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Winds and seas: Exploring the pulses of place in *kula* exchange and yam gardening

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To Professor Erhard Schlesier, 1926–2018¹

Introduction: Movements in the Massim

Austronesians have a common history of seafaring and exchanging, and this chapter explores the movements of people and objects within the *kula* system of gift exchange in southeastern Papua New Guinea as an example of an Austronesian ‘matrix of movement’ (Ingold 2000: 219). I will demonstrate that their journeys and other movements occur in a social space that is experienced as a multilayered web of clan-based communities and a patchwork of defined, often named, spaces (called *mwatui* in the Dobu language) that are entered and crossed, exited, circumvented or visited depending on the social relation of persons to

¹ Professor Emeritus Erhard Schlesier passed away in 2018. Without him, I would never have embarked on this long journey and I am forever grateful for his mentorship and teachings. This chapter is dedicated to him, although words will never suffice to express my feelings in February 2018 when I looked at the mountains of Me’udana, where he did his field research, and realised I could never meet him again.

the space. Socially significant movements often occur in regular bursts, or pulses, as the gardening cycle as well as the *kula* activities are responding to the annual seasons and social events that encourage or prohibit them. People cannot walk around freely; they are obliged to respect the wishes of the landowners when they leave their own *mwatui*, hence the choice of routes is limited to certain paths, blocks of land, villages, beaches, reefs and islands. Strangers or trespassers were not treated kindly in the past (see Fortune 1932), and I have more than once witnessed physical harm done to supposed trespassers during my fieldwork on Dobu Island.²

The concept of movement on a 'path', as it refers to the journey from A to B, is widespread among Austronesians. I will demonstrate that, rather than being seen as linear and absolute, the term, for the islanders of the *kula* region, describes a motion concerning various *mwatui* that will be involved in an individual's journey, causing moral and practical considerations and challenges at times. Depending on their social role, people may have different *mwatui* at their disposition, using principles of clan, lineage and adoption to negotiate them. Some spaces are considered mostly neutral and public, like the wet line on beaches where the waves lap on the shore, while others, such as cemeteries, are prohibited for anyone who is not part of the lineage. Some *mwatui* are regarded as dangerous and spirit-inhabited while others, like a church, are seen as safe. Time also matters when considering which route to take, as day and night provide different restrictions and opportunities, the seasons and the weather determine which options are feasible and the cycle of feasting changes the usual rules during events. Since warfare ended in the 1890s, overseas exchanges have become the main *'eda* (routes) for men to achieve renown. The *mwatui* of *kula* journeying appear as sea spaces that are different from land only in that they are free for all to enter, cross and exit. Linguistically, they are not different from land spaces, but in reality, the challenge of ocean travel and its opportunities make sea *mwatui* more exciting to travel than paths on land. Sea travel requires complex knowledge of the seasonal

2 I conducted fieldwork on Dobu and surrounding islands from 1992 to 1994 and for shorter visits in 1995, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2016 and 2018. My gratitude to the many islanders who worked with me has no limits. This chapter is a collaborative project with those many men and women over the years. Neddy Daniel from Dobu Island never tired of reflecting on semantic questions, but the bulk of information on winds and seas was shared by Synod Timothy, a *kula* master and former captain of a cargo boat who knows the waters and seasons. I am fluent in the Dobu language that serves as lingua franca among the older generation of *kula* masters.

winds and how to navigate them, but in comparison with Micronesia and Polynesia, here island destinations are close enough to travel by waymarks if the weather is favourable.³

***Kula* exchange: The hard work of giving**

Kula exchange is famous in the social sciences as the archetypal example of gift exchange with delayed reciprocity. Two kinds of objects are passed between a chain of partners in a large maritime region (the ‘Massim’), providing strong networks of support, a competitive element between the participants and the thrill of adventure. The fame of *kula* is based on a classic monograph by Bronislaw Malinowski, titled *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922)—the best-known volume of his ethnographies about the Trobriand Islanders. *Kula* has also been known in sociology since Marcel Mauss elaborated on the notion of reciprocity by using it as one example in his classic monograph *The Gift* (1990). More recent debates on the relevance of *kula* in sociocultural anthropology were published in a *kula* conference volume edited by Leach and Leach (1983) and in the works of Fred Damon (1983a, 1983b, 1990, 2000, 2002, 2017) and Nancy Munn (1986, 1990). Complicated concepts, from reciprocity to value and gender, have benefited from *kula*-related material (see Graeber 2001).

The valuables used for *kula* exchange are cut from shell: one is a wide ring cut from the *Conus* shell (called *mwali*) and the other consists of tiny red shell disks chipped from the thin red layer inside *Chama* oysters (called *bagi*, *veigun* or *soulava*). With decorative shells and beads, the valuables are fashioned in specific styles that indicate part of their value. Patina and the knowledge that a valuable has circulated many times add to the beauty of cut and decoration, but the assessment of value remains contested in many cases. There are four categories of rank, from newly made and small to ancient and very fine. Two valuables of the highest rank, called *dagula* (Dobu: ‘head decoration’), appear in Plates 9.1 and 9.2.

3 For Central Carolinians, comparable named sea spaces are documented (for example, Alkire 1974: 45; D’Arcy 2006: 98) and, although on a much larger scale than the *kula* travellers, many similarities point to common relationships between Austronesian peoples and their seas of islands. Mimi George has recently argued that ancestral *mana* can be directed to manipulate the winds and gods in Taumako Atoll, Polynesia (2012, 2018).

Plate 9.1 *Mwali* named Lala, picture taken in Wabununa (Woodlark Island) at the house of Chief Dibolele in February 2016

Photo: Susanne Kuehling.

Plate 9.2 *Bagi* named Komakala'kedakeda, held by Toulitala in Bihawa (Duau, Normanby Island) in February 2016

Photo: Susanne Kuehling.

As more than 1,000 shell ornaments of each type of *kula* valuable travel on their '*eda*' (routes) in opposite directions between the islands, they accumulate individual fame on their journey—on their past '*eda*'—that rubs off on to the persons who hold them temporarily. They are mostly given on credit by the host to the guest and returned when the former host visits his former guest. Ideally, these partnerships are not only lifelong but are also passed on as an important part of one's heritage from the maternal uncle, thereby remaining within the matrilineage. The social networks that are maintained for *kula*, the magic, moral principles and stories that are required for successful exchanges and the specific resources on the islands of the *kula* region are at the root of the sociopolitical systems and egalitarian structures. These valuables—*bagi* and *mwali*—can be used to purchase pigs and canoes. They are indispensable in local exchanges between families, regulating social relations—for example, in marriage exchanges, compensation payments and especially in mortuary rituals (see Damon and Wagner 1989). *Kula* travel and subsistence gardening are tied together by the seasons and the varied environments of the region.

For the Austronesians of the *kula* region, as in many other rural areas, movements are mostly restricted to subsistence activities and family events, leaving individuals little room for choosing their paths. After pacification and conversion to Christianity around the 1890s, new opportunities opened up, as markets and church events provided new, good reasons to move about in a morally acceptable manner (Kuehling 2014), but today's islanders continue to encourage each other to *miabaula* (literally, 'to stay at home and mind one's business') (Kuehling 2005: 82). To wander around the island without legitimate purpose (*adadana besobeso*) is regarded as a wasteful, impolite, disrespectful and potentially dangerous activity and travel is legitimate only when it is classified as 'work' (*paisewa*; see Kuehling 2005: 91). *Paisewa* refers to laudable activities that require persons to do things that are for the community (or lineage), such as gardening, childbearing, mourning, building houses, canoes and other structures, household work, weaving, exchanges of food between affinal relatives, mortuary rituals and, in particular, exchanges of the most valuable things: large yams, pigs and *kula* valuables.

