first sight, that invention is not the white man’s sole prerogative and that it can work in both senses. Relatedness and the potential for it embedded in people and things afford this possibility. A book is just a form of literacy. Carving or gardening are other forms of knowing the world directly, and neither is exclusive nor exclusionary. They all hint at the possibilities of recognising, understanding and incorporating alterity inasmuch as the other is also part of our world.

For Camillus, to assess the work of the current anthropologist was not only a mechanism to control the making of a *dimdim* object. It was also a way to reinvent Trobriand “culture” through that object. But this is not exclusive to the ethnographer. By this rationale, Trobrianders invent Trobriandness, using their own terms and western ones. And so do anthropologists. As Camillus often pointed out, he is well aware that anthropologists inquire obsessively (*katukwayaya*). He knows the answers are gathered in books that explain “culture,” the Trobriand “ways” (*ma kedakedast*, “our [but not yours] paths”) that are part of the Trobriand “essence” (*kala gulagula Kilivila*). He knows that other anthropologists have seen these books and they already know some of the answers even before they ask the questions. Like a steel axe, anthropological literature is a *dimdim*-made object some Trobrianders might engage with in its multiple trajectories. Like a steel axe, the culture-object “book” can be beautiful or ugly, right or wrong, fair or unfair, complete or incomplete. It is often categorised, judged. It is often manipulated and changed.

“It would be fair,” Camillus said to me later on, “if Trobrianders could assess your thesis. Some should travel to Cambridge and tell the other anthropologists there that you have done things right, meaning that your participation and contribution to Trobriand life

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53 Literally “the traditions of the island of Kiriwina.” *Gulagula* can translate roughly as “ways” or “traditions” but it is actually more than that: it includes the ideal behaviour that Trobrianders are supposed to have in accordance with their old customs (*gulagula* being also interchangeable in some contexts with “ancestors”). *Gulagula* is, so to speak, an exemplar archetype of how things should be. A similar expression, *bunela* (“his/her behaviour”) is less inclusive and more restricted to the person’s manners. The same applies to *la kedakeda* (“his/her path”). The latter two do not imply a meaningful compatibility with an idealised past like the former does.
was considered appropriate, that you lived by our standards, not like a *dimdim.*” It is important that anthropologists “get it right,” so as to not to “talk rubbish,” as Camillus himself pointed to me once. Inadvertently, Camillus was echoing one of anthropology’s historic concerns, that of its adequacy and faithfulness to local categories as judged by native criteria and therefore the competence of the anthropologist, not in academic terms but by local standards (see Marcus 2006: 98). This, though, is not a case of validating one’s interpretations while in the field but rather an issue of native control of some thing (Trobriand culture) they perceive as issuing from their perspective and to which they aspire to give some degree of direction. In a way, Camillus had no problem with me taking away Trobriand culture and parts of people in many notebooks. But he deemed it pertinent to try to maintain a certain control over the culture-object “book” I was to produce. Or to “sharpen” it afterwards. He had overseen that I could learn how to “do life” while in Kiriwina and was now concerned with how I was to show “how life is done,” the Trobriand-way. Sticking to Wagner, my Trobriand family might have seen my creative efforts at understanding and explaining Trobriandness “as being my interaction with them, rather than resulting from it” (Wagner 1981: 26). Obviously I could not “do” Trobriand life once I was back in Europe, I could only explain it, and Camillus was genuinely worried that I explained it well. Although I never asked him directly, I sense Camillus might have suspected that *dimdim* books not only “explain” culture but also “make” it.
Chapter 3
Dragons, mermaids and seahorses: the carving of desire in the Massim

This chapter asks what is a *tokwalu* and what does a *tokwalu* do. It reviews the validity of some of the different categorisations Trobriand carvings have undergone in the past, from high art to airport art to material culture, and how Trobrianders themselves have overcome this parsing, focusing on the more encompassing characteristics of *tokwalu*. Woodcarvings incorporate symbols, narratives and relations old and new, acting as mediating nodes between carvers and buyers. Conceived as renditions of Trobriandness for a non-Trobriand other, *tokwalu* need to adapt the local lifeworld and its changes to the outsider’s view of it. This view is pieced together by Trobrianders through a diffuse dialogue with buyers where their desires and those of *dimdims* meet in the form of *tokwalu*. Because their purpose is to broaden exchange possibilities beyond one-off transactions, woodcarvings become representations of commensurability. *Tokwalu* are ontologically flexible artefacts instrumental in visualising alterity and mutually understandable materialisations of the relational possibilities this alterity effects.

3.1 Carving (for) the other

This wooden axe in the Black Collection (Figure 3.1) is another instance of Trobriand engagement with the industrialised west. It is a material witness to the history of contact between *dimdim* visitors and Trobriand Islanders. Where its Swedish counterpart in the previous chapter illustrates the present-day voyage of the European commodity refashioned to fit into the Trobriand social and cosmological world, this artefact exemplifies a somewhat reverse trajectory, Trobriand curio carved for a western market. Yet both objects bespeak Trobriand transformative agency.
The wooden axe can be contemplated from two perspectives: one is the formal duplication of a utilitarian tool through a skilled exercise of mimesis resulting in an early example of tourist art. Another perspective prompts us to look at this wooden axe beyond the material and technical translation: it effectively manipulates a received model into a metaphor of appropriation. The conflation of these perspectives epitomizes the ongoing dialogue between Trobrianders and westerners, a dialogue that partakes of concepts and objects and enmeshes its actors in webs of relations across time and space. Artefacts like this axe are still manufactured to be sold for cash or exchanged for trade store goods (see Figure 3.2). In its mimicry of a western tool, the wooden axe is immediately accessible to western audiences as an artefact that imitates a commodity, yet is still a Trobriand curio. Other woodcarvings instead do not display such a readily discernible template for buyers.

54 In his discussion on contemporary art, Schneider (2003: 221-225) makes the point that appropriation is hermeneutic: it necessitates a dialogue and an understanding of the other to take place. Schneider adds the pertinent observation “that cultural elements are invested with new signification but also that those who appropriate are being transformed” (ibid. p. 224), as we shall see in the next chapter.
to grasp. If we conceive of objects as a locus of contact between geographically, socially and culturally diverse people, then artefacts need to be – at least to some degree – mutually intelligible to both sides, whatever that means. The connection, though, is not always guided by the external shape of the object. The matter of the inner substance in a carving is a coalescence of accounts and aspirations, stories and desires that make the object meaningful. The question, thus, is one of ontological balance and reciprocal understanding. On the one hand, Trobrianders expect that their tokwalu will reach out to "dimdim"s; on the other hand, "dimdim"s expect that Trobriand souvenirs will connect them to Kiriwina. Trobrianders are required to make intrinsically-Trobriand carvings and tourists are expected to buy them all, owing to their unlimited access to an endless flow of cash. Relatively contrasting expectations of modernities and Arcadian primitivisms are played out in an overlapping arena of representations: Trobrianders and "dimdim"s visualize each other and the terms of their exchanges in anticipation of those exchanges. The categories ascribed to each image of alterity (Trobriand and "dimdim") tend to inform their counterparts: traditional and modern or artefact and commodity share common formal elements (see Philips and Steiner 1999: 16). Yet, however straightforward this imitation of objects may look, local craftsmen do not just adopt an image of otherness and reflect it back to its originators. Their inferences are not dislodged from Trobriand referential frames but are incorporated in them instead. The real indigenous appropriation is not that of a form but of the possibilities that can be derived from that form. What are these possibilities? And how do Trobrianders conceive them, how do they enact them?
From a local position, carving equals the making of a domain of connections as much as it is the making of an object. In fact, carvings have been relational artefacts in intra and inter-island exchanges long before the arrival of *dimdims* (Malinowski 1922: 200), establishing trade links among the few villages where *tokwalu* were originally manufactured in Kiriwina (mostly Bwetalu and Okaiboma) and those other places that acquired them throughout the Massim in the context of the kula. The advent of western capitalism and the intrusion of exogenous patterns of behaviour at the intersection of domestic customs have effected socio-cultural transformations that demand new approaches to the production and circulation of meaning. Whereas Trobrianders and their carvings moved within homogeneous cosmologies across the kula ring in the past, they now have to negotiate a universe where cash and western goods are becoming new poles of signification. And although this study uses tourist art as its main focal lens,
interpreting capitalist cosmologies and new regimes of value from a Trobriand perspective is not done by carvers alone. The responses and reactions of buyers and other Trobrianders too are instrumental in assembling visions of the modern lifeworld.

These visions move back and forth between the referential frames that Trobrianders know as theirs and the western modes of sociality that locals try to incorporate. If carvings are meaningful interpretations of the changes in the surrounding world, they are also agents of Trobriand intentionality that carry the aspirations of carvers into that world. Carvings are reinventions that embrace the prospect of change while asserting an inherently Trobriand point of origin, so much so that changes are ingrained within indigenous rationales. These processes of appropriation are obviated by the carvers’ efforts to form a forum of material encounter where the carvings project not only a depiction of the Trobriand self but also of the *dimdim* other. *Tokwalu* like the wooden axe in the Black Collection are channels of mediation where representation meets commensurability and where the object becomes an index of exchange.

Because of this, and above the making of artefacts, Trobriand islanders producing *tokwalu* have another immediate urge: to “make” consumers that will buy them. With an increasing number of people dedicated to carving living throughout the islands, carvings have inundated Kiriwina. They spill over to Alotau and Port Moresby and are found in many other places in PNG and overseas. Competition being so high, *tokwalu* need to be attractive. They need to captivate all sorts of buyers across different cultural domains, draw prestige and money and institute ties that will eventually yield more relationships and more possibilities to sell carvings. As we shall see next, in Kiriwina – like elsewhere in Melanesia – the production of carvings entails the symbolisation of personal relationships (Wagner 1981: 24-25). Trobriand objects are the result of relationships; they are “created not in contradistinction to persons but out of persons” as Strathern has put it (1988: 171). What are the relations, then, that make up a tourist souvenir? Since tourists are not a constant presence in the Trobriands, locals need to piece together the *dimdim* world for which they are carving from other sources. How, then, do Trobrianders conceive and perform (through their carvings) the personal other with whom they will engage in new exchanges?

The following analysis starts with a review of the western-informed historical interpretations of Trobriand carvings. Anthropologists’ have tended to parcel out objects according to ranked categories, for example by establishing a divide between art and
material culture that still infuses discussions and understandings of Trobriand crafts. Correlatively, traditional carvings have been taken as canonical illustrative units of Trobriand customary values, in opposition to the symbolically-void examples of tourist art. Whereas this reading of carving has attributed only to traditional objects the faculty to make links with the ancestors, ritual practices, magic formulae and the myths that form the core of conventional Trobriand knowledge, I argue that in present-day Kiriwina tourist art also increasingly calls on narratives from the past to lend metaphorical weight to carvings and add to their power of attraction. Accordingly, tokwalu can be seen as re-assemblages of symbols, working not as replacement but as a wider cultural framework instead, encompassing a use of tradition that bridges the ontological gap between different carvings. Under this new perspective, the function of tokwalu – to expand networks of exchange – also marks the redefinition of their essence. Consequently, I demonstrate how carvers enact bipartisan strategies of integration to add to the density of tokwalu, appealing to a variety of potential customers while revealing an intrinsic Trobriandness.

3.2 The art and meaning of traditional carvings

Dimdims’s fascination with Trobriand objects is a long time affair (MacGregor 1892; Haddon 1893; Seligmann 1909; see also Quin nell 2000: 88). In fact, at least “since 1860, Trobrianders have been inventing styles and forms expressly for Europeans” (Weiner 1982: 67). Malinowski justified his first sojourn in Kiriwina “because [Trobrianders] were ‘the leaders of the whole material and artistic culture’ of the area” (Malinowski’s letter to Seligman in Stocking 1983: 97. See also Young 1984). In Malinowski’s phrasing, the “material” and the “artistic” are separate, as they are in the dominant western paradigm which distinguishes the aesthetic object from the utilitarian artefact. With or without Bronio’s blessing, a hierarchic divide among artists using magic and producing art pieces on one side, and craftsmen making practical artefacts for “trade and export” on the other was established (Malinowski 1922: 67, 100, 1935: 16; Seligman 1910: 529-530)⁵⁵. Since then, Trobriand carvers (and carvings) have been held in separate, ranked domains, with anthropologists paying more attention to the allegedly

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⁵⁵ Among the items made by Trobrianders – “the chief manufacturers of many native articles,” Seligman mentions “beautifully carved” wooden dishes, bowls and lime spatulas (1910: 529-530, 611), early samples of tourist art.
higher-standing and magic-savvy master carvers who produced “traditional art” as opposed to the talented and crafty “artisans” lacking the necessary qualifications to make them “artists’ according to Trobriand criteria.” (Campbell 2002: 44). Notions of differential status among carvers and how these notions have been partially subverted nowadays will be the object of a more thorough study in the next chapter. Here, I would like to emphasize how this divide between artists and craftsmen has generated a series of separate (and graded) groupings. Simplifying, artists produce complex traditional carvings (canoe prowboards and splashboards – tabuya and lagim, and decorations for the chiefs’ houses and yam-houses) whereas craftsmen make the simpler utilitarian or decorative objects for exchange or sale (see Kasaipwalova 1975).

The former category has always been more appealing to scholars attentive to the abstract imagery found in the traditional carvings of the master carvers. As anthropologists have unravelled the patterns of the emblems found in these carvings, their meanings have been explained by coupling concepts to symbols. Trobrianders refer to these symbols as mauna (see previous chapter). In anthropological accounts, the mauna are equated with graphic signs embedded in the carving, their execution prescribed in a set of recognizable shapes. They can be so stylized that their figurativeness vanishes, leaving only an aniconic metaphor and its name. The attributes of the maunela (its animals, the animals of a carving) are ascribed to their representations, establishing agentive and hermeneutical connections between various elements of the Trobriand lifeworld: myths, ancestors, magic creatures and real-life ones, plants, trees and fruits are part of the corpus of tropes from which carvers draw (Malinowski 1935 vol. II: 283). The visual indeterminacy of some of the elements in the carvings often necessitates explicit exegesis. In these examples, Trobriand woodcarvings have often been treated as “visual texts” requiring linguistic interpretations and subjected to ethno-aesthetic analyses.

56 I want to point to an interesting contradiction here: the possession of magic for carving seemed to have endowed master carvers with social status, according to some accounts (Campbell 2002: 43-44), whereas those “most admirable of all Trobriand craftsmen [from Bwetalu village in the Kuboma district]” with a “reputation for the highest efficiency in sorcery” (Malinowski 1922: 67, 100, 1935 vol. I 15-16) were always considered to be the outcasts of Kiriwina, their skills a worthless token of merit in the eyes of other Trobrianders (see Battaglia 1992). The current reversal of this conception is dealt with in Chapter 4.

57 There are a number of objects to which artistic value has been attributed by westerners on aesthetic grounds: lime spatulas, mortars and pestles, dancing paddles, head combs, clubs, etc. These objects, produced by master carvers and craftsmen alike, are generally considered as traditional notwithstanding evidence that some of them may have been made for Europeans at the outset.
I do not wish to comment here on the worth of translating carvings into the category of the textual for explanatory purposes, other than remarking that notwithstanding the merits of such an approach in facilitating our comprehension of Trobriand concepts it is nonetheless a practice that carvers themselves do not adopt when learning or teaching carving. The associations run at so many levels (phenomenological, material, magical-symbolic) that *mauna* cannot be narrowed to bound interpretive units. The unconstrained capacity of the symbol to expand beyond exegetical frames reminds us of the reductive perception we obtain when drawing a parallel between carving and text. For Trobrianders, the crux of the matter is what the symbol does rather than what it means. *Maunela* are aggregates of coveted characteristics; they act as templates for specific qualities appropriable by means of mediated associations. But they can also act as agents of the carvers’ (or others’) intentions. Their main purpose therefore is to bring together chains of causality and establish links between the elements, people, ideas, objects and actions so as to produce desired effects.

Thus, I was told by other carvers that the *weku* – an important symbol found in the splashboards (*lagim*) of kula canoes (Scoditti 1977: 209-210, 212, 218) – is in fact a small bird that can be heard but not seen: “When you hear it you want to look for it, but you can never find it,” my friends told me. “Yet it exists, but no matter how hard you look for it, it can’t be seen.” Its “beautiful voice” sparks desire and spurs people to move in their quest for the evasive kula valuables. For all its potential for connectedness, the irresistible *weku* is more than a concept associated to a physical referent (in the Peircean sense of icon). The *weku* is a cry that expands into that slippery type of Trobriand cognition, *kateta*: the capacity to understand the environment and the competence to act in it skilfully. An idea that conflates intelligence, ability, fame, status, good judgement, leadership and generosity but also beauty, radiance, power of attraction and other ideal forms of being in the world. It appears to be an effort of apprehension always in the making, like a fragmentary and distributed network of knowing-as-being layered into different, infinite steps. In its simplest reading, the *weku* is the abstract sign of an

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58 The associations are mediated by the corpus of Trobriand things that anthropologists call culture (Trobrianders would appropriately say “our ways/paths,” see previous chapter): practical and magical knowledge, knowledge of the environment, modes of sociality including relationships and their varying enactments, folklore, myths and other narratives, performances, etc. *Mauna* bring together two or more of these elements, attaching meaning and form to expectations and action.
invisible bird that links longing to the vain effort of an impossible fulfilment, for even the highest stages of *kateta* are transient and keep on opening up into new, more complete ones. Just like the self-replicating and encompassing chambers of the nautilus shell, as some carvers tried to show me. The *weku* carved in the *lagim* of the kula canoe is instrumental in visualizing an absence: it is a model for aspirations of fame and knowledge that have not been yet attained. But its agency also fills kula players with desire, motivating them in their search for exchange partners. This image is very much in tune with Girard’s (1965) well-known theorization of mimetic desire: not as a linear expression of the individual’s free will as it becomes fixated in/with an object, but rather as a triangulated relation involving the subject, the object (of desire) and the other (generic or concrete), a mediator taken as a model of plenitude and satisfaction by the subject via her possession of the wanted object.

My example of the *weku* here is intended as a way into re-conceiving carvings beyond those conceptions that treat them as bounded, material aggregates of meaningful graphic signs. Under this new light, the *maunela* in traditional carvings and their textual translation are no longer isomorphic correlates of a Trobriand concept and its western understanding. Instead, they are disputed objects of encounter. I propose to contemplate the symbol *tokwalu* and its surrounding elements (including the possible translations) as nodes of relations in a wider network, representation being only one of these relations (action, interpretation, assimilation, refutation or re-elaboration being other possible nodes).

### 3.3 From meaning to relations: patrons and carvers

Carvings in Kiriwina cannot be comprehended in their singularity, nor can they be dissociated from the complex web of people that give full support to their significance and agency. In the past, the system of symbolic expressions and emblems upon which traditional Trobriand carvings relied used to be restricted to a limited group of people (Campbell 1978, Scoditti 1990). The body of esoteric knowledge necessary to make the prowboards of kula canoes or to decorate yam houses or chiefs’ residences was transmitted by masters to their apprentices through initiation processes that could last a lifetime (ibid; see also Mosuwadoga 2006). The first step in that initiation\(^\text{59}\) signalled the

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\(^{59}\) Scoditti delimits this first step into “a self-sufficient expressive unit consisting of actions, words and substances” (1982: 79 ff, 2012: 21). Scoditti argues for the “self-sufficiency” of the
inception of a creative potential. Carvers in-the-making would then dream of mauna and endeavour to reproduce them in the prescribed forms, owing to the capacity of visualizing forms bestowed upon them by their initiators. Once they had mastered the technique and developed the capacity to elaborate carvings, they were commissioned by chiefs to make prowboards and yam house decorations. With transfers of tangible and intangible knowledge thus regulated, actors moved within preestablished circuits. Trobriand chiefs were the exclusive patrons of master carvers. They supported a well-delimited system of carvers and apprentices where the defining elements were established beforehand. The set of relations within this structure was sanctioned by the commonly-accepted practices that validated the model: master carvers produced the stipulated objects for their patrons who in turn made the required payments to carvers. Apprentices entered the business by making the customary contributions to the masters in the form of services and goods (mostly labour and food) in exchange for the prescribed knowledge that the latter handed down throughout the extended initiation process. This model ensured a certain institutionalization of roles but also a degree of homogeneity in the emblems, readily recognizable and interpretable by Trobrianders and subjected to few stylistic variations between the different schools of carvers (Campbell 1978).

Notwithstanding their superior skills and knowledge, nothing prevented master carvers from making tokwalu for sale, although it was assumed that their prestige was derived from traditional carvings only. Up until approximately 1962, chiefs, master carvers and apprentices could rely on this well-established system to build their status through the commission, production and display of traditional carvings (Leach 1978: 18, 1979: 357). Throughout the 1960s though, tourism increased and with it the opportunity to sell tokwalu directly to dimdims without the intercession of mediators like government officials, missionaries or the Kuboma Progress Society (see Wilson and Menzies 1967 in Campbell 2002: 46) and, later on, the Kabisawali Movement. Yet the institutional framework was not disrupted by the parallel traffic of tokwalu that existed independently from the chief-master carver-apprentice closed circle. The advent of cash and the increase in the demand for tourist art was not as influential in bringing down the circuit of carvers and patrons as much as the decline of chiefs was (see Chapter 1). Currently, chiefs are no longer capable to sustain master carvers beyond the odd canoe or yam house initiation in its formal plane (the self-contained meaning of the act in itself), notwithstanding the ensuing factual implications of the ceremony as part of an extended event that will keep on requiring the combined integration of actions, words and substances in the future.
commissioned on very rare occasions. Simultaneously, the lack of surplus resources (garden crops or kaula, betel nut, etc.) and traditional currency such as shell and stone valuables makes it difficult for prospective carvers to undertake the payments required for initiation and apprenticeship under a master carver.

The disruption of the structure that sustained the traditional carving edifice in the Trobriands has affected the ways of carving. If and when traditional carvings are still made, their production and circulation runs on unconventional paths. They are not crafted with a particular person in mind but a generic idea of a potential consumer instead. More often than not, that consumer will be somebody that is not acquainted with mauna and knows nothing or very little about their hermetic significance, their potential agency and their association to other elements of Trobriand cosmology. Whereas chiefs in the past endorsed the creations of master carvers and master carvers those of apprentices, nowadays the interpreters and judges of a carving tend to be the tourists and other intermediaries that will decide whether it is worth buying or not. This situation has been instrumental in blurring the ontological divide between traditional carvings and tokwalu. Indeed, tokwalu do not need to rely on predetermined associations and formal models, being free from “official” considerations and endorsements evaluating their “rightness.” Tokwalu are freestanding agents of the carvers’ creativity with no prescribed forms. Because they are less abstract to start with, their figurative characteristics make them less prone to exegetical interpretations like those I critiqued earlier. They are not emblems and they contain no obvious metaphors. They do not require interpretation, nor do they have agency derived from symbolic or magic qualities. Their essence is not imbued with esoteric knowledge, their density is not laden with narratives and they need not be connected to invisible animals, ancestors or spirits (although nothing precludes this possibility either, as we shall see next). In principle, they are the expression not of an

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60 There were only two kula canoes when I arrived in Kiriwina in 2008, Tolobua’s and Gumkwaredu’s, in Mweuya beach (Olivilevi-Okaiboma villages). Both had been built directly by the owners, who are also carvers. Gumkwaredu sailed his canoe to Alotau to participate in the 2009 Canoe Festival and sold it there afterwards. Tolobua’s canoe rotted away during my stay.

61 Kaula is the Kilivila term for staple food and more precisely it denotes food from the garden or food that grows underground, as opposed to dimdim food (the food that can be purchased in trade stores). In some accounts, kaula is deemed the traditional food and that which bears the substance that builds personhood (Malinowski 1935, Montague 1983). Although increasingly complemented and at times even substituted by imported food (mostly rice, flour and tinned fish and meat, see Chapter 4), kaula – and especially yams – is still used in traditional payments such as mortuary feasts or “competitive feasting” (kayasa). As Trobrianders say, the yam rules (tetu karewaga, “it’s the yam’s decision/authority/rule”).
aggregate of complex accounts but of a linear tale that links the Trobriand carver and the
*dimdim* buyer in a one-off performance. Correspondingly, if *tokwalu* are embedded in
to anything it is in a set of relations that do not call in myths nor magic. The characteristics
of *tokwalu* are essentially representational, given that they are objects made for sale
outside the Trobriand world. On the whole, their “magic,” so to speak, is not to draw kula
valuables or to facilitate the consecration of knowledge. *Tokwalu* are objects made to
yield cash, their occasional sale complementing other subsistence activities like
gardening or fishing. Unlike canoe prowboards, *tokwalu* need to make sense to *dimdim*s
directly so as to keep a certain flow in the exchanges, even if it is only a flow made of
envisioned dreams borrowed from appropriated narratives of alterity. At the moment of
their conception they are unmediated auspices of personal transactions.

Today, *tokwalu* and traditional carvings are alike inasmuch as both have exchanged
some of their defining characteristics with the other: traditional carvings are now made
for tourists and tourist art now needs to be traditional. The necessity for “suitable
carvings” (carvings that would suit the needs of buyers) was already a priority in official
reports dealing with the carving industry in the 1960s. The Department of Trade and
Industry in Port Moresby advocated “to foster traditional style in handcrafts” to guarantee
customer satisfaction and to “suit tourists demands” (see document 76, Appendix B).
Official reports tended to assume that “tourist demands” were consistently uniform and
often ignored that many “traditional” Trobriand carvings originated from tourists’
instructions departing from local customs and designs. The Bwetalu tables and stools
introduced by Mrs Lumley for instance are good examples of this (see Campbell 2002).

In present-day Kiriwina people carve objects for sale that can move between categories.
They do not renounce elements of tradition but instead incorporate them as they try to
establish new networks. In following this traffic, some questions arise: do Trobriand
craftsmen carve *tokwalu* with a set of relations in mind which is similar to that in which
traditional carving was embedded? If so, how does the creative potential of carvers work
to adapt the object’s qualities to new patrons? Granted that a resymbolisation of the
tourist artefact entails its conceptual reframing, it becomes unavoidable to ask in whose
terms these ulterior re-combinations of representations, interpretations and adaptations
take place.
3.4 What is (in) a dragon? Performing the other

To what extent is the making and circulation of Trobriand carvings an indigenous mode of analysis of a pervading western culture? Or, to put it otherwise, are carvings making their consumers? Even if their essence does not appear to be as complex as the multilayered forms of esoteric cognizance and material symbolism expressed in traditional carvings, the circulation of tokwalu and the corresponding implementation of relational networks spreading from the Trobriand world demands an equally extensive knowledge of the carvings’ substance if we are to follow their agency. Here I use “essence” and “substance” for want of better terms to define the compressed characteristics that compose – materially and conceptually – an object in Melanesia (see Strathern 1990). This Melanesian perspective is in tune with Alfred Gell’s claim that objects are a “congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other persons can be attained” (1998: 68). With this in mind, I suggest we consider the making of new carvings past mere stylistic innovation. With their unconventional woodcarvings, craftsmen create new models of patrons and in the process they also redefine their own roles and positions along the way. In treating tokwalu not as singular units of and for transaction along a linear path from carver to buyer, but as a junction of perspectives and possible actions instead, tourist objects become analogous to traditional Trobriand representations. They visualize a potential for interpersonal affirmation that draws upon relations unobservant of the physical presence or absence of actors in the same space-time. This analogy is propelled by what Appadurai calls “the new power of the imagination in the fabrication of social lives” (1996: 54). Airport art surfaces as the creative encompassment of alternative images of (real or dreamed) possibilities originating “elsewhere” (ibid.). Tokwalu are material tropes of desire (the representation of dimdim wants and impulses but also the delineation of the carvers’ auspices): they summon an idealised other that is made of Trobriand aspirations and their visualization.

In 2009 Moyobana was acknowledged as one of the best carvers in the Trobriand Islands. His fame spread from his village, Kabwaku, throughout Kiriwina, although not on a kula canoe with carved prowboards. Moyobana’s fame rode the islands in walking
sticks (*kaitukwa*) and other *tokwalu* he sold for cash.\(^{62}\) When he showed me his last creation, a one-meter high serpentine carving of polished ebony on a pedestal, I could only admire the highly-detailed execution, of what exactly I had no idea.

- *Avaka besa*? (What is this?), I asked him.

“*Minana* dragon,” Moyobana replied. (She\(^ {63}\) is a dragon).

Thinking that maybe a “dragon” was just a borrowed term to refer to a Trobriand animal, real or mythical, I asked again:

- *Ave mauna*, dragon (what animal is a dragon?)

“*Natana. Minana.*” (One of them. This one). Other people confirmed Moyobana’s view: “that one there is a dragon.” It was quite obvious indeed: a reptilian-like animal with clawed limbs and a big gaping mouth with fangs.

- *Adoki kanavasiya, kana nata kaeuna*, (maybe it’s a lizard, or a snake)

“*Gala, Tonogwa*,\(^ {64}\) *minana* dragon.” No. She’s a dragon, sure enough.

I attempted another approach:

- *E ambese lo kugisi natana dragon, tomwaya? Orebwaga, kana obwarita, kana ambese?* (And where did you see one dragon, respected old man? In the cliffs, or in the sea, or where else?).

“*Besa Tonogwa yegu la mimi. Pela uula yegu bo la mom sopi, uula besa ibwadi ba mimi ave mauna ave mauna, e natana minana* dragon.” (“This one, Tonogwa, I dreamed it. Because I already drank *sopi* [the magic used by carvers to visualize and create their designs], I am able to dream any animal, and one of them is this dragon.”

Moyobana refers to the process by which initiated carvers make “their minds clear” (*nanosi migileu*) at the beginning of their initiation by drinking a magic philtre (*sopi*) to induce dreams. As I have stated before, master carvers dream of the designs they will later incise in the surface of the wood. The dream is a guided inspiration: it is the magic that steers the mind and opens it to the emblems found in traditional Trobriand carvings.

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\(^{62}\) Owing to their limited dimensions and weight and the intricacy of their designs, tourists visiting the Trobes have always had a predilection for walking sticks, easier to pack and carry away than the bulkier canoe or yam house boards or tables. Furthermore, walking sticks (like another all-time favourite of visitors to the Massim, the lime spatula) are often made of ebony wood. Since ebony trees have a very slow growth rate, the thickness of the samples used by carvers lends itself particularly well to long, thin objects.

\(^{63}\) In Kilivila, all the animals, the moon and the stars are classified in speech as being female.

\(^{64}\) Tonogwa is the name given to me in Kiriwina; it belongs to the Mlabwema *dala.*
and handed down by ancestors from the mythical times. Key among these myths is that of Kalaguma, one of the first ancestors to emerge from the ground, creator of customary symbols, designs and decorations (Mosuwadoga 2006, see also SN 139 Appendix A). Engravers rerelive their ancestors’ actions by carving their traditional mainela. Sopi, thus, is the necessary facilitator used by carvers to mediate between two worlds. Those who carve with sopi re-enact an interpretive narrative traceable to other carvers, ancestors and mythical beings. The magic spells map some of these relations by naming relatives and linking them to significant places. As it has been noted, carving is the exteriorization of a type of knowledge that assembles symbols, magic and relations through a constructive dialectic of the material and the intangible. Moyobana’s dragon presented a conceptual puzzle; it was the material visualization of a mythical creature that does not belong to the Trobriand mythical realm. With no electricity, no TV and no Internet, the Trobriand Islands are relatively isolated from western visual culture. Yet it would be a naïve presumption to surmise that carvers from Kiriwina are unquestionably distanced from any external influences – or that they should be so. Due to increased mobility (see Chapter 5), many Trobrianders travel to urban centres today and become familiar with the current historical flow of images (TV, internet, etc.). Regardless, dragons in the Trobes are “legitimate” objects, inasmuch as they do actually exist there as carvings.

Of what, then, is this “elsewhere” that beckons to Trobrianders’s desire made of? My inquiry is an attempt to track the carvers’ dreams. And in order to delineate these genealogies of inspiration (in the broadest sense), one needs to also scrutinize the whys and the hows of the appropriation of a foreign trope. Why carve a dragon? And how to dream it? These questions being interchangeable, the point is to ascertain the implications of the generative impetus, or else, to find out what it is, exactly, that Trobrianders are carving beyond appearances. To put it crudely, my question is, what is a tokwalu and

65 Dreams are also the mediating vehicles used by –kasivila (dreamers) to travel back and forth to Tuma, the island of the dead, and communicate with the spirits of the deceased that live there. (See also Malinowski 1916: 162-164, although he did not seem aware of the Kilivila term - kasivila).

66 In an official report on Trobriand artefact trade dated 28th June 1963, Projects Officer for the Territory of Papua and New Guinea Department of Trade and Industry I. D. Burnet complains that “the art of the Trobriand Islands is showing a certain degree of decay,” allegedly due to Trobrianders’ interest in copying patterns from elsewhere instead of sticking to “their traditional styles.” Burnet protests that there seems to be “influences at work by way of illustrations from books, animals seen in moving pictures, trade store carvings sold in Port Moresby, mission introduced religious art and sculpture, and even artifacts from elsewhere in the Territory [Papua New Guinea]” (see document 18, Appendix B).
what does a tokwalu do? My concern here is with a type of mediation. Not the one between allegedly separate spheres: art/tourist art and culture/life – a somewhat abstract discourse, whatever the terms, bearing more on tiresome academic labels than on real life partitions. Instead of the term “sphere,” which spells incommensurability, I would like to engage with the “paths” of mediation that carvers like Moyobana assemble and follow to link ideas and their material embodiments. As some recent discourses around the anthropology of art stress, there is a tradition that hastily appraises indigenous experimentations with syncretism by affixing historically-situated western tags to them. If the dragon is “postmodern” it is so in contraposition to its reversed correlative, the purist (and ethnocentric) “primitive” or traditional Trobriand carving (see Marcus and Myers 1995: 2-3, 18). This either/or positioning of indigenous objects and practices is accompanied by their respective narratives of encompassment or resistance.

The market-driven and academically-staged tensions thus forged between alternative taxonomies of the “authentic” and the “fake,” “original” and “copy,” “aesthetic” and “functional” (to name but three), are always resolved as either the cultural capitulation of the (weak) local to the unstoppable, homogenizing global, or its unadulterated counterpart, namely the impermeable, arcane artefact which is immune to exogenous influence (Clifford 1988; Vogel; 1988; Foster 1985). Somehow, a dragon carved by Moyobana is more uncomfortable than an African spirit depicted by Picasso. The former is an inauthentic imitation motivated by a “modernizing” force that imposes new cultural frames by breaking tradition. The latter is the artist’s original creation drawing inspiration from its own open-mindedness and attention to other cultures, other forms. The extent to which what we call tourist art participates simultaneously in both of these dialectic oppositions is, indeed, a matter of nuanced mediations. Trobriand woodcarvings conform to none and all of the above if we adhere to a Eurocentric parsing. If we attempt to follow their mediating capacities from a Trobriand perspective instead, we are bound to uncover alternative ways of understanding objects in Kiriwina. The oscillations in these new paths

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67 The term “sphere” is prone to connote segregation. “Path” instead is the almost-literal translation of the Kilivila expression keda. Furthermore, “path” also implies a potential for connections that is particularly important in a Melanesian context where personhood relies precisely on this capacity of establishing and maintaining relations. In his discussion on exchange in Lesotho, Ferguson moves a similar criticism to Bohannan’s use of “sphere” (1955), whereas paths are a “continuous process of creating and maintaining the framework of rules and meanings within which exchange takes place” (see Ferguson 1992: 60). What Trobrianders are exploring and creating with their carvings are indeed new avenues for exchange within their known referential frames.
unfold at two levels: at one level, carvings of “new” animals are dialogues with buyers. They offer a “local interpretation of Western taste” (Silverman 1999) and the subsequent validation of this interpretation through purchase. However, the lack of a continued engagement with the trickle of dimdim visitors that call on the Trobes only sporadically defers the dialogue across an expanded space and a delayed temporality (see Chapter 4). In an effort to prolong the attractiveness of their tokwalu, carvers are forced to build upon their past recollections of dimdim’s taste. The latter is a rather incomplete catchword that should lump together the images of what is Trobriand, what is art and what is authentic, projected from different standpoints. The polymorphic Trobriand object – a discontinuous series of more or less incorporated visions of desire – is constantly enduring conceptually-motivated material re-shaping amid the tensions of what dimdim buyers, on one side, expect from Trobrianders and what Trobriand carvers on the other side think dimdims are attracted to. This postponed dialogue often takes place in the imaginary stages of the precedent: objects already made, already gone, objects from the past that were “successful” in enticing dimdims.

Carvers also try to anticipate, through their carvings, tourists’ tastes. Thus, when craftsmen like Moyobana visualize dragons they are also concretizing an image of those who will be attracted to them. And since in Melanesia objects carry out personal bonds, carvers are also expressing a will to incorporate the buyers within their social relations to-be through their carvings. The issue is not one of formal creativity or practical skills only:68 woodcarvers are tracing patterns of connectedness across past experiences and future desires that need to be mutually validating. Going back and forth between a received, local knowledge on the one hand, and their conceptualization of the modern world and the expectations it holds for the future on the other, carvers weave networks of commensurability to bridge these gaps. Far from being a simple operation of representation, this entails the mobilization of people and ideas ranging from ancestors to Trobriand notions of the dimdim world. If we regard these endeavours as attempts to

68 Nor is it a matter of enhancing individuality. Contra Silverman, I doubt “Tourist art fosters individuality.” (1999: 62). If anything tourist art strengthens the need for a more extensive relationality, among carvers and others (see following chapters), as tokwalu gloss on the cultural values of the islands and offer a material representation that has been filtered through the eyes of the local public. Like in any other artistic enterprise, the exchange of ideas that takes place in Trobriand communities and beyond through carving is a constant dialogue. It yields formal results that are copied, reproduced, discussed and re-interpreted with singular variations that are nonetheless attached to the performances of others as a continuum (see also Jarillo de la Torre 2013).
draw relational links, objects can hardly be filtered through any type of bipolar models of contrasting worlds, let alone be contained in categories such as art, artefact or commodity. Instead of categorizing carvings, I have in mind to work toward making visible the connections of which the carvings are the agents.

**Figure 3.3:** Lasaro, a woodcarver from Wasiya village, Unovek Island (part of the Budibudi archipelago) to the extreme east of the MBP, with three of his carvings, all representing dragons. Owing to its remoteness Budibudi has almost no contact with outsiders save for the odd yacht that calls in once or twice a year. In those rare occasions, Lasaro exchanges his *tokwalu* with food or clothes. Lasaro lived in Kiriwina where he “learned” the dragons. Less intricate, smaller in size and more “traditional-like,” his *tokwalu* are very different in style from Moyobana’s and those of other Trobriand carvers.
3.5 Representing the invisible: the call of the mermaid and the multiplicity of outsiders

Trobrianders portray their interactions with tourists in different and sometimes contrasting ways. They often try to display an image of authenticity that aims at meeting the idealised projections of the Trobriand world that some tourists carry with them when they come to Kiriwina. This, though, does not preclude carvers from trying to conform to other tropes of western modernity as they observe them directly or receive them indirectly through the interpretations of others.

During my fieldwork, another mythical denizen illustrated the popularity of newly adopted motifs in tokwalu. Sawem, a very successful carver from Yalumgwa (see Chapter 4 on notions of success), had another creature to show me. A human torso with a fish tail, this one too was quite obvious.

- Ave mauna minana, Sawem? (What animal is this one, Sawem?)

“Taga, minana mermaid!” (Well, she’s a mermaid!), Sawem exclaimed.
I should have known. Yet when I asked him what a mermaid was his exegesis happened to be more prosaic than Moyobana’s: “This is your animal, it’s a dimdim animal. We don’t have it here in the Trobes.”

- So why do you carve mermaids, Sawem?

“This is a tokwalu, a carving for tourists. It is very popular among divers, divers really like this one. Just like the seahorse, another of your animals.”

The profusion of mermaids and seahorses found in the Trobriand Islands in their different versions confirmed Sawem’s words. Their popularity is a double index: it signals the taste of the buyers and it records the Trobrianders’ reception of that taste and their incorporation into the local pantheon. Tokwalu are, after all, artefacts for the other. Their ontological raison d'être is to conform to the desires of the potential buyers. Carvers effect an interpretation of Trobriand culture through the artefacts they carve. Like any other artisans, they do not proceed in a socio-cultural vacuum. The Trobriand world is tied to the western capitalist one; or rather, to local perceptions of it. Tokwalu have been mediating vehicles of the encounter of Kiriwina and the west for more than a hundred years. In this ongoing dialogue, it is hard to establish long-lasting standpoints ascribed to separate categories of representation. When considering tourists as a delimited group of
actors from which one set of these categories of representation issues, the difficulties of generalizing them into a homogeneous class become evident. Tourists are no longer the white, Australian expats that used to flock the islands in charter flights in the days leading to independence, back in the 1970s (see Weiner 1982). Neither are they the whalers that called in at the Trobes to get yams, freshwater and also got carvings in the deal back in the 18th and 19th centuries (Hunter 1839; Campbell 2002: 2, 16). Nor are they the missionaries that came shortly after that and have been present in the Trobriand Islands since then in their different denominations, at times actively promoting the carving industry (see Lawton n.d.; Chapter 4). These *dimdims* are as heterogeneous as their predilections for different carvings go. They do not constitute a uniform taxon of *tourist*. Nowadays, a “tourist” can be an Asian businessman living in Port Moresby or a public servant visiting the Trobes from another province in PNG. It can be a health worker from the MBP, a kite-surfer from the Czech Republic or a Trobriander that left the islands a long time ago. Or a diver. Their interest in things-Trobriand varies from the landscape to history. On this account, tracing a tourist agenda of preferences in absolute terms is not only approximative, given the heterogeneous origins of potential buyers and the rapidly-changing conditions of the exchanges. It is also a counterproductive reduction of tourists into a uniform collectivity that is not always conceived as such. Though some of these buyers will never reach the Trobriands, Trobrianders expect to reach them through their carvings. If Sawem has carved mermaids in the past and sold them to divers, chances are that other divers may be interested in buying mermaids. Given their proven record of success in appealing to *dimdims*, mermaids are associated to a type of buyer, but this association needs to stay open enough to encompass future prospective partners. Unlike traditional *mauna*, the template “mermaid” does not need to conform to a prescribed set of immutable signs or meaningful actions. Because it is not part of a system, the mermaid functions like a freestanding metaphor to which different values can be attached. It can also “work” in other socio-cultural contexts and with alternative categories of tourists. Visualizing these categories demands a degree of creative flexibility from Trobrianders to adapt to non-native taste (see Figure 3.4).

But it is not a problem of form only, solved by the moulding of lines in carvings to please divers. Some carvers like Moyobana reveal an impetus of appropriation for which mermaids, dragons and seahorses need to become native at their origin. This impetus betrays the aspiration to conquer another type of *kateta*, the knowledge of the *dimdim*
world and the ability to act upon it. Like the weku, the mermaid assists Trobrianders in their conceptualisation of something they have heard about but have not seen (or have seen only partially, indirectly). Carving mermaids or dragons as vernacular expressions is a way of visualising the absent other for which the objects are conceived. Integrating foreign chimeras into Trobriand cosmologies is a procedure performed to construct western subjects with whom locals can engage through mutually intelligible material idioms. The object’s configuration is conceived concomitantly in general and particular terms. Its meaning has to be open enough so as to include standard images ready for apprehension, and at the same time it is required that it also bear the specific weight of a singularity. It needs to create the tourist within the tourists. And in doing so it has to stay distinctly Trobriand as well.