Longer journeys across the ocean are normally related to the movement of these most valuable objects. A *kula* expedition provides a perfect reason to travel in a morally acceptable manner; it is a laudable affair, comparable with visiting family, attending feasts and helping with transport for organising pigs and other resources (sago leaf for house-building, betel nuts, pandanus rolls for weaving mats, clay pots and dried sago bundles). To handle *kula* valuables on behalf of one's matrilineage counts as equally important as providing pigs and yams for distribution. These three items are clustered as '*une*, the most important things in an adult's life (see Kuehling 2005). As the late Ruth Lakatani, a *kula* master from Mwemweyala hamlet on Dobu, would tell me, '*une* are very important [*yage sinabwana*]; other things are worthless [*yage besobeso*]' (Fieldnotes, September 2015).⁴

4 I received funding for this study from the Canadian Social Science Humanities Research Council as well as internal funds from the University of Regina (VP Research Fund and Travel Fund). I am very grateful for the support from my colleagues at the University of Regina—in particular, Nilgun Önder (Associate Dean, Research), Sally Gray and the office of Research Services; Murray Daku and the office of Financial Services; and Tobias Sperlich, who, as head of my department, shifted my classes around the research and showed general support when needed most. The members of both research teams and their leaders, Philip Baloioloi and Synod Timothy, deserve my sincere gratitude, as they volunteered for this project and neither expected nor received any payment for their hard work. The visual anthropologist on our team, Regina Knapp, was cheerful and productive even when the circumstances were impossible (as on the second expedition, when the boat's generator was defective and batteries could only be charged when the engine was running).

In the Dobu-speaking southern region, there are two main reasons to go on a *kula* expedition. First, it is required to cleanse a mourner or reintroduce an heir after the death of a *kula* man or woman (this kind of expedition is called *kwausa*). Second, a strong leader can call out for a competitive journey, in which all participants try to reach a specific goal, called *yawala*. The goal could be to bring back a named shell valuable or a set amount of valuables. In the northern *kula* region—from the Amphlett Islands in the west to Muyuwa (Woodlark, also Muyuw), Nasikwabu, Yanabwa and Egom in the east—*kula* events are also centred on competition and mortuary rituals, but the details and terms differ. Individuals who are involved in *kula*—usually not more than one or two men per matrilineage—negotiate with their wives, sisters and mothers when they can go on a *kula* trip to plan, discuss and eventually formalise the exchanges of *kula* valuables. Those men, often accompanied by a young relative as an apprentice, travel in two directions to visit their partners. Their ‘work’ (*paisewa*) of *kula* is the sum of their experiences during the journeys, the physical discomfort caused by being at a strange place, drinking ‘strange water’ and depending on the hosts’ generosity, the emotional hardships of passing on a beloved valuable and the hard work of providing for a *kula* visitor, reciprocating the hospitality that the host has previously experienced (Kuehling 2017).

Map 9.1 The *kula* region

Source: Malinowski (1922: Map III).

Going for a spin

Obviously, not all movements can be classified as ‘work’. While *kula* expeditions are the only way to experience the larger island world, many men admit they sometimes go for ‘a little spin’, as they say in English. Due to the predominantly matrilineal residence pattern, men routinely move more frequently between villages as they live with their wives but carry responsibilities for their own matrilineage. Their obligations in both places provide excuses that allow them to stop and chat on their way or take a detour for personal enjoyment. For unmarried men, the restrictions are even more relaxed. At night-time, these spins lead either to the house of a girlfriend (*gwali*) or to a gathering in the ‘bush’ with peers (*ediu*), where drinking and barbecuing of a (perhaps stolen) chicken are typical activities (as I was told). Girls are strongly advised to stay at home during the night, as pack-rapes by drunken men (called ‘line-ups’: *lain*) are not unheard of. Women are rarely seen walking to their gardens alone, to avoid encounters with men ‘on a spin’.⁵ Most women prefer not to travel on the sea, although they enjoy an hour of afternoon fishing just off the village, in the company of a child or two, to provide a little protein for the evening meal. Night fishing, or fishing with nets or kites, is restricted to men, in line with the general concept that women should stay in the house at night.

Daytime spins may include a canoe trip. On a beautiful calm day, the commonly shared desire to spontaneously paddle across the sparkling surface of the ocean, enjoying the beauty and looking out for nothing in particular makes it acceptable for unmarried men to travel by sea without explicit purpose. In a well-known story, the hero paddles around just for pleasure, as he explains to everyone whom he encounters in a slightly apologetic manner after being asked what he is up to (Kuehling 1998: 329–36):

‘Ei, niba, mwao tautauya?’

‘Hi, cross-cousin, where are you going?’

Enega i gwae: ‘Ya, tuga ya eneyaneya.’

So he responded: ‘Nah, I am just paddling around without purpose.’

5 Reo Fortune’s statement that ‘they rarely have to be raped’ when encountered alone (1932: 77) does not reflect my experiences and conversations with many girls and women.

*Siwalowa nuagu i ewena ga ya
eneyaneya.*

The calm sea has attracted my
thinking/feeling and so I just
paddle around.

I ona: 'O, bobo'ana.

He said: 'Oh, that's good.

*Nate u neyaneya u naonao
ebwe'una wate yage iabe u loba.*

Paddle to over there and you
will find one special something.

Ebwe'una salu ena.

On one of the islands.'

This exchange represents the appropriate style of an encounter in the region, as persons who move always have to explain themselves to the people they encounter in a deferential manner. The short dialogue also documents the usual way to meet strangers while moving. First, the term for cross-cousin (*niba*) is used to indicate relatedness in a more general manner, implying that they are from a different clan (which in the past indicated a more severe level of strangeness than today). Second, our hero literally justified his purpose-free arrival: he stated that 'my thinking/feeling had been so attracted by the calm sea that I just took off and paddled around'. In response, the local shows his approval to the humble admission of just spinning and regales him with information about 'finding something' when paddling further and then 'crossing' (*naonao*).

Kula journeys

My focus in this chapter is on *kula*-related ocean travel, not on individual adventures ('spins') or land-based journeys. Unlike previous accounts of *kula* exchange that have foregrounded the individual desires and musings of *kula* masters (Damon 1983a, 1983b, 1990, 2000, 2002; Małinowski 1920, 1922; Munn 1986, 1990), I will here dwell more on the communal aspects, the shared environment and belief system and the shared understanding of journeys among *kula* travellers. For generations now, young men have been tested and observed by their fathers and uncles, so that the smartest child of a man's sister would become the principal heir of his *kula* partnerships. These partnerships are ideally self-renewing and most trustworthy. A man 'travels and speaks for himself in public, but he will always have his sisters' children in mind' when transacting and plotting, as I was told many times. *Kula* travellers should therefore be understood as the representatives of their respective matrilineages. They share not only the valuables, but also the stories of their experiences with those left behind, contributing strongly to general conceptions of places in the region.

Plate 9.3 Chief Dibolele of Wabununa (Woodlark Island) displays some of his *bagi* valuables for inspection

Photo: Susanne Kuehling.

In addition to the matrilineage of a man, his household plays a significant role in his success in *kula*. Most men live at the place of their wife and children, who are from a different clan and matrilineage, yet they contribute to the success of the journey in various ways—for example, by exercising *miabaula* during the *kula* journey, as their ‘useless walkabout’

(*adadana besobeso*) can hurt the traveller or damage the exchanges. While a man crosses the ocean, his entire extended family back home remains linked to his fate, in spite of the distance. A wife and a son will receive some *kula* valuables to thank them for their efforts in supporting the husband's or father's *kula*, but most of the inheritance of *kula* stays within his matrilineage, with a man's sister's children. Through their individual actions—and this includes magic, dream travel and witchcraft—the islanders never feel unobserved or singular (see Kuehling 2005), so neither persons nor places should be seen as disconnected from each other when imagining Austronesian paths. The social syndrome called *gwasa* (or *nadiwala*) speaks to this connectedness, as people in a hamlet suffer from hangover-like symptoms when a visitor has left after staying overnight. *Gwasa* lasts for three days and effectively slows every activity in the hamlet and gardens as people believe that they are more likely to hurt themselves when working hard during *gwasa*.

The *kula* region, from a villager's point of view, forms a web of linked matrilineages that intersect and overlap. Former headmistress Millicent Laibobo recalled the time when she had to travel to strange places as part of her job. She explained:

Kula is very important: when I travel and people hear the names of my mother or her brother, their partners go and prepare my bed, my food, my betel nuts. All for free. (Interview, March 2016, Asagamwana, Bwaiowa)

Over and over, people emphasised this aspect of *kula* as the most desirable 'profit'—the exchanges are roughly balanced over time and there is no material gain involved other than the freedom of travel and the wider horizon that it provides.

Routes and paths: The concept of '*eda*'

The English terms 'path' or 'lane' do not translate easily into the Dobu language. Its equivalent, '*eda*' (or *keda* or *ked* in other languages of the *kula* region), is less topographically and rather socially defined. A 'path' is not only a lane, footpath or road, but also can be the solution to a problem, a potential route to another person, such as an exchange partner (both in physical and social space) or the journey of a *kula* shell valuable from hand to hand, beach to beach, circulating through the *kula* network.

Only valuables circulate (*sakowasi*) through the *kula* network; persons only visit the next stops in two directions. Dobu-speaking people, in their perspective, do not ‘walk on a path’ but cross a matrix of named spaces. To the islanders, the world is divided into geographical spaces (*mwatui*) that are subdivided into even smaller *mwatui* in multiple ways. Persons cross these *mwatui* as they go about their lives—for example, when they visit the small outhouse on the beach: they first leave the interior of the house (*toolo*), cross the verandah (*apwesa*), climb down (*mwauta*), cross the village space on the way to the beach (*dolo*), cross the beach (*dolo*) and enter (*lugu*) the small hut over the sea after climbing (*mwela*) and crossing (*abala*) a shaky ‘bridge’. After finishing their business, persons reverse these actions as they come out (*apwesa*), walk in parallel to the beach (*nao*), go back to the house (*laga*) across the beach and enter (*lugu*) the village space. While this is a simple route, choosing the right path in other contexts sometimes creates difficulties and conundrums and wise men are praised for picking the right *’eda*.

Due to the moral dimensions and wisdom required to move appropriately and successfully, the concept of *’eda* offers itself to metaphorical use, and indeed, I have heard it in many different contexts, ranging from highly formal to casual. In speeches, when discussing the movements of valuable objects as their *’eda* or commenting on incorrect movement as *’edagesi* (‘wrong *’eda*’), the term has a legal undertone, but when young people scheme to meet a mate, the term becomes more playful and acquires a sexual undertone. When women talk about their *’eda* to the garden, they often refer to their hard work in even reaching their yam garden. Challenges may be pondered by searching for a suitable *’eda* out of calamity. Taking a ‘heavy’ (*mwau-*) route may take its toll or lead to glory, depending on the individual’s capability. In some contexts, following the appropriate *’eda* is regarded as laudable ‘hard work’ (*paisewa*). There are *mwatui* of the supernatural—spaces where witches and sorcerers are believed to move, where the spirits of the dead are living, and journeys to such spaces are dangerous. ‘There is a hidden world under the cooking stones’, as my friend stated in a confidential conversation, referring to the *mwatui* of *welabana* (witches) and *balau* (sorcerers) that the islanders believe exist in parallel to their physical world.

Islanders acknowledge that women and men tend to follow different *’eda* as adults, each gender group using their specific routes to fame. Women spend most of their time in their hamlet and both last year’s and this year’s gardens, usually working in small groups with their children. They may

paddle out to catch some small fish, within sight of the shore, but are not supposed to roam around alone at night or further out on the ocean. Men are more regularly moving around, from their wife's place to their sister's village and to the bush looking for prey or building material. They are the fishermen and canoe builders; their universe is larger for they are mobile on the ocean.

Mwatui: Named spaces

On land, *mwatui* are owned spaces, usually belonging to a number of people at the same time. Dobu Island, for example, is the large *mwatui* with which I am most familiar. On Dobu, the 60-some hamlets—each a few huts on stilts—are spread around the coastline, forming six separate *kula mwatui* that are quite independent and now elect their own councillor. These *mwatui* are Edugaula, Mwanomwanona, Enaia, Balabala, Wabuna and Egadoi. The island itself takes precedence over these subdivisions. When all the *kula* people from Dobu travel together, they call it *Gulebubu yawalina*: the *kula* expedition (*yawala*) of the dormant volcano that forms the island (named Gulebubu: literally, 'the Rock of the Grandparents'). Within each of these *mwatui*, there are bush lands, gardens, swamps and grass areas as well as several hamlets, each belonging to one or two matrilineages, preferably of the same moiety of bird clans, either those residing in nests or those residing in tree holes (see Kuehling 2005: 67). The island is surrounded by *mwatui*: travellers first reach the *mwatui* of the shore (*loniuniuna*: 'seeing stones and movement') and then the shallow part on the beach (*lodababa'ina*: 'where the waves are moving'). If nobody welcomes the travellers, they will sit on the dry sand close to the waves, gazing towards the ocean, waiting to be approached and allowed on to the island by the landowning matrilineage (*susu*).

All *mwatui* are managed by the matrilineages whose male and female elders assign an individual to use it (for gardening or settlement). In all cases, permission is required to enter the *mwatui* of another lineage. Each matrilineage holds a number of exclusive plots of land near the village; one is a little bit further inland, where the storage huts for yams are located, and another one, also in the vicinity of the hamlet and overgrown with shrubs and often marked by croton plants, is their cemetery. Those two *mwatui* are for the exclusive use of the owners; people from different lineages can only enter together with landowners (this includes husbands

in this matrilineal setup). Before 1900, primary burials were done in the centre of the hamlet, and these *tabu* spaces still exist, unused but still charged with power, invisible to the stranger but always present to the family who lives around it. In the past, only members of the matrilineage would enter their lineage's central burial space (*ali'ali*); others could not cross the hamlet but walked around its periphery, staying in the less restricted space of a footpath or a beach.