After my discovery of the Trobriand dragon I encountered it again several times under different shapes that nonetheless spelled out a similar narrative: the identification of a western trope as something ordinarily Trobriand. Almost every carver had his own dragons. Yet I did not realize how common the symbol was until Mwasisi, a young child in my village, pointed at the thermos in the family’s bwema (resting house) and affirmed naturally that the animal depicted on it was a dragon (Figure 3.5). That was indeed an Asian dragon pictured in the Chinese-made thermos purchased in a trade store in Losuia, and I had noticed it only after Mwasisi’s casual affirmation (a good few months after I saw my first Trobriand dragon).

**Figure 3.4:** Trobrianders often refer to this type of tokwalu portraying a young, bare-breasted woman featuring traditional Trobriand elements (face decorations, enlarged earlobes with turtle shell earrings, grass skirt, etc.) as “Milamala lady.” Most woodcarvers who used to make these types of standing figures not so long ago are now carving mermaids instead. Yet the “Milamala lady” tokwalu seems to resurface whenever there is a cultural festival in the island (like the one sponsored by Serah Clark in 2009, a recreation of the Milamala festivities described by Malinowski, see Young 1998: 89 ff). During the festival, carvers present people visiting the islands with what they deem to be more “traditional” depictions of the very same Trobriand culture that tourists (that precise type of tourist that is likely to know what the Milamala was) are there to experience (see MacCarthy 2012a).
“Bo la nukwali minana dragon,” I already know this one [animal] dragon, Mwasisi said. Mwasisi recognized the dragon in the thermos as something as familiar as a Trobriand *mauna*. His awareness denoted the degree to which dragons are inscribed in Trobriand folklore, but it is legitimate to wonder if they are carved because they are popular or whether they have become popular because they are carved. Here we are left with two questions: one is about the origin of Moyobana’s dragon. To what extent is Moyobana’s dragon inflicted upon him from a radically different otherness? It is plausible that Moyobana had seen a similar depiction of a dragon (in a made-in-China commodity, a T-shirt or even another carving) and absorbed it into his own symbolic pool of emblems. It is equally plausible that Moyobana had dreamed a dragon after seeing one, or after hearing that Asian *dimdins* nowadays are really into buying carvings of dragons. It is

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69 The Asian reminiscences of Trobriand carvings were already noted by Ellis Silas, an artist who resided in Kiriwina in 1922-23. Silas, a much overlooked source of information on Trobriand customs and material expressions, noted in his book *A Primitive Arcadia* how “the snake [carved on walking stick] is almost Chinese in expression” (1926: 206).
tempting to dichotomize among traditional and postmodern carvings, lagim and dragons or mermaids, and to ascribe these dichotomies to the asymmetric positioning of Trobrianders vis-à-vis their western counterparts. LiPuma has warned anthropologists against a deceptive theorization of this dialectic configuration in oversimplified, oppositional terms:

The intertwining of thought, desire, and practice in an endlessly reciprocal spiral is itself a hallmark of the Melanesian encounter with the modern. And so we fail the ethnography when our theory and method fail to capture this dialectic, substituting in its place simple lines of causation, such as those that imagine a world of an imposing West and resisting Other (2000: 6).

From a Euroamerican position, it may be assumed that Moyobana is capitalising on a western trope of mass culture. But from a Trobriand perspective it is also possible that Moyobana had dreamed the dragon before seeing one. In this respect, the problem is not one of western domination: Trobrianders do not portray dimdims as a fundamentally conflicting other but as a potential partner instead, one that can identify dragons and mermaids too. As a matter of fact, Trobrianders do not yield to the modern buyers by becoming sellers of modernities. They try instead to keep their objects recognizable while imbuing them with local agency, a density that would help not only in drawing buyers closer to them but also engage them in a long lasting set of relations. The analogy with the weku comes in handy once more: dragons and mermaids are symbols of the cognitive potential of carvers and of their capacity to create objects with “open agency” able to influence people beyond the Trobriand Islands’ world. Objects that may not have real, physical models but concretize, nonetheless, a concept, an aspiration or an absence into a material trope. Past a dichotomy of Trobriand/traditional vs dimdim/modern, the personal qualities of the carving as a vehicle of interactions transform the essence not only of the object but also of the relation itself. Trobrianders are concerned with the creation of a market. The question on the origin of Moyobana’s dragon is easily answered: dragons and mermaids are the increasingly familiar outer visualisations of this market.

The second question instead involves the range of this visualisation and asks about the origin of Mwasisi’s dragon, delving further into the feedback between images and narratives: Mwasisi said he knew the dragon. On that account, do Trobrianders recognise dragons because of the carvers’ material mediation rather than the other way around?
This too is a question about representing the invisible and investing it with corporeal familiarity. We can assume that we know where Moyobana’s dragon came from but the source of Mwasisi’s dragon is yet to be explored.

3.6 Carving with a story

To what extent is the material representation of aspects of Trobriand culture a comment on that culture? Trobrianders seek to endow their *tokwalu* with an aura of multivocal range capable of transmitting their agency and reaching out to a world with which they have partial engagements only. Like the attributes of traditional carvings, dense with symbolism and emblems, *tokwalu* nowadays carry the equivalent in *dimdim* terms. This, in the Trobrianders’ imagination, is the “story.” The interactions between carvers and tourists are first based on the visual display of objects as embodiments of expectations. Trobrianders expect their *tokwalu* to do the talking. Tourists expect that too (they are attracted to the formal characteristics immediately evidenced by the artefact) but they often seek verbal cues from the authors as guides to the crafts they propose to buy. *Dimdim* try to elicit hermeneutical responses from carvers as markers of authenticity. In their imagination, every object is the solid representation of a local custom or a myth that needs to be extricated from the artefact. The reception of these expectations is exemplified by “the story” in the carving.

Carvers use the English word when asked by buyers about the conceptual origin of their carvings. “This carving has a story” is the most repeated tag line when Trobrianders try to convince buyers of the validity of their material elaborations as interpretations of their lifeworld. Patrick Maganeti showed me two ebony carvings with vague, barely suggested anthropomorphic lineaments (Figure 3.6. See also Appendix C). The style of the carvings had no formal resonance with other Massim objects as seen in the Trobriand Islands or in museum collections. Instead, these undefined *tokwalu* with barely suggested lineaments looked more like Patrick’s interpretation of a western artwork. Yet these two figures were, according to Patrick, the representation of the culture hero Tudava and his mother, Bolitukwa. One of them portrayed Bolitukwa in her pregnancy after conceiving Tudava from the water dripping from a stalactite in the cave where she was hiding from the man-eating ogre Dokanikani (Malinowski 1916: 228-229; Austen 1934-5: 105. See also SN 1 Appendix A). The other one was a representation of Bolitukwa holding baby Tudava after giving birth to him. At the time of telling me the story that went with the carving
(the story that *is* the carving), Patrick was well acquainted with my being an anthropologist living in the Trobriand Islands. In fact, his recounting of the myth was patchy, the fragmentary narration working as an essential set of background information connecting the carvings to a story that I was supposed to know already. I was, after all, a distinct-yet-identifiable class of *dimdim* (anthropologist), different to that other category of potential buyer (the casual tourist) to which Patrick instead recounted at a later time in front of me that the sculptures represented “a Trobriand family, a father, a mother and their child.”

A similar strategy of verbal attachment to a material object was enacted by Toreyawa Towayola of Bwetalu village when I showed interest in one of his *tokwalu*. This one portrayed a woman standing, carrying a toddler and holding the hand of another infant with a dog sitting at her feet (Figure 3.7). As I was holding it in my hands, Toreyawa argued that “this carving had a story” (*manakwa tokwalu kweta stoli esisu*):

**Figure 3.6:** Some *tokwalu* carved by Patrick Maganeti in his house at the Paradise street settlement in Alotau. The sculptures of Bolitukwa and Bolitukwa with Tudava can be seen to the sides, framing a seahorse and a mermaid. *Litukwa* means dripping lime water. Bolitukwa’s real name appears to be Metigisi or Ilouma – see also Austen (1934-5).
Incidentally, it must be said that this dialogue took place shortly after Mother’s Day, a much-celebrated festivity that was sponsored by different Christian denominations throughout the Trobriand Islands. Unlike the Trobriand myth, this ordinary story would hardly stand by itself as anything more than a generic anecdote of the everyday. Its value is to be sought in relation to the carving and the particular moment at which it was told (an instance of potential sale for the carver). But Toreyawa’s story is also a universal one, a story of ecumenical love immediately familiar to anybody, dimdim or Trobriander.

In both cases, the carvings are not reputed to be self-sufficient. These tokwalu are completed by a story that traces their origins and functions as teleological signpost so buyers can understand the significance of the object they are about to acquire. In the first case, the form of the carving is only suggested; in the second case, the form is explicit. Yet in both the object itself is open-ended and able to don different ontological robes, depending on the story ascribed to it. Carvings in Kiriwina are not just expressions of forms, dreamed or seen. The story is a concession to the tourist but also a stratagem. Tokwalu are not bound things with univocal trajectories dictated by their form. The story or stories within the carving can be attached or detached from it. They can be

Figure 3.7: “In former times life was very difficult. This woman here had no husband. She had two kids. They went to the garden with their dog. The woman had to work in her garden while carrying her baby. I carved this for Mother’s Day, as a reminder of the hard work women have to do and of the loving care of all mothers.” Toreyawa Towayola.
manoeuvred to make the carving fit into the chosen path of exchange or even help in creating a new one ad hoc. The material inalterability of the finished carving is completed by the malleable soul of the immaterial narrative. If the carving is a visualisation of several entities (the animal or the mythical creature portrayed but also the carver’s agency and the buyer’s desire), as I have suggested before, the story that accompanies it is the enactment of a mediation to put in contact all these entities. As such, the narrative can be conceived as an intrinsic part of the object, shaped as a translation of Trobriand values as these values are now in contact with western ones (Christianity and capitalism being the most salient examples, see next chapter). Tourist art is not a series of stylistic concessions. It needs to be loaded with “meaning” (including meaningful acts) so that it can reach into the complexity of the outer world peopled by different types of *dimdims* that range from missionaries to boat crews. Objects, like people, are made of narratives that can elicit the relations of which things and persons are composed in Melanesia. Carvings are visualizations of these relations and material repositories for the verbalizations that accompany them.

As it has been remarked above, when we look under their formal designs *tokwalu* do not break apart from Trobriand canons but encompass them within new networks. Indeed, contemporary *tokwalu* bring together a received model and its potential re-elaborations, as the dynamics of the interpretation of the symbol and its subsequent renditions are subject to changes (re-interpretations and re-enactments) in objects that attempt to reach an elusive other. Epitomised by the story, the soul of the carving is a performance in progress. Under this light, carvings become disputed objects that do not belong unequivocally to any one cosmologically-pure tradition. The story helps in selling the carving but it also guides representation. Dragons, mermaids and seahorses are also a challenge for carvers: they exemplify the appropriation of a foreign, epistemologically-unknown form. When engraving these unknown symbols, Trobriand carvers are not only evidencing their intentions of appropriation but they are also announcing how this is done. A carver’s magic is so powerful and encompassing that it allows him to dream *mauna* that *dimdims* thought were only theirs. This capacity to dream western tropes is also a story, it is the narrative of the carver’s success and how he was able to obtain it; it “thickens” the carving with the detachable qualities of the carver, dreamer of strange animals and creator of images, including the successful image of the self, capable of being projected beyond the Trobriand tradition while complementing it.
3.7 The walking stones: spirits and agency

How does a carving that “has a story” embody the dialectic interplay of the material and the intangible as a symbol of the Trobriander’s interpretation and conventionalisation of their changing world? The reciprocal flow of extrapolation, of narratives from carvings and carvings from narratives, is constructed upon the generative potential attributed to objects in the Trobriand Islands. In other words, tokwalu have a story because they can be (or become) a story: they can elicit other narratives and produce other objects. Conceived as performances, some objects’ agency derives from (1) their personhood (their capacity to act like people and be acted upon) and (2) their ontological ductility (their capacity to act from different standpoints or under different shapes across specific socio-cultural domains). Objects, therefore, can reproduce the relations that lie at their origin but also promote new ones. To better understand how the reproductive agency attributed to things is manipulated by Trobriand actors, I turn to native concepts of subjectivity as they are formulated in the attribution of personhood to objects in Kiriwina. Stones (dakuna) in particular emerge as a suggestive example to illustrate this point.

I caught up with Trevor and his brother in 2009, shortly before they set off to Lae, in the Morobe province, to sell some Trobriand objects to a businessman over there. Among the things for sale, Trevor showed me two magic stones that had been in his matriclan (dala) for generations. The stones are buried in the newly-cut gardens to guarantee a plentiful harvest.

“They will protect your yams from pests and make them thrive. After harvest, the stones are put in the yam houses to look after the yams, preventing them from rotting and making the yams compact and filling, so you don’t need to eat as many to feel satisfied,” Trevor said. “These stones,” Trevor continued, “are like people. You should talk to them, make them feel comfortable. When you bury them you have to make them a bed of leaves or else they’ll move elsewhere, they might get lured by somebody else and leave your garden.”

- Trevor, what is this businessman going to do with the stones?

“If he wants to buy them for K1,000 I will also give him the magic that goes with the stones. This man has already bought some of the carvings I brought him in the past. He is the owner of Lae Biskit [one of the most popular brands of soda crackers found all over
PNG], he can put the stones in his factory and make the *pasikeda* [the Trobriandised term for biscuit] last longer and be more filling, it will help his business.”

The stones, it is assumed, will work with *dimdim* food in the same way they work with Trobriand *kuala*. How, then, do Trobrianders command the will of an inert traditional object and link it to *dimdim* cultural categories in such a way that the object is still able to do its job? In the stones are embedded stories that materialise personal connections, manifestations of the bond between the land and the matrilineage. As Battaglia has noted, these *dakuna* “represent transferable concentrates of the accumulated investments over time of *dala* [matrilineage] forces in garden land” (1986: 11). The stones are treated like the literal encapsulation of ancestral power and put in direct relation to the present-day interests of the matriclan. What makes this analogy tenable is the Trobriand conviction that the person-like elements within the stones can be directed to fulfil one’s purposes, just like people can be influenced for the same reasons.

This type of transferable agency is common in Kiriwina. Magic stones⁷⁰ are conspicuous in the Trobriand lifeworld. The characteristics attributed to them range from “positive” ones (like the *kaytumla babukwa*, the “pressers of the floor” that “impart their qualities to the stored food,” anchoring the heavy, compact yams to the yam house, Malinowski 1935: 222) to “negative” or evil rocks (like the *vineylida*, the “live” rocks that jump from the bottom of the sea onto canoes to make them sink (ibid. 1922: 209, 233, 235, 247). When inquiring about the agency of these stones, one is confronted with two categories: the first one ascribes autonomous volition to the *dakuna*. Like the *vineylida*, these stones act out of their own accord without the intercession of humans. In the second category, the stones are directed to act according to the wishes of an individual or a group of people that are able to exert control over the stone. *Kabwenaya* is the most famous and influential of all the Trobriand *dakuna.*⁷¹

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⁷⁰ The generic word for stone in Kilivila is *dakuna*. Malinowski gives *binabina* for stones of volcanic origin imported from the south and *kema* for those hard stones from Suloga in Woodlark Island used in tools (*buku* axe heads) before the advent of westerners (1935: 71-72, 82). Trobrianders also make distinctions among different types of corals depending on their toughness, colour, etc.

⁷¹ There are a number of these stones scattered throughout the Trobes: see for instance *Bomlikuliku*, near Labai (Malinowski 1916: 396).
Kabwenaya lives next to the paramount chief’s house in Omarakana, in a highly-tabooed area of bushes known as olugwalagula. The stone is at the service of the Tabalu matriclan and obeys the orders of the paramount chief, who possesses magic spells to summon the powers within the stone. With Kabwenaya, the Tabalu of Omarakana have control over the harvests and can determine whether there shall be abundance (malia) or hunger (molu) in Kiriwina. To achieve this, the paramount chief will “speak magic” into the stone. Kabwenaya will then turn itself into a woman and walk around Kiriwina carrying a woven basket (peta) in her head. If the basket is empty, Kabwenaya will bring famine; if full, the harvest shall be plentiful. Because Kabwenaya is the highest-ranked rock in the island’s hierarchy, other stones in the Trobriand Islands have to follow its wishes and therefore those of the Tabalu. “When Kabwenaya walks, it will call her younger sisters and they will walk with her,” the Tabalu say. Her younger sisters are the subordinated matriclans that lend support to the Tabalu in the traditional systems of intra-island exchange (i.e. mortuary distributions, see Weiner 1988). One of Kabwenaya’s sisters is Namiriyegwa. Namiriyegwa lives in the coastal village of Mloseda and the chief of the village exerts his command over the winds through the mediation of the stone. It can blow storms away or bring them in, preventing fishermen from sailing out in their canoes.

In both categories, the agency of the stone is given by its having an inner “soul” with anthropomorphic traits that gives it its capacity to act independently. But it also makes the stone susceptible to being influenced by other people. Kabwenaya and Namiriyegwa have a Tabalu identity that makes them follow the wishes of the Tabalu ancestors through the mediation of the current chiefs. In keeping with the Trobriand rationale that you can influence other peoples’ minds so as to have them do something for you (see Montague 1989), the human-like agency embedded in stones can be temporarily appropriated to serve a particular purpose. This link between stones and people is sometimes explicit: some rocks are markers of ancestral power, connected as they are to foundation myths.

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72 Lugwalagula is also the name of a protective plant found in many Trobriand villages. The plant shelters the village space by “covering it up” at night so it cannot be seen from above by flying witches. In some people’s accounts, the lugwalagula and other plants with similar characteristics (I was told that different clans have different plants) have the capacity to turn themselves into magic beings that glow in the dark. These spirits walk around the villages at night, preventing bwagau sorcerers and witches from causing any harm to the villagers.

73 There is a taboo against touching some of these stones. Permission from the chief of Mloseda is required before you can get close to Namiriyegwa and in any case you need to talk to it before laying your hands upon its surface. Through this and other taboos, the analogy between the stone and people of high rank is easily observable.
and the origins of matriclans in the islands (Scoditti 1996: 69; see also Kahn 1990). Some of these stones are perceived directly as ancestors. They are not inert reminders or signposts in the landscape but active loci of power that fulfil a function of space-time binders, bringing the past into the present and acting as connectors between the living and their maternal kin. The agency of these stones is associated to them “being a person” or having a person inside them, quite literally (olumolela tomota, “inside [there is] people”).\(^{74}\) several Trobriand myths describe how people have turned into stones throughout the kula ring (e.g. Malinowski 1922: 44-45). In other cases the bond between the stones and human beings is implicit and mediated by other entities rendered in English as “spirits.” Given the indeterminacy of the category “spirit” in the Trobriand system of belief (and the further complexities introduced by Christian ideology), it is herewith necessary to attend to some of the different visualizations of the term spirit from a native perspective. The importance of this classification lies, as it became evident to me, in its ancillary role for representation: what people think is in a rock can be visualised in a carving and verbalised in a story, and what people see in a carving and tell in a story is what they imagine can be in a rock. The operation, although not necessary for the rock to work, helps in understanding better how things work in the Trobes, both for tourists and Trobrianders.

The basic\(^{75}\) four denominations given to spirits in Trobriand cosmology are kosi, baloma, tokwai and itona. The former are the personal essence or soul of the newly dead before they complete their trip to the underworld of Tuma, where they will become a baloma. Kosi are temporary ghosts or mirror-images of the corpse subject to decay in the same way that flesh is. Unlike baloma, the kosi of deceased people can be seen by the living, often in different rotting stages, as kosi can haunt villagers for a period of time if they cannot progress to the next stage. Normally the kosi of a newly-dead person is said

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\(^{74}\) See for instance Trobriand anthropologist Linus digim’Rina’s un-translated conversations with Tokwakuwa where the latter declares that the stone known as Ilakabwasi has a “pretty woman with white skin inside.” (Silipolakapulapola digim’Rina, Stones, unpublished conversation).

\(^{75}\) This is a very succinct categorisation. Trobriand cosmology includes many other spiritual beings, either individuals like Topileta or Tupilupalupa, creators of the world and deities of the underworld of Tuma or other supernatural beings (see Figure 3.8). Understandably, over a hundred years of Christianisation have affected this categorisation and its interpretation. Some people claimed that the tokwai spirits for instance were indeed “Topileta’s angels,” ultimately acting on God’s behalf.
to travel to Budibudi in the east,\textsuperscript{76} to heal and get rejuvenated before heading to Tuma, the island of the dead. If a kosi is not granted access to Tuma it will roam around its own village until it disappears (Hutchins also reports this possibility, see 1986: 271).\textsuperscript{77} When the kosi enters the underworld of Tuma it becomes a baloma.

Baloma are the souls of ancestors that live in Tuma in a suspended time of perpetual feasting while waiting for reincarnation within their matrilineage. Baloma are sometimes conceived as being the “breath of ancestors” (Malinowski 1916; Scoditti 2012: xiii, 69). As opposed to the kosi, baloma are invisible to the living and can only be seen by “dreamers” (kasivila) that are able to visit Tuma when asleep. Although invisible to them, baloma can interact with the world of the living: they come back to Kiriwina at the beginning of the yam harvest or whenever they are required to do so by the kinsmen of their matrilineage to intercede in their favour. This is usually done by reciting magic formulae (megwa) that summon ancestors by name. Magic, thus, is the verbalization of ancestral life: baloma are an accumulation of voices and actions from the past brought into the present through an ordered sequence that serves the purpose of aligning the vital strength of the matrilineage with that of the self. In this way, they are not only visualized as living voices but they are also the practical recognition of the matriclan as a source of power. The magic incantations of megwa bring together elements that are markers of personhood in the Trobes (the name of ancestors, their voices and the memory of their effective actions) and reconstitute them through the re-enactment of a proposed activity and the desired result obtained from it. Magic works through this cumulative assemblage of people as a repetition of acts with variations. This stresses the importance of the utterance as the re-staging of past relations with the capacity of carrying out efficacious actions in the present.

Tokwai are nature spirits that dwell in trees, plants, rocks, waterholes and other places (Malinowski calls them “wood sprite[s] living in trees and rocks, stealing crops from the field and from the yam-houses, and inflicting slight ailments” and describes them as men with long beards, 1922: 77, 128. See also Scoditti 1996: 216). Some people know how to interact with the tokwai using magic spells and can “direct” them to obtain protection or

\textsuperscript{76} Budibudi is a group of islands to the east of Woodlark Island, in the north-east corner of the kula ring. Budibudi is also a term in Kilivila that can be translated as “the place where the horizon ends” and is thus associated to the netherworld.

\textsuperscript{77} Kosi can also be turned into other things if Topileta denies them entrance to Tuma, the most common being a house post (see Figure 3.8), a snake or a type of mythical fish called Vayaba (literally “to send away,” Lawton n.d; see also Ketobwau 1994).
to cause harm to others (e.g. Malinowski 1935: 278, 375). It is some Trobrianders’ contention that *baloma* can turn into *tokwai* and live forever in an element of the landscape such as a rock, a tree, a reef, etc. (see Figure 3.8).

**Figure 3.8:** (a), (b) *Tokwalu* collected in 1879 by Russian ethnologist/biologist Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay during his short visit to the Trobriand Islands (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, C302). Commenting on this photograph, Trobrianders invariably asserted that the anthropomorphic figure on this betel nut mortar “could not be human. These are the features of a *tokwai.*” *Tokwai* can inhabit/become objects: “they are wood spirits, they live in trees. You have to ask them to leave the tree before you cut it to make a canoe, otherwise the *tokwai* will stay there and make the canoe heavy.” *Baloma* can also be turned into *tokwai* by Topileta, the ruler of the underworld of Tuma. Topileta sometimes “bans” a spirit into a hut post as punishment, confining a *tokwai* to live in it until the post rots away. (c) A lime spatula (*kena*) carved by Dabwai, from Iwa Island, ca1980s. This *kena* with anthropomorphic traits is called *katkupwara*. The *kena* is said to be able to warn its owner of the impending danger of an approaching flying witch or a sorcerer by “shouting” (*katkupwara* is an onomatopoeic name evoking a rattling sound). If the carver/owner of the lime spatula knows the right magic he can get a *tokwai* to live in the *kena* to protect him. This faculty is also ascribed to other *tokwalu* like the *mwamwala* (d), a gargoyle-like figure with human features placed on top of yam houses and huts to guard the dwelling and its inhabitants (see Appendix C). Other spirits too can live in objects. *Gamagelina* for instance are a type of spirits “from outside the Trobriand Islands.” They are carved in some *tokwalu* such as betel nut pestles or wands. The appropriate magic makes them come to life at night and injury or kill the targeted person. Afterwards the carving will get stained with red. Interestingly enough, *gamag* means “people” in Woodlark Island.
Itona is the generic name given to evil spirits or demons associated to the spreading of diseases and famine in the Trobriand Islands. Some of them are said to live in a grove in Kiriwina, not far from the airstrip, yet some others came from distant places, like Normanby Island (Ketobwau 1994: 39, 98) bringing epidemics or illnesses to the Trobes. Itona can be summoned through sorcery or magic incantations that call them by their names (Bodulela, Tauvau, Gabuwana, Ilaveka, see SN 169 Appendix A; Malinowski 1922: 76-77). Like tokwai and baloma, itona too have personal characteristics that link them to the world of the living. The magic spells used to summon them are part of their very essence as they trace the relations of the spirits to people, fixing these relations in narratives that can be re-enacted with every summoning.78

Consequently, the “story” of the stones is a substance of human-like attributes made of words, actions and relations, thus attaching narratives to people in dynamic ways. Just like carvers recognise multiple dimdim and adapt the stoli of their tokwalu to that diversity, the essence of the stones needs to be “personalised” correctly to address the right spirit. The businessman in Lae will be able to mobilise the forces within the stones and channel their agency to his own profit if given the magic spells to summon and steer the ancestral power in them. The history of the stones (the recounting of the stories in the stones, who they are and how they have become that) will be linked to the story of the owner, and the latter will be encompassed within the former with any successive transfers of the dakuna, adding a new set of relations with each circulation. Every invocation is an appeal to a supernatural power that mobilises the spirits within the stone through the mediating intercession of a chain of ancestors that goes back to the originators of the matriclan. But Trevor is also vying for his own appropriation beyond the matriclan, that of his binding relation to the businessman. The stones, with their concentrate of dala forces, ought to prove their agency past the Trobriand Islands, incorporating and validating new narratives and those who have given origin to them. “Bi paisewa,” it shall work, Trevor said. “And the dimdim will come back for more, like he’s been doing in the past years,” Trevor added.

Myths tell how malignant spirits accord humans the magic needed to summon them and perform evil deeds. (Malinowski 1926: 130). It is this first covenant or agreement that is recreated each time the incantation is performed by calling the names of all the ancestors through which the spell was handed down up until the very first one at the origin.
3.8 Capturing the spirits

Thus the story in an object in Kiriwina is an open genealogy of past relations and actions with the capacity to yield and incorporate new ones. This is done by manipulating and directing the malleable essence that is common to some Trobriand objects. Things in Kiriwina are inhabited by anthropomorphic forces that can be made to comply with one’s wishes provided one has the right knowledge to rule those forces. But unlike anthropologists, Trobrianders are not pressed to elaborate classifications of the substance of objects and discuss whether this substance pertains to what dimdim would call animism. Rather, they are interested in the practical processes by which this substance can be managed so as to exercise a degree of control on the connections of which objects are mediators and receptacles. Still, when interacting with dimdim Trobrianders need to find a common ground to communicate the origin and the defining characteristics of the potential that resides in their artefacts. If Trobrianders verbalise the story of a carving when trying to sell it, they do so to establish a common nexus between their cosmologies and those of their Euroamerican consumers. Yet sharing a story with a dimdim is easier than sharing a spirit, harder to portray than any model, be it real or imagined. How, then, do Trobrianders render these abstract concepts in tokwalu in ways that are meaningful to tourists? Does this representation also help appropriation? If so, who appropriates the images thus created and for what purposes?

As it has been noted before, a fundamental part of the carver’s task in Kiriwina is to be able to internalise and externalise images. Carving material representations of Trobriand cosmologies requires a capacity to visualise invisible elements, some of which were never represented before in the local tradition. Apart from the obvious kosi, a decaying reflection of the living person, none of the Trobriand spirits have a clear, canonical image for representation. Trobrianders use descriptions (like the common ones used for Kabwenaya and her sisters) and metaphorical expressions to render the inner essence that animates the Trobriand world. One of these expressions, momova, can be rendered as “life” (Hutchins & Hutchins n.d, Senft 1986, Lawton 2002) or more accurately as “vital spirit/breath” (Scoditti 1996: 68-72, 2012: 67-71). In this latter glossing, the term conveys the all-encompassing presence of a substance of which all the Massim universe participates. The expression is the “synthesis of the totality of relations which man has established with the external world or with nature, including the past, as constructed by his ancestors.” (Scoditti 1996: 70.). All that exists in the Trobriand world (past, present
and future) has a fraction of this common vital breath in it. Interactions among entities are thus facilitated by this shared substance. And since it permeates everything, people are able to exert their personal influence on things – and on other people as well – through the manipulation and the temporary appropriation of this common substance. It is useful here to recall how Trobrianders often asked me if I was going to put “something of them” in my book (see previous chapter). This request made more sense when I learned how this was done in the Trobes.

In a succinct explanation of how a particular type of magic of attraction (kaimwasila, see Chapter 5) works, Joe Beona, a proficient dancer from Yalumgwa, attempted to pin down the defining elements that make the magic efficacious. Kaimwasila is prepared using a concoction of vegetable matter (plants, fruits, flowers, part of trees, etc.) mixed with coconut oil (bulami) over which a magic spell is recited (see also Campbell 2002: 97-98). Anointing yourself with this medicated bulami results in enhancing your capacity of attraction to the point where third parties experience an irresistible desirability towards you and are easily coaxed into complying with your wishes.

The utterance of the spell summons the baloma spirits, “putting them into the bulami,” Joe affirmed, “so they too can help you persuade other people do what you want.”

- What else is in the herbs used to make this bulami, Joe?

“There are also other magic creatures in the bulami. When you collect the plants you have to do it at a special time. That is the time when some creatures come to live in the plants.”

- What creatures?

“Spirits. In Kaibola and Luebila [to the extreme north of Kiriwina] there are mermaids that come to sleep in those plants. If you capture them, they too will be in the bulami. It is them, together with the spirits of your ancestors, that will make the bulami work. You also need to put parts of yourself in the bulami, like your pubic hair and dirt from your body. If you give the bulami to someone – in a betel nut for example – then the mermaid will go and live inside their body making them do what you want.”

Two things are particularly worthwhile about Joe’s explanation: one is the conviction that magic works because the bulami has in it a “spirit” that acts on behalf of the person (and in conjunction with the spirits of ancestors). Plants are not important in themselves:
they simply contain a “collectible being” that is the purposive agent of their power, in association with the spirits of ancestors and fragments of the self. The other remarkable thing is that Joe claims that this spirit living in plants and trees is a “mermaid.” Going back to the questions enunciated above, one could surmise that the mermaid is Joe’s concrete and familiar representation of the more abstract momova or vital breath, never mentioned by Joe in our conversations. Sure enough, the mermaid is familiar to the Euroamerican anthropologist or tourist, but at this point it is also familiar to a Trobriander like Joe who, incidentally, is not a carver. The mermaid has been co-opted in the Trobriand pantheon because it helps any Trobriander (not just carvers endowed with the power to dream images) visualise the invisible, therefore making it more accessible and apprehensible, exteriorising a previous interiorisation. Joe, who is well aware of the mechanisms that regulate the efficacy of a magic he himself uses, is short of exegetical cues when in need of explaining those mechanisms to a dimdim. The mermaid is the concretisation of an abstract image of power, and – even more importantly – one dimdim can recognise. Unlike the elusive weku in the lagim, the mermaid is there to be grasped also by the uninitiated layman. But the fortune of the mermaid also rests upon the fact that it can now be presented as something intrinsically Trobriand: dimdim will recognise the shape of the mermaid immediately, yet it won’t be a “western” mermaid but a local one. And since the same process is equally adapted to validate representations of other Trobriand spirits, the mermaid stands metonymically next to other images of previously-unrepresented creatures in old carvings. For example, carvers of tokwalu in Kiriwina also experiment with renditions of flying witches more than they used to in the past. Flying witches (yoyowa or mulukwausi) and sorcerers (bwagau) are said to be able to transform their own features so as to terrorize their victims. Like objects and landscape features, witches and sorcerers too may have “spirits” inside that act as their source of power (see also Bell 2006). When I asked him what a yooyowa looked like, my adoptive father Camillus gave me the following description of one of his sisters – a reputed flying witch in the southern village of Sinaketa (see Figure 3.9):
His description matches *tokwalu* just as much *tokwalu* match his description. In the Trobrianders’ reasoning, *dimdims* buying representations of flying witches and mermaids are presented with an “authentic” story (insofar as it is a Trobriand one). But if this promotes a more direct understanding of Trobriand myths by outsiders it also assists Trobrianders like Joe or Mwasisi in picturing abstract concepts like *momova* or mythical creatures like dragons. At this point, it is clear that this type of appropriation is not merely the seizing of an image by a carver through imitation or reproduction so as to create an object appealing to *dimdims*. The appropriation of an image is a communal operation carried out by carvers and others, the creators of material objects and those who corroborate these creations with their recognition. This anticipates a theme that will be dealt with in the next chapter, namely how the endorsement of new types of *tokwalu* has

Figure 3.9: “She is a very skinny woman with big glowing eyes, like a cat; she can dislocate her jaw so as to keep her mouth wide open and swallow people; she can also make her teeth, nose and ears grow to appear more fearsome. She has a long tongue that sticks out of her mouth.” Camillus’ description of a flying witch is reminiscent of the features carved in this walking stick, a common representation of *yoyowa* in the Trobriand Islands.
an effect on the status of carvers as they try to position themselves as privileged mediators of Trobriand and foreign cosmologies.

For now the problem remains to understand what a tokwalu is. In reviewing different types of objects in Kiriwina we have seen how Trobrianders conceive artefacts as aggregates of relationships. The wooden axe I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter was, so to speak, a straightforward object, immediately identifiable, acknowledged and incorporated by western audiences (i.e. collectors like Black) and Trobrianders alike. The relationships it spells out are the well-known ones of a pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial presence in the Massim. The axe is a witness of past exchanges and ongoing appropriations. Its symbolism has long been conventionalised and does not require further visual or verbal exegesis. Other traditional objects like the stones or the lagim are also conventional symbols inasmuch as the ties they encapsulate are long established ones. From this (Trobriand) perspective, the curio made by a craftsman for a tourist one hundred years ago and the lagim made for a chief by a master carver in 2008 are not ontologically as separate as some anthropologists would have it (Campbell 2002: 5-6). Both are conventional symbols. Nevertheless, and despite their being familiar artefacts in the Massim, some objects demand an exegetical support in addition to their corporality, especially when they need to operate beyond the Trobriand world. The constituents of some objects (the relationships among ancestors, spirits and living beings that have made the object) are not invariably attached to the image of the object, which is not itself necessarily an obvious projection of these constituents. It is true that their essence is in many cases hermetic: accessing and harnessing it requires a type of knowledge that only some people in Kiriwina possess. Yet this knowledge, and the relationships that form it, are also transferable. This is what carvers are effecting with their creativity, by bringing the constituents to the surface, re-fashioning them and creating new symbols in the process.

Contemporary tokwalu try to achieve this. They project their essence externally, making it explicit to potential buyers. Indeed, whatever we are ready to accept they express, tokwalu express it outwards. If we see them as poetic translations of the world, we encounter the problem of defining what world is that. But if we see them as poetic translations for the world, we need to establish how and why they are translated that way, as this means also how Trobrianders conceive and interpret the dimdim world. Revealing what is in a tokwalu is an inference arrived at through the coupling of narratives with the
image(s) presented in the object. This is done in an open-ended, dialogic way that aims at taking the symbol to its universalisation. The process oscillates back and forth, with Trobrianders absorbing *dimdim* concepts, ideas and images, interiorising them and creating idioms that are suitable to be cast as intrinsically theirs at the origin but susceptible, nevertheless, to further moulding through the incorporation of new narratives and relations. As opposed to traditional carvings, contemporary *tokwalu* are innovative symbols that aim at “integrat[ing] disparate contexts” (Wagner 1981: 53), the Trobriand one and the *dimdim*’s. Once they achieve that metaphorisation, new *tokwalu* become conventional symbols. The mermaid, the dragon and the seahorse, then, will turn out to be as conventionally straightforward as the wooden axe is now.

**3.9 The seahorse and the communal imagination**

At the beginning of my fieldwork I devised a questionnaire to be distributed among carvers throughout Kiriwina to try to better understand what carving was. It was a total failure. You cannot measure carving with a survey. The act of carving can be way too many things: a hobby, a full-time occupation, a hope, a gesture of faith, an extension of the person and his status (see Chapter 4). Likewise, carvings are just as changing as the motivations to carve. “There was a time when there were too many pigs and crocodiles and the market was flooded. Buyers wanted new carvings,” Kuleleku Tomdia, a carver and dealer in carvings from Kwebwaga village once told me. Hardly an astonishing novelty anymore, Trobrianders’ inventiveness in manufacturing their cosmological beliefs and environmental signs into alluring objects for *dimdim* buyers is well over a hundred years old. Many collections, curios catalogues, colonial reports and articles are witness to the “pigs, birds and human beings […] they had done in the past” (Austen 1945: 196). Since the first exchanges with *dimdim* took place, a creative challenge was set in motion to mediate in the traffic of things exchanged. The Trobriand environment has been evolving ever since, to a point where the connections between the people and their lifeworld are not limited to local reference points, nor are they inscribed in ontologically-bounded objects anymore. The first time I saw a carved seahorse in Kiriwina I assumed it to be a conventional Trobriand animal. It was Sawem who told me that the seahorse was in fact an outsider: there is no word in Kilivila for it (Trobrianders call it *siosa*).
“This one siosa, she is a powerful animal, she has healing powers. A dimdim told me so,” Sawem explained. But it would be misleading to think that the power of the carved seahorse rests on its professed healing faculties only, as they are enunciated by dimdims. The seahorse’s real power hinges on its multiple indexical properties: it characterizes Sawem’s capacity to create a representation of an animal he has never seen before; it embodies a dimdim narrative; and it reproduces that narrative as it is recounted now by a Trobriander. Yet fundamentally what the siosa tokwalu does is to establish itself as the product of a series of relations and the potential originator of new ones. Carvings like dragons, seahorses and mermaids have become nexuses of these new relations. They do more than simply agglutinate the contrasting mythopoetic fabric of the Trobriand world with the historical interpretation that Europeans still make of it. Over the last century, carving in the Trobriand Islands has not amounted exclusively to a material display of Trobriand symbols. Instead, we need to see carving as a constructive undertaking, an inventive endeavour set to make sense of a changing reality that involved more and more the continuous presence of foreign elements and their uninterrupted interactions with the locals. To a degree, carvings for foreigners do not only display Trobriandness but are instead the material signification of the relations among Trobrianders and dimdims. Old Trobriand symbols have become symbols of new Trobriandness. New carvings are the material evidence of the transformative agency of these recently developed relations: because the dimdim came, Moyobana is now able to dream dragons. And carve them.

Yet if we effect a transition between perspectives and we align ourselves with the Trobrianders’ stance we could also say that new relations are the product of the agency of these carvings: because Moyobana can dream and carve dragons, the dimdim will come to buy them. This is how carvers see their enterprise: Moyobana carves a dragon so he can sell it to a dimdim but for him to do so, he must first “carve” the dimdim, that is, produce the context or the path for that particular relation to happen. Carvers leave their objects open, thereby allowing the carvings enough “room” to accommodate the stories, relations and actions of future potential buyers. The adoption of a foreign trope and its submission to local referential frames does not amount to a translation. The attributes of the adopted element may stay unchanged and its meaning not completely understood but it is not less fully appropriated for that reason. Sawem knows the seahorse has healing powers. Other Trobrianders don’t, but it doesn’t matter. The seahorse carving works: dimdim like it and they buy it. As I noted at the beginning of the chapter, the real
appropriation effected by Trobrianders is not that of a foreign form but that of the possibilities that form affords. The act of appropriation takes priority and that is what is actually empowering, since it allows Trobrianders to effect a degree of control over the potential embedded in the object. When carvers help other Trobrianders visualise things through their interpretations they are affirming the legitimacy of their representation.

Complete recognition though comes from communal social action: it is the performances of others (Trobrianders and dimdims) that will dictate if the object is accepted as a conventional symbol. As we have seen, these performances include attaching a story to the carving and endowing it with new values in the process. Sure enough, carvings that “have a story” are likely to fetch higher prices, the story adding to the dimdim’s understanding of the object (and therefore increasing her/his capacity to appropriate it). By the same token, carvings help the locals’ appropriations. Mermaids, those invisible fish-like creatures that dwell in some plants, can be captured or summoned and made to act on people’s behalf, just like ancestors or other spirits do. This is not necessarily an asymmetric encounter made of forced impositions and uncritical assimilations. Incorporating a dragon or a mermaid to the traditional Trobriand pool of myths must not be mistaken with surrendering to western cosmologies more than it is adopting and dominating elements from those cosmologies from an entirely vernacular perspective. Simply put, tokwalu gloss on narratives and narratives gloss on tokwalu, narrative and object feeding on each other. Similarly, Trobrianders “create” the consumers of their carvings while those who buy them can be said to endorse (or to “create”) the carvings and their makers in a scheme of mutual validation.
Chapter 4
Magic, rice and carved saints: knowing, assembling and consuming personhood in the “times of change”

This chapter reviews carving as a process of identity construction and status affirmation, both from the carvers’ perspective and from that of non-carvers. The latter is crucial in acknowledging the elements that constitute a craftsman’s success, viz. the transformation of his potential of action and reflection into effective power in the form of material and immaterial wealth. In that regard, carvers operate in the intervening spaces of two dichotomous registers: that of traditional valuables on the one hand, and cash and western goods on the other. As we shall see, Trobrianders try to negotiate a working connection between these two regimes of value by making them complementary. Their understanding and manipulation of ways of knowing is, ultimately, what allows Trobrianders to put in place a scheme of practical action and ideas encompassing this interdependence and investing it with meaning.

4.1 The fame of carvers
Like most accomplished carvers in Kiriwina do when talking about the high prices their objects fetch in the market, Moyobana boasted that he could ask more than K5,000 (approx. £1,530) for his dragon. In the same way as the carving is a projection of a generic other for whom the object was especially conceived, the price too becomes an idealised projection of the self’s emblematic social position. Moyobana was confident that he could claim such a high price in recognition of his status as a master carver, a creator of original images embedded in Trobriand tradition yet nonetheless able to transcend that tradition. Oversimplifying, status in the Trobriand Islands is achieved through the ability to exert influence over people and things. This ability takes on different forms (for instance karewaga – authority), sustains itself on varying types of
expertise (like megwa or sopi, magic knowledge) and becomes observable in the people’s inter-relations (such as in ceremonial exchanges). Occasionally, it can be exercised through the personal agency carried by some objects. Because Moyobana is a knowledgeable man and an expert carver endowed with magic skills, he commands a degree of respect among the Trobriand community. Moreover, he can put a part of his detachable self in his carvings and is therefore able to act through them, influencing people he has never seen before. “When they see my tokwalu,” Moyobana told me, “they know it is I who carved it. They want to buy it, and come back for more,” he added. Moyobana’s work has proven in the past its capacity to “yield social relations” and this, in his view – and in that of other Trobrianders who also acknowledge the fact – is one of the constituents granting his carvings their high value.

Alas, the one he showed me was his last dragon. Not long after finishing it Moyobana died of tuberculosis. In order to fulfil their obligations during the mortuary distributions known generically as sagali (to share, “to divide among everyone present,” see Weiner 1976: 62-91), his kin, hard pressed for cash and other valuables, were forced to sell the dragon to Rex Monavaila. Rex runs a trade store in Obweria village where he mostly sells rice, flour, sugar, noodles, tinned food and kerosene to the locals. In addition, he also buys carvings. People from around the Trobriand Islands bring him tokwalu with a tag price. Rex looks at the carvings and values them, usually at a fraction of the price carvers claim their objects are worth. He bought Moyobana’s dragon for K300, almost twenty times less than the late carver’s estimate. Later on, the dragon was air freighted to Port Moresby together with other tokwalu. Rex Monavaila’s brother-in-law (lubou), Tomdebi Milamala, sells Trobriand carvings in Moresby, mostly at Ela Beach. A few months after Moyobana’s death, his dragon was standing at Ela Beach Craft Market amid hundreds of other tokwalu freighted by Rex from Kiriwina. Tomdebi had “known” Moyobana – in the sense that he knew who he was through his carvings. He told me he really liked this tokwalu and was seriously considering keeping it for himself. He had added two carved herons made of ebony to each side of the dragon, “to make it more beautiful.” The herons were not Trobriand tokwalu:

“These are carvings from New Ireland, they add more beauty to the whole,” Tomdebi claimed, satisfied with his own creation. “This carving could sell for around K1,000 maximum but not more than that. K700 is actually closer to its real price.” As Tomdebi
gives me the rundown on Moyobana’s dragon a man observes the carving and asks him how much he wants for it. “K2,000” Tom says. The Asian man shakes his head: “Too much. It’s a very nice carving, but that’s too expensive.” He seems to be waiting for Tomdebi to offer him a second price, but to no avail. Tom is determined to keep this carving unless he can get an unrealistic price for it. He claims he would do so out of respect for Moyobana.

Figure 4.1: A window display in an ethnic crafts shop in San Francisco, U.S. Both the carved wooden dragon and the stool on top of which it sits come from Indonesia. Art collectors from all over the world visit PNG to collect objects and images of objects. The owner of one of the art galleries in Port Moresby claims there are a number of places in Asia specialised in carving fakes from photographs of artefacts taken in PNG.
Tomdebi’s expression of respect towards the late Moyobana is a token of the old carver’s capacity to have an effect on other people’s actions, even after his death. The expansion of the self beyond the physical boundaries of the spatial coordinates occupied at one given time is a well-documented constant in Melanesia (Strathern 1988). In the Massim, this projection of one’s agency is rendered in the anthropological literature by the term *fame*, usually ascribed to the predetermined, gendered domains of kula exchange for men and mortuary distributions of banana leaf bundles (*doba*) for women (see Munn 1977, 1986, 1990; Weiner 1976; 1988). Munn in particular identifies fame with the positively-endowed name of a person or a community (and therefore a constituent part of their identity), assembled through successful transformative acts that attribute pre-eminence to that individual or group in those gendered domains. Thus, one’s name “climbs” (the Kilivila term is *butula*, literally “its roar;” also meaning “it resounds, it makes noise, it gives renown”) in a ranked social ladder by producing a positive outcome witnessed and acknowledged as such by others (Munn 1986: 15). Fame, hence, is the main basis for establishing and consolidating one’s social influence.

In the present example though, there are two immediate problems posited by this configuration. The first one is whether one’s reputation can be established in this way in domains that are not those conventionally prescribed as the predetermined field to carry out these transformative actions. That is, can carvers of objects for tourists project their fame through *tokwalu*, like they were shell valuables? Moyobana’s story would seem to prove so, although the fact that his carving did not quite reach the selling price he had envisaged in our conversations may go against this. Or else, how can your fame rise while others devaluate your *tokwalu* through their judgement or by not conceding the asked price? In line with this, price alone does not seem to be enough to confer a carver his high status. Rex and Tomdebi Milamala diminished the value of the dragon but they still considered Moyobana a master carver. This leads us to the second question: if price alone does not determine the value of a carving and the status of its producer, what are the other elements involved in the process? The making of a carver’s status in Kiriwina is no longer regulated by the conventional circuit chiefs/leaders-master carvers-apprentices. As we shall see next, the traffic of new artefacts has also entailed a re-design of the paths along which carvings circulate, and a re-classification of the actors that construct those paths.
4.2 Magic airport art

Why was Moyobana recognised as a master carver in Kiriwina and in Port Moresby? What made him stand above other carvers in the eyes of Trobrianders? The status of carvers in present-day Kiriwina is constructed through a dynamic process of recognition of a series of positive qualities. These qualities are to be found in the carver himself, his actions and the objects he creates. People in Kiriwina are quick and unanimous in pointing out who are the best carvers in the island. When I asked people in Kabwaku and elsewhere why was Moyobana one of them, the most agreed upon answer was because he could do faster what took others longer, and because he could do it better too. Furthermore, famous carvers like Moyobana also have the capacity to expand the range of their production through innovative creations (see previous chapter). “Tomwaya [Moyobana],” people in Kiriwina said, “can carve anything he wants to. He has sopi [magic] for carving; he is a kabitam” (he “knows,” he is clever/intelligent/adept/expert). The term kabitam has all these positive connotations and many others: proficiency, knowledge, talent, wisdom, etc. are implicit in the definition of kabitam. As will be shown in more detail below, “sopi for carving” is an integral part of a wider body of knowledge that confers transformative potency to the actions of those who possess it. This type of magic is a re-enactment of the creative powers of the ancestral cultural heroes of the Massim that initiated some of the socio-cultural practices still in force today. Simultaneously origin point and catalyst of a process of continuous learning, sopi enhances one’s capabilities to see and understand things in the Trobriand lifeworld and confers carvers the power to endow their objects with personal agency to act in that lifeworld. Access to sopi and to the power it grants is therefore regulated by those who already have that power, creating a distinction between them and those skilled carvers that despite their prowess cannot produce traditional carvings – such as chiefs’ yam houses or kula canoes – to which specific transformative agency is usually ascribed. The distinction is further elaborated and hierarchised in the breaking down of the “disciplines of knowledge” (Malnic and Kasaipwalova 2000: 16 ff) or categories of sopi, listed by my Trobriand friends in descending order as sopigawa, sopiyelu and sopiguyau. Each type of magic may also have different sub-stages of learning or special skills, each of which typifies a particular fragment of (or a special moment in) the infinite process – in the

79 So called because it originates in the island of Gawa to the east of Kiriwina. There are other types of sopi that derive their name from the place of origin: sopivakuta, sopikaileuna, sopidobu, etc. All of which are Massim islands interlinked by frequent exchanges.
sense that complete understanding of the world is virtually impossible – of acquiring the whole corpus of knowledge.

At least nominally, this dichotomy separates carvers in two categories. Some of the anthropological literature of the Massim based on fieldwork carried out in the 1970s and 80s advanced a model where those who carved with magic produced powerful objects whereas those who did not have magic could only make utilitarian crafts and tokwalu for tourists (see Scoditti 1977: n. 2; Mosuwadoga 2004; Campbell 1978: 8; Senft 1994: 71). By virtue of their exclusive access to a superior knowledge, the former were considered to be better equipped to achieve a higher status in Trobriand social life (Campbell 2002b: 42-49). On the contrary, the makers of utilitarian objects and tourist art could harbour no expectations of earning social pre-eminence through their trade. In the past, most of the tokwalu carvings were produced mainly in the district of Kuboma, a swampy area in north-western Kiriwina famed for the skills of its artisans (see Seligman 1910: 529, Malinowski 1922: 67, 100, 1935: 16 in Campbell 2002b: 42). The village of Bwetalu in particular was distinguished for having the best carvers of tokwalu and utilitarian wooden objects, some of which were distributed throughout the Massim as small opening gifts or “presentation goods” in kula transactions known as pari (Malinowski 1922: 200, 268). Pari gifts such as wooden platters, canoe bailers, walking sticks, lime spatulas or head combs made in Kuboma were meant to “soften” the minds of potential kula partners and induce them to part with their kula shells. Yet the beauty and refined execution of their handcrafts did not grant any status at all to the Kuboma carvers. Quite to the contrary, the inhabitants of that part of the island have always been treated with disdain by other Trobrianders, who consider them lazy gardeners (Malinowski 1935: 15-16), as well as disrespectful of the most common eating restrictions in operation elsewhere in the islands and overall somehow simplminded and unfit to achieve any degree of empowerment for themselves other than through sorcery or luck (Battaglia 1992, 1994). Unlike their yam house and canoe-making counterparts in the rest of Kiriwina, the craftsmen of Kuboma did not have to undergo the lengthy ritual initiation to obtain specialised knowledge and magic for carving. Theirs was a part-time activity “congenial with the tempo of gardening work” (Weiner 1982: 67). They did not have to observe any taboos while carving nor follow any given models. Likewise, their “inferior” trade did not require them to get organised in schools with restricted access. Not having any type of recognition from the Trobriand community, the carvers of Bwetalu and the Kuboma district never gained any
status in spite of being prolific carvers of objects that benefited from a wide circulation in the Massim. Bwetalu artisans were known as tokataraki or “imitators of images,” a magic-less category of carvers ranked below the superior tokabitam, the “creators of images” (Scoditti 1982: 76-77, 1990: 56; see also Lawton 2002; Campbell 2002a).

The increase in the traffic of tokwalu experienced in the 1960s and the relative affluence it afforded for a while to some carvers changed this perception. Those who participated in the Kuboma Progress Society, a local cooperative set up to market crafts from that area in the 1950s (see Campbell 2002: 46), gained awareness of a new possibility. Through the cash obtained with their sales they were able to purchase goods from trade stores, travel to other centres in the province and beyond by boat or by plane or send their children to complete their education abroad. Furthermore, money also allowed them to fulfil customary obligations through the purchase of traditional valuables wherever these could be acquired through cash. An efficacious-yet-elusive new means of achieving old goals, money’s empowering properties enabled a larger number of people to increase their status other than through excellence in gardening, carving sea-going canoes or obtaining famous kula valuables.

With time, western goods such as calico, clothes, house wares and dimdim si kawelu (the food of dimdims) have penetrated the customary paths of exchange as valid payments either complementing or substituting conventional currency (yams, pigs, betel nut, etc.), much like tobacco or steel tools did in the past (Figure 4.2).
The relative prosperity of *tokwalu* carvers in the late 1960s and early 70s prompted others to follow suit, drawing away master carvers from their commitments towards their already-ailing traditional patrons, the chiefs, for the *dimdim* dollars. And although tourism and carving have since then gone through ups and downs – probably with more downs than ups – the economic success of some carvers has endured as an idealised tale of triumph, the mystification of a capacity to reach a high profile in Kiriwina’s society through means hitherto unexploited. When this potential concretized itself in cash-yielding transactions, it modified the way people in the island conceived exchange. Making airport art was, more than ever, a skill that could open up access to alternative ways of relating to people and things, away from the conventional uses imposed by the model of patrons-master carvers-apprentices, a model that left almost no leeway to innovation. More than ever before, entering into these potentially-empowering relations with new actors was done through handcrafts made for tourists.

**Figure 4.2:** A *yawali* in Liluta, northern Kiriwina. Strictly speaking, *yawali* is a type of mortuary distribution that takes place immediately after the death of a person as a repayment to those who have helped carry out funerary services (wake, singing, preparing the corpse for burial, digging the grave, etc.). Other than food, payment consists of traditional valuables, including *boku* stones, *soulava* necklaces and *kwelamola* claypots. In this case, woven mats, lengths of fabric, tin plates and money also constitute part of the distribution.
The quest to maximise this capacity to achieve power through the circulation of tokwalu has been ascribed to the “transactional-mindedness of Trobrianders” (Leach 1982: 251), proficient in establishing and maintaining relational networks to seek that specific kind of personal and communal return, fame. This observation demands careful attention. The question is, how much fame can money buy you? Admittedly, choosing new paths of exchange requires a degree of diversion from old ones. Tokwalu are for a dimdim other that knows little about Trobriand symbols, and even less about Trobriand magic for carving. The tourists’ capacity to discern between master carvers and inferior craftsmen is based on their own aesthetic judgement alone. Unlike local actors in the Massim, dimdims cannot see the difference between two items carved with and without sopi (see Narubutau 1975). But let us not forget that sopi is a layered system of cognition defined by its open-endedness, enabling carvers to apprehend their lifeworld even when this lifeworld is increasingly delineated by interactions with foreign elements. Master carvers are equipped to co-opt these elements into their vernacular cosmologies through the transformative powers bestowed upon them by magic. What anthropologists such as Campbell or Senft have misunderstood when they talk about the “threat” of “over-innovation” and “uncontrolled innovative carving” (Campbell 1978: 4 emphasis in the original; see also Senft 1994: 70-72) is that sopi – like the nautilus shell – bears within itself the capacity to effect its own transformations (see below). If anything, Trobrianders maintain, sopi adds to the person’s capacity to reproduce old concepts in new shapes.

Sopi becomes an instrument of apprehension through innovative creation. New carvings such as the tokwalu made for tourists can also be endowed with the same personal agency that resides in more traditional objects. As it will become even more clear when analysing some of the stages that embody it, carving magic prepares the subject for this possibility, as it reproduces the creative acts of mythical ancestors who, at the time, also generated

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80 Senft in particular makes a series of hard-to-believe affirmations when he states that “the art of carving is in decline,” that the carvings of master carvers have “lost their value” and that it doesn’t pay off to put any effort in carving since “they [the carvers] make more or less the same profit as poorly carved pieces [sic], anyhow.” (1994: 71 ff). Instead, the opposite is the case: there are more carvers and carvings now in Kiriwina and in the whole MBP than ever before, carvings by recognised master carvers have increased in value and poorly carved pieces fetch lower prices than better executed ones, mostly because it is utterly false (and even naïve) that “Most tourists just buy anything, without looking at the quality of the carved piece” (ibid.). These “purist-apocalyptic” observations about the decline of carving echo those of prior scholars that predicted, many years before Senft, the disappearance of carvings in similar ways: see for instance Austen’s affirmation that “woodcarving might eventually die out” (1936: 20), or, much earlier, Lieutenant-Governor of British New Guinea Sir William MacGregor’s erroneous conjecture that Trobriand implements and weapons were “disappearing fast” (ARBNG 1892-3: 11).
the new symbols that were to be “integrate[d]…into the collectivity” (or “conventionalised,” see Wagner 1981: 53). Dimdims cannot reach sopi but sopi can reach dimdims. They may not see it (the difference between a tokwalu carved with sopi and one carved without), but from a Trobriand perspective a tokwalu carved with magic is more likely to attract buyers. Following patterns that are familiar to them, Trobrianders manipulate the ontological substance of objects to insert them into these new paths. The return in the form of cash is only one portion of the assembled fame although not the most important one. One’s name cannot travel on money only. As Moyobana’s example proves, general recognition is more instrumental than cash in granting a carver his reputation.

Concomitantly, any prolonged diversion from the customary paths of exchange (patrons-master carvers-apprentices) entails a redefinition of the categories in which carvers used to be placed. In 2010 these categories were contested mainly for two reasons. Firstly, by then affirmed master carvers and patrons were unable to endorse any material cultural products (and therefore attribute fame through this endorsement) in the way they used to, since carvings no longer circulated through the customary paths they themselves used to demarcate and control. Simply put, they were not in a position to define and endorse the canonical (and its opposite). And secondly, deprived of a guiding, traditional yardstick to measure the knowledge of carvers and the quality of their handicrafts, the “public” (the material, visual and intellectual consumers of carvers) were forced to re-shape these guiding principles, to define the “new canonical.” To a large degree, they have done so by adapting exogenous socio-cultural constructs (consumerism of western goods and Christianity above all) on the template of known patterns of evaluation, filtered as they are, in many cases, through the carvers’ agency.

4.3 Knowing the Trobriand modern

Some of these Trobriand conceptions of modernity are observable in the views of the youth in Kiriwina. The junior generations are growing up in a rapidly changing world and often their values tend to mirror – and sometimes even speed up – those changes (remember young pastor Paul Pulayasi refusing a gift of traditional valuables in Chapter 2). Arguably, young people are more influenced by those western standards they intuit to be empowering, such as money, but like the majority of Trobrianders they do not, nonetheless, accord status to carvers based on financial grounds only. In this sense,
Intergenerational tensions are almost nonexistent in Kiriwina as young and elder people still share common values. When I asked teenagers in Yalumgwa who was a good carver their opinions tended to coincide with those of the adults, although often the motivations given were quite different. For example, skills and the speed of the carver in executing his handcrafts are appraised as signs of proficiency, but so are creativity and the capacity to innovate and make original artefacts, different from the old ones. Similarly, the beauty of the carvings is also a marker of prowess, although new aesthetic standards tend to be in conflict with former canonical rules of appreciation. Figurative carvings with recognizable anthropomorphic representations are nowadays preferred to abstract ones. Quite understandable, given the difficulty to fully grasp the conventional symbols of the old carvings for those who, like many youngsters in Kiriwina, do not know their names, let alone their meanings. In the same way, contemporary objects have a profusion of decorations in the form of inlaid mother-of-pearl and more intricate details, as opposed to the sober simplicity of lines found in older carvings (Figure 4.3).

![Figure 4.3: A series of tokwalu evidence the aesthetic evolution of Trobriand carvings. In the locals’ eyes (a) and (b) are “old fashioned carvings, imperfectly shaped and undecorated,” whereas the contemporary (c) and (d) are witness to the superiority of present-day carvers.](image)
Furthermore, the fascination with the *dimdim*’s utilitarian objects also prompts mimetic appropriations. If Trobrianders carved wooden axes in the past, the tendency is continued today. Much kudos are given to those carvers that can emulate western goods. A famous example is David Moiluvasi’s wooden torch from the 1970s (Figure 4.4), a well-known material icon throughout Kiriwina to which I shall return later.

![Figure 4.4: The wooden torch carved by David Moiluvasi in the 1970s rests on top of his grave in the village of Bwetalu, Kuboma district. David carved a working torch in imitation of the *dimdim* ones, complete with batteries and light bulb. For this and other inventions David is still much praised all over Kiriwina as one of the best carvers in recent history.](image)

Finally, magic, too, is deemed as a productive asset in determining who is a good carver. Yet in today’s view, it is a syncretic type of *sopi*, one mixing Christian elements to Trobriand custom.

Following these criteria, most people in Yalumgwa proclaim Steven Okaulayagila to be one of the island’s top carvers, which is surprising because although Steven does carve, he is nowhere near as productive as other Yalumgwa carvers.
Yet Steven, my 14-year-old adoptive brother Beta says, can “see clearly” (matasi kalagigisi sena migileu, “his eyes’ sight is very clear”). “The Virgin Mary,” Beta says, “comes to him in dreams and shows him things, and surely enough she guides his hand to ‘write’ (ginigini) beautiful carvings. He doesn’t carve a lot because he is not interested in money” (Trobrianders often use the English expression “money-face” to signify a person “obsessed by cash who cares more about money than people”). “Steven is truly the top carver (mokwita top, “truly top”),” Beta concludes, acknowledging, with his English loan expression, what anthropologists otherwise recognise as butula, “his fame.”

If the status of carvers in present-day Kiriwina is an assemblage of perceived positive qualities, it must be said that Christian values are integral in moulding that assemblage. The status of carvers at the intersection between received models and new ones in the making is mediated by their perception and adaptation of Christian ethics. As for everybody else in Kiriwina, Christianity has provided a template for new relational possibilities for carvers. In a similar way, old Trobriand conceptualisations and established relational networks provided, in the colonial past, a template for Christianity and its adaptation as an intrinsic Trobriand cultural value (a recursive mutual validation that is reminiscent, in a metaphorical way, of the nautilus’ self-perpetuating spiral). Christianity and magic are thus linked by a dialectic of mutuality, interpreted in a Wagnerian way as a “dialogue-like alternation between two conceptions or viewpoints that are simultaneously contradictory and supportive of each other” (Wagner 1981: 52). Like a more democratic sopi – potentially attainable by anyone willing to be a good Christian, religion has enhanced the capabilities of Trobrianders to see new things and act in the new arenas that are becoming part of their lifeworld. In the Trobrianders’ view, Christianity is one of the positive things dimdims brought to the Massim.

Trobriand Islanders’ notions of “tradition” and “modernity” echo Euroamerican tropes on socio-cultural change, where “tradition” is identified with a static past and “modernity” with a promising future. The most recurrent idioms used by Trobrianders for the latter include “civilization, “development” and “exposure” whereas “custom” is readily interchangeable with tradition. These are terms used mostly by educated Trobrianders that have had the chance to live in urban centres outside the islands. Although expressed in English and clearly mirroring a western global and somehow
evolutionary vision of history, from a structural point of view “tradition” and “modernity” are the headings of a set of negative/positive oppositions that are also shared by those less educated Trobrianders that have never left Kiriwina. They, too, see the future as a locus of power sparing a wider range of choices than the highly-stratified social configuration that was customary in the past. What gives these expressions their symbolic value is the fact that, despite the different terms used to refer to them, they all convey the same generic idea of antagonistic principles ascribed to each heading: in the past things were worse, now things are better. This vision encompasses several instances of life in the islands that, as a result of “exposure” to western goods and services such as roads, education, religion, medical assistance and consumer’s goods are said to improve the lives of Trobrianders. Furthermore, this notion of progress has also engendered a cognate idea of knowledge as being more accessible to everybody through the inclusive activity of Christian missionaries (misinari) and schools. Bo lema tapwaroru (the church has already arrived) is a common expression often heard in Kiriwina to indicate that things have changed irremediably, bo e senisi (“already it has changed,” senisi being the Trobriandised version of the English word). Generally speaking, the change is positively valued. Owing to it, today Trobrianders can see, understand and do things that were precluded to their ancestors without having to surrender completely those practices of old that are still considered to be useful.81 In circumstances of socio-cultural change, economic and political empowerment result from the successful incorporation of new models into known patterns regardless of apparent incoherencies (see Battaglia 1992: 1010). Magic and customary payments in traditional valuables can combine with political speeches and money to make a candidate win an election in Kiriwina, upholding her/his position from apparently contrasting perspectives.

That the new is better is a judgement that also applies to carving, at least in the locals’ view. In my conversations with Trobrianders (carvers and not), I voiced a ethno-historic concern with the decline in the calibre of carvings effected by the artefact boom of the 1960s and 70s. In some westerners’ view as it is reported in the literature, the conspicuousness of craftsmen acting outside the chief-master carver-apprentice circuit led to the massive production of second-rate carvings. An increase in demand by foreigners, 

81 In fact, the use of the English borrowed expression senisi (change) does not imply rupture but a harmonising continuity instead. The Kilivila words for change, katuvili (to twist completely, to turn 180 degrees) or kalitavila (to change one’s path, one’s mind) insinuate a fracture or a discontinuity and is therefore never used by Trobrianders when discussing old and new practices as they try to integrate them.
some anthropologists argued, resulted in more carvings of less quality in an attempt to maximise earnings (Campbell 2002b: 47-48; also Weiner 1982: 69). Yet with time, competition among carvers consummated an inversion of this situation. More carvings did not necessarily translate into more money. New designs and original artefacts integrating Trobriand and dimdim values did (see previous chapter). As carvers recombined narratives, adjusted representations and invented new symbols altogether, their objects began to acquire unprecedented ontological status. Categories of carvings for tourists, such as tables, walking sticks, wooden plates and bowls for instance were created and delimited from others. The critics’ appreciation of new tokwalu within each category served as a benchmark for comparison and distinction, resulting in conventionalised examples of “good” and “bad” carvings. As most Trobrianders put it, tuta tokunabogwa tokwalu bwena, taga bestuta tokwalu mokwita bwenigaga, (before the carvings were good, but now the carvings are truly very good). Old carvings are said to be dull, too coarsely cut, unpolished and undecorated, lacking in detail and verisimilitude in their representations (see Figure 4.3 above). Carvings nowadays are more varied, reveal never-seen-before elements and are more accurate in their portrayal of real life animals and mythical creatures – Trobriand and dimdim. An educated Trobriand intellectual like John Kasaipwalova subscribes to this upgrade, arguing for the supremacy of the new over the old. John maintains that traditional carving and tourist art arise from different circumstances. Traditional carvings commissioned by chiefs were, in fact, the material pinnacle of a ritualised, exclusive and highly sophisticated system of cognition that needed to be enacted in a precise way. Carvings thus made needed to be judged according to the rules prescribed in the body of knowledge itself. Yet new circumstances demand new responses. Carvers nowadays need to seek actively for customers and patrons outside the Trobriand Islands, anticipate their taste and secure alternative partnerships. Released from the constraints of the carving schools, craftsmen are now free

82 A concern also shared, at some point, by some colonial officials, worried about the deterioration in the quality of carvings (see document 53, Appendix B). Theirs, though, was an apprehensiveness directly linked to the state of their personal business only: in the 1960s carving was said to bring some AUD25,000-30,000 to the island each year (see documents 75, 86, Appendix B), although in another document the Methodist United Church in Oyabia states that AUD2,000 were paid to carvers yearly, less than ten percent of the total income. At some point there was an attempt to address the issue by setting up a “Control of Carving Standards” seal to be attached to carvings for export (see Appendix B). The project was dropped altogether given the impossibility to assess the quality of carvings independently from within the Trobriand Islands, as personal interests, jealousy, alliances and enmities would always be issues too problematic to overcome to produce objective assessments.
to experiment with new idioms, their results open to a measure of recognition or indifference that marks their social position.

4.4 The light of the new

This freedom is largely a result of the social changes that have taken place in Kiriwina in the postcolonial period and is consistently placed under the positively-connoted trope of modernity. Generally speaking, most people in Kiriwina (young and old, affirmed master carvers and beginners) agree with Kasaipwalova’s opinion: carvings today are superior to old ones. In the Trobrianders’ conversations lies an explicit evaluation of things “new” as positive in contraposition to the “old stuff.” The former are connoted by ideas and concepts that evoke “light,” (rendered in Kilivila as lumalama, “moonlight,” but also meaning something “bright that can pierce the darkness” and therefore a metaphor for knowledge), in opposition to the latter: old stuff is “dark” (dudubila, darkness). “People in the past lived in darkness (esisusa odudubila) because they did not know (gala inukwalisi)” was a common thought often expressed by Trobrianders in our conversations. Ascribing affirmative value to contemporary understandings of the world as Trobrianders are able to perceive it nowadays underlines the importance of a metaphor of representation that appears to sustain itself on a visual paradigm. Modernity is positive because it allowed people “to see through the dark.”

This rather simplistic idea of evolution from obscurity towards a higher moral ground is propelled by Christian ethics and popularised via missionization (see Berde 1974), although similarly-structured ideas regarding light and darkness were already in place in pre-contact Massim. The missionaries have often used native cultural structures as vehicles to get their own messages across. Through the mediation of missionaries, these images of modernity were given form and acquired the dimension of a familiar revelation (indeed, in addition to brightness and light, Lawton also glosses lumalama as the Christian way of the church or a revelation of the gospels, see Lawton 2002). Contrasting metaphors connoting darkness as negative and light as positive were articulated in Massim cosmologies in ways that stressed the favourable passage from the former to the latter. Damon reports how in Muyuw (Woodlark Island) the “old year” is perceived as “a time of darkness” in comparison with the “new year, a time of ‘light,’” where the former
is “bad” and the latter is “good” (Damon 1982: 232). Munn also gives us examples of the allegorical contraposition of light and dark in Gawa, where “skilful carvers are said to have been bespelled in childhood to purify their minds so that designs can…‘emerge outside’ clearly delineated…in the light” (1977: 47; see also Munn 1986: 17). The transformation of “negative qualisigns” (as Munn brands the polarised fraction or image of a an ensemble that gives its value to the whole it signifies – much like a symbol, ibid.) into positive ones enables the expansion of the person beyond the limiting confines of an otherwise unproductive darkness, associated, among other negative things, to heaviness, death and flying witches. The opposite, instead, is enshrined as one of the ideal attributes of the successful self all over the Massim as her/his capacity to emit a type of radiance, or brilliance, known in Kilivila as mwasila. Being able to shed the darker aspects of personhood and transform them into an “unusual beauty…shining like lightning” becomes the condition sine qua non to achieve fame (ibid. 99-101, 174). The image of the lightening gives wholeness to the metaphor. Fame is the “thunderous roaring” (butu) of one’s name as it resounds beyond the corporeal body of the person and her/his home. The passage from a status of darkness and ignorance to another of light and understanding is a favourable auspice that Trobrianders try to appropriate through metaphorical actions. This is what prompts master carvers, for instance, to carry out the initiation of carvers at dawn, during the transition from night to day “because light begins to dominate dark” (see Scoditti 1990: 173).

The analogical association between the correlated opposites dark/past /ignorant/non-Christian and light/present/knowledgeable/Christian is received and co-opted by locals that extend the analogy to other instances of Trobriand life other than carving. The display of the trope is readily observable in the everyday. Trobrianders feel ashamed if they are caught out without kerosene to light their lamps at night, and would say “we are in the dark, like in the old times.” The opposite situation is their ideal vision of the dimdim’s’ house and the city, where people have laiti (lights) to do things like reading, watching TV or “telling stories” (the expression used throughout the MBP meaning simply to talk, to chat). This perspective encompasses Trobriand ideas of consumption:

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83 Elsewhere (1990: 67) Damon states that the connection between past/dark and new/light could indeed derive from “the culture’s new year beliefs” or that it could have been “drawn from the church.” The trope of light vs. darkness and the missionaries’ use of it is well extended in the Massim (see Young 1980: 89 ff).
84 Likewise, see the taboo against certain types of food that could “cloud” or “darken” the vision of newly initiated carvers (ibid.).
gas lamps, generators and the occasional solar-powered LED (none of which is conspicuous in Kiriwina) are coveted goods because of their practical use but also because of their symbolic value. They are the “items of progress” the dimdimms brought to help them pierce the dark. They allow Trobrianders to see with more clarity, righteousness and good judgement. This rationale surfaces in almost every comparative comment Trobrianders make of carvings. People remark that present-day carvings are “better” than the old ones, “more perfect, more beautiful, brighter.” And sure enough, carvers today are more talented and knowledgeable than their olden day peers. Today, carvers can dream and create any “animal” or emblem as their vision has been enhanced by a Christian “light” that expands beyond past views without fully negating them. No doubt, then, that Steven enjoys such a high reputation. Because he reads the Bible and prays, and because magic has made his mind clear enough, he can summon the power of the Virgin Mary to assist him, like one invokes her/his ancestors when performing magic rituals.

In the next two sections I detail how carvers have interiorised these concepts of modernity and made them meaningful in the present-day context. This is done either by inserting them into previously-existing frameworks that maintain distinctive values although with nominal changes (master carvers – now known as tokataraki – are creators of images, superior in status to those who can only copy the images of others – now termed as tokabitam, see below). Or, alternatively, by claiming the possibility of achieving a high status within new frameworks or regimes of value that do not rely on old categories anymore, where the carver is a master not by virtue of his magic associations with God and the ancestors but through a direct “feed” with a dimdim world he is now able to seize.

4.5 Magic comes from God: Christian integrations

Christianity has contributed in shaping the Trobrianders’ concept of history by operating a perspectival transformation of historical events. It has superimposed a linear evolution inattentive to the local past and focused on an ecumenical future to the traditional Trobriand circular recursion of conventionalised tropes (see Robbins 2004). Nonetheless and despite an appearance of uncritical adaption, Trobrianders have appropriated this biblical historicity in two simultaneous and complementary steps, by transforming foreign elements into theirs and by keeping vernacular ones into the resulting cultural
edifice. The proposed linearity is thus bent to accommodate facts from the past into future projections that end up becoming conventions. A narrative of progress results, the passage from darkness to light is effected by the intercession of the missionaries who brought God’s knowledge to defeat darkness, but it would never have happened in the first place if the possibility had not been already embedded in Trobriand cultural constructs. In Kiriwina, localities define grand narratives, rather than the opposite.

This was made clear to me throughout my stay by two master carvers, Steven Okaulayagila from Kaurigova hamlet in Yalungwa and Samson Kwenama from Bawai village. In our conversations, the carvers unravelled for me the requisites any master carver needs to possess in order to achieve fame. To my surprise, they both termed master carvers as tokataraki instead of tokabitam:

- Isn’t the tokabitam the master? Isn’t he above the tokataraki?
“Gala. Tokabitam besa gala sopi, kavasaki wala. Tokataraki e yosi sopi.” (No. The tokabitam has no magic, he only copies. The tokataraki is the one that holds sopi).

Steven’s assertion is surprising because it reverses the usual order between these two categories of carvers found in the literature. However unexpected, this inversion of terms defining who is the original creator of images (as opposed to the reproducer or imitator) was confirmed to me by many carvers in the island. Steven proceeded with his explanation. He was initiated in carving by his maternal uncle (kadala), who entrusted him with the carving magic of his matriclan’s ancestors. He took him to the beach and gave him sopi magic in the form of yeluyelu. Yelu is a flowing body of water such as the sea current, and in this particular case, the stream of brackish water that runs to the shore from a hole dug in the beach for the newly initiated to drink from it. There is an implicit association with this flow of water and the flow of ancestors that any magic incantation conjures, but the association also works at a more direct level: in Woodlark, yelu is the Muyuw term for ancestor (Damon 1982: 233). And just like the mermaids that sleep in plants or the tokwai that dwell in trees, ancestral heroes are sometimes also represented as “living in the water” (Scoditti 1996: 242).
“After drinking the *yeluyelu* you will dream. This first dream is called *luwalawa*,”85 Steven says. “In this dream you’ll see a hole (*pwanana*). Looking through it you’ll see all sorts of designs, they shall get imprinted on your mind so you can reproduce them.”

The symbolism is rich. The mind needs to flow freely with ideas like the running water does. *Sopi* requires a mimetic apprenticeship. Trobrianders appropriate the powers of their lifeworld through the seizing or consumption (symbolical or real) of the sources of this power. Key among these sources are the spirits of the ancestors that become interiorised and whose actions are to be replicated by the carvers. Steven insists that *yeluyelu* though is not a one-off moment but a process that never stops. After his initiation, several other stages followed, each of which conferred a new capacity to Steven:

> **“Tomwaya e sakagu kwegivayelu.”** (Uncle gave me *kwegivayelu*).

- **Avaka besa, kwegivayelu?** (What is *kwegivayelu*)?

According to Steven *kwegivayelu* translates as “things from the past that you are able to bring back.” It includes memories, ideas, recollections and objects (real and imaginary).

> “It is a strength, a power.” Steven alternatively uses the Kilivila term *peula* and the English loan word *pawa* (power), like when he says that the faculty of *kwegivayelu* is “to make your mind more powerful.”

> “Whoever has *kwegivayelu*,” Steven continues, can see an “animal” (*mauna*, an emblem, a symbol) with his mind and then his hands know how to carve it. You will remember it (*luwai*).”

*Kwegivayelu* can be roughly translated as “bringing back or giving birth to the memory.”86 This magic skill thus, allows carvers to “drag” from the past the *mauna* that were first carved by the original creators of images. The magic reproduces each instance

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85 This expression suggests an interesting association: other than a type of mortuary payments, *lowalowa* is a type of clouds also known as *budibudi*, the place where the spirits of the dead (*baloma*) travel before settling down in the underworld of Tuma. The first dream after the initiation is thus linked to ancestors via the journey of the *baloma* to “the clouds at the end of the horizon.”

86 Mosuwadoga (2006) glosses *kwegivayelu* as the “voice to follow,” alluding to the voice of the ancestors as part of a continuum of which the initiated is a constitutive part. Other carvers’ exegesis on *kwegivayelu* is less elaborate than Steven’s, yet they essentially convey the same idea: when you have only *kwegivayelu* you can carve the old but you cannot create new designs.
of the handing down of the symbols as it has been taking place from the original ancestors all the way through to the last apprentice of the matrilineage (dala).

- You can only see “animals” from the past? What about new animals? I ask.

“That is the next stage of the carving magic, kwegapwala. Kwegapwala is the name of a vision, a dream, the capacity to envision things future,” Steven adds. “Once you are able to combine these two powers you can call yourself a tokataraki,” he concludes.

Thus, kwegivayelu and kwegapwala combine the conventionalised creative force of the past with the capacity to innovate. The latter expression is better understood through one of the meanings of kwegapwala, a type of magic used to help parturition. Kwegapwala assists in bringing children forth in difficult deliveries. The symbolic analogy between these two stages is complete when one analyzes Trobriand long-established ideas of conception. Newborn babies are in fact the spirits of the dead (baloma) that float in the ocean among the foam and the sea scum and are, at this stage, known as waiwaiia. When the baloma want to return to the world of the living they enter the bodies of women from their same dala and reincarnate (Malinowski 1916: 404). In this way, the future is literally drawn from the past, not as repetition but rather lived anew as re-enactment. Kwegivayelu represents a conformity with “form and content in a given tradition, whereas sopi [the combination of kwegivayelu and kwegapwala] often takes the given tradition and gives it new form and content,” (Kasaipwalova 1975: 6), and that is how sopi carries within the seed of invention.

Through this narrative, Steven explains how to become a tokataraki, yet it leaves out the particular reasons of his personal success. Although he is a highly respected man in Yalumgwa, his carving output is nowhere near Sawem’s or Giyumkwumumkwu’s in terms of numbers. His objects seldom make it to the crafts markets in Port Moresby or Alotau. Steven is a good, yet not outstanding gardener and he does not do kula. I could not help asking him:

-Steven, does being a tokataraki grant you fame automatically?

Gala (no).
Steven argues that his status comes from being a very active member in the Catholic community in Kiriwina. He credits his Catholic faith for his reputation. In successive conversations, Steven explained to me that, although at first he did not know it, it is now clear to him that all his “powers” derive ultimately from God. The magic he received from his maternal uncle did come from his ancestors but it was bequeathed to them by God.

“The missionaries,” Steven argues, “did not come here to destroy our culture (Steven uses *gulagula*, the “code of behaviour” of the “right” Trobriand behaviour) but to complete it.” He believes that the Virgin Mary\(^ {87} \) comes to him in dreams because of his prayers, but also because he has the “clarity to dream” that magic has granted him. “I can carve whatever you want me to,” Steven says. “I’ll pray and then dream any *mauna*, any design you want,” he affirms.

Ultimately, both *sopi* and Christian religion are positive qualisigns or fractions of the same total enabling the positive transformations (through actions, speeches, dreams, objects, etc.) that have conferred his fame to Steven. Most of his success lies in the capacity to articulate both qualisigns into a common frame and display it as part of the “right custom.”

### 4.6 Trobriand saints: Christian transformations

Samson is another renowned carver in Kiriwina. Like Steven, he too was initiated by his maternal uncle and has completed all the stages of *sopi*. Like Steven, Samson is a devout and active Catholic. His knowledge and qualities allow him to carve anything he wishes, and Samson wishes to carve religious images. To my knowledge, he is the only one in the whole of the Trobriand Islands that specialises in Christian sculptures, some of which are so outstanding that they have found their way to Catholic churches in Europe (Figure 4.5).

\(^{87}\) Marian devotion is high among Catholics in Kiriwina. During my stay in the islands, I could not ascertain with exactitude the extent to which there is a link between this and the matrilineal character of Trobriand society. The veneration of Mary is a pan-Oceanian phenomenon, endorsed by Pope John Paul in 2000 via a papal encyclical (*Ecclesia in Oceania* 53) and also big in other parts of PNG (*Hermkens* 2007).
Figure 4.5: (a) Augustine, a very charismatic layman with many unconditional followers in the Catholic community of Kiriwina (see Chapter 1), leads a spiritual retreat in the church of Oluweta, Yalungwa village, in March 2010. A sculpture of Virgin Mary carved by Samson can be seen in the foreground. (b) Detail of Samson’s sculpture.
Until 2010, the Bishop of the Diocese of Alotau-Sideia, of which the Trobriands are part, was Samson’s main patron, commissioning him with many of these carved saints. Samson too does not hesitate when I ask him what is the Trobriand term for master carver:

“*Tokataraki. Tokabitam* is a more general term indicating somebody with ‘intelligence’ (said in English). A *tokabitam* can only copy. A *tokataraki* instead has acquired ‘wisdom’ (said in English).”

- So wisdom is above intelligence?

“There are different stages,” Sam continues. “A *tokataraki* has completed them all; he has insight, intelligence and wisdom (all said in English). A *tokabitam* can have insight and some intelligence too, but he lacks wisdom to do the right thing.”

This definition – like Steven’s – leaves the categories of carvers intact, endorsing the hierarchical distinction between master carvers (endowed with sopi) and magic-less imitators of images. On the other hand, Steven and Sam’s accounts transpose the names of each category. Although everybody in Yalungwa and many people in other parts of the island agreed with this inversion, very few could explain why. Steven’s elder brother, Dubiyayola, tried to spell it out for me: “*tokataraki* is the name of a professor; but he’s also a student. He is wise and he goes high, like the white cockatoo, nothing can harm him.” Dubiyayola’s obscure exposition did not do much to clarify the point. Steven and Samson’s were the most elaborated explanations, but I still could not understand how come the *tokataraki*, clearly signified in books and articles as a craftsman, “an artist lacking sopi” (Mosuwadoga 2006; see also Campbell 1978: 2, 2002: 41; Senft 1986; Scoditti 1990: 57), had recently become a master to the detriment of the *tokabitam*, now demoted to a mere imitator of images. Sure enough, the Trobriandness found in books not always proves to be “right,” but this was more than an inaccuracy, it was a reversal that questioned the findings of several anthropologists working in different parts of the Trobriand archipelago.