There are six bird clans (*manua*) on Dobu, spread across the island. Being in the *mwatui* of one's bird clan is seen as being with family ('we are one'), as all the food of that land can be consumed without hesitation or repercussions.⁶ I learned repeatedly that, in the past, clan was indeed the connection that ensured the partner was safe at a foreign place. One reason was, as I was informed many times over, that fellow clan members could not be eaten in cannibalism times, as eating someone of one's own clan is believed to cause a debilitating fatal disease called *lala*, which causes the abdomen to swell and the blood to turn 'bad'. I witnessed a situation where a man who had passed away during a *kula* expedition in 1993 was left behind on Normanby Island because 'his partner was of the same clan so he could be buried there' (Fieldnotes 1993; also Kuehling 2005: 202). Due to frequent conflicts over land during my fieldwork, I could not map the clan lands outside the hamlets, but Map 9.2 shows the six *kula mwatui* and roughly indicates the dispersed clans and their *mwatui* of residence on Dobu Island.

Often, footpaths (*'eda*) follow the boundary of two clan *mwatui* or are located between the sandy beach and the soil of someone's land. Ownership, clearly, is a complicated matter in this system: while a person may be assigned as the owner of a specific taro plant, the *mwatui* of that plant is situated inside the *mwatui* of the *susu*, which is also part of the clan land of that *susu*. After harvesting that taro plant, seniors of either *susu* or clan level may advise a person to plant the next one somewhere else and so a person's house garden *mwatui* may keep changing, as does one's yam garden (*bagula*) and last year's garden (*yakwala*) in the rhythm of swidden agriculture that is practised in the *kula* region.

6 Some clans stored the bones of their deceased in secret and exclusive limestone caves on the Sailele peninsula. This practice is now discontinued and one of the caves has been inaccessible since 2016.

Map 9.2 Map of Dobu Island, with clans from census taken in 1993

Source: Author's creation.

Some key attributes of *mwatui* were created in the past. When a person dies, the house of the deceased will be abandoned and seen as a 'dirty' (*baibaila*) space. No new house will be built on this *mwatui* once it has fallen apart. As long as memory lasts, the space remains connected to the deceased person and the life that once happened there. The children and grandchildren of a man will not eat any food that has been grown near his house or eat pork raised nearby, not just because it is regarded as disrespectful but also because it is believed to cause a dangerous disease. These spaces remain connected to their deceased paternal relative for two generations, no matter how a village changes its appearance over the decades.

In theory, *mwatui* on the islands of *kula* exchange could be mapped according to interlinking bird clans, likely indicating that individuals are intimately related to *mwatui* all across the region. It used to be advisable to marry the daughter of a *kula* partner to ensure stability in the multilinked networks of overseas partners. Such links have left traces, resulting in people on different islands stating that they are 'the same' regarding

lineage and clan.⁷ The ocean is part of this patchwork of subdivided spaces. Although not linked to clans (as far as I am aware), the routes that can be sailed or paddled are named *mwatui*. These *mwatui* eclipse smaller *mwatui* like reefs, islets, rocks, a vortex ‘that pulls the canoe under’ named Mwanou (Mwasiuna Taikeu, February 2016) and other features. Mythological tracks of culture heroes abound and connect the region (for example, Fortune 1932: 216–31; Young 1991).

Travel is experienced as the result of moving between *mwatui*, whether on land or by sea. For example, if a man goes to the beach, intending to travel by canoe, he crosses the *mwatui* on land and, pushing (*pela*) the vessel from further up the beach, enters the *mwatui* where the waves lap up to the sand and wades (*gayo*) into the shallow sea (*lodabadaba*). He climbs into the canoe and paddles past the region where he can still see the stones on the ground (*loniuniuna*) while setting up his sail. All these motions fall under the larger category of going seawards (*dolo*) as he reaches the zone of deep ocean (*ola simasimata*). There are reefs (*nuwa*) and spots where certain fish can be caught sometimes—smaller *mwatui* related to subsistence, usually named and owned by a matrilineage or clan. In the Dobu region, one can almost always see some land, so the traveller is unlikely to reach a zone of deep and endless ocean (*bwagabwaga daita*) but will usually reverse the motions to go on land (*laga*) on a neighbouring island to visit a relative or exchange partner. Epeli Hau’ofa has famously argued that, for Pacific islanders, the ocean is not a restricting boundary but a place of opportunity and movement, a ‘sea of islands’ (1994, 1998). There is no linguistic difference between *mwatui* on land and *mwatui* on the ocean for the *kula* region.

***Kula* as a regional system**

Overseas travel in southeastern Papua New Guinea, as in many other island regions, was dangerous in the past, when raiding and occasional cannibalism caused severe fear of foreign coasts. Many islands had no name as they did not constitute a unit, so the clustering by the early European explorers does not correspond with local notions of island

7 In the century since pacification, the relevance of clans as places of the same intrinsic substance has decreased, but Reo Fortune’s remark that ‘totemism is not important in establishing international exchange partnerships’, based on his fieldwork on Tewara Island in the late 1920s (1932: 209), is inconsistent with my data.

space. The sea of *kula* islands excludes many islands, like Goodenough, and only spots on the other large islands of the D'Entrecasteaux archipelago belong to it. It consists of more than 30 islands: the Duau region of Normanby, the Bwaoiwa coast of Fergusson and Dobu in the D'Entrecasteaux archipelago form the southern boundary; the Trobriand Islands and Muyuwa (or Muyuw, Woodlark Island) are the northern extension (see Map 9.3). In between are smaller groups of low islands, reefs and sandbanks, making it a treacherous region to navigate. The *kula* exchange connects at least 10,000 islanders across the region, providing news, assistance and kinship. In the past, essential items like clay pots and canoes, pigs and other resources were included in the network and still today large canoes can be bought with four or so *kula* valuables and a few pigs. Large clay pots are a typical (and welcome) gift to *kula* partners, who pass them on to a wife or other female relative when returning home. The valuables themselves are an important resource for places that do not produce them, like Duau, Dobu and Bwaiowa, as they, like the other *kula* communities, need them for affinal exchanges within their islands, mostly as bride-price and mortuary gifts, but also for the use of land and as compensation 'payment'. I believe that many more communities indirectly benefit from the network, as gossip and objects are always in motion and people are related to places outside the *kula* region, too.

The experience of space is ever changing in time, so in this section I will explore how the winds and seas, seasons and individual knowledge of their patterns contribute to the experience of *kula* travel in the Massim region of Papua New Guinea. Since Małinowski's classic study of *kula* in the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), research on the ground has mostly focused on intensive studies in various island communities.

The named sea spaces of the *kula* region and beyond invoke memories—for example, of myths and songs that narrate the mythical wandering of culture heroes in the island world. For *kula* traders, traces of the mythical fights between giant snakes and powerful cockatoos are still visible in the landscape of the Duau coast and the movements of a mythical snake from Goodenough Island to Duau and further northeast are not only visible in the formation of reefs but also present in the minds of the islanders, who are always willing to share the public version of these stories. Mermaids and sprites populate the mind when travelling these *mwatui*, but also stories of wrecked ships, drowned valuables and passengers and brave (or not so brave) captains and crews.

Map 9.3 Languages and winds of the *kula* region (red spots are *kula* communities)

Source: Author's creation.