Some clues, though, can be found in that same literature. In his transcription and translation of the incantation recited by the master at the moment of initiating his disciple, Scoditti glosses *kataraki* as “images’ creators” (1984: 50). Mosuwadoga (a Trobriand Islander and former Director of the National Museum and Art Gallery of PNG) also gives
us the first lines of the *sopigawa* magic, where a man called Kataraki is paddling in a canoe together with his “ancestor Kabitam.” (2006) From this, it can be evinced that the apprentice Kataraki learned the magic from his ancestor Kabitam, fixing the hierarchies in the apparent linearity of a preceding action that influences and determines its following, hence Kabitam’s pre-eminence. Yet this fixed linearity is at odds with Trobriand concepts of temporality. As we have seen, time is defined by a vision of the past as the recurrent, malleable embryo of future possibilities. When the past is re-enacted, it brings back the ancestors, metaphorically and physically. The spirit of Kabitam can assist Kataraki, but travelling by sea as *waiwaia* it can also reincarnate into Kataraki. Is this why the student *tokataraki* is also the professor *tokabitam*? The *kwegapwala* magic embodies this reversal among the possibilities of manipulation it confers. A potential also recognised in a Kitavan poetic formula where, according to Scoditti, *kataraki* “can also allude to having sharp wits, the ability to manipulate news in order to benefit from it” (1996: 255-256). Kataraki is a creator of images and a manipulator of narratives, and also a possible re-incarnation of his ancestor Kabitam or a student that has superseded his master. Metaphorically, Kataraki is a renovation of the creative forces present in the Trobriand lifeworld.

Consequently, the premise for the reversal appears to have always existed. If so, why did it only take place recently? As a token of his broad knowledge and well-deserved fame, Steven offered me a likely answer. Knowing that the inversion of the terms used for master carvers had me perplexed, one day he came to me with a Bible in his hand. “Daniel [the Prophet] was a *tokataraki,*” Steven revealed: “God spoke through his mouth. Daniel had insight, intelligence and wisdom.” Indeed, the Prophet is endowed with the capacity to have visions or dreams in which God discloses the meaning of mysterious events to him. Daniel was “found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding” (Daniel 5:12). Unaware of my conversations with Samson, Steven was repeating to me what the carver from Bawai had told me were the three stages that made a *tokataraki*: “insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom” (Daniel 5:14). Daniel provides an ideal of the *tokataraki* or master carver as an enlightened Christian with an all-encompassing knowledge directly derived from God. There is, in the hierarchical reversal of the categories that define the status of carvers, a conscious transformation operated by some locals. The message carvers like Steven or Sam are trying to convey is that the old master carvers, the *tokabitam* of the literature, have now been overthrown by
the carvers of today. Present-day artists are more skilled and knowledgeable and better prepared to carve the modern out of their relations with the *dimdim* world. Christianity, as one of the defining elements of that same *dimdim* world, ratifies a narrative that is only partly new, since the possibility of the disciple displacing his master was already contained within the traditional order.

The average Trobriander would say that “exposure” to the “light of the new” has brought about the realisation of this possibility. But the analysis of more knowledgeable locals like Steven and Samson goes deeper. Appropriating Biblical concepts and adapting them to the carvers’ code of conduct is a validation of a new regime of value in which they themselves have already invested many resources, and successfully so. Steven’s status is the product of his acts and these include the transformation of hitherto canonical cognitive structures. His is an effort of connection and integration. Three qualities – conceived as three learning stages – define a superior carver, in the same way they define a Prophet. Both speak God’s words and are therefore positioned as the right interpreters of a system of knowledge they themselves attempt to define. Steven is part of the people who know this syncretic type of *sopi* and as such, he is in a position of power to redefine further the conditions of access to that position. He knows what makes a *tokataraki* and he’s got written evidence of this knowledge in a book (*the book*). In the presentation of his exegesis to an anthropologist lies an impulse to endorse his newly-built hegemony. He does so by re-working Trobriand tropes and reinvesting them with a new “meaning” or rather a new appraisal of a reified performance (in the form of an object or an explanation) that bears a detachable part of him. In the same way *lumalama* (light) came to signify “the Christian way” and “the revelation from the gospels” in the translation of Lawton, a missionary that had a direct interest in making this association work (see Lawton 2002), other Kilivila terms have been invested with new, partial significations.

Thus reverend Fellows, the first missionary in Kiriwina, composed the hymn *Labuma* in 1894 to associate “the sky” (the original meaning of the Kilivila word) to the Christian heaven (see Fellows 2001 [1902] vol 2: 193), to the point where today very few Trobrianders would use that term to indicate the sky at all. Another, more recent and telling instance of this type of encompassing identification is the deliberate use some Evangelical and Pentecostal Trobriand preachers make of the term *Guyau* (chief) to refer to God (as opposed to *Yaubada*). The God-chief is supposed to take care of his subjects,

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88 The Bible in Kilivila is known as *buki tapwaroru*, lit. “book church,” sometimes also *buki tabu*. 
to the point where some use the expression “Father-Guyau” (in English) to convey this idea and extend it to the realm of kinship relations, expanding an already-existing metaphor (the Trobriand chief as a fractal father, see Mosko 1995) by coupling two meaningfully-loaded terms (in English and Kilivila).

The transformative agency of Christianity becomes inscribed in Trobriand thought and practice through the actions of carvers like Steven or Samson when interpreting the Bible. Once apprehended, the *buki tapwaroru* turns into a generative “thing,” paired up with magic spells or substances. People have different versions of this instrument and they use them in their favour to achieve their goals. Christianity, then, is a tool of mediation and translation, a relational instrument with the potential to make good Christians but also famous carvers.

4.7 A carved torch pierces the night: success without magic

Yet not all the carvers strive to legitimate their social position using the same tools. Not displaying any of the symbols that are customary in traditional carvings, *tokwalu* are judged and interpreted “outside convention.” Away from the carving schools and their rigid prescriptions, carvers can dialogue more freely with each other and with outsiders and make, as it were, their own categories. A fluid instrument of articulation of socio-cultural change, the “light” of modernity is experienced as validating innovative associations (like *sopi* and Christianity) that make possible a redefinition of the value of the self. A consequence of this increased freedom of action is that some carvers try to project their success through their own, unsanctioned associations. Some use old idioms with new meanings whereas others try to construct new idioms altogether. As we have seen already, the capacity to make original artefacts is another condition for success. It relies in the public’s acceptance of these artefacts, not only as mediators of commercial interactions with outsiders (as in the case of *tokwalu*) but also as generators of other, more utilitarian tools employed by locals.

Some carvers do not need to call themselves *tokataraki* or claim any esoteric knowledge to project their fame. The potential of innovation of the otherwise-low-ranked craftsmen of Bwetalu, in the Kuboma district, was already noticed by Assistant Resident Magistrate (ARM) to the Trobriands Ernest Whitehouse. In one of his patrol reports dated 1923, Whitehouse observes how “These craftsmen possess one peculiarity…they can evolve new ideas and can execute these ideas in material” (Connelly 2007: 127). This
skill did not go unnoticed to the *dimdim* traders that lived in the islands. In 1921, A.C. Lumley, the wife of a pearl trader in Gusaweta, instructed Bwetalu craftsmen to produce objects for sale, directing them to make bigger and more appealing *tokwalu* with anthropomorphic traits in a marketing bid to lure buyers in the then provincial capital and trade post of Samarai. As a result, Kuboma carvers eventually “invented” the tables and stools carved from solid blocks of wood for which Bwetalu is reputed nowadays (see Austen 1945: 195-196). This precedent lends formal coherence and historical depth to an otherwise uncontextualised (“over”)inventiveness that may pass for commercial opportunism, colonial imposition or mere stylistic replication. Not quite any of the former, the Bwetalu carvings are the outcome of a realisable potential and the acts of improvisation with which this potential comes to be concretised.

A good example in point is the late David Moiluvasi, the over-innovators’ trailblazer. As I mentioned above, one of his most remembered carvings is also one of the most telling material symbols of the empowering action of the new. When David made his wooden torch, complete with a light bulb and fitted with batteries (see Figure 4.4), his *tokwalu* projected his/its brilliance in two directions: it gave him almost immediate and long lasting reputation and it lit up the way to success for other carvers in his habitually-despised community. A native of Bwetalu village in the Kuboma district, David was the living proof that the carving boom of the 1970s could also elevate the status of a maker of utilitarian objects and crafts for tourists to the heights of master carvers. Success for David came in the form of the wide recognition he achieved throughout Kiriwina and overseas. Most people in the island will tell you how David was one of the first Trobrianders to travel abroad, a feat echoing former Paramount Chief Vanoi’s appearance in a Japanese TV show with his thirteen wives. Yet whereas Vanoi’s power derived from his affiliation to the highest-ranking clan, his paramount chieftaincy and the ensuing possibility to take many wives and tap into the resources such alliances offered him, David was a commoner from the lowest-ranked village in the Trobriand Islands that gained success through his skills and his inventiveness in making unconventional carvings.

David, who was chosen to represent PNG at the Sydney Royal Easter Show in 1970 (documents 138, 139, Appendix B), is often credited for being the first to have carved something. He “invented” the foldable chair – “like your *dimdim* chairs” – and carved the modern equivalent of the old axe (see Chapter 2), a wooden shotgun. Many people have
told me he was the very first carver in Kiriwina to get K100 for one of his carvings, K100 being the symbol of an attainable wealth that was, until then, deemed to be the exclusive privilege of the white colonial powers. The K100 have been mythicized as a never-seen-before sum. They symbolise the white woman’s acknowledgment of the Trobriand prowess in carving and a source of potential socio-economic emancipation through the making of crafts.

But David Moiluvasi’s carvings are also practical innovations, local tools for the locals. He is the inventor of the kaidawaga board (Figure 4.6) used by all the women in Kiriwina to manufacture nununiga, the banana leaf bundles exchanged by women at mortuary ceremonies known as lisaladabu (Weiner 1978). 89

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89 Lussu (1992) is, to my knowledge, the only anthropologist that credits Moiluvasi for this invention, which she dates back to 1977. This is all the more surprising since Weiner, arguably the most knowledgeable anthropologist of the Massim when it comes to women’s currency, does not – to my knowledge – mention the kaidawaga (and the fact that it is a recent incorporation) in any of her publications. No doubt Weiner – who first went to Kiriwina in 1971 and kept on going back up until 1981 – must have witnessed such a noticeable change in the making of doba. A likely explanation is that Lussu got her dates wrong: David’s kaidawaga in Bwetalu is dated 1983 (see Figure 4.6). His relatives maintained that it was the first kaidawaga he made.
The range of this invention is capital in terms of value-creation and the consumption of western goods. Prior to the existence of the *kaidawaga*, the *nununiga* were “painstakingly completed one by one” with a sharp shell (Lussu 1995: 1). *Nununiga* (sometimes referred to as *doba*, a more generic term that also includes women’s fibre skirts), are a type of currency in Kiriwina manufactured by women only and used mostly – but not exclusively – by them in different types of transactions. *Doba*’s main purpose is to repay clanspeople and affines for their services when somebody dies. The women belonging to the same matriclan of the deceased express their gratitude for the nurturing of the dead person by others while s/he was alive. The payment in *doba* at *lisaladabu* is indeed a reciprocation that aims at evening out the transactions carried out throughout the person’s life, thus extinguishing any outstanding obligations. Each bundle of *nununiga* has a set value that can be gauged at any time, for *doba* in Kiriwina acts as valid currency. Therefore, women accumulate *doba* either by making it or bartering it with traditional valuables or consumer’s goods. In this last practice, called *valova doba*, women attend mortuary ceremonies in which they have no part at all. They bring with them betel nut, tobacco or commodities from trade stores (anything from candy to notebooks, from balloons to stock cubes, soy sauce, batteries, temporary tattoos or just whatever may be considered necessary or appealing) and they set a price for each item. In 2010 three betel nuts (with a market price of between 60 toea and K1) were worth five bundles of *doba*, establishing the monetary value of one bundle of *doba* at 12-20 toea (K1 is divided in 100 toea). In this way *doba* also circulates in a circuit that runs parallel to that of the mortuary ceremonies proper, as women try to acquire it through commodities before they participate in a *lisaladabu*, or else use it to obtain these same commodities after they have received *doba* at a *lisaladabu*. Moiluvasi’s invention has turned the making of *doba* into a much easier task, its side effect being an “inflation” of the value of the bundles but also facilitating their circulation, therefore bringing more exchange possibilities to more people. Probably not his original intention, David’s *kaidawaga* has, nonetheless, augmented the flow and consumption of trade store goods as these become more accessible through *valova doba*. Reflecting his own story of success, David’s board is a tool that facilitates the generation of ties in an indirect way. Unlike *tokwalu*, his

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90 Notwithstanding its monetary equivalence, *Doba* is never acquired directly with cash. My colleague Michelle MacCarthy pointed out that the closest thing to “buying *doba*” directly would be giving a monetary donation to the Catholic women’s fellowship and getting *doba* in exchange for the gift.
innovation is not aimed directly at *dimdim* consumers. Instead, it promotes local consumption of *dimdim* commodities while helping Trobrianders to better accomplish the goals of *lisaladabu*, namely, the “‘de-conception’ of the deceased’s…network of personal relationships” (Mosko 1995: 774). In doing so, the people involved are freed and free to establish new relations, an enterprise made easier (and more habitual) by the parallel traffic of goods prompted by the barter of *doba* and commodities.

Other carvers followed in the wake of David. One of them is Lake Moyabona (not to be confused with Moyobana, the late carver from Kabwaku). A native of Okaiboma, a coastal village with a tradition in the making of wooden bowls, Lake’s fame is not sustained in magic, nor does he claim any sort of religious inspiration. “I have no *sopi*. Nobody ever initiated me in carving, I learned how to carve after I moved here [Port Moresby],” Lake says. Lake used to work for an insurance company up until he resigned, taking up carving as a hobby. Lake’s success is based on his remarkable capacity to project an image of himself as an exceptional carver. “I make sure everybody talks about me here in Moresby. I talk to the newspapers, to the radio, magazines,” Lake observes while he shows me the cover of the business section of *The National* running a feature piece on him.91 Although Lake is very skilled and capable of carving a number of *tokwalu*, he admits his carvings are not particularly innovative: “I make turtle bowls, pigs, crocodiles, dolphins, like everybody else.” Or else he carves for corporate patrons – of which there is a plethora in thriving Port Moresby.92 Lake carved some Trobriand decorations on a series of furniture pieces for the Department of Fisheries. His clever self-promotion has granted him trips to Micronesia and Japan to work over there, allowing him to successfully exploit the status the media have accorded him.

4.8 *Tokwalu*, education and modern identities: when money becomes our garden

Lake has undoubtedly benefitted from living in Moresby, where the materialisation of positive qualisigns results more from mastering the magic of the modern than from possessing *sopi*, the magic of the Trobriand world. An educated man, Lake is able to shape his story/ies from the privileged perspective of somebody who can experience

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92 According to the OECD, The GDP growth in annual percentage for PNG in 2010 was around 8%. The US$15 billion-worth PNG LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) Project is expected to bring more business opportunities for carvers like Moyabona.
directly the consumer’s taste and react to it, as his interactions with customers in PNG’s capital are almost uninterrupted. As these types of narratives become increasingly known back in Kiriwina, more people there attempt to follow similar paths to gain success. Kuleleku Tomdia, who used to sell carvings in Port Moresby, recognises the importance of education in exploiting the potential of an urban milieu where tradition and modernity intersect. The disjunctures Trobrianders undergo when moving to metropolitan centres are mitigated by their knowledge of the English language and their capacity of adaptation. “Students and even school dropouts,” Kuleleku insists during our conversations, “are the winners in this setting; they are better equipped to become successful carvers than traditional ones. If they don’t pursue further education, they can still revert to carving. These kids are at an advantage, other than carving they also know how to draw,” Kuleleku says. “They are good at that because they were taught how to write at school,” he concludes. Kuleleku is unknowingly echoing one of the postulates of the Sopi Arts School as enunciated by Kasaipwalova in its manifesto almost forty years before: “village dropouts are potentially a very creative force if given fine encouragement and the opportunity to express themselves.” (Kasaipwalova 1975: 3). In Kilivila, drawing and writing are conveyed by the same expression, ginigini, a term also meaning “to carve” and by extension any incised or drawn decorative element. Nowadays, a ginigini is also a school/university student. The term, thus, conflates drawing, writing and carving with studying and learning.

The polysemic understanding of the expression re-conceptualises old practices under new light. Once again, there is a reversal in customary categories effected through the endorsement of an external innovation. Not so long ago, it was a taboo to draw the lines of a carving prior to incising it (Scoditti 1982: 81-82). Nowadays, not only the proscription has become a common practice, it is also the sign of a superior talent that integrates carving ability with the ability to write and read and therefore the enhancement of one’s possibilities for success. Through ginigini Trobrianders today can “carve books.” Some of their tokwalu have a written story to go with the carving. In fact, it is not uncommon to see these stories hand-written (and sometimes even printed), ready to be given to potential buyers to “explain” a carving or a typical Trobriand trait. Yobwita, the old master carver from Kwebwaga who told me how he could tell whether a carver had

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93 Scoditti identifies more clearly three terms for the act of carving as used in Kitava: takeda, tasewa and rairai, stating that “gin[gin]” is thus a more general term” (1990: 73) that he glosses as “to leave a mark” or “a lasting imprint” (2012: 53).
sopi or not by merely listening to him working, has lately taken up drawing under the
guidance of his nephew (Figure 4.7). Drawing enables him to undertake other sorts of
carvings, “different from the traditional ones,” augmenting his expressive range and the
relational possibilities that come with it. Ginigini is a term that spells embodied practice.
It epitomises a Trobriand appropriation of a modern tool of transformation – school
education – that is seen as instrumental in granting access to yet another tool of change,
money.

Figure 4.7: Some instances of ginigini. (a) Yobwita’s storyboard mixes traditional Trobriand
symbols and writing, like the magic formula uttered by one of the characters in the story (see
Appendix C). (b) Yobwita’s drawing for the proposed logo of the new school to be built in
Kwebwaga. (c) At Moyobana’s lisaladabu in Kabwaku a woman verifies the distribution of
doba following the names of recipients written in a piece of carton.
Modern education, fame and consumption are interwoven in what Trobrianders see as a tale of spiral progress that includes traditional practices and their contemporary adaptations. Success in blending these allows for exponential growth. Some of these elements are conflated in the example of Moyobana’s funeral. Besides introducing issues about detachable personhood and modes of personal empowerment through the circulation of a reified self, the practices surrounding the funeral also bring up the role of money in Trobriand society. At the time Ephraim, one of Moyobana’s clansmen, explained to me cash was needed urgently to buy food to feed people and store goods (gugua, things) for the ensuing distributions that are part of the funerary rites (yawali). “We don’t have enough yams right now,” Ephraim said. “And not enough kuria (traditional clay pots given away at sagali).” Moyobana was a “big man” (toveka, honourable, famous, important person). Following his death, his clan had many commitments and needed to prove its strength through the fulfilment of these conventional duties. Mortuary distributions in Kiriwina offer a good sample of Trobriand taste for western “things.” The dissemination of gugua that surrounds the funeral proper in the form of goods purchased with doba (valova doba) is but one instance of this. Running at a deeper symbolical level, the objects exchanged at a sagali are ontologically joined to the participants’ ideas of adequateness to the task, which is, ultimately, the dissembling of the deceased person through the deconstruction and extinction of the relations of which s/he is composed. The articles – “traditional” and “modern” – used to achieve this define the current landscape of Trobriand consumption practices and help us situate the trajectories of objects within these changing regimes of value. Nowadays, mortuary obligations are not always met with traditional payments only. The increased mobility Trobrianders enjoy (see Chapter 5) often keeps them away from their gardens at crucial times, resulting in less abundant harvests and therefore less yams for distribution. What started as an alternative possibility (to partly settle funerary obligations with cash or commodities acquired with cash) has nowadays become ingrained into Trobriand practices and sometimes even enforced as a communally-agreed upon, unorthodox rule. The length of the mortuary cycle of payments and repayments has become too onerous in the eyes of Trobrianders that are often lacking in resources to carry out all the stages of the ritual cycle. Talks of simplifying the customary sagali are now in place everywhere in the islands. Whererever there are no such talks it is because a simplification of the mortuary rites has already been agreed upon.
Indeed, in places like Vakuta or Kaisiga (Kaileuna Island), a chanting wake (wosi) is held the same night somebody passes away to “accompany the deceased” (kopoi), followed by a one-off distribution of food (sagali) taking place either immediately or at a more favourable time in a near future. In other places like Obweria, north of Yalumgwa, the locals have agreed (under the aegis of charismatic Pentecostal churches run by fellow Trobrianders) to downgrade mortuary exchanges to a one-off ceremony altogether, scrapping the several stages that enact the extinction of the relations generated by the deceased throughout her/his life. The burden of having to work for several years to complete customary payments is now considered unproductive and distracting from the commitments Christians have towards their most immediate nuclear family and their parish. The re-conceptualisation of the Trobriand family in Christian terms contradicts one of Malinowski’s projections, namely that “the cardinal dogma of God the Father and God the Son…would completely misfire in a matrilineal society, where the relation between father and son is decreed by tribal law to be that of two strangers (1929: 186-187).” The opposite is the case instead, with missionaries taking on the paternalistic role of chiefs who were, in turn, rightly seen by Trobrianders as “metaphorical fathers” at a bigger scale (see Mosko 1995).

The re-assemblage of the family in Christian terms informs today’s mortuary rites. Instead of doba, the proponents of simplified funerary practices contend, we should exchange “useful” things: fabric to make clothes, western food and house wares to feed the family properly and cash to pay school fees and buy notebooks, pens and soap. There is, in these tendencies, a tension between the use of traditional valuables and their replacement by western commodities. The different symbolic value ascribed to one or the other carries this tension beyond the realistic possibility of acquiring both through cash. Some Trobriand women argue for the doba as a more “democratic” currency within the range of any Trobriander and against “the things of the westerners” (dimdim si gugua), so out of reach for the average villager. Others instead see in western commodities a possibility of empowerment rooted in Trobriand systems of exchange but operating with dimdim objects. Nowadays sagalis all over the Trobriands display a mix of these seemingly contrasting conceptions and it is now common to see distributions of traditional valuables, cash and western goods at the same mortuary ritual (Figure 4.8). The aim of this re-written material hierarchy is, in many Trobrianders’ minds, to redefine the paths of access to a perceived ideal of western modernity. Well-dressed, well-fed and
well-groomed children can go to school and excel; they can achieve success by learning the *dimdim* way.

**Figure 4.8:** (a) and (b): a *yawali* distribution. Different lots are prepared for the people that assisted in the first stages of a funeral. The lots include woven mats and housewares, lengths of fabric and banknotes. (c) A similar display is seen at a *lisaladabu* distribution, this time also with *nununiga* bundles. (d) A woman carries out *valova doba* at a *lisaladabu*, sporting bags of crisps and *Spear* cigarettes she intends to exchange for *nununiga* bundles.
One of the most salient examples of this in Kiriwina is the conventional practice of feeding rice, noodles, flour, tinned fish and meat to the tenth-graders while they are taking their final exams at the high school in Losuia. As many concerned parents explained to me, it is very important that the kids are pampered in this way. Only if they eat good food (“like you dimdim”) will they be able to achieve academic success. The school, they say, teaches the ways of modernity (“civilization, culture, progress”). The reiteration of this discourse has made it into a familiar, undisputed mantra of modern values as they are endorsed by multinational firms with an interest in spreading the consumption of processed foods throughout PNG. Hence in Errington et al.’s example, drawn from Nestle’s activities in PNG, good food is equated with good health, good education and a good job, resulting in a good life that makes the “whole community…happy” in an uncomplicated narrative of linear progress (2012: 26-27). Like sopi, this knowledge too, enlightens through the mimetic consumption of sources of power, in this case dimdim ones. Informing this practice is an underlying pattern of analogy: if you are what you eat, dimdim food will make you more dimdim.

The encroaching of education, consumption, carvings, money and status has its most powerful visual allegory in the office of the Headmaster of Kiriwina High School. Behind Harry’s desk is a pile of tokwalu more or less arranged by dimension and shape. Ebony walking sticks and large rosewood bowls are the most prominent ones. Parents from all over the Trobriand Islands bring in tokwalu as a form of payment for their children’s school fees. In addition, tokwalu also help finance the purchase of food for boarding students. In his periodic trips to Alotau and Port Moresby Harry tries to sell the woodcarvings to his colleagues or to other public servants. “This is not an art gallery,” he complains while showing me all the crafts behind his desk, yet he always accepts tokwalu from parents lacking cash for the school fees because “parents are genuinely concerned about the education and the nourishment of their children. We feed them mostly local food but whenever we can we try to buy rice for them,” Harry concludes. This particular example illustrates why tokwalu have become such empowering tools. They assist in the

94 The Orokaiva (Oro Province) classify “whitemen foods” as being “light, wet and weak,” thus conferring these qualities to those who consume them (white westerners). The qualities, though, are equally positive and negative. Although lightness allows whitemen to achieve their wealth and participate of the modern world, it also prevents them from becoming anchored in the land and fulfil customary obligations (Bashkow 2006: 153). Dimdim food does not have any negative connotation in the Trobriands, other than its high price, which becomes a positive sign if and when Trobrianders manage to acquire it and co-opt into their conventional social frames (see below).
construction of a modern self with an increased range of action, augmenting the person’s potential to negotiate cultural change in contrasting settings (rural-urban, centre-periphery, customary-new). Again, Bashkow’s suggestive ethnography (2006) comes to mind. Yet unlike his Orokaiva example, the “acquisition” of modernity is an extra “skill” for Trobrianders, who do not feel to be losing the capacity to operate within their traditional socio-cultural models when incorporating elements from the dimdim’s modernity. Simplifying, they may become “like” dimdims but they are still Trobrianders, an ideal of fluid mobility that defies categorization.

4.9 Rising rice

One of the ways of gauging the personal success upon which the self’s worth is built across all these settings is her/his capacity of distributed consumption (the reception and use of a resource by the group of persons benefitting from it). Given the space constraints of this thesis, it is not possible to go into detail about how Trobrianders objectify and articulate their conception of modernity by consuming it. Like elsewhere in PNG, material goods and commodities of all sorts are coveted as tokens of modernization and absorbed, where possible, in local and regional customary practices and socio-cultural models (see Gewertz & Errington 1999; Foster 2002; Mosko 2007; West 2012). There is, nevertheless, one item that indexes particularly well Trobriand conceptualizations of the modern on account of its reach. Rice. Rice has become omnipresent in Kiriwina and, under many circumstances, a complement of yams in mortuary ceremonies, a form of remuneration for goods and services, a valid item in bride price payments or even a necessary way of soliciting supernatural help (see below). As it is well known, yams in the Trobriand Islands are not only food. They are mostly items of wealth and power (Weiner 1988: 95-96) laden with symbolism (Mosko 2009), associated to magic (Malinowski 1935: 153-154) and instrumental in underlining the social hierarchies and the value of individuals, clans and villages (Malinowski 1929: 442-443). Rice is nowadays used together with yams in all of these instances (Figure 4.9). This complementarity becomes at times a substitution made possible by the integration of rice within local social schemes.

Of all the dimdim things that have made their appearance in Kiriwina, Trobrianders are particularly obsessed with food, a welcoming change from the rather bland diet of the usual boiled tubers. Understandably, people in the Trobes are amenable to “more intense
flavors” (Errington et al. 2012: 23) than the staple roots. Their obsession with *dimdim* food seeps into the naming of children: Noodles, Raisi, Sugar, Samani (a brand of canned tuna) are, in their eyes, common “Christian” names. “I love it [tinned fish] so much I wanted my son to have that name,” was a villager’s explanation of why he called his son Samani. *Dimdim si kawelu* exemplifies a contemporary Trobriand desire and its apprehension, real (through its acquisition and ingestion) or metaphorical (through the naming).

**Figure 4.9:** A *sagali* in Kaisiga, Kaileuna Island. The food distribution comprises yams and cooked rice. The cooking pots full of coconut-creamed rice are allocated to groups of people that have contributed to the funerary ceremony. The recipients will eat the rice on the spot and take the raw yams with them. Unlike other places in the Trobriand Islands, in Kaisiga there are no subsequent mortuary rites such as the distribution of women’s wealth (*lisaladabu*). “People that come here for a *sagali* would rather feast on rice; they know here in Kaisiga we eat rice, like you *dimdim*,” was the accepted motivation for the practice among locals.
Rice in particular has become both a pleasure and a privilege. Unlike other modern foods like noodles, rice is filling and “aesthetically abundant.” Whereas noodles are marketed in “monodose” packages, a 1kg packet of rice constitutes a meal for a whole family or a group of working adults and is therefore better suited to the Trobriand practice of sharing food with others (rather than eating on your own). In fact, as Errington et al. concede, “calorie-for-calorie instant noodles are about two-thirds more expensive than rice and gram-for-gram about twice as expensive” (2012: 24). Although Trobrianders may not have such exhaustive knowledge of these properties, their intuition guides their predilection for rice as being better than noodles. Yet despite being so widely favored by all, rice remains a privilege: at K6 or more a 1kg packet, rice is almost a luxury item (in Yalumgwa a day’s work in the garden was worth K5 in 2010). It is precisely this categorization as an expensive, hard-to-get thing that gives rice its high value. Indeed, rice fulfills the role of status-enhancer by concentrating and reifying into one product the aspirations of Trobrianders to enter modernity.

Not only is rice the food of choice for those who attempt “to be like dimdims” (see above) but in some occasions it is also a strong currency employed in customary practices. Its “power” can be compared to that of yams. Locally-grown yams require a type of internally-oriented knowledge (magic, gardening skills, help from ancestors) that is grounded in tradition. Imported rice instead needs to be acquired via another type of externally-oriented knowledge. But the two can be integrated with and complement each other, either in everyday consumption (okaukweda, lit. “in the veranda”) or in traditional practices (paisewa, “work.” See Chapter 1). Thus, whenever there is communal work to be done (for the church, the government or whoever can afford making the right payments for it) the workers expect to be fed rice by the sponsor in order to participate. Although rice and yams apparently belong to two different ontological regimes, the fact is that they actually come together not only as food but also as currency and as markers of fame. If yams evidence garden prowess and high status, rice indicates some sort of business capabilities. Packets of rice are witness to a person’s (or a group’s) skills in

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95 In 2008-2010 this was more or less a fixed rate. Some people (very few) occasionally pay to have work done in their gardens. While in the past chiefs and leaders would carry this out via food distributions (as some still do), nowadays they enlist the help of garden workers through the intercession of their parish. Groups – like the Catholic youth fellowship of Yalumgwa – raise cash by working collectively in somebody’s garden, contributing their wages to their church group. This money can be used to purchase goods (guitars to be played during mass, power generators for night services, etc.) and western foodstuffs (mostly rice) for religious feasts. This invariably results in the enhancement of their status as members of a collective.
extending and mastering relational networks beyond the immediacy of the traditionalTrobiand lifeworld, even when the same packets of rice are subsequently introduced incustomary socio-economic frameworks. In its association with money (throughacquisition, exchange and consumption), rice develops a symbolism of its own that ties itto the customary and the new. For that reason, rice is nowadays expected in any paka(feast), whether it is for traditional purposes (like a kovesa, the food distributionfollowing a competitive display, mostly in gardening) or the opening of a new school.Hence kuyala, a traditional pudding made of pig’s blood and offal served at any ritualwhere a pig is slaughtered, is nowadays invariably mixed with rice. This delicacy, usuallycooked by men for men only, is deemed to be incomplete and even inappropriate inpresent-day Kiriwina if it cannot be served with rice.

One of the indicators of the role of rice in recent times is its use as sosula, a type ofpayment made to obtain help from supernatural entities. Trobrianders explained to mehow some people travel to Tuma, the island where the spirits of the dead live awaitingtheir reincarnation, to ask Topileta (the spirit-deity that oversees the world of the dead inTuma, see Malinowski 1916: 156) to grant them favors. This soliciting was traditionallydone with yams, betel nut and tobacco but Trobrianders insist that rice “works muchbetter. That’s how Gerald Beona [a former MP in the 1970s] won three elections in arow, by giving rice and money to Topileta,” my adoptive father Camillus affirms. In mostof my conversations with Trobrianders, Topileta either assumes the role of God or of a saint (St Peter) put in Tuma by God himself. Tuma is likened to heaven and the tokwai toTopileta’s angels. Following a logic that sees Trobriand cosmologies embedded inChristian beliefs, it is pertinent to ascribe this recent practice (there is no mention of it inthe literature)96 to the missionaries’ influence and the Trobriand reception andencompassment of it. The “light” of Christianity confers symbolic value to new items likerice and consolidates the interdependence of what would otherwise be separate spheres ofaction. If Beona won three consecutive elections it was thanks to the support of his affine,thepowerful chief Narubutau, who backed him financially and materially (yams andtraditional valuables), but also thanks to Trobriand magic accessed via western goods.Although still not yet a replacement for yams, in 2010 there were many Trobrianders

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96 Newly dead people are sometimes laid with a betel nut in their mouths or traditional valuables (like bekutax-blades) as tokens for Topileta, so he would not refuse them entry to Tuma. Payments like the one described above though are – to my knowledge – absent from the corpus of Trobriand literature.
growing rice for the first time. At the time of my leaving the islands, in the SDA community of Kaisiga there were plans to bring in an expert that was known to have taught locals in other places in the MBP traditional rice-milling practices.

4.10 Trobriand roots, Trobriand routes

Daniel, a United Church pastor in Kitava, once told me he believed Trobrianders already knew the Bible before the *dimdims* came. According to him, Trobrianders are one of the lost tribes of Israel that ended up in Kiriwina. 97 Time made them forget who they really were but their biblical origin is indisputable. The evidence, Daniel maintains, is Labai, the cave from where all the Trobriand clans originate (see Appendix A SN 139). “Labai is a deformation of Levi,” Daniel claims. “People didn’t come from a hole or a cave. The Levi clan came on canoes and swam ashore, emerging from the holes that connect the beach to the mainland through the coral cliffs. With time the story and the name got distorted and we were made to think our ancestors emerged from the ground, but they only swam and stayed in the cave,” he assured.

It is hard for Trobrianders to categorise social change as an all-external intrusion. Almost everything is embraced as being already Trobriand or is made to be so by endowing it with a Trobriand root post hoc. Carvers’ innovations are subsumed within familiar formats and given the appearance of natural materialisations, the effectuation of a possibility that needed only to be eventuated. Through the first stages of their initiation, master carvers are given the capacity to acquire a series of abilities during their lifetime. The expertise is not bestowed upon them as a one-off act of interiorisation of a whole corpus of knowledge but is developed instead in successive steps, each of which is the practical realisation of an embedded potential. This potential is lodged within the carver at the moment of his initiation, turning the recipient into a container of as-yet-undeveloped skills. Craftsmen thus equipped need to foster these capabilities. Theoretical and practical knowledge are composed of an accumulation of the former experiences of ancestors and other carvers. But like the examples of Steven Okaulayagila, David Moiluvasi or Lake Moyabona reveal, there is not a unique route to developing creative potential. Under the gaze of his clansmen, some of them budding carvers, Moyobana told

97 A not-so uncommon claim beyond the Massim: Dundon (2011) documents it among the Gogodala people in the Western Province; and Timmer (2012) reports an equivalent instance from Malaita in the Solomon Islands.
me that “everything is there already,” pointing at a crude block of wood under a hut. “If you have the knowledge, you can carve it all out,” he said. How much one can carve out determines the person’s worth in terms of fame more than the ways in which this is done.

Carving knowledge goes through constant redefinitions, the validation of each of which results in the conventionalisation of the status of its proponent(s). Thus carving in Kiriwina is a quest for knowledge encompassing a variety of forms of knowing across the socio-cultural spectrum where Trobrianders act, in and out Kiriwina. Knowledge is instrumental in making old, traditional carvings and in creating new ones, but mostly in affording carvers the possibility to extend their web of relationships so as to maximise the benefits these relationships can yield. There is, in the Trobriand Islands, a perception that contact with Euroamerican outsiders has widened the playground for people to deploy new networks and secure fruitful partnerships. These are increasingly shaped upon western models of consumerism that become, nevertheless, embodied in local regimes of value. Thus cash and the commodities it buys are – just like religion – appropriated by Trobrianders as self-replicating tools, the reach of which appears to escape to Trobrianders themselves. Understandably so, as Graeber notes when commenting on the unawareness of “potential perspectives:”

It is almost impossible for someone engaged in a project of action, in shaping the world in some way, to understand fully how their actions simultaneously contribute to (a) re-creating the social system in which they are doing so (even if this is something so simple as a family or office), and thus (b) reflexively reshaping and redefining their own selves (2001: 64).

The “rice paradox” (the lack of food prompts the consumption of rice, while the consumption of rice can be identified as one of the reasons why food is short in the Trobes) illustrates Graeber’s concept. But not all Trobrianders think the sale of tokwalu is a project worth undertaking. Some blame this relentless pursuit of western goods and cash as the cause of the abandonment of traditional Trobriand activities, chiefly gardening. According to them, too many people are fooled into thinking they can provide for them and their families just by making tokwalu. Yet even the hardest working gardeners in the islands spare some cash, whenever they can, to buy rice at the trade stores and canteens. Although through different ways, rice and money are becoming the garden of many Trobrianders. Carving is a tool to work that garden, an activity deeply
embedded in Trobriand tradition that also serves as an instrument of innovation. Carvings replicate local socio-cultural patterns while modifying them, an example of the inclusive and expansive qualities of things in Melanesia.
Chapter 5
Necklaces, crucifixes and the fame of God: moving things, people and words in the kula ring

In the previous chapters I have illustrated how Trobrianders conceive and enact their world through the active interplay of material assemblages and immaterial narratives that have as a common denominator the creative renewal of varying relational possibilities between objects and subjects. In this chapter, I consider in more detail one of these patterns of livelihood, namely the circulation of people and things, as an act of perception and generation of the modern Trobriand universe. In that sense, the chapter evidences how circulation is not a mere transmission of prior meaning, but rather an act of creation (see Lee & LiPuma 2002: 192). As the tale of the snail and its ever-growing coil suggest (see Chapter 1), things in the Massim are constantly generative and encompassing. The chapter explores the expansive and comprehensive use of kula as an idiom for establishing novel relational networks.

5.1 How is the kula today?

The way it is “played” currently in the Massim, kula is all but a reductive expression in its concrete enactments. Kula people refer to the kula as a game, something you play for fun or to become good at, an exciting activity that induces bliss, a diversion that has the potential to turn you into a hero or make you feel proud of yourself. Most people I spoke to in Kiriwina associate kula with the practice of football.98 Thus, choosing the wrong path is like “making a foul,” and bad behaviour (using sorcery) is sometimes common (and maybe even useful in some cases), but it can earn you the equivalent of a “red card” (death). Other allegories people use when talking about the kula include comparing kula

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98 Football is the most popular sport in Kiriwina and across the MBP (see Rollason 2011), whereas rugby remains prevalent in the rest of PNG (Foster 2006). Cricket instead stopped being played even by the time Trobriand Cricket was filmed and nowadays is staged only for tourists (see McCarthy 2012).
partners to banks: a person is “a location” where one can place a valuable (but also a promise, an expectation) so as to get it at a later stage when needed. Kula-like exchanges integrate objects and narratives old and new more than ever. One example is the “exchange of sermons” (katupela guguya). In the past, missionaries from the Methodist United Church tried to oppose the kula, labelling it an immoral waste of time and resources (Leach 1983: 14). An exchange practice where magic was profusely used to journey through dangerous paths populated by witches, and to lure partners and their wealth by virtue of the magically-enhanced capacity of attraction of the self was not bound to be popular among Christian missionaries. Today, instead, the United Church has helped re-shape kula narratives and practices into new patterns of circulation and exchange. With the katupela guguya, whole villages are encouraged to visit close or distant communities to “give prayers” on a set date. The word of God is literally gifted by visiting parties that preach for several days in partner villages. The hosts will later on reciprocate and offer other passages of the Bible to their current guests. Being also an excellent opportunity to travel to other islands, the exchange of gospels does not, nonetheless, prevent individuals from exchanging goods or securing kula valuables while the katupela guguya takes place.99 The more or less sequenced arrangements of this traffic denote a type of framework that is systematic only in appearance: what matters, more than its more or less recognisable ceremonial shape, is to diversify and maximise the potential of exchange practices. Today, the act of naming some of these practices kula is a choice determined by contingency more than by convention: the kula is a flexible metaphor accommodating a range of acts and narratives that are ingrained upon a familiar trope that is instrumental in favouring circulation and producing new meanings.

Therefore, instead of representing them as an ordained structure, I suggest we conceive Trobriand exchange practices (including those termed as kula) as an expression – both material and immaterial – of potential. The point at issue is that kula and kula-like traffic embody the possibility of circulation and the ways in which it is conducted – the realisation of this potential. “Potential” evokes both the creative impetus with which actors engage in exchange and the uncertainty of the outcome of every transaction, given that such outcome is never to be taken for granted. It ensues that this two-fold aspect of

99 An adaptation not necessarily triggered by European influence, see Harrison’ s point on the circulation of reified cultural elements (i.e. Christianity): “in precolonial Melanesia cultural practices tended to be reified in ways that equated them with material valuables for at least one quite simple reason: namely, that both sorts of goods could move in the same exchange circuits and were thus often convertible into each other” (2000: 668).
potential is all-encompassing. It covers both the fulfilled aspirations of the people that are directly implied in it as well as the temporarily unfulfilled expectations of those that were left outside (see Munn 1986: 72). People choose to tap into this potential in different ways, creating new relations with each movement of objects, persons and words. This flow of relations is the reason why, ultimately, the kula – as an unconstrained symbol of movement (a rapidly-changing point metaphor in Roy Wagner’s reading, see 1986: 29-31) – becomes a powerful analytic device to observe and understand how people negotiate social change in the Massim.

The prospect of being able to dominate this uncertainty in a competitive setting is a driving force behind any type of exchange interaction in the Trobriands. Success means the explicit realisation of this potential through rhetoric prowess, magic mastery and resource-managing skills. It also means wealth and the capacity to fulfil old and new obligations, such as the ones prescribed by Christianity. Ultimately, success is the measure of one’s influence over other people: a temporary appropriation of identity (of the other and her/his relations). Anthropologists have capitalised on the term “fame” to evoke this influence (see Munn 1986). Today, fame can be thought of as a hierarchically-ranked position that affords a better control of the surrounding spatio-temporal environment and not necessarily requiring the continuous physical presence of a person in that environment. Fame, as we have seen in Chapter 3, is an integral part of personhood in Kiriwina and along with kula its content has been redefined on the way to modernity. Present-day kula incorporates traditional elements and blends them with the constituents of what is perceived as an impending western way of life. To stay as faithful as possible to this contingent adaptability, the following is an account that spins away from the abstraction of any given circular model. Rather than stressing exchange over production as the normative rationale informing Trobrianders’ behaviour (a feature commonly emphasised by Melanesianist anthropologists, see Foster 1995: 227, 233), my viewpoint actually considers circulation and exchange to be open-ended, diffuse and fluid productive acts with uncertain outcomes.

5.2 Kula carvings: creation as mobility

Walking around Oluweta hamlet in Yalungwa I join Giyumkwumkwu (Paul) Kalubaku on his veranda. Paul is carving a lagim, the splashboard found at both ends of the outrigger canoes used in kula expeditions. A lagim is, essentially, a carved piece of
wood to which red, black and white paint is applied. In some accounts it is also a material compendium of Trobriand aesthetics and epistemology, where the incisions and designs that form it achieve the visually and intellectually harmonic balance of what is beautiful and what is right and truthful (Scoditti 1990). In the western tradition of interpretation through allegorical translation (or appropriation), the lagim is a “visual text,” an encoding device requiring iconological deciphering to unveil all of its potential of communication – or meaning (see Campbell 2002, Scoditti 1977). In these readings of equivalence where the lagim could be a book (is like a carved and painted book), its patterns compose a system of graphic symbols that index attributes linked to mobility, speed and lightness, much sought-after features in any kula enterprise (Scoditti 1980). Additionally, this embedded knowledge can manifest itself as the corporeal witness to the efficacy of the sopi magic required to produce it. The lagim then is also the conspicuous, tangible focus of the magical agency of enchantment that emanates from it. When rightly executed in its form and content, the lagim helps alluring kula valuables (veiguwa) by exerting an irresistible power of attraction that owes to the conflation of all these qualities in a piece of wood (Gell 1994; see also Campbell 2001). Beauty, talent, harmony and many other positive qualities ascribed in the western tradition to the high artist and her/his artworks are integrated in any lagim carved using sopi. While studying some lagim at the then National Collection in Port Moresby in 1975, Narubutau – a Trobriand chief and a master carver, maker and owner of the last kula canoes of Yalumgwa – commented on one particular piece: “This canoe prow is the work of somebody with sope [sopi] (literally ‘water’: the flowing quality of line and rhythm that only the artistic genius is capable of)” (1975:1). Narubutau was responsive to the influence of the artist. The carver had inscribed himself and his magic in the object and was thus able to reach and to move Narubutau.

Paul is a master carver himself; he carves with sopi. Paul’s maternal uncle (Narubutau) taught him how to carve. He also gave Paul the charmed mix of red betel nut that would open his mind and guide him in his search for superior knowledge so as to make his lagim work (Campbell 1978, Scoditti 1982: 81). While he carves, Paul tells me he belongs to a branch of the Kwenama matriclan (dala) that traces its recent ancestry to the neighbouring island of Kitava. His dala possesses a type of sopi that derives its power from an ancient hero known as Monikiniki of Kudayuri (or Kodeuli) in central Kitava, to the east of Kiriwina. Anthropologists have individuated in this ancestral figure the
initiator of the ceremonial exchange known as kula (Malinowski 1922: 307, 310, 311-316; Scoditti 1990, 1996). The first kula expedition, it is said, originated there. I ask Paul whether he thinks the lagim stands as a symbol of exchange. My question seems irrelevant to him. I then ask if he thinks the lagim is Monikiniki. “Monikiniki” he says “is the one that carved the first lagim. If you ‘hold’ [yosi, to hold, to have, to apprehend] his magic then he’ll guide you when you carve the lagim. He’ll also help you sailing and obtaining the valuables you want or anything else you desire.”

As Paul keeps on carving I wonder if a fraction of an ancestor’s distributed personhood can live through magic formulas and narratives, dwell in a carved piece of wood and act from it. This is not exactly what Paul says but rather my own inference, based on the mediate agency of ancestors and spirits when summoned through spells or stories. More than mere preservation, I imagine the act of utterance and repetition as a re-enactment of what the ancestors did, thus who they were but also what “us-Trobrianders” (yakamesa) can become with them. And if the oral myth of Monikiniki is kept in secret magic formulas within the Kwenama matriclan it is also personified in a segment of wood. The story circulates through different channels, different personifications, each circulation also a re-creation of the myth. One of these embodiments (or re-creations), a small wooden sculpture representing the ancestral hero, found its way to the collection of an Italian anthropologist that subsequently displayed it at an exhibition in Rome (Scoditti 2000). The exhibition, called Argonauti del Pacifico, featured Massim objects from Scoditti’s personal collection at the Baths of Diocletian in Rome. Parallel narratives among seafarers in Melanesia and Roman myths were suggested through the exhibition of archaeological pieces from the Classic world next to artefacts collected in the Massim. In Scoditti’s reading, this representation of the myth shows an androgynous figure, the father-mother of Monikiniki. The carving is an interpretation of the incestuous union between a brother and a sister from which the hero originates. It is also the expressive portrayal of two brothers that are partly male and partly female. In the associated myth of the flying canoe, the death of the elder brother and the failure of the younger to sail successfully sanctioned the opening of the kula paths by their sisters. Transformed into flying witches, the sisters cut sailing paths through the coast (the kula routes) and left physical landmarks still visible around Kiriwina (Scoditti 2004).

I mention this sculpture to Paul and show him an image of it in a book (Scoditti 2000), yet another circulation of the myth. When I comment upon the iconological features of it
Paul seems rather unimpressed. We move on. I point at the two anthropomorphic figures on top of the *lagim* of the last kula canoe left in the Trobes I recently photographed in Mweuya (Figure 5.1).

“These” Paul says, “are the *bwalai*. They travel with you. If you’ve put magic on them (*lo ku megai*) before sailing, they will help you if something goes wrong, they will save you from drowning or getting eaten by sharks, or from being attacked by flying witches (*yoyowa*). If you know your magic and bewitch the *bwalai* they can call a giant fish called *suisayu* [the porpoise];\(^{100}\) if you’re in trouble, the fish will carry the canoe in her head (see Appendix C). But if you didn’t put magic or if you did it wrong, the *bwalai* may eat you instead if your canoe capsizes.”

- Are the *bwalai* like the two brothers of the myth? Is it them?

\(^{100}\) As Hutchins & Hutchins (n. d.) report in their lexicon “people like to see them [dolphins], there are stories of them rescuing people at sea.” Trobrianders do enjoy watching dolphins at sea and often comment *sena bwena si mwasawa* (“their playfulness is good/nice [to watch]”).
“Gala ta nukwalisi (we don’t know). Adoki tawau, adoki vivila, maybe they are men, maybe they are women.”

The bwalai in that lagim are indeed unspecified, no sexual organs are in evidence. Sometimes though they have male or female genitalia, or both, although no explanation for this is provided. According to Paul “they are like spirits, souls (tokwai, baloma). Each carver represents them as he visualises them, for some they are male spirits, for others female ones.”

- Is Monikiniki half-man half-woman?

“Gala, tau (No, he’s a man),” Paul asserts.

- So why is he sexually undefined in that sculpture in the book? And why is it the same with the bwalai? Does the death of one of the brothers in the myth imply that personhood is unspecified at the outset, that we all have male and female elements and only through the shedding (or the “death”) of one them, as we grow, we can start becoming man or woman? Is this death (or transformation) the beginning of exchange? Or is it the aim of exchange, to enact successive transformations through circulation, so one can attain full personhood through the appropriation of complementarities?

I ask Paul all these questions in a slow succession as he keeps on working with the knife. None of this matters much to him. Back in 2009 there was only that one kula canoe left at Mweuya, the beach of Okaiboma and Olivilevi villages, on the east coast of Kiriwina, facing Kitava. It belonged to Tolobua, a well-known master carver, kula man and the chief of Olivilevi. By the end of 2009 it was rotting away on the beach. Yalumgwa had not had a kula canoe for over thirty years now and Paul was not making one. Paul was carving the lagim just for himself, or maybe to sell it to a tourist. Bored with my approximate second-hand exegesis, Paul asks me if I want to buy his lagim or if I know

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101 It is noteworthy that Seligman (1946: 129-130) reports that the human-like figure in the prowboards of the canoes made in the D’Entrecasteaux are referred to as “baby (wama ‘ea on Fergusson Island) or newly-born child (guama).” It is plausible in this context to see infants as idioms of transformation and exchange. In the Trobriand Islands, when the spirits (baloma) of the dead re-incarnate, they do so by entering the vaginas of women bathing at sea under the form of waiwaia (see Chapter 4), a spirit-child enclosed within the white surf of the waves (polu). In the Massim, newly-born individuals are considered as compendia of masculine and feminine elements in the making. The transit from the spirit form to infant to fully-grown individual to spirit again is a process marked by a series of exchanges involving relatives and affines in the construction and deconstruction of the person. Campbell (2002) maintains the bwalai are known as tokwalu in Vakuta, affirming an etymological link between human-like sculptures (tokwalu) and the spirits (tokwai) that live in/embody them.
somebody that would be interested in it. Although not in a canoe, this lagim, too, needs to move.

5.3 Carving the kula: mobility as creation

Carvings – tokwalu or not – must circulate. They need to be sold or exchanged, moved around, seen, commented upon, admired. Not only there is no point in making a beautiful carving and keeping it wrapped in fabric inside a hut. In a tropical climate, almost everything wears out quickly. Unlike long-lasting kula shells, woodcarvings eventually succumb to weathering. And a rotten carving is worthless.

Moving away from Oluweta up the main road I arrive at the next hamlet, Kagutoki. Over there, too, people are carving. My friend Budia is from Kabwaku village, though he spends most of his time in Kagutoki, where his father-in-law lives. Patrilocal residence for married couples is still the rule throughout the Trobriand Islands, yet it is often abandoned for more practical considerations. Nowadays, current concerns help redefine old customs in Kiriwina. Living in strategic locations enhances mobility and the prospective outcome of fruitful circulation is temporarily favoured by some Trobrianders over the more traditional – albeit not always productive – “obligation of belonging” to a certain village. Trobrianders will ultimately be buried in their land (pwepwaya, soil) but for the time being they can toil other grounds as long as these are more prolific. The proximity of new settlements to the main road facilitates the transfer of people and goods, whereas living near a trade store increases the chances of performing exchanges. People also move to places that are considered to have more resources (i.e. coconut or betel nut plantations, good fishing areas in the coast) or better business opportunities. De facto matrilocality is yet another possibility to exploit the potential of diversifying relational approaches in the face of an increasing demographic pressure that puts constraints on the customary exchange networks. There are more people living in Kiriwina and as the land available to them shrinks so does its productivity. Gardening is supplemented with carving and trade and new contacts are sought to expand the influence over people and objects.

Although mobility in the Trobriand Islands and beyond has much increased over the past thirty years, it is not a recent by-product of modernity. To the contrary, there is at least that one instance of well-studied Trobriand exchange that epitomises the ongoing traffic of subjects, objects and concepts across the islands of the Massim: the kula. In kula
mythology (the compilation of both local tales and the narratives of anthropologists), people, things and ideas shift around the island world of the MBP, activating channels that are both the cause and the consequence of meaningful creative acts encompassing the daily lives of Trobrianders. Because they all move, the world exists. Tourist artefacts are among the things that move the most in Kiriwina. The traffic is not always a direct carver-buyer face-to-face business anymore, centred in one or two focal points (the guesthouse or the airstrip, see Weiner 1988: 18, 20-21). Instead, it has become a delocalised affair, with many new actors operating as intermediaries. This dispersal of artefacts can be seen as a strategy to create new outlets for the carvings in times when tourism is far from the 1970s’ heyday. The strategy of dispersion, though, is not entirely new.

Budia spends time in Kagutoki because his father in law, Valaosi, is a master carver. Affinal relations create a bond that offers opportunities for trade. Yet in present-day Kiriwina people maximise their chances of engaging in trade practices by turning to other types of bonds, like friendship or a simple sense of belonging (to the same hamlet, ward, church or even a “professional category” like carvers or ward counsellors). Valaosi taught at the National Arts School (now the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Papua New Guinea) in Port Moresby for some ten years in the 1980s, after which he decided he was better off back in his village in the Trobes, carving artefacts for tourists. While there are not that many visitors right now in Kiriwina, in 2010 Valaosi received a large commission for a series of carvings to be sold to a dimdim in mainland PNG. Valaosi did not receive the order directly from the dimdim. Like in most cases, it was passed down via several intermediaries. It is hard to determine exactly all the ramifications of such networks and trace the genesis of a commission. Carvers get orders for one or several objects and sometimes they hand down part of the task to yet another carver. Thus they often ignore not only the final destination of their carvings but also many of the middlemen that will mediate between all the parties. During my stay in Kiriwina, reputed carvers like Valaosi would receive such commissions at least once a year. News of big commissions spread fast and carvers move around in search of “side jobs” (providing materials, refining outlined carvings, etc.) around such commissions. The revenue, too, is not always known. I once joked with Valaosi and other carvers in Yalumgwa:

- This going around of carvings is like the kula!
“Eh, makala (yes, it’s like that),” Valaosi replied. “You know, sometimes we just pass the carvings on, expecting to get something in return.”

- To whom do you pass them on?

“Oh it can be a relative, a friend, an acquaintance or a stranger… and from there, who knows where they will end up; hopefully we’ll get something back. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t… But we have to try,” the Yalumgwa carvers said to me.

In the classic definitions and examples about the kula exchange given in the literature (Malinowski 1922, Leach & Leach 1983), the kula participants only knew in the flesh their most immediate partners to the east and to the west: those were the people they dealt with directly. Knowledge of the furthest partners was a fragmentary and fluid reconstruction of relations over time, pieced together through stories and shell valuables. Similarly, all Valaosi knows is he will get some sort of payment in due time to carve a series of ebony artefacts for some dimdim. When I ask him, Budia says John Kasaipwalova is Valaosi’s direct partner in this business, yet he ignores who are John’s associates. Like the kula, the circulation of carvings can also be a game of knowledge, secrecy and aspirations where the only tangible certainties are the carvings that will eventually leave Kiriwina on a plane or on a boat. These aspirations, fashioned upon the known model of the kula for circulation and deferred correspondence of obligations, can also be seen through the allegorical lens of the “dimdim’s bank,” the “house” where “one leaves something to have it at a later stage, when needed,” as Valaosi put it to me when I asked him why was he giving away so many carvings without asking for a price immediately. Like a good kula player, a good carver builds his reputation through the dispersion of his work: a fraction of his personal identity (his knowledge, his skills, his imagination, his magic but also his ambition and his desire) circulates locally and beyond, “acting” for him. Success amounts to the degree of control over other people he can obtain through this dispersion. A good example of this is Trevor’s experience with the businessman in Lae: leaving him the stones created an obligation of reciprocity to be fulfilled either through payment for the magic stones or via more commissions, establishing an ongoing bond between Trevor and his partner, a bond enforced by the “presence” of Trevor and his ancestors in the stones (see Chapter 3).

Success, in these terms, is also independent from what we formally understand to be “the kula.” Although in some aspects it bears resemblance to it (the building of reputation
or fame through successive circulations, see below), in others (the materialistic quest for cash, the unprescribed formal improvisations) it sanctions novel behaviours. Like in the kula, carvers sometimes also try to hold on to their carvings for long periods of time. In the carvers’ mind this is a strategy to increment the prices (or at least not to bring the prices down). Sometimes craftsmen will not sell a carving until they get what they feel is a right price. A risky operation if carried too far, as a rotten carving is worth less than one sold too cheap. The problem, thus, is not one of definitions but of descriptions, and more specifically of describing functional paths of meaningful circulations. How to attempt a description of the contingent modes of circulation performed in the Massim and illustrate in which ways these are relevant to the construction of the present-day Trobriand world? Adding to the usual split between armlets and necklaces that distinguishes the kula in the anthropological literature, it is necessary to follow the movements of cash, carvings and western commodities. If the idioms of circulation and transformation are conflated, it is also essential to ask who is Monikiniki today. If he were the demiurgic hero from the past that created a world that has been enacted up until now through varying exchange itineraries, today Monikiniki stands as a symbol of inventive circulation and of those who look for new routes to expand their local world into a modern one. Although perhaps not invoked directly by name, or only secretly so, the hero’s distributed trademark is still flowing as a manipulable mythical substance fit to extend the Trobriand world beyond the contemporary myth of western wealth and Christian spirituality.

5.4 Kula and beyond: the theory and practice of Trobriand exchange

When Malinowski predicted that the kula would become “entirely disorganised” due to the fall of chiefs and their lack of resources and power (1922: 465), he did not account for the emergence of unsystematic forms of exchange carried out on the wake of recognized trade structures. If people move fast and objects change hands quickly in Kiriwina, most things appear to stay the same. A “stereotropical” landscape, the Trobriand Islands give the impression of a monotonous repetition of daily businesses against a steady background. Repetition is also a narrative expedient, a stylistic overtone of familiarity found in storytelling. Repetition conceals change, but does not necessarily negate it as it persists below the apparent continuity. In our “anthropolocal” imagination (the objectified image of all things “Trobriand” we anthropologists and Trobrianders project to the world from an allegedly culturally-confined territory), Kiriwina is an uninterrupted
spatial and mythical environment with its continuous solid and ethereal inhabitants intent, as they are, in carving meaningful social acts out of this ongoing flow. Life in Kiriwina often calls for communal assemblages that replicate the existing relational network of the Trobriand community; hence a feeling of familiar repetition. Reiteration, though, also bears renovation. If the place feels like a continuum it is only an acquired appearance. The truth beyond the projected static image of the Trobriands is more that of “a shifting site in a network of global flows” (Foster 1999: 146), where new exchanges are modelled on those encompassing customary multi-local connections that “define conduits for the flow of meaning” (ibid. p. 147). The metaphor here is that of the chambered nautilus (see Chapter 1), the shell that grows following the rule of the golden section, seemingly replicating its components only to outgrow them with every addition. Drawing from the past but never bound to repeat it verbatim, the present is an open-ended replica performed through the recurrence of the daily traffic of things and people through slight variations that reshape the perception of the world and with it, the world itself. Or, in Wagner’s symbolist parlance “building metaphor upon metaphor in such a way as to continually divert the force of earlier expressions and subsume it into newer constructions” (1981: xiv). Prescribing this flux of movements – or freezing them – means running against their very nature: it is from the residual potential of allegedly fixed conventions that innovative changes ultimately take place.

Nevertheless, some modes of exchange in the Trobriand Islands still bear the familiar aspect of tradition. These vectors of movement, though, are not perceived in tension with new ones whose trajectories may appear to collide with the ways of the “old times” (tuta omtibogwa). This tension is only apparent. And it is only problematic when enunciated as a general theory. Particular examples show how a general conception of modernity (modern western goods and cash but also concepts such as “speed” – in the form of fast transportation or enhanced communications, the things the dimdim invented and brought to Kiriwina that are ever more present in the island) is correlated to change in a positive way. Changes are negotiated in everyday practice and eventually co-opted within local cultural frames. Archetypal models based in custom fade altogether, to the point where their enunciation becomes itself a malleable past narrative divergent from the current practice but not so much from the contemporary recounting of it. Understanding these examples of practical instances of exchange is a matter of accounting for these modes of
circulation and distribution of people and things without relying completely on given models, yet without leaving them aside either.

In this matter, freedom of movement has become of paramount importance in the Trobriands. Prescribed ceremonial actions have given way to more flexible ways of circulation that generate new spaces in the interstices of ritual repetition. One of these is the act of *taina*, “to roam” or “to spin around, to wander.” *Taina* is an expression of the freedom with which women and men move around Kiriwina and beyond. It is also an idiom that sums up a compulsion to move, to not stay put in one place. In Kiriwina it is customary to ask people where they’re going as soon as they start moving (*ambese bu kula*, where are you going), even if their destination is obvious. The question implies a desire to know the purpose of the journey and one should reply by giving as much information as possible (*balola bala Losuia bakokwava inia olui bakeita bayaki inagu*, I shall walk, go to Losuia, get fish, later on I will return and bring it to my mother). Senft calls it ritual communication, a form of greeting and showing that you care about the person in question (1995: 217-218). It is also a way of checking on other people’s movements and obtaining information. The only one answer that does not require further specifications as to the final destination is *bala ba taina* (I’m going for a spin, I’m going around). *Taina* is not kula yet it is like kula in the sense that it conveys the potentially generative power of movement. For the Trobriand flâneur there are no idle interactions. *Taina* expresses both a search for the hidden and a resolution of secrecy. Unforeseen opportunities may arise from a walk about (for example, selling a carving or getting a commission to make one). *Taina* also allows one the undisclosed confidentiality of the generic wandering in lieu of having to declare the purposeful business, effectively cutting out potential competitors.

Tomdebi, a kula man and a master carver from Bawai village once told me in front of a group of villagers that he was going to Alotau “for a spin” (*bala ba taina*).

- What will you do in Alotau, Tomdebi? I asked him.

“Spin around, visit some relatives,” was his reply.

Immediately after he left, somebody whispered in my ear *gala Tonogwa, bila Dobu bila ikula!* “No Tonogwa, he is going to Dobu to do kula!” The idioms of kula and *taina* are conflated together to the point that the sign is irrelevant, what matters is the action.
performed and even more so the results it can yield. Currently in Kiriwina taina and kula do not run parallel and separate but are incorporated into each other.

Accordingly, a totalising, abstract theory on Trobriand exchange charting a system based on dual oppositions (such as ritual/non-ritual or external/internal exchange, as it is played out in kula and mortuary ceremonies, see Damon & Wagner 1989) precludes the possibility of assessing social change as it takes place in the MBP. Ritual and non-ritual and internal and external exchanges are indistinctively interlinked in Trobriand practice. Tracing a boundary among them throws back the echoes of an anthropological interpretive metaphor unfamiliar to Trobrianders. Notwithstanding the extent to which these combined motions seem to rule out systematic theories, they do not deny exchange itself. At present, affirming that “In the Trobriands at least economic exchange does not enter into ceremonial exchange but runs parallel to it” (Hage et al. 2009: 108) sounds like a fake truism. The platitude of the statement presupposes that “economic” and “ceremonial” are separate realms when they are only so in our derivational application of western categories cross-culturally. In the same way as Paul does not conceive a purely ritualistic or mythical management of the lagim in opposition to its current usage as the object of a potential transaction, the efficacy of exchange is weighted independently from systematic classifications. Likewise, Budia, Valaosi and other carvers expect to obtain returns from the successive passages of their carvings, their aspirations shaped upon the recognised framework of the kula, where the object carries the inner force of the relations that make it. In the carvings are embedded the prospective vectors of future achievements or materialisations, even though they are not, strictly speaking, kula valuables. The ceremonial is as commonplace as the commonplace can be ceremonial. Or in other words, not all kula is only about kula. People make connexions by conceptualising objects through familiar referents in non-exclusive ways. Calling upon ancestors or magic is commensurate with today’s necessities. Understandably, the links are slanted depending on who establishes them. Whereas Valaosi was a kula man, Budia is not. The trajectories are necessarily patchy and incomplete, and so are the narratives that originate from them.

Moreover, the detachable personhood with which Trobrianders are invested comes to the fore in these exchange instances. The personal characteristics and qualities of the “human person” or “people” (tomota) are often embedded in objects that are seen and treated as actors per se (see Gell 1998). This has been made exemplary visible in the
context of the kula. The kula is performed in a double-dialectic way: between the material (objects, goods, resources) and the immaterial (fame, knowledge, status) on one hand and between the “person and its persons” on the other. Kula valuables are identified with more than one individual, a sound metaphor for identity-construction processes in the Massim where persons are created as aggregates of relationships. Shells have the potential to accumulate layers of personal density. As such, they are symbols of and agents for social change at the same time. This is important because it is upon this dialectic that the kula is actually built and enacted: individuals travel and act within objects. Objects expand into names and fame, making up social landscapes in which more individuals will travel, new trajectories superimposing old ones and revealing with each movement the potential for expanding the otherwise ephemeral nature of relationships. Players attach and detach their personal selves to shells as best suits them, so as to possess or de-possess a relation, as it were. A shell valuable that has a person (or is a person), which in turn is an assemblage of relationships and narratives is a difficult object to theorise about in its multiple trajectories. Under this light, so is a carving like Paul’s lagim. Every movement calls into question the acquired familiarity with which the object is perceived. The relations that stem from the object (that are the object) are renegotiated with every circulation, to the point of changing the object.

5.5 Circulation as appropriation

Desire, in Stéphane Breton’s view, is the human rationale that drives the necessity to produce objects, display them and ultimately appropriate them, based on the “myth of lost wholeness” (2002: 124). Quite in tune with Breton’s Freudian view, the desire for appropriation in the Massim acts as the impetus for circulation, with the particularity that in the Trobriand Islands circulation is an instance of creation where the object is not simply passed along, but is in fact redefined and created anew as it moves on. Mobility is ancillary to this re-creation. And so is reified personhood: the object that circulates is embedded with new constituent qualities, idiosyncratic fractions of those that lay claims on it. An apt example is the story of the communal assemblage of a mwali armshell and a carving I heard in Bawai hamlet in 2009.

The mwali Segusegu (sandfly) was fitted into a woodcarving in order to make it more “beautiful” and to ultimately be sold to a Japanese businessman operating in Port Moresby for a large sum of money (Figure 5.2).
The owner of the mwali, Tomdebi, claimed ownership of the shell “because there are no longer soulavas (necklaces) with enough ranking to match the mwali. They have all been sold or dismembered. Segusegu belongs to me.”

Tomdebi himself made the carving, although subsequently I discovered that several other carvers collaborated with him in its production. When asked why he thought it adequate to make a carving for the mwali, Tomdebi gave two reasons. One was to show his prowess in carving in order to impress the Japanese buyer, so he could ask for a higher price and get more commissions in the

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102 Tomdebi never mentioned the mwali was his kitoum (see Leach & Leach 1983). Only when I asked him directly did he concede it, although he never provided any explanation so as to what is a kitoum or why is Segusegu his kitoum.

103 Later on and at a different place (Port Moresby 2010), I learned some of these carvers contended the authorship of the carving supporting Segusegu. To some extent, they claimed a “part” of the mwali itself - “I too made this mwali,” as Lake Moyabona put it to me.
future (other than a kula man, Tomdebi is also a recognised master carver). By doing so, Tomdebi was putting part of him (his fame, his skills, his knowledge) into the object. The other reason was to claim ownership of the mwali: currently it is common to see armshells and necklaces with names written on them with thick marker pens (see Figure 5.3).

Interestingly enough, there is a conscious mixing of the names, those of the shells and those of the people, in an attempt to appropriate the object by identifying it with a given

Figure 5.3: David, a young man from Sinaketa village, returns home from an exchange of sermons in Omarakana with the mwali Gudara, a prized kula valuable. The mwali has been inscribed with a marker pen. Other than its name (in green), the mwali also bears the name of “Paul D” (in black ink), probably a “former possessor” according to David who, given his young age and relative lack of expertise in kula matters, did not know who Paul D was. Gudara is the name of a famous kula master from Bovagisa, Woodlark Island (Malnic and Kasaipwalova 2000: 65), but I could not ascertain whether the mwali was named directly after him. Tomdebi thinks this mwali was once paired with another one: “they were big mwalis, they used to walk together and were known as Gudaraikaya” (lit. Gudara swam, went swimming), Tomdebi claimed. Gudara means “coconut leaf torch” in Dobuan.
kula player that exchanged it at some point. Tomdebi's carving for Segusegu acts as a very thick marking pen stating an impossible ambition: to reveal an indelible status, that of the successful kula man and accomplished carver, an ephemeral status by nature that is not made to last since kula shells as well as carvings are constantly changing hands. Both the kula man and the carver are constructed as a dynamic aggregate of people and relationships (other carvers, other kula players) prone to transformations. The paradox runs thus: the aspiration to “freeze” a high-status can only be enacted through change. Mobility is a necessary risk to attain the higher stages of personhood. If circulation constitutes the momentary appropriation of different relationships (embedded in the shell) and acts (the decision, what is to be done with the shell), we also need to account for resistance to this appropriation. Annette Weiner’s paradox of keeping-while-giving is no longer circumscribed to objects that should not circulate or should only do so in special circumstances (see 1985, 1992). Distinctions between alienable and inalienable, gifts and commodities are therefore made redundant as the paradox extends to any object that enters an exchange network. Fixing a possession/position signals an ideal, impossible situation of “stasis-in-movement” where an acquired high status would need to move no more. Yet – as everybody in the Massim knows – immobility is only an illusory option as its enactment would eventually dispel fame and with it, any possibility to produce positive qualisigns.

The stimulus to arrogate is not exclusive of carvers, neither is it aimed solely at valuables and artefacts. And it is not circumscribed to authorship only. If seizing things in Kiriwina is a common practice to increase one’s fame, it has to be done to the detriment of others. Budia knows how to carve, although he is not considered to be a master carver and he is not training to be one. But Budia has seen many carvers at work in Kabwaku, a place known for the outstanding quality of its intricate ebony walking sticks. As we talk, Budia works on a walking stick his father-in-law, Valaosi, has just passed on to him, urging him to finish it quickly. The designs on the ebony walking stick have been roughly delineated by Valaosi himself. He chose the layout and the motifs, but it will be Budia who will terminate the job, refining the patterns and polishing the composition. Later on,

104 The written signature has undoubtedly become a way of appropriating objects in the Trobriands. Literacy as a “thing” from outside, and more precisely from the dimdim world – has acquired an almost magic proportion in the Trobriand imaginary. Writing a letter for instance, is like casting a magic spell: it summons “forces” that can be directed to obtain the required results, like obtaining cash for school fees from a relative working abroad. Putting bulbami (magic of attraction, see Chapter 3) in such letters has become a common practice.
when asked who carved that walking stick Valaosi undoubtedly replied: “I did, it is my carving” (Besa yegu latea, ula tokwalu). As with Segusegu and its supporting carving, claiming individual ownership often contrasts with the real communal enterprise of creating an object. Predictably, having individuals asserting exclusive authorship of an object is not as much of a paradox as it is a constant dialectic only resolved within the object (and only temporarily). “I did it” (Yegu latea) is an effort of appropriation, not of an object (or not only of an object) but of the people that may lay claims to the object too. Valaosi asserts his temporary ownership of the relationship with Budia. Valaosi’s claim, though, is only meaningful at the moment of circulation. As if the actual making of the carving was not taking place before my very eyes by Budia, this walking stick will be Valaosi’s only when it changes hands, its circulation sanctioning its re-birth. Objects (and their associated concepts, the material and the immaterial substances of exchange) are not just created once and then put into circulation. Each circulation can be conceived as a re-creation. In that sense, making and exchanging something are interchangeable idioms in Kiriwina, associated to the agents that make and exchange. Trobrianders use the expression la vavagi (his/her doing). As it changes hands (and sometimes also shape), a tokwalu can be several people’s doing.

The ontological identification with kula valuables becomes evident. The density of a kula valuable, that is, its accumulated properties as they are perceived by those who come into contact with it, is both a defining element of the object and of the person that comes to handle it. People act upon objects and objects act upon people, but this is only recognised as long as (and when) there is an exchange. Clearly, this is valid for kula shells, but also for Swedish axes (see Chapter 2) or carvings. The synergetic interaction between actors in the Trobriand Islands facilitates the rearrangement of categories past the simple re-wording of types of exchange that bear a resemblance to the kula. Objects, be they carvings or shells, exist as the compressed performances (Strathern 1990) of the relationships that originate them. The transactions – or paths, in Trobriand terms – in which the objects are caught are in fact constitutive of the objects themselves, although not necessarily in a cumulative way. Objects are relations and people at the same time. They can be done and undone, modified, aggregated, appropriated, lost. Their value is assessed not in an absolute, quantitative way but in the modes in which their apprehension is creatively renegotiated within each transaction. The interdependence of

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105 Myers (2002) describes similar networks of collective creation by Aboriginal artists in the Central Desert of Australia.
trade partners relies not as much in the nature of valuables as well-defined, limited entities sealing obligations (inalienable gifts) but rather in conceiving valuables as parts of persons subject to unlimited potential transformations. Therefore, each circulation is an attempt at successfully harnessing this unbound potential by playing these transformations to one’s favour. At present, though, the social context demands more flexibility in adapting the nature of objects to the needs of the inhabitants of the Massim. For instance, the current cultural and economic framework also needs to accommodate cash transactions, as money too plays a role in establishing new networks and increasing the actors’ chances of affirming their positions in these networks.

**5.6 The fame of cash and commodities**

Moving along un-trodden paths also means creating new networks. In the last years in the Trobriand Islands this has been effected out of necessity. All over the so-called kula ring – as in the rest of PNG – there has been a significant increase in population since the 1970s. The demographic explosion in Kiriwina has led to many predicaments, resulting in a higher demand for those supplies that are now dwindling on the island. More often than not, the inhabitants of the MBP are left to fend for themselves in an area where government services are scarce and slow to reach the most remote communities, when they do so. A bigger population concentrated in small islands has entailed food security issues (see Bourke, Allen & Salisbury 2000) and a shortage of resources in many corners of the MBP. The growing mobility is responsive to some of these quandaries. Resulting from a substantial improvement in the capacity to move around (opportunities afforded by ferries, trawlers, dinghies and the fast and relatively easy to operate sailau canoe from the southern Massim), there has been an emergence of novel forms of binding people across space in the kula ring. Social obligations – marriage or funeral payments, for instance – have become more spread out in space, where people now have links that extend to Alotau in the mainland and even to Port Moresby, blurring the distinction between internal and external exchange. These obligations are also more frequent in time due to the demographic boom. The increased mobility affords an opportunity to attend to a higher number of these obligations. Not only are people forced to travel more often to

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106 The first official census counted 2.2 million people in PNG in 1970 (see National Statistical Office of Papua New Guinea). The total population is currently over seven million (“Population of PNG is more than 7 million” by Gorethy Kenneth in *The PNG Post Courier*, 4 April 2012), more than a threefold increase in just forty years.
engage in community activities or customary assignments. They are also more inclined now to establish new paths of exchange (Ferguson 1985) and seek out new partners to fulfil these new obligations.

The monetisation of exchange transactions coupled with the surge of stores trading in European goods (as already described by Scoditti & Leach, 1983: 259) has brought to the fore the possibility to use kula as a social mechanism to obtain access to assets in places where neither the state nor the local, traditional chiefs are in a position to regulate the flow of exchange and provide resources within the customary obligational channels. Today everybody can be – at least potentially – a player in the kula. This means there is now a democratisation of the game,\footnote{Annette Weiner already noted how since colonisation the kula went from an enterprise reserved to high-ranking lineages to a more inclusive, democratised venture in which commoners too could participate (1988: 142). Strictly speaking, this differentiation would have applied to northern Kiriwina only, since other areas of the Massim do not seem to have had such clear-cut distinction between commoners and high-ranked clans and subclans. This democratising trend has continued until nowadays (see also Liep 2009).} deriving partly from necessity, partly from lack of restrictive control and partly from the realisation of the potential that lies in new partnerships. The kula has gone from an exclusive club of powerful, knowledgeable people with (traditional) resources to a growing and ever-inclusive group of islanders in search of solutions to old and new problems.\footnote{See Foster on mortuary rites in New Ireland (1995) and Strathern’s analysis of modern variations on the moka system in the Western Highlands (1999).} Its openness hinges on the ontological ductility of the elements that constitute it. Adapting things and narratives from the past is made easier when the new frames of reference are geared towards empowering new actors without harming the status of the already-established ones.

Unsurprisingly, some of the most prominent kula players in the Trobriand Islands are those who couple the need for mobility with the capacity and the resources to move around speedily. Among these are the owners of two trade stores in Losuia, David Tomeuda and Abraham Cameron. David travels frequently to Alotau in chartered trawlers to bring cargo to his store, stopping in the D’Entrecasteaux and in the Amphlett Islands on his way. He admits to have started in the kula only recently. Doing kula is a way to fix the privileged position – albeit devoid of emblematic meaning – money affords store traders against a more symbolically-loaded background. Because the circulation and accumulation of money alone does not automatically grant status in the Trobriands, the traders engage in kula to seek out new relational links, objects and partners that can be appropriated in order to attain fame.
In a similar story to that of Tomdebi’s Segusegu, a famous mwali, Ugwabwena (Figure 5.4), was embedded within a lagim in order to be immediately recognisable as a very valuable object even by a person not familiar with the ranking of kula shells.

Its owner, John Kasapwalaowa, had created a new kula path ex novo so that the armshell could travel to Alotau in time to be presented to the Governor of the province during the celebrations of the canoe festival in the provincial capital. John claimed that “Nobody has ever come up with such an idea. I believe I will be starting a trend and from now onwards more and more people will be presenting mwalis in this way. The Governor is going to like it very much.” Incidentally, a visit to the Governor's headquarters in Alotau confirmed this: armshells and necklaces can be seen hanging around even though the Governor – actually a dimdim – is not a kula man himself. Aspiring and affirmed
politicians alike in the MBP are well aware of how important it is to build relationships that enable a rapid circulation of the self and the mobilisation of symbolic resources when needed. The flow of cash is just a partial solution because, as someone put it to me in Kiriwina “money only cannot be people.”

On the other hand, some of the partners of the storeowners in the Amphlett Islands and in the D’Entrecasteaux find themselves in the reverse situation: traditional kula players with shells seek new paths to obtain monetary resources and western goods. An old man from Nabwageta travels to Losuia in his canoe every two months or so with traditional clay pots from the Amphlets. In May 2010 he also took two soulava necklaces with him on his trip to the Trobriands. He usually trades his pots for money with David. One of the necklaces will continue to travel eastwards on the path of a partner in Kitava Island. The other soulava will be dismembered into the smaller necklaces known as kuwa (see below) and put to sale at the store for K150. Occasional tourists from PNG or overseas, public servants or boat crewmembers will be among the potential buyers. The Nabwagetan will also receive cash and store goods (rice, flour, machetes, kerosene, etc.) for his clay pots. The pots (kwelamola) are still produced in only two places in the Massim. In the past, they were traded around the islands as kula valuables and the value attached to them was similar to that of beku stone-axes or circular pigs’ tusks (dogadoga). Clay pots are still exchanged at mortuary ceremonies but people living in the Trobes are often pressed for them, to the point that they sometimes go to the trade stores to buy them if they cannot obtain them via traditional channels of exchange.

The Kitavan partner of the storeowner will, in due time, make a trip to Losuia to get the necklace. In a way, this arrangement suits all parts: the storeowner displays his kula valuables and sometimes presents them as gifts to dignitaries that visit the island, portraying himself as a successful kula player and a generous person “beyond” business and acquiring fame because of it. His kula partners are able to secure much needed cash and goods, especially the man from the Amphlets, where the traffic of commodities is scarce. Symbolic capital (Munn's accumulation of “symbols of influence or control” 1983: 277) is appropriated by the storeowner in exchange for goods. The creation of a symbolically-laden relationship with each circulation adds layers of personhood to the participants. The man from the Amphlets, too, will see his reputation increased when he gets back to Nabwageta. Shortly after he concluded his “kula talks” (kula livalela) with the storeowner, he told me the goods he will bring back will be seen as tangible evidence.
of his success. It is within these complex trajectories that each player creates new uses for old valuables and inscribes new goods within old contextual frames, depending on what is needed on each passage. Even though a bale of rice is not a famous mwali, bringing it back to a community where food is scant can also be perceived as an effective personal and communal achievement as it is appraised in terms of “distributed” consumption (see Chapter 4).

Furthermore, these arrangements are described by the actors as kula, not as anything else. The Nabwagetan youngsters that travel with the old man speak highly of his prowess in finding these new paths (kedə). In their eyes, he was indeed responsible for securing the goods they were looking for in Losuia. They talk of his skill and his intelligence (kabitam, knowledge) in ways that are reminiscent of the legends of great kula actors. The Nabwagetan’s success, I am told, lies also in the fact that he is a “powerful sorcerer that has magic.” With it he can steer other people’s minds. Unfortunately, I was unable to ask him if it was the magic of Monikini before he left for the Amphletts.

5.7 Playing the life game with the magic of new paths

Other than through objects and cash, the interconnection of people across the islands is also played out in the narratives invoked – both orally and materially – to validate the connecting bonds associated to new paths. These narratives are a double dialectic linking together past and present and persons and things. Magic, at the same time a pervasive ethereal concept and the corporeal incarnation of that concept, shapes the narratives of interpersonal exchange. The conflation of the personal characteristics of objects and the personal characteristics of magic acquires a transformative agency that signifies itself through circulation.

Just as Paul’s matriclan has Monikini, others too use their magic to steer the relationships that bring objects and fame into their sphere of influence and to open up new paths with potential fruitful outcomes. Magic is conducive to exchange through different ways that owe their disparity to magic’s ductile capacity of adaptation to the characteristics of the present-day Trobriand lifeworld. There are magic spells for every intention, as long as the intention is to bend things so as to make them come your way. In the Massim, it is expected that tentative acts of appropriation will be met with a degree of resistance. Magic holds the key to overpower this resistance. Using the Trobriand canoe
boards as an example, Alfred Gell deemed “magic” as “the ideal means of technical production” (1992: 59), acutely lumping together the productive technical procedures with the magic performances, much like the beautiful, the functional and the correct are also coterminous practices of knowing and acting. If we consider the ontological continuity between object and subject and production and circulation in Kiriwina (both equally creative acts), this Trobriand holism still holds. Indeed, while he works his way through the hollows of the wood with his small pocketknife, Budia is telling me in a hushed voice about kaimwasila,109 the powerful love magic of his matriclan that makes people irresistible to those anointed by it. Such is the power of the magic of attraction that obtaining it is never free, not even among cosanguines within the dala. Payments must be made in advance to have access to this type of philtre that guarantees success in securing lovers, wealth, kula valuables, jobs in town or votes in elections. The magic enhances the power to influence other people’s minds, that is, to appropriate them temporarily.110 In that sense, it actively complements and completes knowledge as a form of being in the world.

Whenever somebody approaches the veranda Budia changes the subject of the conversation:

“Well we are making these carvings for a dimdim that lives in Alotau.”
- Do you know him?
“No, but tomwaya [Valaosi] says he lives in Goilanai.”
- Does he work for the mine? [Goilanai is an area of Alotau where the offices of Woodlark Mining Limited (WML), subsidiary of Kula Gold, an Australian-based mining company, are situated. In 2010 WML was prospecting for gold near Kulumadau in Woodlark Island (Muyuw)].
“I don’t know that. All I know is he gave ebony off cuts to John [Kasaipwalova] so as to get tokwalu.

109 Kaimwasila is the equivalent of Malinowski’s kwewaga (1929: 369), another term for love magic or magic of attraction.
110 In a thought-provoking paper, Montague calls this “the game of life,” played by the bored spirits of the deceased that live in the underworld of Tuma and the aim of which is “to see how much control you can exercise over other minds” (1989: 25). I am unsure whether many Trobrianders would be able to elaborate such a sophisticated account of their apparently very Platonic existences (Montague goes on to affirm that the body envelopes the mind as “physical shell,” restricting the knowledge of the players), yet it is an observable trend that in a more material, everyday praxis the philosophy of life is somehow similar, with people trying to apply a domineering influence over the agency of others.
At this point Valaosi jumps in: “Yes, he gets the ebony from Woodlark.”

- How?

“He goes there by plane.”

Since Woodlark is serviced only once a week by a small plane chartered by WML for the exclusive use of their employees, we all agree this dimdim must be working in the mine operation.

Ebony (gai)\(^{111}\) is a key resource in the carving business. So much so that the success of the artefact trade in the 1960s and 70s has decimated the numbers of this slow-growing species in Kiriwina. More carvers and the spread of metal axes in the islands have made ebony almost disappear in the Trobes, with few trees left in southern Kiriwina, Vakuta, Tuma and Kaileuna Islands. Other types of hardwood (e.g. meku or kwila [Tok pisin] – intsia bijuga, or the kerosene tree – copaifera langsdorfi) have suffered the consequences of overpopulation. More trees are cut to make new houses, clear more gardens for cultivation and carve tokwalu. Still, everybody knows ebony carvings are more beautiful than other types of hardwood. Tokwalu made of gai also fetch higher prices when sold.