Since most of the islands in the *kula* region can be reached in steps of two-day canoe trips, it comes as no surprise that the islanders are interrelated and share a sense of community. Yet it could be argued that, without the moral dimension legitimising travel, such connections would not exist in spite of the short distances, and in fact, many islands in the east of the region are less connected since they lost their link to the *kula* network around 1900. The barren, uninhabited Conflict Islands were once a critical stopover point for canoe fleets connecting Misima and Sudest to the *kula* region, bringing red shell strings as part of their exchanges. These strings were fashioned into *bagi* by specialists within the *kula* region (Bwanabwana). While named sea spaces still connect the island regions, they do not constitute *kula* 'paths' of the present but are evidence of a broken link. Strings of shell disks are now peddled (about 20 centimetres for about A\$100) through the provincial capital, Alotau, or purchased when visiting Sudest or another island of that region (for about half that price).

Figure 9.1 Going up and down for *kula*

Source: Author's creation, based on map by Martha Macintyre (1983: xxi).

The notion of 'up' and 'down', as in many Austronesian languages, is connected to the rising and setting of the sun, which crosses its own *mwatui* in the sky on its daily journey. Except for the Trobriand Islands, located at the far northwest of the *kula* region, with no islands to go 'down' to, the principle of this polarity is applied in the various languages of the *kula* region. To complicate matters, the *kula* regions are recognised as separate, *kula*-related *mwatui*, so a canoe crosses over (*abala*) from Dobu Island to Esa'ala on Normanby, the government station, but it goes 'upwards' or 'downwards' when following the *kula mwatui* that connect the islands.

From a Dobu perspective, one travels 'up' (*laga*) to Duau, Koyagaugau and all the way to Muyuwa—a place that most islanders never visit in their lifetimes. They usually know the name and village of their *kula* partners but do not meet them in person. Going west, one travels 'down' (*dolo*) to Fergusson Island, the Amphletts and other islands on the way up to the Trobriands (a place that is now more frequently visited because of the betel nut trade to Kiriwina).

The verbs that qualify direction within and between *mwatui* are based on either physical terrain or the movements of the sun. This is confusing for an outsider, as one can at the same time go ‘up’ and ‘down’ when moving in the *kula* network, depending on the context. When a person paddles from Dobu Island to the *kula* region of Fergusson Island (Oyao or Bwaiowa), the *kula*-related motion is ‘to go down’ (*dolo*). When reaching the physical point where the water becomes shallower before reaching the island of destination, a traveller is going ‘up’ to the island, even if the general direction in the larger, *kula*-related mental map is ‘down’. Only the Trobriand Islanders do not go ‘up’ and ‘down’ for *kula*, but ‘across’ to Kitava and Kaileuna or Sinaketa. I was told by my team members that this is likely related to the relative position of the archipelago in regard to the sun and the *kula* travels.

Passages of the *kula*

The named spaces in the ocean that can be travelled connect *kula* communities and are used to link up further to the southeast as well as to the mainland of New Guinea. Expert knowledge of these spaces is complex; a rich and deep understanding of the relationships between persons, the environment and spiritual forces informs decisions on travel. Some of the high-ranking *kula* valuables are named after these spaces, such as the *mwali* Dalmuyuw, the *mwali* Kepou, the *bagi* Dauya and the *bagi* Kabwaku Tamagwali (literally, ‘Sea Swallow of Tamagwali’).

The names of these sea spaces thereby turn into the names of valuables that move and leave a trail of loved namesakes behind, just as new babies are often named after the valuables in the possession of a matrilineage at the time of their birth. Before World War II, *kula* valuables of high rank were passed on in chiefly circles only, so that commoners had very little chance to lay their hands on them, but since the war, increasingly it seems, high-ranking *mwali* and *bagi* have been pulled on to different tracks for a variety of reasons (such as bribery, lack of heirs or insufficient *kula* knowledge). There are still circles of partners who handle most of the valuables of high rank, but since they overlap and are switched in places like Koyagaugau Island, confusion about proper routings has become a grievance to these men and women.

Figure 9.2 The *mwatui* of *kula*

Source: By the author.

Most famously, the *mwali* Kibu Tokunuwesi is an example of a valuable with a namesake that has high value (although it has barely moved in almost 40 years, only from Kiriwina to Bwaiowa). The *mwali* shell was found on a reef of this name in northern Kiriwina in the late 1960s by a man named Tokunuwesi (see Kuehling 2017: 186–87). Out of gratitude, the shell was passed to a medical orderly working in the Losuia aid post, who commissioned the cutting and decorating of the enormous *mwali* shell and named his newborn son after the *mwali*. This man is now in his mid-30s and uses this name as one of his Facebook handles. I heard him saying a number of times that ‘Kibu is me. I am Kibu’—an expression that reflects the same sense of similarity as that of the mothers or grandmothers who call and cradle a child while showing them a picture of a *kula* valuable, excitedly saying: ‘Look, this is your namesake, it is you! Your uncle held it when you were born!’

When I brought back the photographs of more than 1,000 *kula* valuables in 2018, I witnessed such scenes multiple times in all parts of the *kula* region. Valuables build emotional links between people and places as they travel, just as humans leave their traces in the form of narratives when they visit their partners. Namesakes around the network speak to the long duration of circulation and it is an indication of high rank when it is said that ‘a valuable is so old, its namesakes have passed already and their *bubus* [grandchildren] are now adults’ (as is the case for those valuables that were created after World War II, when *kula* was re-initiated). As personal names are the property of matrilineages, the name is passed on through generations of women, connecting the lineage deeply with the valuable, as names are more than just signifiers but also serve as indicators of close connection.

The winds⁸

The seasonal winds determine whether sea travel is possible, advisable or not recommended, so *kula* expeditions are facilitated and timed by the weather and by *kula* masters who organise their journeys accordingly, thereby creating the desired movement of valuables in what I would like to call a ‘pulse’ that pushes the objects around the region of islands in large quantities of up to 300 or 500 pieces at a time, out of an approximate total of more than 1,000 valuables of each kind. Planning and leading a *kula* expedition requires much personal investment of time, resources and consensus-building and can involve a lot of logistical organisation and rescheduling. It can be nerve-racking as plans are readjusted all the time, while the pressure is high since much is at stake; to make a name as a successful leader (*toniwaga*), the participants of a *kula* journey need to bring home many baskets filled with *kula* valuables. The term for the desired and expected movement of many valuables together, *ulai*, was sometimes translated by men in all *kula* regions as ‘year’ when they spoke English, although they were well aware that one *ulai* can take three to five years and refers to the circulation around the chain of partners; it is not a purely temporal but a spatiotemporal measurement. If a ‘year’ is

8 The diagram I published in my monograph (Kuehling 2005: 187) has ‘the winds all wrong’, as I was told by the late Labenia Ephraim. In this chapter, I wish to correct my errors in that work, but my mistake also indicates the current situation in which knowledge of winds is less important, as *kula* travel can happen at almost all times provided there is a boat. Only in the peak gardening season for men is it unusual to shy from the hard work and travel.

understood as referring to a cyclical temporal unit based on the sun and the winds (rather than the modern calendar year), the error in translation can be explained by a *kula*-centric notion of a spatiotemporality (*ulai*) rather than a yam-centric one in which the word year (*yakwala*, also referring to last year's garden) is used when discussing the movements of *kula* valuables.

The pulse of *kula* and the rhythm of the winds combine to create windows of opportunity and adventure, giving men a chance to prove themselves and to escape the daily grind of subsistence work. In the southern region, November is the season for harvesting taro, but once the yam seed tubers are in the ground, the women close their yam house and manage the remaining tubers. As food at home is limited, *kula* partners like to travel during this period in hopes of receiving their valuables without much delay as the women in their hosts' family are also keen to save their food for the months to come until the next harvest. As all belts are tightened, a *kula* journey is attractive for its culinary delights. The prospect of bringing some yams of the highest quality back to the home village adds to the lust for shell valuables. I was told that, after finishing their own gardens in January during the north wind (*yalata*) season, Duau people can go to Muyuwa, saving their own food while being a burden on their partner's household until he passes on a valuable. This is a strategy of *kula*, although direct exchange between Duau and Muyuwa is technically incorrect. As a form of leapfrogging that leaves out a partner, this is a widely lamented but very common practice.

Malinowski has informed us that northeast winds mark the high season for *kula* sailing in Kiriwina (1920: 103; 1935: Fig. 3, pp. 50–51), probably referring to the time when the *yalata* blows and when the yams are planted. During this period, however, timing is everything as, from November to February, various winds may occur and the islanders need to know how to read the signs of each of them to make safe choices. According to Synod Timothy, these winds come in some kind of order and last for varying periods:

- The north wind (*yalata*): Winds that blow from November to February. This wind is not very strong (other than *bolimana* and *kaluwabu*, see below) and lasts only a few hours at a time. When this wind shifts to the northwest and takes on strength, it is called *otola*. It is the time when *saido* nuts (Pacific almonds) are ripening and falling to the ground. During this time, new gardens should be ready for regular weeding

and maintenance work, which is mostly done by women, freeing men up for a journey. During *yalata*, canoe travel from Kiriwina to Muyuwa is possible as the wind hits the sails from the side. Sailing south, however, is impossible, so Trobriand Islanders can travel to Fergusson to visit their partners in Bwaiowa but they cannot return until *yalata* recedes. From Duau to Dobu and back, and from Duau to Muyuwa, is possible, and from Duau to Koyagaugau is difficult but can be done by ‘following the wind’, as Synod Timothy put it (March 2018). This wind is desired; it gets ‘called’ (*lo’ulo’uloyei*) by shouting *ku mai* (‘come!’) and waving one hand down, in hopes that it will appear some days later. Women are often experts in calling this wind (see also Fortune 1932: 211–14).

- The east wind (*bomatu*): This wind is expected to blow from November to January. It calms down and brings a lot of rain, but at infrequent intervals the clouds are moved away when the wind strengthens again. This is the season for kite fishing and for burning newly cut gardens to prepare for planting. It is possible to travel by canoe from east to west (for example, from Duau to Dobu) as well as to sail both north and south. Sometimes *bomatu* can blow strongly (*habolimana*) and these are the times when notoriously slow-moving, high-ranking valuables are passed on to the next partner because only tough people, and only those on inherited high-ranking tracks for these valuables, will brave the wind and visit their partners to receive valuables of high rank. Mwasiuna Taikeu, a *kula* master from Bwaiowa, told me that this was his strategy—to paddle to Vakuta (crossing the *mwatui* named Kepou) or Gumawana (crossing Niupulupulu, literally, ‘the round coconut’) at times when the others did not dare, and to bring home high-ranking *mwali*.
- The southeast/east wind (*kaluwabu*): Occurring between November and July, this wind is very strong and makes canoe travel too dangerous. When it blows, high waves and occasional rain occur. It joins forces with *bolimana* and brings clouds and rain. In June, when *kaluwabu* is in peak season, southeasterly winds blow (sometimes also as *bolimana* or *yawana bolimana*) and then stop and shift into *yalasi* until December.
- The west wind (*ebwaga*): This also occurs from November to February. This wind moves around and when it comes from the west it is very strong so that waves hit from east to west—for example, the Bwaiowa coast has high waves. When it comes from the east, the surf is wild and

the sea is murky but calm on the surface with strong undercurrents. There is a vast amount of plant debris in the water. When it blows from the south, it brings heavy rainfall, with dark clouds forming on the Duau mountains (*bwaula koya*) and low temperatures. When the west wind becomes strong, it can cause cyclones as it covers a large area, allowing it to form into a spiral.

- The northeast wind (*boboli*): This blows from November to February, too. It hits the Duau coast straight from Muyuwa. Both northerly and easterly winds (*yalata* and *bomatu*) can turn into *boboli*.
- A southeasterly wind (*yawana*) may also occur at this time. If it blows from the south or southeast, it joins forces with *bolimana* and becomes very strong, bringing clouds and rain (*yawana bolimana*). If, however, it blows from easterly and southerly directions, it neutralises the *bolimana* and turns steady and quiet (*yawana*).

These winds are interspersed with calm periods when the winds change (around October/November and March/April). Małinowski (1935: 50) has noted that calm periods are used to paddle back to the Trobriands after visiting partners in the south (on the Amphletts, Sanalowa or even as far as the Bwaiowa coast). I have witnessed how the winds can change within an hour, turning a placid sea into a wild and dangerous space. Winds from the south can be especially strong and make canoe travel difficult or even impossible.

- From April to June, the southeast wind (*bolimana*) causes high surf and swells that make it nearly impossible to launch or land a boat. This wind brings no rain. It is the season of new yams, a time of plenty.
- From July until December, the south wind (*yalasi*) brings cold nights and heavy seas.
- From June to August, when the south wind (*yalasi*) and also a southeasterly wind (*yawana*) blow, low tides may block shallow passages through reefs. I witnessed canoes being stranded on corals in the passage between Dobu and Bwaiowa. With long stakes, the canoes were slowly pushed forward until we reached deeper waters again. Most certainly, these situations occur elsewhere as well, limiting the availability of certain *mwatui* at those times.

Plate 9.4 A *kula* canoe from Egom Island

Photo: Susanne Kuehling.

Gardening, *kula* and the winds

Yam gardening and *kula* exchange are interlinked, as men work in the gardens unless they participate in *kula*. Women do most of the weeding work while men are strongly engaged in the heavy lifting involved in preparing new gardens and tending to the yam sticks. While gardening practices differ between the south and the north, the basic idea that there are special yams for *kula* partners is generally shared and the preparation of clay pots with quality food is similar in all *kula* communities I visited between 1993 and 2018. The gardening may differ between the islands, but the same, most delicious yams were prepared for us when we visited in 2016 and 2018. For Dobu Island, I learned that among the cultivars (Dobu: *'uma*) deemed appropriate for serving distinguished visitors are large tubers of purple and white-purple yams as well as white, creamy varieties. Of 39 different cultivars used on Dobu (in 1993), there were 21 different kinds of *Dioscorea alata*, of which seven were deemed appropriate for serving *kula* partners (named Bodalau, Damoni, Dayakulo, Didi or Dubwala, Samulolo, Suwasuwa and Yamosa). Eighteen cultivars

of *Dioscorea esculenta* were planted, but only seven were seen as prestige food (Madiyasa, Momouwa, Mwamwa'uwa, Mwanalawa or Gadagada, Tetuboiya, Tetuwale and Uyagasu). On Fergusson Island, in the Bwaiowa region of the *kula*, where this is the only subspecies, the cultivars used are named Awabwaduwe, Gulia, Ututuwau and Uyagasu. Uyagasu, which is a whitish purple colour with a soft, creamy texture and sweetish taste, is valued as the best of all types of yam and used to be cooked only for chiefs and distinguished *kula* partners. The complex knowledge required to oversee the production of sufficient yams for a year's purposes of hosting, gifting, sharing and eating the smallest and least valuable yams marks a good wife and sister, and those women whose yam house is always full and whose cooking fire never cools are highly respected. In the past, men could specialise their efforts in gardening, *kula* or warfare, while women gained a name with gardening and *kula* if they aspired and qualified.⁹ Only a few women travel themselves. Since they are often held back by children and the garden and see these journeys as an additional burden to an already busy daily schedule, most women pick a nephew or brother, husband or uncle to visit *kula* partners on their behalf.