Unlike Kiriwina, Woodlark Island has plenty ebony but almost no carvers at all (although they used to, and successful ones at that, see Damon 1978: 15).\(^{112}\) Obtaining ebony for carvings has become a challenge for many Trobrianders, up to the point where a successful carver is also the one with the capacity to obtain ebony (something Kitavans used to get from Woodlark in kula exchanges, see Scoditti 1983: 263). One way or the other, Valaosi is never caught out of ebony wood to carve. He attributes it to his knowledge of paths/ways (Yegu anukwali ave keda, “I know which way”) and his capacity to influence people along these paths in order to achieve his goals (see Montague 1989: 24-28). Like kula valuables or carvings, ebony too circulates along established and new paths. In present-day Kiriwina, finding or creating new paths is a

\(^{111}\) Trobrianders distinguish between two types of ebony: the striped one (kagegai), which has whiter shades and the black one (gai). The word gai is also used in Dobu, meaning “to blacken, to become black.” (See Lithgow 1998).

\(^{112}\) Damon claims that Donald Neate, the expat that ran a lumber operation on the western side of Muyuw, used to buy AUD600.00 worth of carvings from locals every fortnight and sell them for about AUD1800.00 in Port Moresby (ibid.). With the Neates long gone there are no carvers of tokwalu left in Woodlark, a much more remote and difficult to access island than Kiriwina. In fact, with two commercial flights a week and a regular ferry service to Alotau, Trobrianders are less isolated than Muyuwans and therefore more exposed to tourism, either directly or indirectly through the stories that reach them from the “outer” world.
temporary achievement, but keeping these paths alive and fruitful is a sign of enduring success.

When Valaosi goes back to his own veranda Budia continues to talk about the secret aspects of his renowned magic of attraction. Beautification too is a condition for love. Magic needs recipients, and they can be both people and things.

“I could give you kaimwasila,” Budia says, “it’ll make you beautiful, but you too need to prepare yourself (katubayasi), adorn yourself to be alluring, attractive (katubayasi literally means “getting ready, your preparation” but also connotes the way you bring out your most beautiful inner self). “For instance,” Budia stresses, “you would need a kuwa necklace. How come you don’t have one?”

![Figure 5.5: Two examples of kuwa necklaces commonly worn in Kiriwina.](image)

Kuwa\textsuperscript{113} are necklaces made of the red spondylus shell (see Figure 5.5). They are like a short soulava, but unlike the latter, a kuwa is worn all the time and not only on special occasions. Weiner notes how these necklaces symbolize “youthfulness, attractiveness and beauty” and emphasizes their power of seduction: “To wear a red kuwa means that one is trying to attract someone” (1976: 129). Kuwa necklaces have subtle differences that mark

\textsuperscript{113} Campbell gives a specific definition of kuwa in Vakuta: a “red, white and black necklet made of spondylus/chama shells and banana seeds worn by everyone in the Trobriands” (2010: 1), while Seligman (1910: 717) described the special mourning necklet made of black banana fibres as kua (see also kuva in Senft 1986: 297). Kuwa/kua/kuva stands for necklace in general and includes both the red shell necklaces and the black mourning ones (Hutchins & Hutchins n.d. Lawton 2002).
either their origin or distinguish those who wear them. Like kula valuables, it is possible to determine approximately how ancient a *kuwa* is: bright red ones are newer than the pinker-whitish *kuwa*. Plain necklaces with no other ornaments than two dangling pendants (*bibli* or *bwibwi*) are usually favoured in Woodlark Island. People from Goodenough Island wear theirs tightly around their necks, unadorned. Trobrianders embellish their *kuwa* with miscellaneous trinkets. They cut red plastic circular disks from broken buckets and insert them in their necklaces, together with black plastic beads and fake white pearls. Some also use other discarded objects salvaged from western consumer goods that somehow have made it to Kiriwina. This ontological recycling is an expression of creativity blending experimental materialisations (Bell and Geismar 2009). In that way, a Trobriander’s *kuwa* is clearly distinct from the others through its additions. The *kuwa* is a symbol of distinction that can be personalised as much as it can personalise its owner. The value of the necklace is its beauty, which is not intrinsic to itself but is to be perceived in connection with the person that wears it, who in turn can be more or less attractive depending on whether they are anointed by magic or not. If *kuwa* contribute to the creation of the “social and political persona,” as Gardner affirms (1997), it is because of the relation between the person and the object. In a way, the owner of a *kuwa* inhabits her/his own necklace. Once again, the concept of beauty goes past mere aesthetic connotations. The person projects its *mwasila* (radiance, the brightness things and people emanate when they are infused with magic), an aggregate of combined knowledge(s) with agency. *Mwasila* is a polysemic expression. The radiance of the individual derives from her/his beauty, the beauty sprouts from the magic of love that enchants the viewer as much as it beautifies the person. Munn reports that in Gawa “a person of unusual beauty can be described as ‘shining like lightning’” (1986: 99), a metaphor that links beauty to other desired qualities in the kula context such as speed of movement, but also to the roar of the thunder – *butula* – that signifies the fame of one’s name. In the context of interpersonal transactions, this type of beauty is an attribute of people and objects without which complete personhood is somehow unattainable. Personal enchantment is carried in those beautiful things that have the power to captivate people. Like narratives or magic, the attributes of this personal radiance can be encapsulated in objects and transmitted with the endeavour of benefitting the self in his/her quest for success. In fact, as Munn has it, “fame is a further expansion of beauty beyond the physical person in the inter-
island world” 1983: 287-288). The result is that fame (and beauty) are traits associated to movement: they become efficacious (and hence they exist) only if and when they travel in conjunction with people and their acts (things and/or words).

Although *dimdims* buy *kuwa* necklaces for a set price (in 2009-10 the price ranged from K90 to K150, sometimes even more), few Trobrianders ever pay cash to acquire one. Cash lacks the symbolic capacity to embody personhood by itself, other than not being a conductor of “radiance.” Instead, they use their networks (or paths) as markers of their knowledge and their ability to secure valuables. Knowledge and ability (*kateta, kabitam*) are two English terms that do not quite capture the multifaceted reach of what a Trobriander intends by his/her ways: all-encompassing links toward a desired (and fundamentally unattainable) full personhood. This paradox has been noted above. The person is an assemblage of the relations established through circulation. But each movement also requires the fragmentation of the person, hence the impossibility of conceiving the self as a permanent, homeostatic whole. The polysemic expression of “knowing” is comprised of the command of magic, the capacity to summon help from ancestors or from God, a background in modern education (and hence a sound familiarity of the wider *dimdim* world and its workings, including the English language), material wealth and, of course, the capacity to create, mobilise and exploit relational networks. Magic, therefore, is but a fragment of this knowledge.

*Kuwa* necklaces, like *soulava* ones, are material incarnations of these polymorphic ways of “knowing” or of “being” in the Trobriand world. Talking casually of *kuwa* necklaces, Budia says that Rossel people (the inhabitants of Rossel Island, in the southeast corner of the kula ring) accept woodcarvings as payment for their necklaces:

“I know that path for the *kuwa*. One man from Kabwaku knows who accepts carvings as payment for *kuwa* necklaces in Rossel Island” (*Yegu a nukwali makadana keda pela* 114)

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114 The all-encompassing notion of beauty in the Trobriand lifeworld pervades all areas, from the person to the object, from the tangible to the ethereal. In the Trobriand Islands, what is beautiful and agreeable is also what is right and good. Or, as Malinowski put it when talking about the aesthetics of gardening: “Care is lavished upon effects of beauty, pleasing to the eye and the heart of the Trobriander” (1935: 56). Scoditti has elaborated further on Massim concepts of aesthetics (1990, 1996). Gell (1994), on the other hand, pithily examined how the convergence of the beautiful, the magic and the efficacious is intrinsic to the Trobriand ethos inasmuch as a compartmentalisation of those concepts is only an anthropological reductionism foreign to Trobrianders.
kuwa. Teta tolela Kabwaku inukwali avela igimwala tokwalu olopola Rossel), says Budia.
- What for?
“We don’t know,” Budia continues. “Maybe they just like the carvings and want to keep them.”
“They use them as presents,” one of Valaosi’s daughters says.

Trobrianders who have no ebony for their carvings get it from other islands, including Rossel, where there is plenty. In 2010, in order to get a kuwa, it was possible to give a Rossel Islander a carving, perhaps one made out of ebony wood that may originally have come from Rossel Island itself. Symbolic transformations of objects along kula paths are familiar to scholars working in the area (Munn 1986), but in this case the metamorphosis is quite literal: from raw wood to carving, from carving to kuwa necklace.

- Is it possible for somebody to turn these kuwa necklaces into soulava ones, I ask Budia.
“Adoki (maybe). If you can, if you know a path, or can make one,” is Budia’s reply.

This plausible movement would mirror and reverse that of the Nabwagetan who brought the soulava to Losuia so it could be turned into a kuwa necklace for cash and store goods. It would also signal the transformation of the paths themselves, from established kula ones to new routes used for new transactions in search of practical recognition. The literature emphasises how the material reshaping of the objects has a metaphorical equivalent in the symbolic plane (most notably Munn 1977, 1986). Yet in present-day Kiriwina, the Trobrianders’ emphasis is not upon the customary orthodoxy of the established symbolic metamorphosis, but highlights instead the potential for residual creation. This potential, as has been noted, lies within the object together with the relations in which it is wrapped. The relations embedded in things are re-worked upon with every step. Each movement indexes the temporal appropriation of an existing path or the creation of a new one. Furthermore, with each movement the person signifies this appropriation with a necessary fragmentation of the self that nevertheless needs to stay substantial enough to maintain some degree of control over the relation, be it with the

115 See Liep 2009 for an analysis of forms of exchange in Rossel Island.
intermediation of mythical ancestors or through the power of magic (itself also a relational intervention through the intercession of “appropriated others”).

Budia’s narrative is also that of the communal carving or the communal shell, the mutating object that oscillates between its many authors and their attempts to apprehend it so as to assemble new relations as they disperse their own fractal person with the ensuing circulations. The circle, though, is only apparent, like the kula’s never-ending approximate circularity as a metaphor for the quest of fullness. The metaphor, too, is incomplete, and understandably so. In demanding from this quest a coherent form of self-perpetuation, we obviate the inherent nature of Trobriand knowledge: it is because the apprehension of the world can only be partial that the procedures are ever-changing. There is no prescribed formula to understand and appropriate the world fully, other than the necessity to improvise new formulas. The rapidly changing, fragmentary essence of the Trobriand and the *dimdim* lifeworlds coming together results in what we see, from a western perspective, as a shortcoming. Our Eurocentric translations need stable schemes. Massim enactments instead require flexible practices. If the Trobriand world is generated by an expansion of the past into the present and its approximately calculated future variations, then the visual image more closely resembles an almost circular spiral that does not quite repeat its past lines. A tentative outline of these circulations needs to take into consideration their extremely protean characteristics. Budia’s narrative is one among many. Beyond what it makes explicit, it also points to those possible transactions that lie yet unrealised and to the direction they may take.

One of these potentialities evokes the mythical ancestors and their current metamorphosis into religious role models. If the perception of things and ways of doing things in the Massim has changed, so have the narratives that accompany them. Given the association of object-subject is such a close one, it ensues that notions of personhood, too, are being modified. In this sense, Christianity has set a new template for identity construction through exchange. As it will become clearer in the next section, this new template is fashioned upon the re-working of old narratives and their inclusion in contemporary conceptual structures.

### 5.8 New paths of magic: gender and the fame of God

The metamorphosis of the necklaces and the carvings takes place in conjunction with the alteration of the paths/ways along which they move. Magic is recognised as a further
support to successfully incorporate new relations into one’s domain of influence, so as to accrue the possibility of increasing wealth and symbolic capital with each transaction. The assimilation of magic in the current traffic partakes of this adaption of old narratives into new forms of conceiving identity in the Massim. A new type of magic, though, has now become central to carving out the self in the Trobriands. Admittedly, personhood is nowadays redefined in ways that transcend former gendered divisions. The association of internal exchange with the female domain in opposition to the all-male domain of external exchange has become blurred enough to be beyond systematising efforts. If Monikiniki – the mythical symbol of the creation of exchange routes – has been co-opted in the new transactions that define the self in innovative ways, his alleged androgyny today turns to be more fitting than ever. Back in the 1980s Annette Weiner and others claimed that the kula was an exclusively male, individual regeneration of the self and his fame, distinct from other types of exchange because in kula it is only men’s wealth that is at stake (Weiner 1983: 147-170; Campbell 2002: 188-189). Consistent with that view, men operated on a separate level that involved their personhood only, leaving other instances of identity-building processes untouched and untouchable. Kula was said to be the only sphere where men could act completely free of the obligations that linked them to women and to the matrilineage (ibid.).

Not quite. When Tolobua told me how he and his wife do kula together, I asked him if he meant they were kula partners:

“No,” he said, “we work as one person, me and my wife, it’s the same (kamateyu makala tetala). These are our kula shells, we exchange them, or else we give them away or sell them according to the family needs.”

This arrangement is not uncommon and I have heard of similar ones in other islands, although I have not seen it myself. Other people in the village confirmed to me that the couple are indeed very successful at kula and that their strength derives from the fact that the whole family supports it, both from the wife’s matrilineage and from the husband’s

116 That the kula is a men-only endeavour is a common belief well extended in the literature (see for instance Gell 1992: 185) and, according to most people in the Massim, wrongly so.

117 In a similar frame of inter-island trade in the southern Massim, Battaglia describes the workings of cross-sex couples operating as a unit in inter-clan exchanges of wealth in the context of mortuary feasts in Sabarl Island, yet she draws a divide between the type of objects men and women exchange (1991: 86). I found no such divide in the Trobriand Islands. Women and men play kula with no ontological distinctions as per the objects of exchange.
Such exchanges – across matrilineages – were usually reserved to marriage exchanges or to funerary rites, but today they are becoming more common. In Yalumgwa for instance, the Catholic Church encourages an annual exchange of presents among all the members of the community. On these occasions, a partner is chosen randomly and the couples formed in this way have to present gifts to each other. “This is good for the community,” my father Camillus explained to me; “it makes us work hard and not forget our obligations, it would be a shame not to be able to give something good to our neighbours here in Yalumgwa.”

The degree to which these paths can be considered new rather than a re-working of old ones is hard to establish. The first time I visited him, Willie, a man from Wasenta hamlet near Losuia, was getting ready to go see a kula partner in Dobu aboard the Starships ferry bound to Alotau. Once in Dobu he was going to try to clinch a necklace from his partner. “But that is not important” he said. “What I need to bring back is plenty coconuts and betel nuts for my wife.” His wife needed doba (women’s wealth manufactured with banana leaves, see previous chapter) for a forthcoming mortuary ceremony (lisaladabu) in which she had to show her strength and that of her matrilineage. Due to dwindling resources (only one type of large banana called wakaya can be used in the making of the bundles), doba is increasingly hard to produce in the Trobriands. With the coconuts and the betel nut from her husband’s kula partner, Mary will be able to valova doba (exchange the nuts for bundles of doba, see previous chapter). Since they belong to different dala, husband and wife are supposed to work in opposite directions and in some cases even compete among themselves so as to strengthen the status of their lineages. Yet this view is now at odds with many cases where a clear-cut male-female differential is questionable. And even though the affiliation to a matrilineage still reverberates through many of the social practices in the Massim, contemporary concepts of “family” and “community” brought in by Christianity are making things more complex. Competition is now enacted around new aggregates of relationships that obviate matrilineages and feminine and masculine separate domains. Willie’s kula looks nothing

118 Weiner (1978: 179-180) concedes one exception to this when she relates how men provide “their wives with women’s wealth by taking their own wealth objects (e.g. pigs, fish, yams, taro, betel nuts, locally manufactured and trade store items),” although she sees it as a reciprocation for the yams the husband gets from his wife’s brothers. Despite this not being the case anymore in Kiriwina during 2010, men still contribute to their wives’ valova, moved by a perception of “the family” as a new social aggregate of which all members of the family are responsible. Cf. Hermkens 2005 for different instances of identity construction across gendered domains through the exchange of women-made barkcloths in Collingwood Bay, PNG.
like the ceremonial exchange of the past, yet if this implies a change it is hardly perceived as a rupture as much as it entails a continuous adaptation. To a degree, the exchange hero Monikiniki has been symbolically re-elaborated into a metaphorical matrix for the transmission and adoption of new patterns of exemplary personhood based on Christian ideals.

One day I got word that Paul had finished the lagim that opened this chapter. I was told it was extraordinary. When I went to visit Paul in Oluweta I realised it truly was. Paul had fitted his canoe prowboard with a crucifix and hung the lagim on the wall of his house (Figure 5.6. See also Appendix C).

![Figure 5.6: Paul’s lagim and tabuya with the crucifix given to him by his late father inserted in the lagim.](image)

- Why is there a cross in the lagim, Paul?
“"I put a cross because the word of Jesus (Guyau la biga) travelled all over the world, that’s why it is right to put him in a canoe, so he can travel around," Paul convincingly
argued. The villagers that were present agreed. They all thought Paul’s *lagim* was beautiful and that his reasoning was right. One of them, Mwedola, added his own comment on Paul’s material interpretation:

“You see,” he started, “in the *lagim* there used to be these figures, the *bwalai*. The ‘canoe-chief’ (*toliwaga*) is meant to put magic on them, so they will look after the people in the canoe. But if the *toliwaga* does not do his job, the *bwalai* can turn evil (*kala gaga*, the bad thing) and they can end up harming the crew instead.”

- Yes. It is clear that the *bwalai* are good or evil depending on the peoples’ actions and omissions. A good *toliwaga* will never allow his crew to be harmed.

“Right. But this was before, Tonogwa,” Mwedola declared. “Things have changed now (*bo e senisi*, already it has changed). Nowadays,” Mwedola continued, visibly moved, “there is only one person that can look after you: God!”

The word of God travels in the Massim on familiar tracks. The analogy with the *bwalai* is obvious. Like the anthropomorphic spirits of the *lagim*, God’s agency stands on a morally specific episteme (in Foucault’s sense, see 1994). If you are a good Christian, God will look after you. The analogy, though, does not stop at the *bwalai*; it travels further. The latent inventiveness derived from a model of exchange based on the kula is readily available in the “exchange of sermons” (**katupela guguya**). The expression is formed of **katupela**, meaning to come back (Hutchins & Hutchins n.d.), to go forward or to change from one house to another, but also to continue telling a story by telling another one (Lawton 2002). **Guguya** is an expression borrowed from Dobu meaning to exhort peace. It can also be glossed as educating by giving a sermon or a public speech as it is usually done by chiefs (ibid.). **Katupela guguya** is a Christian kula ingeniously set in motion by the United Church in the late 1970s and now reproduced in its most essential features and under other names by other Protestant confessions in the area such as the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Rhema Bible Church or the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. To grasp the success of **katupela guguya** we need to understand first the context in which it has flourished. As we have seen previously, the ever-increasing presence and influence of Christian missionaries in the MBP has filled a void left by under-resourced local level governments and, in the case of Kiriwina, traditional chiefs. Different church denominations manage to co-ordinate communal work in the
village and the ward, organise religious activities (often superimposed to traditional festivities) and in many cases even regulate ceremonies such as marriages and funerals, morally educating all members of the community and sanctioning which practices are appropriate and which are not. The commonly-held view of the role of Christianity, as it is perceived by Trobrianders from across the several confessions that are present in the islands, is that of a spiritual guide. Around each parish or church there is a community that finds its cohesive strength through inclusive participation in religious activities. While the harvest celebrations are nowhere as important as a visit from the Bishop or Easter Sunday, it is not surprising that active Christians in the Massim pay more attention to Christian rituals and how to be a “good family” and part of a “good community” who can work together to overcome problems. The Christian community is constituted as a supportive network, both materially and spiritually. It affords a prototype of positive influence by offering the possibility of a new behavioural model based in another, non-excluding type of knowledge that, unlike traditional magic and technical expertise (epitomised in Trobriand thought by terms like kabitam, kateta, see previous chapter) is not secretive but is accessible to everybody as a group. Furthermore, the Christian encompassment of personhood within a wider unity issued with relational potential (the family or the youth fellowship, for instance) cuts across former polarities such as the male-female one, establishing real actors that are able to redefine the social body in Kiriwina.

The Christian community also affords an immediate potential for mobility: if in the past only some privileged people could travel to other islands, nowadays everybody is encouraged to participate in inter-island trade (Demian 2007). The basic idea of the “exchange of sermons” is that a village or a community pays a visit to another one (either in Kiriwina or in another island) in order to “give” them some passages from the Bible by reading them aloud. Katupela guguya is a performance where excerpts from the scriptures are chosen beforehand and enacted as communal storytelling. The hosting community will receive, host and feed its partners observing the classic rules of kula hospitality and then reciprocate the visit at a later stage to deliver some other passages of the scriptures. The parallels with the kula are not fortuitous. Ritual protocols and performing correlations aside, kula and katupela guguya also share a very valuable item that fluctuates between the immaterial narrative (i.e. magic spells) and the material object (i.e. the Bible): words. Speech is central to securing valuables in kula just as much as the
written word of God sanctions the right path to becoming a good Christian. If words can turn into valuables and give you renown, their biblical incarnation also has the power of accruing your reputation and building up your fame. As has previously been suggested, the creation of the Trobriand lifeworld (including its present redefinitions) is also the object of collective assemblages. In this particular case, redefining Trobriand social life is done through the innovative interpretation of Biblical narratives in ritualised religious exchanges. Exchanging sermons and interpreting them communally also affords – like the kula – the possibility of reformulating narratives as chained stories that link past metaphors to new ones. What is strengthened in the process is not the position of the individual participant but that of the community (see Robbins 1998: 310). In fact, when the *bwalai* in the *lagim* are substituted with a crucifix, it is not through Paul’s inference as the unilateral choice of a bound individual. His innovation is in fact an objectified relation (that of Christianity with the Catholic community of Yalumgwa), the product of which gets fed back into an already-modified framework to be (re)validated.

Ultimately, the exchange of sermons fulfils the function of establishing a model of ideal Christian personhood using the performance of a shared spirituality that becomes tangible through the ways it displays new understandings of fame, not least so because it is based upon the familiar pattern of another well-known ceremonial exchange. This collective identity is rooted in a sense of pride deriving from the capacity to appropriate the positive qualities or quasiligns that a person, a family, a hamlet or a whole village is said to have. In the past, this pride might have derived from the supremacy in kula some people enjoyed. In many cases, successful kula men could irradiate part of their fame to the rest of the *dala* or even the village (just like they could project it into an object). Yalumgwans often say that when Narubutau, the last big chief of Yalumgwa, was alive, nobody could compete with him/”us” (Yalumgwans) in kula. Being a subject of Narubutau, doing kula with him or just sharing the same physical and symbolic space than him was akin to “being Narubutau” as far as appropriating success goes. “Thanks to Narubutau’s leadership we Yalumgwans were above the Tabalu (the highest-ranked matriclan in the Trobriands) when it came to kula,” several men from Yalumgwa told me. A similar sense of pride might have been felt by the people of the Amphlett Islands when the old man from Nabwageta returned with the goods from the trade store in Losuia, sharing his success within the community to increase his fame. Whether the “community” is a new ontological categorisation of relations centred around a newly-found social space (the
church) and its modern socio-cultural emanations, or whether it is the present-day adaptation of a pre-existing unity of relations anchored in the hamlet (where cosanguines from the same matrilineage used to live and garden together), the community’s symbolic value (a marker of success or failure) is always a shared perception, subject to continuous re-assemblages. The interactions of a community with other communities and with the members within it sanction its status as a unit endowed with social potential to establish and control new relations.

In the kula of the gospels people travel long distances to see their partners (be they single individuals, families or “partner villages”) and pray with them. They exchange not only the word of God, but also food, betel nut, calico, pigs, and shells. This new narrative works like the magic emblems found in some carvings such as the *lagim*. There is a mimetic appropriation of qualities recognised as being equivalent, enacted by way of a transfer of analogies. To be a good kula player is also to be a good Christian. In contemporary discourses both are said to give the measure of a generous, knowledgeable and accomplished person that knows where to stand. The superimposition of these two kulas is by no means perceived as an incongruence. To the contrary, it spells out mobility and inclusive participation in exchange and hospitality, all of which are tenets of the Massim ethos as it is manifested in Melanesian beliefs and aspirations. It also brings together religious knowledge and the know-how of “personhood composition.” A successful Trobriander needs to know how to relate to and appropriate the surrounding environment, now peopled by many different Christian denominations and those ascribed to them. Doing *katupela guguya* is always a good occasion to obtain resources and construct new partnerships, establish new links with other communities (sometimes through marriages), and prove your worth and knowledge while setting up alternative relational networks and affirming the position of the self within these networks. Appropriating the word of God and spreading it through the exchange of narratives gives fame to actors in the Massim.

5.9 Materialising circulations

When I stayed in Woodlark in early 2010, knowing that I was coming from Kiriwina, the people there told me about this Trobriander who had come to the island on the mining plane from Alotau to clinch a very famous *mwali*. Against all the canonical rules that prescribe that you cannot cut through established paths and bypass kula partners by
jumping ahead of them, this man had achieved his goal of securing a prized armshell and returning to Kiriwina with it via Alotau. The plane trip, though, was not seen as an unsuited move by any of the Woodlark Islanders I spoke to. To the contrary, this man was much praised for his audacity and his capacity to hitch a ride in the *dimdim*’s plane so he could get the *mwali* before anybody else. I even heard that somebody in Woodlark named his newborn son after this intrepid kula player. This man was Tolobua, the chief of Olivilevi, the carver of kula canoes, the same one that had, in his recounting of “the true kula” (*besa kula mokwita*), disparaged other people for not doing kula in the right way. Tolobua never saw his plane trip as inappropriate. His performance summoned all his knowledge (*kabitam*) to create this innovative new kula path. Like a present-day Monikiniki, Tolobua enacted his own myth; any potential conflicts between traditional rules and current improvisations were resolved in it and in future projections of this recounting. The naming of a Woodlark child after him endorses Tolobua’s act (it perpetuates his fame by grounding it in an ongoing relation beyond the recounting of the myth), whereas his narrative effects valid modes of local analysis of changing socialscapes by merging old and new knowledge in a tale of success. “I used the *dimdim*’s canoe (the plane) to fly and get my *mwali*,” Tolobua said to me. “But if it worked it was all thanks to his magic,” one of his sons added. Similar to Steven Feld’s characterization of landscape as a personal marking of spatio-temporal trajectories in the living (or “biography as itinerary,” 1996: 113), the inscription of Tolobua’s movement through the landscape into a contemporary account offers new possibilities of rephrasing and re-enacting future stories upon old myths (or mythographies as itineraries). A Trobriand understanding of freedom involves the capacity to re-write existing narratives, recombine personal interactions with objects and draw new exchange paths without pulling away from social obligations. *Taina* is not different from tradition, neither is it detrimental to it. Rather, it is an adaptation to the new shapes tradition takes when projected onto a changing, globalised setting.

Apart from the methodological difficulties of drawing topological accounts of irregular exchange vectors in today’s Massim, there is also a more empiric problem facing Trobriand actors. They, too, need to improvise as they go. How, then, does one harness a potential positive outcome in a seemingly-uncontrollable series of circulations that involve losing control temporarily of a part of yourself while trying to control others at the same time? Mapping the flow of shells, persons and fame has been one of
anthropology’s central concerns, elevating the kula to the paradigmatic myth of circulation despite many other instances of exchange transactions taking place in the area. Mythical, perhaps, but not so paradigmatic. An analysis of current enactments of intra and inter-island exchanges shows that the flow of anthropology’s systematising efforts does not always run parallel to the changing motions and the divergent trajectories the kula can take. The circulation of carvings following an approximate kula-like pattern (with expected deferred reciprocations or payments) is just one example. The expectations ensuing from circulation are not institutionalised in fixed rules, nor do they always follow orthodox paths. Yet circulation carries with it the potential to open up new avenues. Malinowski – as usual – was the first one to draw attention to other types of exchange that do not fall, strictly speaking, into the kula category. Anthropologists working in the Massim have focused mostly on so-called “ritual traffic” (kula and mortuary exchanges), leaving aside other features that involve more unsystematic – although no less conspicuous for that reason – circulations of people and goods. The more or less contingent visit of two *dimdim* anthropologists to Tuma Island, and the ensuing exchanges that occurred, provides a good example. The stationery and school material a colleague (anthropologist Michelle McCarthy) and I brought there triggered a series of exchanges that included betel nut, tobacco, ebony for carving, fishing lines and hooks, but also some of the knickknacks that had arrived a month before to Yalumgwa as “presents” for the followers of one of the Evangelical churches there (see Chapter 1). One item in particular, a pair of sunglasses, had changed hands at least six times under my eyes in just two weeks, moving from Alotau to Losuia, then to Yalumgwa, back to Losuia again and finally (or momentarily) to the remote island of Tuma.

Neither is the kula rooted in a paradigmatic all-male sphere. In the past, anthropologists upheld the kula as one of the social markers of the gendered domains of the Trobriand cosmology notwithstanding evidence against it. When asked, Trobrianders mock this institutionalised fiction, suggesting either a manipulation of the anthropological object-book that according to them depicted kula so wrongly or, alternatively, a rewording of the past. In 2010 several kula players maintained that “women have always done kula, and they are better than men at it!” Tolobua laughed at me when I pointed at the allegedly all-male sphere of kula as an exclusive field of male individuality: “If you are smart enough you play kula together with your wife, if you can, as a team.” Tolobua scorned previous ethnographic exegesis: “You need to re-write these anthropology books,” he concluded.
“The kula” is more of a convenient abstraction than an affirmed factuality (both in anthropology books and even in some contemporary local narratives). Convenient, in the sense that ideas of the kula (like its gendered division) match the somehow romanticized image of the kula that features in popular western accounts (including films and documentaries) and its perpetuation in the collective imagination. As enquiring anthropologists, we seem all too eager to get “proof” in the field about the kula as we have studied it, and locals sometimes seem too eager to corroborate distant narratives so as to confirm their ever-valid currency. These two aspirations coincide in the fabrication of new, joint narratives with a double-parallel endorsement: the tale of the anthropologist and the local lending support to (and fabricating) each other and the temporalities of the past and the present affirming continuity and validity of the ongoing lifeworld. But the reality of the kula in the 21st century is no more that of a perfectly choreographed movement of well-planned and well-timed inter-island trips elevated to the almost naturally-occurring execution of a given set of rules carried out in a “closed circuit” (Malinowski 1922: 81). Instead, the contemporary transit of people and goods in the Milne Bay Province reveals an understanding of kula that stresses the potential that lies in circulation and how people tap into it.

When we (anthropologists and Trobrianders) talk about it, the kula is an open-ended idiom with several possible meanings. It is a constant re-creation of itself, enacted and validated through a continual, innovative and inclusive movement of people and objects. Hardly the ritualised, closed circuit of exchange of valuables (veiguwa) described by Malinowski and others, its systematic exposition in native and western narratives as a model (the rules of the game) and the automatic application of said model (the way the game proper is played) seldom coincide. The kula that anthropologists have been playing with is a well-defined series of prescribed norms and behaviours – the kula “as it must be,” almost as if any deviation from the given model was nothing more than a local peculiarity either subsumed within the system (Weiner 1988: 140) or cast away from it, never questioning the integrity of the structural organisation of the kula model in itself. Not quite the exclusive prerogative of anthropologists, this, too, is mirrored by many Trobrianders whose accounts talk of “pure” kula but who act otherwise. The paradox is only apparent and dispelled in the empiric reality of exchanges that are not kula but yield kula-like results: the circulation and creation of valuables and relationships, the accumulation or the loss of material wealth or immaterial fame, the assemblage or the
dismantling of personhood, and lately, also the strengthening or the dispersion of Christian spirituality.

In the Trobriand Islands, Strathern’s (1988) suggested pattern for Melanesian social relations as being fashioned upon pre-existing ones is only partially true. It may be so at the outset, but as the concept of taina shows, in pre-existing social relations there exists an unused potential for improvisation that diverges from the predetermined. When uncovered, this residual potential can be exploited to re-work new paths away from the structured predestination of pre-existing ones. Unlike the kula relations that were either known in advance, acquired, inherited or constructed on already-existing frameworks, new links are now being devised that drift away from these networks. The whole point is that Trobrianders will not see this as a paradox, nor will they negate the validity of the old relations as a model for future ones in the process (as partially posited by Weiner 1982). Whether this attitude is the eroding product of sustained intercultural contact or a more inherent Trobriand predisposition to creative innovation is a contention that belongs to academic speculation. In practice, devising these new connections requires a redefinition of the strategies and the practices deployed to secure relations. Wealth, magic and Christian religion are all valid tokens to enact these improvisations. At the same time, establishing these networks also serves to cement what are no longer improvisations – or, at least, what should not look like improvisations. Rather, if these innovative practices need to be systematised, they should be defined in terms of “negative potential” or the potential of the opposite. Momentarily left undefined, unaccomplished narratives may redefine and later on validate the paths on which social life in the Massim depends. And since narratives and paths are closely interlinked and inform each other in the Trobriand temporality, the flow will also work in the opposite direction.
In this thesis I have assembled a multifaceted view of present-day Kiriwina through the lens of carvings and the materialisations they effect. These materialisations are simultaneously analytic and creative performances. They are witness to the locals’ reception and interpretation of the socio-cultural flows that cross their world while also constituting that world. Things in the Massim are combinations of material and immaterial symbols functioning as agents of perception and tools of apprehension. They help one to understand one’s lifeworld and act in it. Throughout the thesis, I have turned to the metaphor of the nautilus shell and its pattern of exponential growth to show how the future is a projection of the past and how the new is encompassed within existing structures, absorbing change within familiar constructs. Recent materialisations are modelled on previous ones. Yet because the past recurs constantly in the everyday as unfinished actions, materialisations are malleable. They remain open-ended even when they reproduce known patterns. Contemporary tokwalu are concrete examples of what Roy Wagner calls “metaphorization” (1981), viz. the creative appropriation of unknown symbols that are eventually subsumed within that frame of known ones we anthropologists identify as “Trobriand culture.” Unconventional woodcarvings are artefacts of translation and mediation. Artefacts that enact innovative improvisations and envision an increasingly-networked lifeworld commensurate with the Trobriand ideal of it. Carvings portray local representations of the relations between Trobrianders and a modern other as meaningful symbols where the new eventually becomes familiar. Instruments of translation and mediation, tokwalu are also generative items. Once absorbed within Trobriand frames, symbols become conventional materialisations ready
to act as templates for new ones, promoting a replication of encompassed variations, evoking once more the spiral image of the nautilus shell.

In Chapter 2 the episodes around the European-made axe and anthropology books proved that the “creative ambiguity” of “metaphorization,” as Wagner terms the acts by which we understand and appropriate unfamiliar experiences, is not a one-way highway (1981: 21, 26). Neither is it a purely conceptual operation, since it can also take a material twist. My questioning of Trobriand acts of appropriation and the locals’ responses – some of which were mediated by books – marked my “initiation” as a fieldworker, inasmuch as they revealed two fundamental aspects of doing work in this field. Firstly, they showed me that Trobrianders, like anthropologists, invent “culture” (dimdim and Trobriand culture alike) by seizing foreign tropes. And secondly, I recognised how the analogies Trobrianders put in place to make sense of “cultures” can take the shape of “material bridges.” A Euro-Trobriand axe, neither commodity nor symbol yet both things at the same time, can be a metaphor explaining/constructing Trobriandness from a Euroamerican perspective. It can also be a corporeal trope through which Trobrianders appropriate western material culture and make it intrinsically theirs by means of a “signature” (understood as a western concept – the appropriating signature as personal endorsement – resolved within a Trobriand action – the carving of a Trobriand symbol as interpersonal validation). To be more accurate, the designs in the handle of Camillus’ axe functioned as inscription (or momentary appropriation, like the signed kula shells in Chapter 5), an instance of Melanesian projection of personhood beyond the human body.

The acts of obviation involving the Swedish-made axe tried to resolve any possible incongruities by materialising relations and things into a network that purported to project itself beyond any characterisation of Melanesian exclusivity. What the chapter evidences is how this Trobriand inventiveness can be regarded as an act of mediation geared towards cultural commensurability via the expansion of networks. Persons and things can recombine in many ways and it is precisely this potential for recombination that invests the constituents of the Trobriand lifeworld with a common substance that facilitates comprehension. Yet if unboundedness allows change to be encompassed within tradition, this encompassment is not always synonymous with symmetry. Even less so when cross-cultural analyses are deployed exclusively from western perspectives. The necessity of encompassment itself results from the sustained intrusion of modern industrial values in
Melanesia. In fact, “Euro-American culture,” as Marilyn Strathern argues, “seems to have the longer arm, to reach everywhere, so ‘we’ can simultaneously recognise ourselves both in what we appropriate from others and in what they appropriate from us” (1999: 122-123). Indeed, the experience with the anthropology book Yobwita showed me is a literal illustration of Strathern’s affirmation: the book as a trace of the anthropologist’s analytical appropriation of Massim culture and my witnessing of the islanders’ (re)appropriation of the book and its content. Yet this act of apprehension, albeit indicative of the omnipresence of western anthropologists in the Trobriands, also reveals to what extent an obviously-western (and seemingly immutable) thing like a book can also become a very Trobriand tool. It is made of Trobriand people and their stuff and even though it may be flawed and contain mistakes nothing prevents the locals from amending it. To “make it better,” like Camillus said of the axe. Sharper, attuned to his body performance and capable of “producing” things and personal associations with its circulation. Yobwita’s book, too, was an object made of modifiable relations. Not a passive container of unchanging ones but a generative tool instead with the faculty to re-create new associations through communal engagements with it.

This adding and taking from objects confirms the fluidity of things in the Massim, their capacity not only to be modified and modify but also their potential to connect local and global, the imagined and the real. Wagner’s “reverse anthropology” is not only an interpretive device with which natives make sense of the modern changes they experience. It is also a way for locals to forge the relations that effect these changes.

Whereas Chapter 2 looked at the inbound end of this mediation through the adaption of exogenous items – the fitting of dimdim things into the Trobriand universe – Chapter 3 advanced a local view of the outbound side of the connection, namely the adaption of Trobriand stuff for the other. Tokwalu encapsulate how Trobrianders envisage this fitting of the Trobriand universe into dimdim things. In asking what is a woodcarving and what does a woodcarving do, the chapter raised questions on representation and performance where the former condition the latter. The issue is not to be reduced to the identification and interpretation of symbols in carvings (mauna), as Forge pointed out when discussing Abelam flat painting:

The representational/abstract dichotomy is meaningless, to identify a ‘representation’ is not to find out what the painting ‘means,’ it is merely one element in a complex web of
meaning which is to be found in the relationships of the parts that compose them (1973: 187)

Forge, who was concerned with the expressive aspects of Sepik art, drew attention to the relational components of artefacts forming systems of communication. But the task of Trobriand woodcarvings is to expand relational webs. I argue that the problem is not one of conveying messages only. Tokwalu are not just units of meaning within a bigger network of signification. They are also units of action. They bring together chains of causality linking different elements. And they visualise expectations and desires from carvers and buyers. Outsiders seek to consume “some thing” essentially “Trobriand” while locals see in the fulfilment of the buyers’ aspirations a way to engage with the globalised, modern world of the dimdims. These representations shape woodcarvings as communally-enacted materialisations of networking tools. Tokwalu expose an impetus of appropriation of things-foreign while stating the distinctive Trobriand identity of these things once they are appropriated. What I understand as the creative appropriation of the thing is the coming together of people and artefacts in the meaningful terms effected by the transformative agency of a necessity: the need to establish an area of equivalence that is – at least potentially – equally satisfactory for all the actors involved. Despite being sometimes contrasting, these renderings need to be resolved for the tokwalu to “work.” In fact, carving for the other is, in a way, carving the other, the mimetic seizing of an image of alterity and the possibilities this relation can yield. Dragons, mermaids and seahorses embody the trope of desire, the realisation of a culture of correspondence where the locals’ wants can be achieved by meeting the outsiders’ taste. After all, Trobriand woodcarvings have been ongoing channels of mediation between Kiriwina and the west for more than a hundred years, constantly reflecting the changes in the relations between Massim people and the people coming to the Massim.

Lime spatulas, wooden swords and images of flying witches are more than aggregates of material and immaterial opinions expressed by dialogic exchanges that become mutually legitimising. In the decidedly relational world of Melanesia, where objects act upon people that act upon objects, woodcarving is a demiurgic process expressing a worldview. The particularity of this perspective is to be located in the intentions of Trobriand carvers aspiring to extend these paths beyond the immediate transaction. A successful carving is not one that gets sold but one that grants more sales, one that reaches out beyond the one-off sale. In the Trobriand Islands, where visitors are seldom
and buyers even more scarce, Trobrianders try to anticipate the *dimdim* sense of taste so as to establish new paths of exchange. Their carvings are the chiasmic agents of this intention. *Tokwalu* are the objects that shape the paths and, simultaneously, they become the paths that shape the objects. By considering the transformative potential of woodcarvings made for tourists, Trobriand material production is tied to social reproduction through domestic efforts of adaptation of exogenous tropes. Yet the flux also allows a reverse circulation. If adopting things from outside is a way of making things Trobriand, adapting Trobriand things to the outside is also a way of generating new metaphors with valid universal meanings. When Trobrianders carve artefacts for tourists they are making things for them but also making “their” *dimdim*s.

Chapter 4 evaluated the ways in which carving is deployed today to achieve fame and influence and how, in doing so, carvers convey an ideal of modern identity where the new is better than the old. Consumers of modernity, Trobrianders are also the makers of it, of one type of modernity, theirs, made not of homogenising sameness but of common differentiations. Trobrianders’ understanding of *dimdim*s is a collective process resolved in different ways. As craftsmen put into practice their choices of new expressive idioms, their *tokwalu* become open to a measure of recognition or indifference that sanctions their social position. No longer characterised by traditional markers of prestige (and by those who institute and control these markers), carvers try new ways of assembling a dominant status. Appropriating and displaying *dimdim* ways of knowing means simultaneous participation in various regimes of value, all of which are potential sources of empowering capacities. In their efforts to “learn” these capacities and add them to their repertoire, carvers sometimes identify them with Trobriand elements at the origin so as to make them fit within familiar frames. The new, thus, is also the old (or part of it). And if making *tokwalu* is also creating consumers for carvings, these consumers can also be considered creators. The phenomenon is by no means an exclusively Melanesian one. In his study on consumption in western capitalist societies, Robert Foster underlines the concept of “customer-made” products resulting from the co-creative effort of producers and consumers (2011: 42). This idea of consumption and production as equally inventive and sometimes indistinguishable processes of value creation seems to be intrinsic to contemporary *tokwalu*. *Tokwalu* are epitomes of this co-creation aiming at producing the desired outcomes for carvers and buyers, encompassing different principles and
contrasting views along the way. The chapter asked what are those values for Trobrianders and how they combine to endow a community and its constituents with its socio-cultural semblance. Trobrianders have collectively singled out what they see as positive components of the modern world. Christianity, education and the power to accumulate old and new forms of wealth and decide what to do with it are some of these elements. Combined with local traditions, they have become instrumental in providing a sense of fulfilment to present-day Trobrianders. To attain a sense of personal and communal achievement, people in the Massim strive to reflect and match the *dimdins’* capacity to act at an increasingly larger scale, beyond their own immediate lifeworld. English language, writing, Christian morality and cash are identified by Trobrianders as some of the tools that allow westerners to expand their social influence. Trobrianders are creative consumers of these tools. Money, rice and religion are status endorsers instrumental in defining contemporary Trobriand personhood. Appropriating and using *dimdim* goods is proof of one’s worth across diverse socio-cultural territories. In fact, much like old forms of it, modern identity too relies on fame, the positively-endowed projection of one’s name beyond the immediate here and now of Kiriwina. Woodcarvings are agents of this projection. They generate materialisations with favourable outcomes for carvers and their communities. When setting up connections between traditional and modern knowledge, people in the Massim invest in alternative ways of knowing. *Tokwalu* support the construction of a more knowledgeable self with an increased range of action with potential to negotiate cultural change in contrasting settings.