The same yams are used for gifts of cooked food (in Dobu: *buyo*) that are required as part of affinal exchanges locally. Large raw yam tubers of these preferred varieties are gifted in large baskets as part of most local exchanges (mortuary feasting, compensation payments, marriage exchanges and so on). Women's contribution to *kula*, the role as perfect host, requires them to grow, manage and provide the yams needed for visiting partners, to prepare delicious meals for them and make them feel as comfortable as possible. Only when the supplies of yam run out will the women interfere and quietly inform their husbands that it is time to send the visitor away with a *kula* valuable, as I was told by various women in all *kula* communities.

The support team behind a *kula* master

Women need clay pots from the Amphletts or Bwanabwana (or mainland New Guinea's East Cape) to prepare this special food. They also need specific kinds of pandanus-leaf bundles to weave the new mats that

9 The key position of women in *kula* is in Kiriwina acknowledged and symbolised by a principle called *kailagila*: '[T]he Three stones on which the cooking pot rests' (Malic and Kasaipwalova 1998: 103 ff.).

a visitor will be offered to sit on as soon as he or she arrives. Men are often involved in providing these resources. A man may kill a pig for a visitor, but the entire work behind the scenes is in the hands of his wife, from fetching water to minding the small children while speed-sweeping the hamlet and collecting the laundry, blowing the fire and organising a little sugar for the guest by sending a capable small child to the neighbours. Since the husband needs to sit and talk with the visitor, the wife shows her virtue and respect by never showing exhaustion or discontent and even by keeping babies from crying. I was told by many *kula* masters, male and female, that the services provided by the wife and the rest of the household under her direction are an essential element of *kula* and that a partner would excuse himself and wander off for good if he did not feel welcome due to the attitudes of a wife and children. So, in each location, while men are busy with their *kula* scheming, their wives and other female relatives are equally involved in *kula* 'work' (*paisewa*) by providing the various resources and services that make the exchange system possible. In the southern region, the women control the stored yams, so if there is a need for the support of a *kula* partner, a man needs to cooperate with his wife and sisters as men must not enter their wives' yam houses. Therefore, the movements of *kula* travellers are deeply entwined with those of the gardeners and food providers.

Yet *kula* and gardening are connected on even more levels. It appears that the region has developed a mutually advantageous setup, as the gardening cycles shift between the archipelagos. The Trobriand Islands and Northern Muyuwa complete their new gardens first (in October and November). Bwaiowa and Dobu are next (in November and December); Duau completes new gardens in January and the small islands of the Bwanabwana region have planted their seed tubers by February. When the seed tubers are in the ground, a lean period begins in which yams are only seldom consumed and are stored for feasts or to feed distinguished visitors. In Dobu, this time is named *botana* (literally, 'hunger'). Once the yam plants are well established, two to three months into the gardening cycle, the old tubers are removed. In Dobu, this is called *mweia* and not only is it believed to strengthen the plant and increase the harvest, but also it is used as a way to gauge the upcoming harvest by feeling the size of the new tubers.¹⁰

10 Yam gardening in the northern Massim differs from the south, but space does not permit a more detailed comparison (see Malinowski 1935; Digim'Rina 1995 for Basima).

Plate 9.5 *Bagi Dilimeyana*

Photo: Susanne Kuehling.

The different gardening practices and yam cycles in the *kula* region combine to form a safety network for the islands with fragile ecologies, like the Amphletts and the Bwanabwana region, which see many harvests destroyed by floods or droughts, as occurred in 2015–16, when it did not rain from July until February in the Bwanabwana region and the yam seed tubers dried up in the ground. So, in February/March, when the

Bwanabwana islands have planted their yam seed tubers, the northern islands of the Muyuwa region have already started their harvest and can assist their southern partners. In April/May, Amphlett islanders may need to rely on the food security of the Bwaiowa/Dobu region when their seed tubers are planted. In September/October, they can also ask their partners in Vakuta and Sinaketa for assistance if their yam harvest fails. During the time of plenty, short voyages are possible in intervals of calm weather, so knowledge of the seasonal winds directly links with yams and *kula* exchange. Years without any harvest used to happen in the past as well; some are recounted in the stories of high-ranked *kula* valuables. The *bagi* Dilimeyana, for example, was brought by a man from a drought-stricken island in the Bwanabwana region shortly after World War II, when *kula* was taken up after the ban during the war. He asked his *kula* partner in Duau for help as his sister's daughter, named Dilimeyana, was starving. After receiving a generous supply of yams and pork from the abundant gardens of Duau, the man returned to his home island with the shell valuable, finished its decorations, named it Dilimeyana and sent it to his Duau partner, who used it in his *kula* network (see Kuehling 2017: 199).

Subsistence and the winds

Successful gardening depends also on the right timing of the winds, bringing the rain or dry air that yams need. The garden cycle is connected to other subsistence activities that are also markers of time and help people remember incidents from the past.

When the east wind (*bomatu*) blows from November to January, it opens the gardening season in Dobu and Bwaiowa by assisting the burning of dried leaves and branches of the newly cut gardens and preparing them for planting. This wind makes everybody feel tired. This is also the time for kite fishing (as in the song *Tai goma Losina*; see Barton and Dietrich 2009: 120).¹¹ From December to January, in Duau, the yam seed tubers are prepared for planting. Once the chosen seed tubers are piled up in the yam house, they are sprinkled with magic liquids and treated with incantations as well as other techniques to encourage their growth. One of these

11 It appears as though one specific kite-fishing method in the Massim region only occurred in *kula* communities, suggesting the skill was passed between *kula* partners (Barton and Dietrich 2009: 70).

techniques used to be cat cradles (*'abi'abi*: literally, 'building something'), played during the planting season (*é'sa'é*), which was believed to 'open the eyes of the seed yams' so they would grow once in the ground.¹²

Between November and July, when the strong southeast/east winds (*kaluwabu*) join forces with the southeast wind (*bolimana*), bringing clouds and rain, people are resigned to weeding their gardens while silently complaining about the unpleasantly cool weather, consoling themselves by feeling happy for their growing yam plants.

From June to August, *yalasi* and also *yawana* are marked by low tides, enabling the collection of shellfish. This season is called *kebulabula*. The old yams have been removed from the planting holes and gardeners can estimate their harvest and use up the last stored yams accordingly. From July until December, however, when the south wind (*yalasi*) blows, south-facing coastlines, like Duau's, are sometimes affected by strong gusts and waves, and the yams may be damaged by the wind.

From April to June, the southeast wind (*bolimana*) brings no rain. It is the season of new yams—a time of plenty for the islanders of the northern Massim, Bwaiowa and Dobu. On the Duau coast, the early yam cultivars (such as *Sabewa* in Dobu) are stealthily harvested so as to taste their sweet softness, with people excusing their lust by saying that they need to feed the new babies ('their first yams'), but in spite of the slight stigma attached to those 'greedy' people who harvest too early, there are stories and restrictions linked to the practice. During this time, islanders observe the Pleiades in the night sky, because if they see its 'tail' dropping, this indicates that heavy storms will occur in the evening, 'spoiling dinner time', as I was told.