Chapter 5 explored how circulation activates this potential and makes it visible. The chapter explained how material and immaterial artefacts in the Massim are not produced and subsequently exchanged in two separate actions. To put it simply, things do not stay the same when they move but become other things instead. Each time things move they can be invested with new qualities, deprived of previous elements and redefine the networks in which they are inserted. When objects circulate they are created anew, putting exchange and creation on the same level. Circulation sanctions the ontological creation of an object and reveals the relations that keep on making it as it moves. Like the self-replicating nautilus shell, objects in the Massim are constantly generative. They produce other generative tools that may have different forms but are, nonetheless, eventually re-shaped, co-opted and recognised as part of the familiar Trobriand universe.
Not less so because things carve that universe with familiarity. This leads to a paradox: things are never newly created in the Trobriand world as they are modifications of their existing precedents. Yet each time things move they are considered to be different from their previous form and therefore can be seen as if they were new. As a result, this flow of things is not a dissemination of previous concepts within a system of conventions. Things instead become new constituents of that system. With time, it is the system or frame that assumes a new semblance altogether. The kula is one of these generative and encompassing things that highlights circulation as creative performance.

If the kula deviates from the model it also provides a model for exchange. This is perhaps the most salient feature of the 21st century kula and the one that Chapter 5 focuses on. As an unbounded idiom susceptible of varying appropriations, the kula has been used as a template of movement and for movement. The kula is the present-day embodiment of past mythical narratives of ritual circulation re-arranged as acts of potential creation, that is, the generative capacity that yields material and immaterial wealth in the face of modernity. Blending past and present performances of the kula culminates in the making of a non-ritual trope that transcends the ceremonial. A Christian kula is not anchored in traditional kula myths nor does it follow the paths and actions of the mythical kula heroes. And the exchange of God’s sacred words by Christian laymen and women outside the sacred space-time of the Mass divest them of any ceremonial mantle, turning the gospels into corporeal valuables, the epitomes of a newly-appropriated modern identity that cuts across traditional social divisions. The result is a contemporary metaphor of the innovative potential of circulation and exchange as tangible and symbolic material for alternative modes of sociality. One of these constructions affects the redefinition of customary domains of exchange and who can participate in them. Indeed, this highly-mobile personhood is hinged partly on an inclusive perspective of the kula that transcends gendered divides and gives Trobrianders the possibility to get past prescribed male-or-female-only relational networks. This is not as much an exogenous imposition from Christian missionaries or western models of production as it is a local adaptation to a reality that requires new strategies to reshape the boundaries of Massim sociality. The kula, then, becomes an idiom for new practices of exchange and social change.
Tokwalu are exercises in embodied cognition displaying indigenous processes of apprehension of a progressively networked environment. Taken as material symbols of perception, they reveal modes of Trobriand analysis and action that combine many things. They materialise not only the spirits of the wood but also theoretical information and practical skills, old myths and new narratives, Trobriand ancestors and dimdim exchange partners. Woodcarvings bring together tools from afar and local instruments and integrate esoteric spells with the magic of modernity, encompassing visions of desire and the means to achieve these visions.
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Appendix A

Jerry W. Leach Collection of Trobriand Folklore

The following narratives were collected by anthropologist Jerry Leach in Kiriwina in 1971 and are now part of the “Jerry W. Leach Trobriand Folklore Collection” at the National Anthropological Archives (Museum Support Center in Suitland, Maryland), Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Leach recorded many myths and folktales and had them transcribed preliminary by Kilivila-speaking students at the University of PNG in Port Moresby. Each narrative was copied down on separate numbered sheets with translation to follow. On the top of each manuscript sheet there is an accession number (from SN1 to SN 365). I reproduce in this Appendix some of the myths to which I have referred throughout the dissertation, both in the vernacular language and the English translation. The translations given are my own.
SN 1

NAME OF STORY: **Tudava**
NAME OF STORYTELLER: **Mwakwabuya**
VILLAGE OF STORYTELLER: **Kaibola**
SEX OF STORYTELLER: **Male**
TYPE OF STORY: **Liliu (foundation myth)**
WHERE STORY OBTAINED FROM: **Mataya and Moyamakusa (Labai village)**
DATE STORY OBTAINED: **January 1971**
ORIGINALLY TRANSCRIBED BY: **W. Mwenunuwa (Teyava Village)**

COMMENTS: The myth of Tudava, the slayer of the man-eating ogre Dokanikani is known, with some degree of variation, throughout the Massim (see for instance Battaglia 1990). Some elements seem to be constant in it: the abandonment of Tudava’s mother by her kin and fellow villagers, her confinement and miraculous conception, Dokanikani’s defeat through Tudava’s maternally-inherited magic and the consumption of the ogre’s flesh after his death.

STORY


Tuta wabogi minawena vivila Bolitukwa, inala Tudava ikatubayasi vavagi tukunabogwa megwa. Imigai kwegapani, sulumweya, avaka avaka ikatubayasi iwokwa eyamu iluki latula ekebiga:

“Kulokeya, kulokeya kugisi. Bukula bukutoli [stand, wait] giluwakewa [a place?] kulai mkeyala biyowa bila ambesa bitobu e kulola kula kukwau.”


235

“O ki; inagu bakeita.”


Bogwa inala eyopwi miyana bisila sekupakwapa bogwa iluki inala makawala kedala evagi, ikatuyau miyana bisila ela mutawa ikeita ima iwai okukula, ikatuvili ima Liluta ikeita miyana bisila ima iwai okukula, tuta ila orebwaga miyana bisila ikaluwitai wala ikotuni [to cut – the string to which the bisila is attached] Ujanem walla opiu iyowa wala ila olopola udila miyana bisila. Eyokewa Tudawa: “O besa esisu Dokanikani.”

Besa bogwa e kevitusi miyana bisila e besa ililola Tudava olui. Ilola ila itoli e igisiga esisu. Mwada bibasi gala, inanamsa gala. Ekebiga: “Bwena gala babasi, igau bakatudeu [I shall joke, play around]. Besa isisu iyaula imu, laimu owula makewena kai yagala makakana, ewaga Tudava itola wala iyuwetaula ila odogina kai. Iluki mauna ibutusi, Dokanikani isisu ikukululu [get angry, like when nomwaya used to say kokolugu gugwadi!], ilagi mauna ibutusi, deli lavatai ivitaki mauna pela kalakaweluwa iyomadisa [they – the birds – wasted his food]. Ikiuya kwetala [Tudava turned one of the fruits – so it will drop, like you spin coconuts to make them fall], ikimali iokwa ilai ikapusi ima otanawa okekela Dokanikani.


E Tudava tuvela kweyuwela ikiuya [to turn to make it drop] mokakana, ikimali osukwekwela bidubadu ikilai ima besa wala okekela ambese imu eiyaula ima iwai. Isisu idoki minasina mauna taga imitubilibili [he twisted – to see better] igisi iyumasi tomota ikimalisa makwa vavagi e ikalakova ikau makwa vavagi igisi.

“E bwada kutota wala igau amweya wa bwala daim” [that’s Dokanikani talking].

“Kuweya batotaga.” Tuta isui wawala Dokanikani iseli im idoki bisunapula taga Tudava bogwa leyeumwetaula etobusi emwa itomwa opwepwaya. Ikowana imokeya kwewakuwa imokeyaga etota, bogwa opwepwaya. “A bwada kutoli igau sitana tabigatona, sena toveka yoku[a].”

“A gala lamala agisem, pela elivalemis kuwawai tomota e lagela lama agisem.”

Dokanikani mesinaku ekebiga: “Ambesea bukusuki bukula?”


“O bwena kumwa.” Iyuwetaula Tudava ikapiyoya yatala wotunu yagala pilipali iwa wala iwoli kekela ikalitawila gala ikalakai yamala kweyatala itomwa ikoma idoki gala Tudava kekela ekatuni, mitaga yamala titolela, pela evakoma lenagowa. Ikamkoma ivenoku, ikeita Tudava imwa itomwa. Misinaku ekebiga Dokanikani: “Amamkeda bukumwa?”

“Gala, bukutota wala bawa gala batola kweyayuwela yamam, oilavam batola bala.”

“O bwena kumwa.” Iyuwetaula Tudava ikapiyoya yatala wotunu yagala pilipali iwa wala iwoli kekela ilavala igigili kekela ikalitawila gala ikalakai yamala kweyatala itomwa ikoma idoki gala Tudava kekela ekatuni, mitaga yamala titolela, pela evakoma lenagowa. Mesinaku gala inukwali kala mmayoyu ekamkoma titolela. Tuvela ekebiga: “Ambesaga tuvela mkeda bukumwa?”


“Bogwa lemesa katitekina dakuna kwevakaveka, Labai mapana lewewa, wa Siliya mapana lewewa, yagala Olakedawaga.” Besa mina Keli isisu, luletla Bolitukwa.
“Sogu [he addresses his mum as friend? Or is it the narrator’s figure of speech, common to say “sogu” before making a rude or violent statement, or just arrogant, like when Tolobua used to address me as “tau” so as to ascertain his position of superiority] adoki bamtuli lumta lagela, gala tetala bisisu,” iluki Bolitukwa evalam.
Deli wala lavalam iluki latula: “Uluguyau yoku, akoma pwam, gala bukuweya kadamwa, luguta tatogu. Taga eyogagegusi besa, desi wala avaka mnanamsa bikeitasi wala. Gala bisisusa besa.”

ikebiga: “Ina[gu] bogwa lamtuli lewokwa, besa tuta som ulakwava minana, magigu
besa tuta bitatatokeyasi bitasilisi odawagasi bitasuwesa Lomyuwa, Lomyuwa
Luebila, Luebila Idaleka, Idaleka Kapwani, Yuwada bitataina bitawa bikala wala
ambesa valu nanogu bitobusi e besa bitasilisa. Mesinaku Tudava isila itotolasi [to
punt] inala, lakwava matona itotolasi, itotolasi itabusisi Kiluwa italagwasi
Lomyuwa, ilesi Kaibola ikakidonatusi siya, okepapala kwebweyani dakuna
manakwesi, titolela wala ivakanasa Kadumyelu ilukwemwa wala puwala ‘likuta liu’
[he said something to his testicles?] ikatitaki, titolela wala ikatudewa, puwala
kwetabwabogwa likuta liu ikasewa wala [his testicles were full]. Minasina vivila
igisesa manakwa puwana waga ekasewa, igigilasi, e ekalisesila lewa tuvela ekatupoi:
“Avaka kugigilasa?”

“Gala kagigilasi wala deli litumayasa, kakovilasi.”

“Gala bogwa lanukwali. Kugigilasa pela yegu kugigilasa. E balukwemi, kabiogigisa
yokwami, dakuna kakemi, kulumi bibweyani. E tubovila, tubovila agulitetila
bikanwagasi, ilemi Kaibola. Littumya okupupapisa luipepa [to carry on the back]
dakuna otuwami, kweyuwemi, lukumilidakunasi [you’ll turn into stones].
Imilidakunasi [they turned into stones] wala mayuwona ilesi Kaibola [women from
Kaibola], gala natana ima ovalu. Itola itaina lela lela Bomatu itaini, ila Mtawa,
katitekina Mtwawa okudewala itomwa Yuwada itomwa itopwagega [open his legs]
ipopu, wapwalatobwabogwa. Kekela bakwela kweyatala kweyuwem, epopu
dakuna kwetala makawala Siyakakita [the name of a rock? In Luebila, Kaibola]
vakela, pwala, ilukwemwa imiladakuna kwetabwabogwa. Besa etaina lela oluwalala
ela besa Omarakana, gala bakateta, Kwebwaga gala anukwali kalalitetila, taga
Tudava anukwali ila, ila ila Madili [place] besa mesisiki. Tudava toulawola kwau
tokulakola kalala besa, ila besa kalala gala ikola, kwau mina Madili bitalokeyasa,
mina Myuwa [place] makala wala lakau vagisa Kaibola e makala leuvagisa. E
matona tomota lasimla manakwa igigisi tuta latuta iluki inala, lakwava: “Bitasisi
masimlana simla bitasilisa davalusi bivagi.” Isili masimlana simla, ilukwemwa
iguyugwayu gala wala bitagigisi mitaga biyosi bunukwa bigela [it screams] bitalagi
wala, biweya kalayaguma bitalagi wala, biboku [to cough] talagi wala, mitaga
masimlana simla bitagigisi gala, besa Madili ila isili bogwa ekaili. Mina Madili kasi
luya wala. Besa wala ulabiga mekeita, ula story pela Tudava.
This time I’m going to talk about the story of Tudava. This Tudava did not live at Labai only but he also had a mother with her brothers who live at Kemwamwala. When Dokanikani started killing people they ran away to Labai. They went to Labai and made canoes and left for Keli leaving their sister on the shore because the canoes were already full. As she stayed back her youngest brother cried for her and came back and tried to take her in, but his canoe was already full so in leaving his sister he said, “you stay. If you die, it’s no problem but I’ve got to take my family away and we’ll go with my brothers who have already gone ahead.” So they went to Keli and stayed there and that woman named Bolitukwa stayed, stayed by herself and got pregnant, somehow we don’t know what happened and as a result she got a child. She got pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy whom she named Tudava. He was already big and tall and we don’t know how tall he was but his footsteps can be seen on the footpaths and we know his foot is bigger than ours by the footprints. That man grew and grew and he was already old enough to take girls out and he asked his mother, “my mother, why are we living in the bush?” His mother said, “one man’s name is Dokanikani, he lives here, he was killing your uncles and your grandparents and me and my brothers ran away. We came here and your uncles made their canoes and sailed away with their families and left me near the rocks because their canoes were already full, my youngest brother cried for me and when he finished he said to me that it didn’t matter if I died but now I’ve given birth to you.” That’s why Tudava responded to this very strongly. He said, “my mother I think I’ll go and see him,” and his mother answering him she said, “I think you can’t go and see him because you are still young. We’ll stay until you get a little bit bigger and you’ll go and see him. If you go and see him now and you come back and he follows you, you are strong, you’ll run away but as for myself he’ll kill me and eat me.”

He asked: “does he eat human beings?” She answered him saying “he eats human beings, when he catches them he takes them away and kills them, he cooks them either on a ground pit or else he boils them and after cooking them he eats them.” Her big son said, “my mother I’ll go to him!” Then his mother said, “all right your time is tomorrow and you’ll go.” When the night fell the woman named Bolitukwa, Tudava’s mother, prepared things of olden days, magic. She said magical words for kweyapani, sulumweya [wild basil?] and everything else and when the next day came she said to her son, “you go, you go, you go and see him. You go and stand at Gibwakwa you throw your spear and it will
fly and it will spear something then you go and get it!” So Tudava went to Gibwakwa and threw his spear, the spear flew to the land of Tubowada people called Bokenavasiya. The spear flew and speared a lizard in a yakwala tree and fell to the ground. He went behind and found the spear with that lizard and he carried it back to his mother. Tudava asked his mother “Is this the one, have I killed him?” She said, “no this is a lizard. When the season for dance comes we’ll skin the lizard and use the skin to make our drum and dance.”

“Oh yes, I’ll go back” he answered. He walked and went to where he killed the lizard and stopped and threw his spear and his spear flew to Kadukumeu and speared one frog against the ground. He went and found his spear with the frog and carried it back to his mother at Labai. He went to his mother and said, “mother could that be him?” “No this is our food, our animal. When there is a drought and no food that will be our bush animal, we go and collect them, wrap them up, we roast them and eat them, we are from Tokuluwala that is our obligation!”

He went back again and threw his spear and it flew to Kudukwadoya, speared the cuscus and fell down with it. He went along and saw the cuscus and carried it back to Labai to his mother. He asked, “mother is this the one?” His mother answered him saying, “no this is our food. For the people from Kudauya side this is a bush food they can’t eat but as for us this is our food.”

“Alright mother, I’ll go back!”

“Go back!”

So he went back, he went back to where he killed the cuscus, threw the spear and it flew to where the missionaries are living now at Mutawa, the name of the land is Kwepakoya. The spear flew but it didn’t spear anything. He walked and found out his spear hadn’t speared anything and so he stood there and thought, that is why the called the place Kwepakoya because that was where Tudava was thinking about where Dokanikani’s place could be. He had with him a decorative pandanus leaf (as the ones used for dancing) which had been magically prepared by his mother, he threw it in the air according to his mother’s instructions, he threw it and it went to Mwatawa and came back to his chest, he threw it again to Liluta and again it came back to his chest but when he threw it towards the cliff it flew and broke the string and went into the bush. Then he said, “that is where Dokanikani lives.” The pandanus leaf had shown it to him so Tudava followed it. He walked and walked and stopped. He wanted to spear him but he gave it a second thought, he had an idea. He said to himself, “it’s good I can’t spear him but I’ll
play a trick on him.” When Dokanikani was weaving the small string he came quietly and climbed up the tree called Mokakana [a tree that gives a red and sweet fruit] and went to the top. He told the birds to fly; meanwhile Dokanikani was bowing his head making the string and when he heard the birds cry he got angry to them because they were finishing his food. Tudava got one of the fruits and dropped it on Dokanikani’s legs. Dokanikani believed that birds did that, he did not know that was a man because the people were gone, he finished them off, they ran away. It fell near him and took the fruit and said, “may they eat their own shit, they are going to finish my fruit.” Tudava again let loose more of the fruit and it dropped near Dokanikani’s legs. For a while he thought it was birds but when he glanced above he saw it was a human being and he took the fruit and looked at it and saw that it had human marks. He looked up and said to Tudava “my friend where do you live?” And Tudava answered him. He answered, “Nowhere, the two of us live here.” Dokanikani said “My small brother you stay there I’ll just go and put away our imu [?].” Tudava said, “You take it away, I’ll be here.” Then Dokanikani went in the house and came out and found out Tudava was already in the ground. He said, “My small brother you stay and we talk, you are very big!” “Oh no, I came to see you because I heard that you kill people and today I just came to see you.” Dokanikani said, “Which way are you going?” Tudava answered, “Now I’m going back to Labai.” Dokanikani went ahead. Dokanikani talked to the ground, he told the ground to open up and he went down on the hole hiding expecting Tudava to go past in front of him. But Tudava had already seen his head coming out of the hole, he wanted to spear him on the head but instead he held on to his spear. When the head came out he threw the wild basil that had been enchanted with a spell by his mother and Dokanikani ate it. Dokanikani said, “My small brother you stay, you are my chief, I already ate your shit.” “No you come, you come, you come and we go. While Tudava was walking Dokanikani told the ground to open up and he went down intending to stop Tudava. But Tudava was walking and looking at the spot from which the head poked out, he was going to spear the head but he held on to his spear instead. He said, “I can’t spoil it, I’ll take him away.” He took the second package of charmed wild basil and put it in Dokanikani’s mouth who was already going out of his mind. His mind/ideas were like the fish that get poisoned with Tuva [Derris root, a rotenone-containing plant of the fabaceae family of legumes used as
a piscicide] and confused in the reef, they go without knowing, they bump their head on the coral and they come swimming to the top, that was what Tudava did to Dokanikani. He was feeding him herbs and he was already full and he just led him away. Where he had speared some things previously that’s where he led him. He started walking with him in the morning and when the afternoon came Dokanikani’s body was very weak and looked as if though he was going to die. He was going to kill him on the road but when he saw him he said, “Wait, I’ll take him away.” He took him to Gibwaku, where Tudava stood and Dokanikani stood on Gibwatilawa, at Labai, and he took him to the shore. Dokanikani said, “Which way are you going?” Tudava said, “You just stand, I’ll stand on your shoulder and come down.” Dokanikani said, “Alright you go.” Tudava jumped and hung onto a vine called pilipali and with his legs he touched Dokanikani’s shoulders but then removed his leg back; Dokanikani turned his head and chopped off one of his own arms thinking he was eating Tudava’s legs because he was already out of his mind due to the herbs he ate. He ate his arm and finished it and Tudava went again. Dokanikani asked, “Which way are you going?” “No, you just stand, I’ll come and stand on your other shoulder and come down.” “Oh, hurry up and come.” Tudava hung his leg and touched the other shoulder and Dokanikani turned around and chopped the other arm off. He started eating and finished the arm thinking that he was eating Tudava’s leg, he was already stupid/confused. He didn’t feel any pain out of eating his own body. “Where is the next way you are going?” “You stay there and I’ll stand on your hips and go down.” Tudava touched his hip and very quickly took his leg away and Dokanikani turned to his own leg and chopped it, his body fell on the ground as he was now helpless. Tudava got hold of his clam shell knife, it was still in Labai but it is now already gone, I saw it during my youth. Taking his shell knife Tudava said, “Today is your time, I’ll cut your neck off, because you killed my uncles, my relatives and also other people, I came and tricked you and you came here and I’ll cut your neck.” Dokanikani said only a few words. He said, “Oh my small brother, my chief, don’t rubbish me up [berate me]!” He cut the neck off and left the whole body, then he took his spear, put it through Dokanikani’s eyes and carried the head away. He stood on the land Pulula and he shouted a cry of happiness, but Bolitukwa was making banana-leaf bundles of Trobriand currency [doba] in the house of Tudava near the shore, there was plenty of noise made by different things, birds, and many other animals and the
leaves of *kwebila* used for decoration flapping in the wind, the fish were jumping in the sea and Bolitukwa said, “Stop making noise and I’ll hear what my son is saying.” She had already heard her son but she thought it was only birds, then she told the birds and the other animals to stop, then he shouted again and this time she heard him. Then Bolitukwa said, “This is my son’s voice.” Tudava came to the village carrying Dokanikani’s head and asked his mother, “My mother, is this the one?” “He is no other, you have already killed him.” They were still keeping the head and he asked his mother, “Mother, what can we do with it?” She said, “It will stay and I’ll send it to your maternal uncles at Keli and they’ll see it. Tonight I’ll send it and it will go.”

When the night fell she took the bowl and took that head and put it in the bowl and said some magic words into it, put the bowl with the head on the current and it floated away to Keli. The night fell, day came and night fell again and the day came once more and that bowl floated with the tide, a wave came and carried the bowl and it bumped onto the door of the hut of the eldest of Bolitukwa’s brothers. It hit the door, the eldest brother came out and looked for it but the bowl had already gone back floating on the sea. The bowl goes back to the sea every time it bumps the door, because these brothers neglected their sister Bolitukwa. It went back to the sea and the next wave came carrying the bowl and went to the middle brother’s hut and bumped it, the brother came out looking for the bowl but the bowl was already back floating in the sea. The head then went to the third born floating by itself and bumped the door; he came out searching for what it was. He found out that the hut’s floor was already wet; the bowl went to the fourth brother’s hut and did the same, it went to the door, bumped it and floated back to the sea when the brother came out looking for it. It went to the fifth brother, the last one, the one that cried for his sister on the shore; the head bumped the door of the last born. He came out and looked at it and picked it up and took the bowl to his house, he blew the fire and found it was something different. He said, “that man [Dokanikani] has already been killed.” He though things out of his head, we don’t understand where he got the idea from. “I think my sister has given birth to a human being who has already killed Dokanikani.” He hid the head, he didn’t tell his brothers, neither his kids nor his wife. He carried the head and put it in his wife’s basket for banana leaf bundles; he woke up the next morning and told his brothers, “Guys, I want you and our sons to go cut some yam sticks for my yam garden. I’ll prepare the feast and you’ll come and eat when you’re done.” His brothers stood up and said, “Good!” They told their sons and went to cut some yam sticks; he stayed and
cooked the mashed yams. After cooking the mashed yams he took up the head of Dokanikani and put it right at the bottom of the cooking pot. The head went down and stayed there, after work they were tired and hungry, he made the feast and they sat around and ate the top part. Sago, betel nut and other things were in abundance. They ate, ate, ate and time came for reaching the bottom, one of them put his shell ladle in and banged it against Dokanikani’s teeth; it sounded like when you bang a shield. It made a noise and they heard the noise but they at the food, they ate the food and it went down as they ate; they looked inside and found something different in appearance that was in fact a human being; they lifted the head.

“Guys, we already ate a man, that is his head!”
The youngest brother said, “That head came last night. Last night it came and it bumped into my veranda, I went out and it was there.”

Molitomwaya [the eldest] started talking. He said, “It hit mine first, brothers, but when I went to look for it it wasn’t there.” The other brother said the same, the third one said the same, the fourth one said the same. The youngest said, “The reason why it came to my veranda and stayed, I have an idea. Because I cried for our sister and I got sad and said my last words. I told her, ‘if you die it doesn’t matter, you’ll lie here, but we’ll go with our friends.’ That’s why that thing [the head] lied in my veranda. Our sister has given birth to a human being, I think. Now you come, we’ll prepare the skull, we’ll clean it and we’ll take it back and see how is our sister, whether she is dead or alive.”

They made their canoes and sailed and when they came to Bedaya Tudava’s mother said, “I think your uncles are coming because there are only five of them.” Tudava didn’t look up to the sea because his mother had already told him what his uncles had done to her. He was inside his hut, he gave his back to his uncles, he only asked his mother, “You see them? How far are they now?”

“They already came to Obombom. They stayed there for sometime and he asked his mother again, “Do you see them, where are they now?”

“They already came to the big stones just a bit further than Labai and Siliya, the name of the place is Olakedawaga.” That is were the Keli people went behind and were hiding, these were the brothers of Bolitukwa. When they were closer he told his mother, “You look,” and she said, “They already came to Osapola.”

“I think I’ll kill your brothers today, none of them shall live,” he said to Bolitukwa.
While crying she said, “My chief, I eat your testicles, don’t kill your uncles, my brothers. They did something wrong back then but leave aside your bad thoughts, they will go back, they will not stay here.”

They sailed to the shore and looked up and saw a man sitting, he was very big, they were very scared, his uncles were very frightened. Bolitukwa only said to them, “You come quietly and sit down, you talk among yourselves, you’ll go back today, we can’t all stay together today, or this evening or tomorrow, this very moment only.”

The eldest brother blew the conch shell and took one of his daughters and a kula shell valuable necklace and threw it. He said, “Tudava, she is your wife and that is your kula necklace.” When he was done Tudava whispered to his mother only, “Mother, who is this man?”

“The eldest one.”

“Put the necklace aside and tell the girl to go to the right, not to the left.”

The second brother pulled his daughter like his elder brother had just done and threw the necklace. Tudava asked, “Mother, which man is that?”

“The middle born.”

“His daughter will go and stand with her friend to the right.”

It came to the third one, he pulled his daughter, blew the shell, handed her over and threw the necklace.

Tudava told his mother, “You tell her to go with her friends.”

The fourth one did the same. When it was the last one’s turn Tudava asked his mother, “Who’s that man?”

“That man he cried for me and then went with his family.”

“You put that girl on the left with you.”

His uncles got ready and sailed as far away as Muwa Island and then Tudava turned around and asked his mother, “These girls, where are they?”

“They are over there.”

“You keep that one, she is my wife, you stay with her and hold on to the necklace her father brought. The other four will take the necklaces and tie them to their bodies.”

Bolitukwa prepared the four daughters and then Tudava said, “Mother, you stay, I’ll come and hit them and cut their necks off.” (And nowadays their bones are still there. This is my story and you can see it yourselves, you can go and ask Lalasi [Tolosi?], you can go and see the bones of those girls). He brought them up to the land, cut their necks
off and threw them into the deep holes in the cliff. Then he came back to his mother and said, “Mother, I’ve already finished them off. Now you and my wife, I want us to sail on our canoe, go through Lomyuwa, from Lomyuwa to Luebila, from Luebila to Idaleka, Idaleka to Kapwani, Yuwada, we’ll go around to where I think it is a good place and that is where we will stay. That was it and Tudava, his mother and wife punted their canoe and came to Lomyuwa and the women of Kaibola were collecting kidonatu shells at Siya, where there are those red stones, and Tudava, as a joke, told his own testicles likuta liu [?] and they swelled becoming very big and filling up likuta liu. One of the girls saw the testicles which filled up the canoe and they all laughed so Tudava punted his canoe towards them.

“What are you laughing at?”

“We are just having fun me and my sisters and laughing.”

“No I know it. You are laughing at me. I’m telling you, I’ll made an example of you, you will turn into stone and your hair will turn red. Generation after generation it will be like this with you women of Kaibola. Your sons and daughters, the ones you are carrying on your backs, they too will turn into stones, you’ll be both turned into stones.”

They turned into stones, all these women from Kaibola, none of them came home. They punted their canoe and went to Bomatu, Mtawa, close to the Mtawa shores between Mtawa and Yuwada he put his legs apart and defecated, his shit turned into a stone as big as Siyakakita [?]. His footsteps still can be seen on the rocks and his shit turned into stone. Then he went half way to Omarakana, I don’t really understand how, via Kwebwaga, I don’t really know which route he took. But then I know he went, he went to Madili and stayed there. Tudava fishes sharks but not jellyfish. If we go to Madili we’ll find they do the same things we do here in Kaibola as far as sharks are concerned. That man Tudava stopped crying and said to his wife and mother, “We’ll go to that island and make it our home.” He stayed on that island and made the air dull so we can’t see him, but when he kills pigs we still hear the screams, when he rattles his lime pot we can hear the noise, when he coughs we can hear it but we can’t see the island, he went to Madili and changed it. Madili’s people eat only coconut.

These are my words, my story of Tudava.
SN 139

NAME OF STORY: Tabalu
NAME OF STORYTELLER: Tolosi
VILLAGE OF STORYTELLER: Labai
SEX OF STORYTELLER: Male
TYPE OF STORY: Liliu (foundation myth)
WHERE STORY OBTAINED FROM: Matoya & Moduwaga (uncle & father)
DATE STORY OBTAINED: January 1971
ORIGINALLY TRANSCRIBED BY: Theresa Patterson
COMMENTS: This is an incomplete and abridged version of the foundation myth of the Tabalu matrilineage (dala). Kalaguma is featured as one of the first ancestors of the Tabalu, creator and disseminator of symbols, emblems and bodily and object decorations.

STORY

mwaleta bi toli. Ikaliyeyasi makwa bwema iwokwa itoli. Itoli yagila sena kwetabwabogwa lema itovila, itovila itovila, e igisesa ekebiga: “Sogu, kuvitoki tolosila da valu bi ta busi bi ta wakeya otanawa deli kada vilomugwa ta siwesa.”
“E yokwa kusila besa bu vu luvaula kama wa kaya sogu tau e bu ku mwemwena kama sopi e bu ku gubugabu kama kawbwa e bakama ba kamkwamu.”
Isiwa Tokwamu kuwakaya. E ivapwalisa obulabula Tomaku isiwa.
“Avaka pela o ku sibisi o ku sili otanawa?”
“Ah, gala bogwa lokumesa sena tovakaveka yokwami kusiwesa orakena basimwaga otanawa.”
ikasikula kala segadula. Ekau makena segadula ekeimali, ekeimali emeya ekebiga, “Avaka?”

“Lameya kada katubayasa makena kada kuwa ku siyemwa balaga ba butabwata [butia?]. Sena itasikula.”

Ikeita, Ikeita ima isisu iyaula la imu. Igigigi makwa tuwetuwa [chief’s wristband?].

Ikeimali. Ikebiga: “Avaka?”

“Kada tuwetuwa makwa maka kwasi ku semwa e sena a yaula ula imu igigigi.”


“O bogwala besa KAISIKALU, KALUBILABETA, BWEMLELAI bwena bakatudidemi ba meyaki tau isewa o ma bwema, wa bwala bi katubiyasi.”

Ikatudidemi. Ikatudidemi ilau isekewa.

“Avaka pela okumeya?”


“Avaka pela okumeya bunukwa?”

“Gala, besa lameya e bitomwa balaga na mwala minana [maybe mwamwala, the house decoration?] etowa ba yosi ba kama ba rigewa bulukwaga bu ku toyemwa e ba yayosa ba migamegwa kalala bima ba kulakola e ba pokapokala baisa yoku ba kamu kwamu.”

TRANSLATION:
The rules at the village of Obukula were set by the authority of four subclans, one of them was Iluva, another was Kweoma, another one was Mwauri and another one was Mlabwema. They all came out [from the origin hole] together. Iluva and Kweoma were working on the bomyoyeva [a rare type of yam-store roof built on a single post that can pivot around], they were arranging and decorating the different boards, panels and logs of the yam house with the emblems they had brought with them when they surfaced in Kiriwina. They were getting it ready when I came out together with Mwauri, his chest was attached to mine. When I came out the old man who was sweeping clean the kivalagama [decorations] turned around and said: “Hey, you, come brush yours decorations,” so I wiped the Kalaguma [decorations] and hence they called me Kalaguma. So I took the one decoration to the ground and gave it to the Tabalu. So the Kalaguma people [matrilineage] came and sat down and assembled all the other clans and when they got together they inter-married and they called it “marrying.” After that they went TUBUKELAVASIA [the place where Tudava speared a lizard in his hunt for Dokanikani, see SN1]. They remembered and went down to OLUWALAWOSI, they remembered to walk to TOULA, they walked to KUNIVARIYA, they walked to KELITA and they also came here [Labai?]. And me, my grandparents [from the same matrilineage, his ancestors] came here to BOMYOYEWA [name of a place that probably takes on its name from the resting house/yam-house roof that was first built there] and built that resting house/yam-house roof. They built that yam-house here in LABAI and it was the only one. The Mwauri people didn’t build it, the Tudava people didn’t build it, no one else built that yam house but my people. And wherever the Tabalu went they didn’t build a yam-house like this one. When my people finished building that yam house in Labai a very strong wind started blowing and he/they said: “My friend, go claim ownership of our village, we’ll come down [to the banana tree], lower ourselves down and mix ourselves up with our commoners/servants.”
“Oh, put some drinking water in the vessels. It is called Tolosi village.” And they came down and came here to Labai, where they stayed. They stayed and they built that resting house there and one them said: “My friend, maybe we should look for a village. Let us not stay here, let’s look for a village. Let us listen for any shouts of joy, for cries of celebration or the blowing of the conch shell and we shall know.” So the two of them walked together, up until they came to Kuwakaya and ordered the people of the
Tokwamu matrilineage: “You shall stay here and grow our wakaya banana trees, climb to get us our green coconuts and roast our food for us whenever we are hungry.” So Tokwamu stayed at Kuwakaya. They came to Obulakula and Tomaku stayed there. They told him: “You shall stay here for our needs, to get us water or green coconuts, our mustard, our betel nut, or just to garden for us.” And so did Tomaku. Then they came upon the Yaubisila matrilineage that lived in KOBAGATOLA, this one is known as the matrilineage of the buna [cowrie shell]. They asked Yaubisila: “So, you will stay here and watch over our mustard and whatnot, right?” And so Yaubisila stayed. Then they brought their relative from WAKELUVA and asked him to stay there to look after their mustard, their betel nut and to make gardens for their food. And so the respected old men kept on walking. They walked up until they met the Pakalaki matrilineage. By the way, the day before yesterday we had a court case talking to Pakalaki, the Bolotalota matrilineage has now disappeared, there is none of them left.

Anyway, when they came to the Pakalaki matriclan this man called Eshakeyasala was there sitting on his veranda, he saw these two men coming with their decorations and their emblems and he came down from the veranda and sat on the ground. They asked him: “Why did you come down and sat on the ground?”

He replied: “Well, you already came here and you are such big, important men, you should stay on top and I shall squat on the ground.”

“Oh, you already made a mistake,” they said. They stayed there and the man told them: “My grandparents called this place KADUWAGA KESANAI, although today we call it only KESANAI but its real name is KADUWAGA and it used to be Bolotalota’s [a matriclan] village. So because he had already come down from the veranda and squatted in the ground there were no more privileges for him, no more shouts of happiness from others to celebrate the Bolotalota people, no more respectful bowing in front of them, the Bolotalota matrilineage had already become a matrilineage of commoners.

The two respected old men stayed in Kesanai and built their resting houses there. They stayed there up until one of the old men said: “My friend, maybe I shall return to our village [of origin].”

And the other replied: “Will you? Well, good, go back and look after our village, I shall stay here.” So one of the brothers went back to Labai with all his ornaments and body decorations. At the time when the mullet fish came by he went fishing; he went fishing with all his decorations. His segadula [head band ornament made of red spondylus shells
that hangs down the back] got tangled while he was fishing so he walked back to Kesanai with it to return it.

“What’s the matter,” said the old man in Kesanai when he saw him coming back with the head ornament.

“I brought back our ornaments,” said the other men. “You take care of our necklaces, they bother me while fishing, they get tangled. Take them, I will adorn myself with wreaths of flowers instead.” He went back to Labai and was making ropes when he noticed his woven wristband was too tight, so again he walked back to Kesanai to return it and he was asked: “What’s the matter?”

“Our wristbands and our armbands, keep them, they are too tight on my arms when I work.”

“Fine,” said the other man, and he sat there while the other went back to Labai. He went back to Labai and he was making his fishing nets, when he got them sorted he went fishing and he entered okakawaga [a place?], he tried to encircle the mullets with his net but they split up. The day came and he didn’t manage to get any mullets as they split up and escaped when he was trying to round them up with his nets. So he came back to Labai and said: “This is it, it is time for me to tear down the various decorated boards from the yam house and bring them to Kesanai, so he can decorate our house there with them.” He tore them down and took them to Kesanai.

“Why did you bring these?”

“Because I cannot catch any fish, these boards are tabooed and they prevent me from getting any fish.” As he was walking back to the village he stepped on some pig’s shit and then on the pig’s testicles so he picked up the pig and returned it to Kesanai.

“Why did you bring this pig?” the other man asked him.

“I brought this male pig here so you can keep it and raise it and it won’t interfere with my magic whenever I summon the mullet, so in the future I’ll fish the mullet and bring you some and you can give me some pork, we’ll exchange fish for pork. But whenever I will dance I’ll come here and get all our decorations and put them on for the dancing. We’ll share all our decorations and they shall stay at Labai”
NAME OF STORY: Itona
NAME OF STORYTELLER: Katuloka
VILLAGE OF STORYTELLER: Mwatawa
SEX OF STORYTELLER: Male
TYPE OF STORY: Liliu [foundation myth with magic spell]
DATE STORY OBTAINED: January 1971
ORIGINALLY TRANSCRIBED BY: Henry Lupovalu
COMMENTS: The story contains fragments of magic spells to summon the itona spirits. Magic spells usually start with a u’ula (or reason), a series of set formulae that are not always intelligible and that often use loan words from other languages (Dobu, etc). Then follows an enumeration of the ancestors from which the spell was obtained that is also a call on their spirits to recognize their kin (allegedly the invoker belongs to the same matriclan – dala – as the ancestors) and help him/her in his/her magic endeavours. The u’ula part of the spell is less subject to variation than the middle part (tapwana, usually a repetition of actions enunciated in poetic yet understandable ways, using more common language than the beginning of the spell. See Malinowski 1922: 428-429, Senft 1997: 370, 2010: 40).

Itona is the generic name of evil spirits in the Trobriands that dwell in particular places – rocks, springs, wells, etc. They are normally associated to the spreading of diseases. Current Christian beliefs associate them to demons capable of possessing people. The other names might be those of particular spirits.

STORY


Besa pela kasiyoba. Yabala katoula deli molu e besa kasiyoba mapawena megwala mapana yegu Katuloka lakeula.

TRANSLATION:
Ilaveka, Itona, Bodulela, Tauvau, Gabuwaina. These are the people responsible for that disease; in the olden days the respected old leaders established it this way through their authority. If Itona the spirit said that there was going to be a death in a given village today, then somebody died in that village like the spirit had said. In the olden days those were the ways of us the elder leaders. But nowadays there is a new authority, God’s authority, and it is God that rules these days. In the olden days the elder idolised Itona, Ilaveka, Bodulela and Tauvau as they were the ones that ruled. This is because the elder of the olden days used magic and these spirits decided whether things should be prosperous and abundant or whether there should be death. People would call Webadi and Vanoi [two paramount chiefs before the time of the current one, Pulayasi] and ask
them to come to their village so as to “open up” the village for the spirits. Then we would make magic to bring hunger, Itona, Ilaveka, Bodulela, Tauvau and Gabuwaina would come and bring sickness and hunger and people would get sick. This is because we summoned them. In Kiriwina, that’s the reason why these are the spirits that rule. Webadi and Vanoi would call the spirits into the village and we would get stricken by hunger, they would seize the food and make it disappear, people would get thinner and we would get sick and die because the chiefs had ordered it. In the olden days we would call: “You Itona, you Labuma and all those ruling spirits [itona]. And thus I grasped the chiefs’ magic to call on the spirits: (mostly untranslatable magic spell follows. The names of ancestors are uttered and spirits are called upon to bring famine to the village).
I, Katuloka, seized this type of magic to bring disease and famine.

SN 232

NAME OF STORY: Baloma [the spirits of the dead]
NAME OF STORYTELLER: Tokombobu
VILLAGE OF STORYTELLER: Kaibola
SEX OF STORYTELLER: Male
TYPE OF STORY: Liliu (foundation myth)
DATE STORY OBTAINED: January 1971
COMMENTS: The idea of the two coconut halves is that Baloma (and after her all the spirits of the dead) had the upper half of the coconut, the one with holes or “eyes” in it, so that the spirits can see the living by looking through the holes on the upper coconut husk. Baloma gave the lower half to the couple with the idea that since there is no hole in that half of the coconut shell the living will have no means of seeing or identifying the spirits of the dead. This is a traditional explanation why spirits cannot be seen now.

STORY

Baloma ilela Okupuku. Ikaliga ila isisuga latula unai latula.
Idou inala bigabi kala bimeya. Ila isisu Tuma iwokuva itapu uli mitawena imeya.
Iuvalutu wala isilalaguva Lomuyuva. Igebila. Igogebila wala katukwabwaku ikau iseki.
Itiyakesa Keboli [Kaiboli?] isimwa iuwewasi. Iuwewasi iwokuva, ilupokesa igebla.

Igogebila wala kasibegula Baloma Dayagila bisalili isekiga.

Ikasubusí Dayagila isili. Isisu kwetala mwamwai ilupkesa igebla.

Igogebila wala Yalumgwa ikasabusi itaya iseki.


Itayekesa ilesi Mweliligili itilapopula isili. Isisu bogwa iuwewasi iwokuva.

Igogebila wala bogwa Okupukopu bikasobusi ikaugwa iseki.


Kutaidolegu wala bamova basimwa, bitasimwesa bamilitomota. Iló isíwa osikwawa kala biga isulusuluga latula isiseki. Lemwala obuyagu wala ibugubagula lema kalabiga isili wala okabilupilupa ilai a matala ila otatom.
Matala mabulubolela. Igisi, “Wi avaka besa?”
E vavagiga lakwava “Inagula. E kariga gola elagi butula ula valulu egabi kagu emeya.”

“O gala sena kokola woula.”

“Ke mikweisibuna ula kweimatanaga.”
E bala basisi tutela yoba milamala bama yegu bagigisemi, yokwamiga bakugisegusi gala.”

Mekeita kadukukwanebusi. Puli puli kasiyene labisa kweluva.

TRANSLATION:

Baloma was a woman from Okupukopu village.
She died and went away but her daughter, who was alive, gave birth to child. The daughter called her mother Baloma to bring her some food. After her death Baloma had gone to Tuma [the island of the dead] but on her daughter’s request she prepared some food to take to her. Being a spirit, Baloma’s journey over the sea between Tuma Island and Kiriwina was easy. Arriving at Lomyuwa [Muyuwa, Woodlark?] she sang:

“O whose food am I carrying - O whose food am I carrying o-o- It is my child's food I will carry, - carry - carry -o-o - put it down and see. O my neck hurts my neck hurts -u-u-u.” [From carring the food on her head like all women do in Kiriwina].

The people from Keboli [Kaibola?] helped her to take her load down, and she sat down to rest. After resting they helped her to put her load back on her head. Coming to Dayagila she sang for the second time:

“O whose food am I carrying, whose food am I carrying -o-o- It is my child's food I will carry - carry - carry -oo - o - put down and see. O my neck hurts, my neck hurts.”

Arriving at Dayagila she sat down to rest. After resting the women of Dayagila helped her putting her load back in her head and she set out.

Coming to Yalumgwa, she put her load down and sang for the third time:

“O whose food am I carrying, whose food am I carrying – o-o My child's food. I will carry - carry - carry - o - o put down and see. O, my neck hurts, my neck hurts - u - u - u.”

The women of Yalumgwa came to help her. After resting they helped her to put her load back on her head. Coming to Moligilagi she chanted for the fourth time:

“Whose food am I carrying, whose food am I carrying o - o - o My child's food. I will carry - carry - carry - oo. O my neck hurts, my neck hurts.”

The women from Moligilagi helped her put her load down. She sat down to rest.
After resting, she was helped to put her load back and set out for Okupukopu.

“Whose food am I carrying, whose food am I carrying? - O - o - o.

My child's food. I will carry - carry - carry - oo, put down and see. O my neck hurts my neck hurts - u - u - u.”

Coming to the village of Okupukopu she found her daughter nursing her child. Baloma handed over her load and took the little child and went in the house. The daughter immediately started cooking. After eating, Baloma told her daughter this. “I will [resting?] in the corner of house. When you cook, pass some soup to me so that I can heal and regain my strength. After a while, I will become a person again.” Everything was done like Baloma said. However this was done in the absence of the girl's husband and when he returned from the garden he saw a pair of eyes in the corner of the house. They were very big. “What is that?” He asked, pointing to the corner of the house.

“That's my mother. She died but when she heard I had given birth she brought me food.”

“No, I don’t want it, I am very scared,” he complained. “Bring me a coconut,” Baloma asked him. They brought her coconut to. After husking it, she broke it horizontally in two halves. Handing the lower half to them she said, “Your lower half, my upper half. I'm going, but I shall return at Yoba time during the Milamala [the harvest festivities] and when I do, you will not see me, but I will see you.”

This is the end of our story.

The kasiyena [a type of wild yam] are breaking forth in clusters in my garden. Ripe with pawpaw [?]

Hanging their kasiyena in my garden your Katayela (?) Dimu. [??]

[These last two sentences are a formula uttered by the storyteller when s/he finishes telling a story, to invite the next storyteller to tell her/his story]
Appendix B

Losuia Archives, Kiriwina, Trobriand Islands

The following are copies of official documents from the Losuia Archives in Kiriwina, Trobriand Islands (now National Archives, Port Moresby). For clarity’s sake, I follow the numbering the documents already had when I scanned them (circled number on top-right corner of document). The documents evidence the colonial administration’s efforts to promote the carving industry in the late 1960s right before PNG’s independence from Australia.
20th June, 1968.

Assistant District Commissioner,
LOSULA
Milne Bay District

ASSISTANCE IN ESTABLISHING A NATIVE ARTIFACT MARKETING INDUSTRY

Reference is made to your 25-2-1 of 30th April, 1968, which has been discussed by our Division of Business Training and Management and Division of Industrial Development.

2. It is of interest to us to see progress being made towards preserving the quality of the traditional carving of the Trobriand Islands. Artifacts from the Milne Bay District are well received but recent feeling on the poorer quality of articles available indicate a need for some control.

3. Present Treasury Regulations, restricting travel make it inconvenient for an officer from this Department to visit your area at the moment. In the meantime it would be helpful if you could conduct an internal handcraft survey and forward available information to us.

4. In order to appraise the marketing situation, we would need to know:

(1) How many dealers are operating in the Islands?
(2) Are these missions, private dealers, councils, companies?
(3) List names and addresses wishing to be placed on our mailing list for trade enquiries.
(4) What type of crafts do dealers handle?
(5) What percentage of sales are made locally and what percentage are despatched to other parts of the Territory or overseas?
(6) To what places are they despatched?
(7) What methods of packaging and accounting are used?
(8) Is there customer dissatisfaction on receipt of goods due to breakage or lengthy time of despatch?
(9) What handicrafts are bought by the local tourist?
(10) What crafts are purchased by other customers?
(11) Are the carvings made by the older village people?
(12) Is there any indication of young people learning the art from their parents?
(13) Are the craftsmen making use of local dyes and materials or relying on trade store purchases?
(14) What is the supply of raw materials?
(15) Are the materials easily obtainable by all villagers?
(16) General price structure from raw materials to finished article.
5. Information collected will supply an overall picture of the local scene which will assist the Handcraft Officer in making further suggestions to enable the council to embark on their proposed scheme. The marketing scheme, as you have outlined, would be most satisfactory. It must be realised however, that no organisation will be in complete control to the extent of forbidding the sale of rejected handwork.

6. While the market lies in customer satisfaction, it is important to continue to foster traditional style in handicrafts. An endeavour should be made to interest the craftsmen in producing an article to suit tourist demands.

7. Your proposal of affixing a "trade mark" to carvings for quality control would not be correct. A "Trade Mark" simply prohibits anyone from using that particular mark or design. Facilities for this are unavailable in the Territory and application must be made through the Registrar of Trade Marks, Canberra.

8. The more usual form, and quite suitable for your requirements, would be to have a handcraft label printed. Wording could be simply:--

"APPROVED
HANDCRAFT
OF THE
TROBRRIAND IS."

or more pertinently:--

"ONLY HANDCRAFTS BEARING
THIS LABEL ARE APPROVED
BY THE COUNCILS OF THE
TROBRIAND IS. FOR QUALITY
AND AUTHENTICITY"

A quote from the P.N.G. Printery, Port Moresby for such a sticker is:--

500 labels from 1"x2" to 1½"x1½" printed on Davao gummed paper . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . $14.50

for 1000 stickers, an increase of $6 - $7.

9. It is considered with this simple quality and price control the artistic effort of the carvings will improve and, with the improved standard, a more lively market. Business procedures can be introduced to suit the marketing scheme eventually established.

10. Would you keep us informed of any new developments in the near future until such time as an officer from this Department is able to visit your district.

M.F. Jackson
(M.F. JACkSON)
Acting-Director

266
One of several development schemes devised by the government to control and supervise the production of *tokwalu*. Government-backed projects were never implemented successfully in the Trobriand Islands.
In his report to His Honour the Administrator of Papua and New Guinea entitled "The Survey of Handicrafts in the Territory" Mr. Angus McLean noted that whilst he was unable to visit the area the samples of artifacts from the Trobriands he saw indicated great natural skills in exactly the type of area which could benefit most from the development of native handicrafts. This section of his report gave emphasis to a previous decision that the under-signs should visit the area to obtain a first hand appreciation of the potential for handicrafts.

2. A period of seven days were spent on Kailama and Kiriwina Islands of the Trobriand group. It had been intended to spend two weeks in the area but bad weather prevented access to the more remote islands and as it turned out, an adequate area section of villages could be visited in the densely populated main island in one week. Kiriwina Island is served by an excellent road network and because the Assistant District Officer, Mr. Crain made transport available freely a good coverage of the island was possible. The writer arranged with lady Cleland to make some purchases on behalf of the Girl Guides Shop. This was intended to encourage the native people to bring forward their artifacts in quantities that were representative and it had the desired effect.

3. The general range of artifacts available in the Trobriand Islands was described in memorandum 14-1/3 of 19th October, 1960 from the Assistant District Officer Lomalai now on file 6/20/1 at folio 41. As the coverage in this memorandum is comprehensive no attempt will be made to describe items and prices in the same manner.

4. The art of the Trobriand Islands is showing a certain degree of decay. The Trobriand people carved for trade and utility and because their art was not anchored by religion or tradition it has been very susceptible to outside influences. To some extent this susceptibility is an asset if, as in the case of Beivalu tables, the outside influence makes for an aesthetic utilisation of traditional skills but at present outside influences are contributing to the decay of their art in various ways. The main thesis of this report is that with the introduction of Local Government it might be possible to precipitate a renaissance in Trobriand art which would benefit the people economically and socially.

5. The traditional Trobriand carvings show signs of decay in many ways. The traditional figures and designs embodied in tables, figurines, bowls, lime spatulas etc. show less attention to finish, less detailed designs and coarser shapes than the old examples of Trobriand art illustrated in textbooks. The Trobriand people carve for money and they seem to have decided that quantity provides better returns than quality. In terms of the local market they are probably right. The present premiums offered for quality are inadequate and have little relation to labour content or consumer demand. A range of 300% in payment between the acceptable and the superior would probably be appropriate but as it is about 30% seems normal.

.../2
6. Besides the people’s tendency to be sloppy in copying of their traditional styles there is also a noticeable trend toward copying styles from elsewhere. There seems to be influence at work by way of illustrations from books, animals seen in moving pictures, trade store earnings sold in Fort Mooroit missions introduced with religious art and sculpture, and even artifacts from elsewhere in the Territory. The general effect of these innovations is depressing and even the more solid commercial considerations point toward maintaining traditional styles rather than imitating introduced ones. The one possible exception is religious art. Some of the examples of religious carvings seem to show a considerable Trobriand influence and these were highly attractive and saleable. In consequence the imitation of European styles was more complete and the result, although still highly saleable, was less attractive.

7. On my visits to the various villages I showed many people illustrations of the classic Trobriand tradition in a book entitled “The Art of the South Seas”. The people were highly interested and in some cases made sketches of the illustrations. In another case a native showed me piece of wood on which he had started work and asked if he could see the illustration again so that he could make a good reproduction. It should be possible to recapture a lot of the previous quality of Trobriand art if the artists are shown plenty of illustrations of museum pieces from the Trobriands and if some of their best current work was kept on display in the Council house.

8. It has been said that BOTAIJU village was the only important source of Trobriand carvings. This was not the impression I gained on my brief visit. Whilst the BOTAIJU’s have a justifiable reputation for their tables every other village had something to sell by way of lime spatulas, betel grinders, wooden bowls, cane prows, grass skirts and so on. Most of these lines are more profitable than tables anyway. Tables are heavy and cost a good deal to freight by air. Tables also require large first class pieces of timber which are becoming increasingly hard to find. Handicrafts, particularly carvings, would offer a comparatively easy way for all village people to earn a moderate income should they so desire it.

9. Marketing is not regulated on behalf of the producers in any way. Prices are set by the trade stores and the missions and are more or less in line with what the market will bear in Kiriwina. There appears little doubt, however, that the market in Port Moresby and beyond can stand considerably higher prices. This is not to suggest that prices should be upgraded immediately. It would be better for higher prices to be introduced, if and when, the newly formed Local Government Council is in a position to participate in marketing. Local Government Councils in Kavieng and Angoram derive considerable revenue from the mark-ups they charge for handling native artifacts in these areas. A Trobriand Council could make the decision as to the extent to which higher prices derived from artifacts should be absorbed by the Council as a source of revenue.

10. The question of timber supplies is one that could well involve council participation. It is well known that the Trobriand people have made inroads on their hardwood timbers to such an extent that it is no longer possible to produce a table of more than 12” diameter. Cane logs have to be brought...
away from Kitava Island. It is understood that steps are already being taken to plant trees in various parts of Kiriwana so that future generations will have adequate timber for housing, canoes and carving. The Trobriand people have a unique asset in their access to ebony for carving. This timber is unavailable in other areas and, in any group display of Territorial artifacts, Trobriand ebony carvings stand out remarkably. This resource should be husbanded very carefully and future supplies assured through replanting. As an interim measure a Council might be able to arrange for supplies of large logs of high quality hardwood to be brought in from Kitava and Woodlark and to be made available to Kiriwana carvers.

The village people need some guidance in preparing their artifacts for sale. The woods used for carving in the Trobriand are of exceptionally fine quality and artifacts should be cleaned and polished properly to bring out this quality. The appearance of an ebony carving in particular is enhanced greatly by careful polishing.

Some of the best Trobriand art takes the form of painted canoe pros, dancing bats, war shields and house friezes. The paintwork on these artifacts suffers considerable damage in transit and this limits the scope for selling them. The same problem is being faced in the Napepik area where all artifacts are brightly painted. It is thought that the answer lies in mixing the natural pigments with a latex base or gum arabic which should preserve the rough character of the native paint whilst ensuring that it does not rub off so easily. Another approach would be to reproduce the same designs in miniature in ebony wood. Ways and means could also be investigated whereby the line which the Trobrianders rub into the incised decorations in their carvings could be made more permanent.

The foregoing is not intended to disparage the existing work being done to market Trobriand artifacts. The efforts of Mrs. Orwin in purchasing artifacts through the station club have provided a regular outlet to the Kiriwana for their carving and this has in turn encouraged them to engage in regular production. Mrs. Orwin estimates that the annual turnover in artifacts through the station club is £1,000. However, Mrs. Orwin will be leaving the area soon and the future trend should be to put the trade on a more formal and permanent basis utilizing institutions such as Local Government Councils or co-operatives. It is hoped that this department will shortly recruit a specialist to engage solely in the task of encouraging production and assisting in the marketing of native artifacts. It is perhaps fortuitous that this department's plans for active participation in the field should materialise at about the same time as a Kiriwana Local Government Council is to be established.

In conclusion I would like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Orwin for their active interest in the survey and for their generous hospitality.

J. D. BURNEY
(I.D. BURNEY)
Projects Officer

28th June, 1963.
The above report (document 18) also gives information on prices and timber supplies and advice on deforestation and imports from Woodlark Island. Fifty years on and the deforestation problem has not been tackled yet, putting carvers (but also everybody else in the island) in the dire straits of ecological instability.
The Director,
Department of Trade and Industry,
KONINOKU.

Application for assistance in establishing a Native Artifacts Marketing Industry.

When His Honour the Administrator visited this Sub-District in January this year, he asked that something be done to regulate the production and marketing of native artifacts.

2. Carving is the dominant industry of this Sub-District, and brings in some $25,000 each year. You have no doubt seen Trobriand tables and other artifacts on display elsewhere in the Territory.

3. When I put His Honour's request to the last meeting of the Kiriwina Local Government Council it was favourably received, and the council set up what it called "Carving Committees" in each ward to try and bring some order into the haphazard manufacture and marketing of these carvings.

4. The Council is interested in establishing some sort of control over size and quality of these carvings so as to standardise as far as possible, the production and the price. It is proposed that the Committees examine each artifact intended for sale, reject those that are inferior, and approve those that meet the standard by affixing on them, a distinctive trade mark.

5. The Council then proposes to forbid by Council Rule, the sale of any artifact which does not have the trade mark affixed.

6. It would be appreciated if an officer from your business advisory section could visit this island and advise the Council on how to establish this marketing scheme. I suggest that the officer visit the Trobriands by normal weekend tourist charter so that he can see how the carvings are presently marketed to the tourists, and he would then be in a good position to advise the council how to make improvements. (The tourist fare incidently is half the normal scheduled fare and would be a saving to your department.)

7. In the meantime, the Council would also appreciate advice as to how and where trade marks are made and what procedure is necessary to obtain one.

(ML MacKellar)
Assistant District Commissioner.
Subject: Tourist Poster.

An Australian artist Mr. Max Middleton has been painting for some weeks in the Trobiand Islands and will depart on 10th October to finish off his large collection of Trobiand studies, in his Melbourne Studios.

2. Mr. Middleton has given permission for one of his paintings to be used to make a tourist poster, and before he leaves these islands I will inspect his work and select some studies which I consider, when finished, may be suitable subjects for the selected paintings are finished Mr. Middleton will have them photographed, and forward colour slides of them to me. From these slides I will select one from which I consider the poster should be made. I will then forward this slide to you.

At this stage approval is sought for this scheme so that the necessary funds can be reserved and other arrangements made in time for there to be no delay in making the poster after the colour slide arrives.

3. Tourism is the biggest industry in these islands and contributes the following estimated annual income:

- Sale of Carvings to tourist $30,000
- Miscellaneous services to tourists $30,000

Total: $60,000

or $2 per head of population on Kiriwina Island.

Your support of this poster is requested to assist this office in its drive to double the income from tourism, which is part of this sub-district's contribution to the "Double Production" drive for the Milne Bay District.

(M.P. MacKellar)
Assistant District Commissioner.
Assistant District Commissioner,
Losuia,
Milne Bay District.

TROHRIAND ISLAND CARVINGS.

I shall be proceeding to Samarai on December 13th to discuss the above matter with the District Commissioner. Following these discussions I shall write some comments on this and forward a copy to you.

2. As discussed with you during my last visit I have forwarded by airfreight two samples of Tami Island carved dishes. It is not intended that the Kiriwina people use these as bases from which they may carve copies, but if you could arrange for these samples to be shown to the carvers I feel it would be valuable in that they would be able to see the standard of design and finish achieved by hand carvers in other parts of this Territory. The retail price of these samples is $18.00 and $9.00 respectively giving an estimated return to the producer of $10 and $5 respectively.

3. I trust that this will show the Kiriwina carvers the sort of competition they are up against and encourage them to revert to their old standards. I am confident that they can produce design and finish contents equal or superior to the samples enclosed.

(D.J. HANNUX)
Actg. Projects Officer (Small Scale Industries)

Copy sent to
D.C. Samarai.
Dear Mr. Angela,

The show is over and I think we were all glad of the relaxation after the hectic Sydney trip.

Thank you for your assistance in getting David's things together at such short notice. The three craftsmen selected got on really well; adapted to the strange Sydney situation without too much trouble.

The show itself was a work of art, if rather a fiasco, never having seen a Sydney show, I wasn't expecting anything of such a high standard. The crowds were fantastic - every day, the nearest to the thing that impressed me, and the others greatly, that so many new people could flock to one place day after day. David's good reaction (being at home!) was to say that 'Sydney is all the same!' Sydney! The night, the day, it's all the same! The Daily Express demonstration was a great success. David completed one large feature column - worth a substantial price.

It was surprising how many people spoke to ex-Confederate soldiers during the last day.
Our show day began at 7am with breakfast.

7.45 am was pick up. We worked through in session till 3 pm with numerous cups of coffee, tea, hot dogs etc. At 3 pm I had a conference call ordered & we were taken off to our hotel on a sightseeing trip till about 6 pm. We back to the hotel for a smoke & a clean up to return to the show at 7 pm - 9 pm. Towards the end of the time, there were a few hotel people & occasionally one or another had an afternoon or night off to relief.

Excursions were varied & interesting. Sydney people were most helpful & we left the best seat for views on the bridge, through tunnels, over the harbour etc. At the end took the party on a trip to the area showing industry & suburbia on day. We could eat after this.

An important feature of course was the visit of the Royal Family. The next evening, we spent some time dancing to most of us. Daily, there were TV, teetotal & tea party photographers with N.S.W. Legations getting into the act.

This is just a note to give you a brief outline of activities. I will send a full report & accompanying photographs, newspaper articles, and I am getting them together. I also have a
Distroff
25-2-1
Sing le
GS/II

Division of District Administration,
Sub-District Office,
Lesuia,
Milne Bay District,
Papa

14th April, 1972.

Miss D. Schwenke,
Department of Trade & Industry,
Port Moresby.

Dear Miss Schwenke,

Thanks for your charming letter, and thanks for
David in good working order, and thanks for giving him such fun on
his trip. He loved it, and as he is a very valued friend, I am
very grateful.

He asks often about his camera and the pictures he
took. If they should be ready, would you buy an appropriately sized
album (I will reimburse) and send the pix along? I mean don't
let this wait on the completion of a long report or the bookwork.
My reason for asking is that I want David to be ready for quick bit of
gallery and the Sub-District - a small lecture and those
pictures will do our P.R. a shot in the arm.

Good-bye, and thanks again,

(C.Y. Single)
Assistant District Commissioner

277
Appendix C

Catalogue of Massim woodcarvings

The following is a small sample of different types of tokwalu I collected during my fieldwork in the Milne Bay Province for the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), University of Cambridge. Objects are catalogued using a brief description of the item (including its use and the materials) and stating, where possible, the provenance of the artefact and its author. Unless otherwise indicated, all the objects belong to MAA. The last item in this Appendix is a commentary on some of the carvings found in decorated Trobriand yam houses.
OBJECT: Small walking stick (*kaitukwa*)
TYPE OF OBJECT: Tourist art
PROVENANCE: Wabutuma village, Kiriwina Island
ACQUIRED IN: Kuyawa Island, Trobriand Islands
MATERIAL: Ebony wood (*gai*) with mother-of-pearl inlays (*ginenepu*)

Formerly representing the status and high-rank of their owners, walking sticks are currently carved for tourists only. Most of them are at least one meter long and intricately carved. This one is a rare exception, probably owing to the fact that the original piece of wood was too long to carve a lime spatula yet too short to make a proper walking stick. The carving is very refined and denotes the skills and sensibility of the author. This *kaitukwa* was traded for fish by a carver from Wabutuma village in Kiriwina. The carver took his *tokwalu* to Losuia on Easter Sunday in 2010 and gave it to some fishermen from Kuyawa Island in exchange for his catch. The fisherman’s wife sold it to me in a subsequent visit to Losuia.

The carving features an anthropomorphic figure on the top near the handle (perhaps a woman) and an animal below it, most likely a wallaby. Below: detail of walking stick with anthropomorphic features (left) and a carver and his *kaitukwa* in Kwebwaga village.
These two figures are a representation of two founding heroes in Massim mythology. They depict Tudava, the hero that killed the giant man-eater Dokanikani and his mother Bolitukwa (also known as Metigisi or Ilouma). The sculpture to the right portrays Bolitukwa’s pregnancy whereas the one on the left represents Bolitukwa after giving birth to her son Tudava.

The author, Patrick, says that this is a founding myth that belongs to the Lukuba clan. Below is the story as it was told to me by George Mwasaluwa of Obweria village (Cf SN 1 in Appendix A, a different version of the same myth). In fact, there are different versions of this myth in different islands around the Massim. Although other names associated to this myth change, the name of Dokanikani, the man-eater, stays the same in all the versions.

“Dokanikani is not a giant but a man-eater that turned to cannibalism after he tasted his sister’s daughter’s flesh. They (Dokanikani and his sister) lived outside the village, feeding on coconut scraps, until the people of Liluta village invited them to live in the village. MLABWEMA, KWENAMA and TUDAVA sub-clans originated in Liluta. One day Dokanikani’s sister went looking for food and he killed his niece and ate her. He liked it. The sister came back and suspected something, she was so ashamed she left him and went to live in a cave. Meanwhile Dokanikani kept on eating people. He was a big man, actually yes, he was a giant. A woman called BOLITUKWA lived in the cave too, hiding from Dokanikani. She was there because when everybody else left the island, scared that the giant might eat them, she couldn’t find any space in a canoe and was therefore left behind. At some point, drops of water fell into her vagina, making her pregnant. The baby was called TUDAVA. He grew up, and one day asked his mother, why are we in the cave? She told him why. TUDAVA had magic. He could “read” the plants and listen to and understand the birds' language. Thanks to the signs sent by plants and birds, TUDAVA could find Dokanikani. Then, through magic, he led the giant to a

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**OBJECT:** Set of two *tokwalu* figures  
**TYPE OF OBJECT:** Tourist art  
**PROVENANCE:** Iwa Island, Milne Bay Province  
**ACQUIRED IN:** Alotau, MBP  
**MATERIAL:** Polished ebony wood *(gai)*  
**AUTHOR:** Patrick Maganeti
place where Dokanikani was disadvantaged and cut his throat. He then took his head to his uncles in KELI. The uncles told him to go to the gardens and invite people for a feast. Then they made *mona* (taro and coconut dumplings) and TUDAVA put the head of the giant in the clay pot. They ate the *mona* (all of them except for TUDAVA and one of the uncles) and saw the skull at the bottom of the pot at the end of the feast. What's this? It's Dokanikani! He’s dead now. Now we can all go back to the Trobriand Islands!

The style of these two carvings is highly original: the figures have very abstract, barely suggested features. I never saw anything similar to this type of carving anywhere else in the Massim. Patrick (the carver) has been living in Alotau for a long time and it is possible that he may have been influenced in his style by foreign buyers.
OBJECT: Carved storyboard  
TYPE OF OBJECT: Tourist art  
PROVENANCE: Kwebwaga village, Kiriwina Island  
ACQUIRED IN: Kwebwaga village, Kiriwina Island  
MATERIAL: Striped ebony (gai)  
AUTHOR: Yobwita, Kwebwaga village  
TIME OF EXECUTION: 3 weeks  
REFERENCES: See “Sail the Midnight Sun series,” National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Series of 15 panels wrongly attributed to John Kasaipwalova in 1979. Yobwita claims he was the artistic director of the project.

Carved storyboards are fairly recent in the Trobriand Islands. The concept of the storyboard is often attributed to John Kasaipwalova, who is said to have copied it from Sepik artworks as seen in Port Moresby. Although not a carver himself, John K started the SOPI ARTS SCHOOL in the 1970s in Bweka, in the Yalumgwa ward of central Kiriwina. Several master carvers worked together there, exchanging ideas and collaborating in the creation of carvings that were influenced by other styles from all over PNG. Storyboards are visual narratives that offer interpretations of traditional stories and or legends. Yobwita is a renowned master carver and one of the former directors of the Sopi Arts School. He is one of the few carvers in Kiriwina able to carve storyboards, a skill he has passed on to his nephew Joseph Toyalaka. The only school of storyboard carvers in the Trobriand islands is in the village of Kwebwaga. The following is a translation of the story associated to this panel, as narrated by Yobwita himself:

“A young beautiful man, RAUDONEDONE, lives in GUMASILA Island with his mother. RAUDONEDONE has heard about the beauty of a young woman in the island of TEULA (TEWARA in Dobu language), near Dobu, although he has never seen her. One day his mother finds him weaving women's armbands (kwasi). “Is that for that girl, are
you trying to go to see her?” She asks. “Maybe,” says RAUDONEDONE. Then one day while is mother is in the garden he gets ready to sail and departs in his canoe, bound to TEULA. The mother comes back and runs to the beach, climbs up a tree and makes magic (e megai) [part of the mother’s spell was incised on the storyboard by Yobwita], so the sea swells and her son has no choice but to return back home. She has nobody else that can look after her, so she does not want her son to leave. This happens two more times until the son finally manages to make it to the island and marry the young lady. They stay in TEULA for two years until they both decide that it is finally time to return to GUMASILA. They load the canoe with coconuts, betel nuts, pigs and their own baby boy and leave. But at some point a giant octopus named Ilukwakwita seizes the canoe and threatens to sink it. “I forgot to mention this,” says RAUDONEDONE's wife, “we should have given a present to the octopus or else he'll sink our canoe.” They drop betel nut into the sea, they drop coconuts and pigs but the octopus would not let go. Until they take their own son, dress him up with all the traditional ornaments and throw him overboard. The octopus eats him and the canoe is left to sail, finally reaching GUMASILA where RAUDONEDONE and his wife reunite with his mother.

Yobwita makes some comments on the storyboard: the girl's father is a chief, hence the kingfisher (udawada) on the panel. The udawada is a symbol of chiefly rank. Malinowski recounts how Trobrianders fear this giant octopus and how throwing a small boy adorned with valuables is the only way to escape it (1922: 234).
OBJECT: Big drum (Kasosau)
TYPE OF OBJECT: Ritual (music)
PROVENANCE: Okabulula village, Kiriwina Island
ACQUIRED IN: Yalumga village, Kiriwina Island
MATERIAL: Hardwood with mother-of-pearl inlays (ginenepu) and monitor lizard's skin (momla)
AUTHOR: Gelina, Okabulula village

Drums come in two sizes in the Trobriand Islands, the small katunenia (usually beaten with the thumb, see below) and the bigger kasosau (beaten with the hand). They are still used as accompaniment to traditional dancing and singing. Some Christian Evangelical churches in the Trobriand Islands use drums during Mass to accompany the singing of hymns (although plastic and PVC pipes are also used currently).

The upper part of the drum is called Towamomla whereas the open end is called Towabiri.

Inside the drum, towards the middle, there is a thicker part called la boala kikoni (the house of the mice) that is said to improve the resonance of a good drum. Okabulula village is renowned for its tradition in drum making.

Some bigger drums with intricate carvings (often in the shape of a crocodile) are popular types of carvings made for the tourists. This drum has some elements reminiscent of the artefacts made for the tourist market, notably the crocodile-shaped mouth and the legs.

A katunenia drum carved by Gelina from Okabulula village.
OBJECT: Fish sculpture (Tokwalu)
TYPE OF OBJECT: Tourist art
PROVENANCE: Kwebwaga village, Kiriwina Island
ACQUIRED IN: Kwebwaga village
MATERIAL: Kwila wood (meku) with mother-of-pearl inlays (ginenepu)
AUTHOR: Daniel Tobweyova, Kwebwaga

Fish are a popular theme for tokwalu woodcarvings in the Trobriand Islands. They are often represented with their mouths wide open (kapwagega). This one is particularly original. It features an elaborate canoe splashboard (lagim) in the tail (see detail below). The author explained to me that this is because this fish “has a legend” - in the sense that it is a visual representation of a story (kwanebu) or a myth (liliu). Daniel told me the story of the carving: “One canoe went to do kula in Muyuw [Woodlark Island], then they wanted to see Budibudi [a remote archipelago to the East of Woodlark Island]. On their way back the vine lashings on their canoe got damaged and they risked sinking, but one of the persons on board knew this type of magic; he called a big fish [suisayu, identified by some as a porpoise] and the whale took them back safely to Kiriwina on their canoe.” This tokwalu incorporates some traditional esoteric symbols such as those found in the lagim “because it’s a tokwalu about the kula.” Daniel, who was initiated as a woodcarver and learned to visualize and represent stories and symbols throughout his apprenticeship, shows his skill in scaling down the symbols to the size of the fish's tail. Daniel is the maternal uncle of internationally acclaimed Trobriand painter Martin Morobubuna.

Detail of the tail carved in the shape of a lagim (left). A kapwagega tokwalu (fish with open mouth) in Kaulaka village, Vakuta Island, Trobriand Islands (right).
Canoe splashboards (*lagim*) are one of the highest expressions of traditional Trobriand woodcarving. Formerly, they were only made by master carvers who were commissioned by a chief or a person of high rank to complete a sea-going dugout canoe to engage in the *kula* trade. The emblems within canoe splashboards and prowboards (*tabuya*) are stylised renditions of plants and animals or more abstract symbols attached to myths. Some emblems have apotropaic attributes. Among the latter are the anthropomorphic figures known as *bwalai* (one or two human figures, depending on the size of the splashboard and the canoe), who are put there for protection, although according to some people they can also turn against the occupants of the canoe in some cases. Significantly enough, this particular *lagim* features a crucifix in place of the humanoid *bwalai*. Paul, the author of the carving, observes: “I put a cross in the *lagim* because the word of Jesus travelled all over the world, that's why he needs to be in a canoe and travel around. The cross is very important to me. It was given to me by my father [Andrew Kalubaku, a fervent Catholic that launched the Wapipi Catholic School in Kiriwina and campaigned against the use of magic].”

Paul’s carving tools. To the left of the photograph are two *ligogu* (carving adzes); both have Paul’s personal designs carved at the bottom of the shaft.
This is the eastern Massim equivalent of the Trobriand canoe splashboard (*lagim*), known as *kunubwara* in the Budibudi Islands. Both the shape of the boards and the stylistic elements carved within it vary from the Trobriand ones. For instance, some carvers in Budibudi maintain that the two circles seen at the top of the carving are the *kunubwara*’s eyes, just like the *kunubwara* itself is said to be “the canoe’s face.” People in the Budibudi archipelago used to build kula canoes and participate in the kula exchange with Woodlark Island (*Muyuw*). Notwithstanding their absence from the kula for many years now, they still build seagoing dugout canoes for transport and fishing (Budibudi is 80kms east of Woodlark, the nearest island). The people of Budibudi – unlike Trobrianders – decorate even the smallest fishing canoes with prowboards and splashboards. “It is our custom,” they say, “we decorate all the canoes because our ancestors did.” In the past, the splashboards had a similar role to those made in the Trobriand Islands (aesthetic beautification, magic agency, protection, etc.). Like in the Trobriand Islands, the *kunubwara* used to be decorated with red, white and black colours. The colour was applied once the board was completed; the younger participants in a kula expedition would apply colour both to themselves and to the splashboard, beautifying both and identifying one another. To do so, some taboos had to be observed – no chewing betelnut, refraining from having sexual intercourse, etc – so as to make the magic work in order to obtain both kula valuables and women, according to people in Budibudi. The equivalent of the Trobriand *tabuya* (the canoe prowboard) is called *adaban* in Budibudi. The names and the shapes of these canoe boards are the same in neighbouring Woodlark Island.
OBJECT: Stylised carving of canoe (tokwalu)
TYPE OF OBJECT: Tourist art
PROVENANCE: Moligilagi village, Kiriwina Island
ACQUIRED IN: Moligilagi village, Kiriwina Island
MATERIAL: Polished ebony wood (gai) with mother-of-pearl inlays (ginenepu)
AUTHOR: Isaac Saluwai (Labagula Gai)

This unusual carving is part of an unfinished set. The author, a well-known Trobriand carver, has had commissions for carvings from private operators as well as from governmental institutions in Alotau and in Port Moresby. Isaac was working on a gift for PNG’s Prime Minister Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare. The canoe model was meant to sit on top of a wooden panel depicting Somare himself. Isaac never got around carving Somare’s portrait. The canoe is a metaphor. The people sitting in it are hunched. Isaac said: “they are not working, they are not paddling; you see? These people don’t know what to do, all they do is sit in the canoe and expect it to go somewhere. This is a warning to Somare. If people sit down instead of governing, the canoe will not move, it shall not sail anywhere; it will stay put and eventually capsize and sink. The same shall happen to our country if its politicians do not take action.”

The canoe includes some designs that are also found in seagoing kula canoes (of the type known in Kiriwina as tadobu, as opposed to the bigger nagega type found to the east of the Massim, in Gawa and Woodlark Islands. Isaac was initiated as a master carver by his grandfather Vesari and carves using a type of esoteric knowledge and magic known as sopiyelu. He started selling carvings for tourists in the then only hotel in the Trobriand Islands back in the 1970s when he was only a kid. Labagula Gai is not his real surname; it literally means “[his] garden is ebony,” alluding at his pre-eminence and renown as a master carver, so much so that he does not need to garden himself for subsistence like most Trobrianders do.
Trays are common in the Trobriand Islands. In the past, big circular ones called *kaboma* (ka, wooden + boma, bomala, sacred, taboo) or *kaidadodiga* (ka, wooden +dadodiga, diga, to load, to fill up) were used to carry cooked food as an offering to someone. The Trobriand old custom establishes that when carrying cooked food to someone it cannot be concealed but has to be displayed for everybody to see it. Such big wooden dishes were also used to eat communally. Nowadays the trays are made for tourists only. The shape has varied, from the big, hardly decorated circular trays of the past to the profusely adorned containers seen nowadays that often take the shape of animals (turtles, fish, clam shells, etc.).

Highly polished and decorated trays like this one are popular among highly-skilled Trobriand carvers, able to produce such refined examples of craftsmanship with very basic tools (mostly a small pocket knife only). Carvers are aware that this type of trays are much sought after by tourists. They command high prices given their use in the hospitality sector (some of these trays can be seen in hotels all over PNG).
OBJECT: Sculpture of a snail (*Tokwalu*)
TYPE OF OBJECT: Tourist art
PROVENANCE: Tamure hamlet, Yalungwa village, Kiriwina Island
ACQUIRED IN: Tamure hamlet
MATERIAL: Kerosene wood (*ganogwa, copaifera langsdorfi*)
AUTHOR: Mokakum, Tamure hamlet

Small carving made with the leftovers from a big tray carved out of a kerosene tree, so as to use up all the available wood (this is a common practice among carvers in Kiriwina, given the increasing difficulty to find good wood for carving and the necessity to maximise potential sources of income through the sale of small, cheaper carvings). Mokakum, the author, picked an original subject, the snail (*duduwa*). Mokakum explained that the snail is a powerful animal: “My father taught me that everything is in the snail’s shell; based on what’s already there, it can outgrow anything.” Below are some examples of other small-sized *tokwalu* made with wood off cuts from bigger carvings.

Pig woodcarving (left). Pig-shaped *tokwalu* (*bunukwa*) have never ceased to be popular; they are found in museum collections all over the world. Detail of a wallaby (*wela*) woodcarving (right).
These type of stools are carved from a single block of wood of the *meku* tree. Only the people of Bwetalu village, on the western side of north Kiriwina Island, carve stools and tables (the latter are made from bigger tree trunks). Missionaries and traders are credited for promoting in the past these type of carvings among the people of Bwetalu. Ms Lumley in particular, the wife of a pearl trader who settled in Kiriwina in the early 1930s, is said to have encouraged carvers from Bwetalu to make pieces of furniture for the Australian and European markets (see Campbell 2002: 45). The abundance of the right, big-sized trees around the swampy area of Bwetalu – as opposed to the lack of trees whatsoever in other parts of the island – is one of the reasons why stools have stayed a Kuboma specialisation. Although this piece was made in Kuboma Steven Okaulayagila from Yalumgwa village added further decorations on the top (see details below). It is common for carvers to work on other people’s *tokwalu*. Unlike some Bwetalu carvers, Steven did not use chisels to decorate the stool; he made the patterned incisions with his pocketknife.
OBJECT: Decorated yam house (*liku*)
TYPE OF OBJECT: Traditional building
PROVENANCE: Tukwaukwa village, Kiriwina Island
AUTHOR: Kabata Mokawola

This impressive yam house was commissioned in 2009 by Kwewaya, the Tabalu chief of Tukwaukwa village in Kiriwina. Tukwaukwa is the largest village in the Trobriand Islands. Despite assistance from his in-laws, Kwewaya was unable to completely fill the *liku* with yams.

Detail of the front of Kwewaya’s decorated *liku*. According to most Trobrianders, the colours on the *udawada* (the red and black emblems of a stylised kingfisher incised and painted on each side of the *kavalapu*, the flat, white rafters or gable boards enclosing the
painted triangular cover of the yam house) are reversed. The back of the udawada should be black and its “belly” is usually red (see below). When I pointed this out to Kwewayaya his answer was: “I am a very high-ranked chief, I should know better than anybody else how I want my emblems to be painted. That’s why I can have them this way.”

Kwenama’s resting house (ligsa, buneyova) in Bawai hamlet, Moligilagi village, Kiriwina Island. Chiefly resting houses are decorated similarly to yam houses. Note how the udawada in this ligsa are painted in the customary way, black on the back and red in front. The mwamwala (the gargoyle-like face, see Figure 3.8) can be seen on top of the tympanum where the kavalapu boards meet.

Sometimes the longitudinal (kebudaka) and transverse (kelagim) logs of chiefly yam houses are decorated with a carving known as kabununa waga (lit. “the nose of the canoe”). In some occasions this carving has the shape of a canoe (see left image, Mkwemai’s liku in Buduwelaka, Kiriwina Island, 2009). Mkwemai is the chief of the Mlabwema dala. Some people claim that having a kabununa waga in the shape of a canoe signals that the owner of the liku is involved in kula. This carving keeps its name even when it does not portray a canoe (see right image, Kelai’s liku in Kaurigova hamlet,
Emblems used as *kabununa waga* include dog’s heads like the one photographed above, sea eagles, parrots and other animals. Despite most people in Kiriwina stating that the *kabununa waga* is only a decoration, some informants also maintain that *liku* owners may commission the carving of a specific emblem to signify their belonging to that particular *dala*, as represented by the sub-clan’s totemic animal.

A *kabununa waga* in the form of a stylised bird, photographed in Kiriwina by C.G. Seligman in 1903-04 during his fieldwork in the Massim (MS 364, C.G. Seligman Collection, Archives of The Royal Anthropological Institute).

An example of *mwamwala* guarding the top of a *liku* in Kaurigova hamlet. The *mwamwala* is considered to be a *tokwat* a spirit. Given the right magic, the *mwamwala* can be put to the task of guarding a dwelling from evildoers. Some informants contend that *tokwat* can also live in the posts and the beams of the house with similar protecting
duties. Uridoga from Kutoila hamlet explained it in these terms: “Whoever approaches a dwelling with bad intentions, trying to steal something or harm the occupants, shall get disease-stricken by the house tokwai.” Patrick Maganeti from Iwa Island claims that in some places in the Massim the mwamwala has a Janus-like appearance with two carved faces looking in opposite directions. Situated on top of the roof, one of the carvings faces the sky on the lookout for flying witches while the other looks down, guarding the entrance of the hut. According to Patrick, these house spirits are unable to strike trespassers; their duty is to warn the house owner of an impending danger by making loud noises.

Janus-like carving at MAA, collected in the Massim in the 1970s by anthropologist Michael Young (1978.87). Although the object is catalogued as “airport art,” this carving may have been inspired by a mwamwala figure. Janus-type tokwalu are common in lime spatulas and walking sticks in many museum collections, making Patrick’s explanation a plausible one.

These carvings of “a human-headed bird” and “head of reef-heron” were collected by Seligman in the Trobriand Islands in 1903-04. This is one of the plates from the Seligman Collection at The Royal Anthropological Institute (MS 364) from which Seligman drew the sketches published as Figure 48 in his book The Melanesians of British New Guinea (1910: 685).

The carvings collected by Seligman evidence the variety of forms of the mwamala.
Sketch of the front part of a yam house with names of elements and emblems.