From July until December, the south wind (*yalasi*) dries up the garden areas after they have been cut in preparation for the *bomatu* season, meaning the leaves and plant materials will burn well when *bomatu* comes up. Bringing very cold nights, this wind effects people's health, and many suffer from respiratory tract infections.

12 According to Damon, 'movement is the point' to string figures. He describes beautifully how string figures are a way to perform stories in motion (Damon 2017: 283–91)—a 'kind of magical geometry' (p. 292).

Figure 9.3 Overlapping gardening cycles in the *kula* region

Source: By the author.

Changes

While in the past the privilege to travel to distant exchange partners seems to have been limited to leaders and chiefs (Swadling and Bence 2016), the postwar shifts of power have resulted in a large number of participants in the exchange of *kula* valuables, with certainly more than 2,000 individuals now involved in *kula* travel (see also Young 1983). Generous gifts of yams were a token of appreciation for a partner in the past—a gift called *masula liga* in the southern *kula* region that is now rare as only chiefs can assemble large amounts of yams.

This increase in numbers after World War II led to the splitting of valuables (called *gasi* in Dobu), making two *mwali* out of a former pair; the two *mwali*, Bwaluada and Koka (both meaning ‘sea eel’), used to be a pair; similarly, *bagi* strings such as in Dilimeyana 1 and 2 have been halved. Most precontact valuables are out of circulation; only a few greenstone axe blades, beaded belts and pig-tusk pendants are kept as family heirlooms. Quality yams of the appropriate cultivar are still served to *kula* visitors, but

rice and canned food are highly desired and are routinely part of meals. Only the two objects *mwali* and *bagi* are now in regular circulation; some are being newly created and decorated by specialists. The decorations have changed in style over the past century, as islanders increasingly gained access to decorative glass beads. Due to pearl diving, empty shells became readily available as headpieces on *bagi* strings and the size of red shell disks has changed significantly. Before, there were two sizes: larger disks (*sapisapi*) were used to decorate the *bagi* string or were sewn on to a piece of cloth to make a belt (*gadiwa'uma* in Dobu), while smaller disks were very fine and thin and were used for the string. Nowadays, *sapisapi* shells are largely replaced with plastic and *bagi* shells are less carefully crafted—not as thin and smooth as they were in the past.

Plate 9.6 *Mwali* Lagim (centre), held by Edward Digwaleu from Tewatewa

Photo: Susanne Kuehling.

Some *mwali* have been bleached to look ‘cleaner’, while others have retained their patina but have undergone mending and redecorating; some valuables of old have changed their appearance and name. I heard rumours that some high-ranking shell valuables are hidden in Port Moresby, while copies bearing their names are circulating in the *kula*. Often, I heard that the Queen of England has removed the *bagi* Goma'alakedakeda and is hiding it in the British Museum, a story that

was credited to John Kasaipwalova by various men on the islands. It seems that the shells themselves are getting smaller while the decorations are getting larger, to the point that a *mwali* can hardly be taken on a canoe journey. These include the ‘witchcraft’ *mwali* Kabisawali and a new *mwali* Lagim, introduced to the *kula* in 2016—both commissioned by John Kasaipwalova and adorned with large, heavy carvings.

While creating new good reasons to move about in a morally acceptable manner, the market economy also limits people’s movements today, as without money, transport is increasingly difficult to find for people who cannot brave the seas on a canoe. Pacific lifestyles have always been subject to change (see D’Arcy 2006). The islanders of the *kula* network were always mobile and inventive. The growing intensity of change in modern education, the global cash economy and various forms of Christianity is blurring the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘the others’, and in the light of fading local belief systems and a loss of subsistence-related skills, location remains a critical element of identification with a group. The named spaces on land and sea are constructs of collective history, memory, personal and shared emotions, based on experiences of movement in the environment, creating social interaction and relationships. On the islands, the rhythm of *kula* is still determined by gardening and travel, and both activities are of equal importance.

With the introduction of rice and other desirable store-bought food items, however, the significance of yam gardening appears to be decreasing. The late chief Digim’Rina from Okeboma, N-Kiriwina, was quoted as saying that ‘when the men *kula*, they care for their gardens’—implying that non-*kula* men are more prone to neglecting their subsistence and prestige activities, finding cash more attractive than shell valuables. These days, however, a visitor will expect store-bought food to be served, increasing the burden on the host. Leaving a trail of borrowed money, tobacco, rice and kerosene in Dobu, these debts are called ‘bookings’ (*bukis*) and should ideally be repaid, to be extinguished (*kwe’u*).¹³ *Kula* practice is increasingly shifting from subsistence to a fringe existence in the global cash economy, becoming a burden rather than a blessing for families with access to cash and an impossibility for subsistence gardeners without an income. With low wages and high costs for transportation, store-bought food and fuel for small boats are very expensive. *Kula* indeed makes no sense in

13 I have elsewhere discussed the effect of this increasing trend of the cash economy on the islands, where stores are notoriously short-lived and debts rarely repaid in full (Kuehling 2005).

the profit-oriented setting of the global cash economy, when access to goods and *kula* opportunities depends not on personal merit but on cash infusions from helpful relatives in town.

Nowadays, travel by modern boats interrupts the rhythm of *kula* (*ulai*) as these boats can go against the wind and currents, take shortcuts and brave heavy rain that would have soaked the pandanus sails of the past. Modern vessels allow more flexibility for those individuals who can afford a passage, own a dinghy or have relatives with a cargo boat who can provide free travel for *kula* purposes. Those people are not always leaders, as in the past, but display a more entrepreneurial interest in *kula*. John Kasaipwalova falls into this category. He is an Australian-educated playwright from the Trobriand Islands who once called the *kula* a 'development corporation' (1974) and spent time and money travelling the entire 'ring of power' to collect valuables and assist in the creation of a coffee-table book on *kula* (Malnic and Kasaipwalova 1998) and a film featuring a number of these *kula*-for-profit traders (Mitchell et al. 2000).

The *kula* exchange of the Amphlett islanders is critically affected by modern transport and selfish partners. They used to be the western bottleneck of the exchange system, connecting the different languages of the Dobu and the Boyowa dialect chains. The elders on Gumawana explained that they should go first to Vakuta to pick up *mwali* and bring them home so that Bwaiowa people (from East Fergusson Island) can come and pick them up from their partners on the Amphletts. After this main exchange (*ulai*), Bwaiowa people who have established exchange partnerships directly with Vakuta are allowed to leapfrog and travel directly to their partners in the southern Trobriand Islands to collect the leftover *mwali* valuables to create an even larger *ulai* to attract Dobu islanders and excite the *kula* partners on faraway islands who plot and ponder how to get a hold of many, or specific, valuables. Therefore, the frustration is enormous for the *kula* communities of the Amphlett Islands when they are left out, as happened in 2018. I was told that the last *ulai* went past the Amphletts altogether as Bwaiowa people went by modern vessel to Vakuta and so the Amphletts 'did not touch one *mwali* in that *ulai*'.

Similar complaints come from the eastern bottleneck, the small islands of the Bwanabwana region, as well as Yanabwa and Egum further north. In the past, these islands were important stopovers for all vessels, as the long stretches of ocean in the eastern part are demanding and exhausting to cross. There, as well, modern types of transport have reduced the

importance of these islands (see Macintyre 1983) and formerly central Tubetube Island has now lost this role, with a young generation exclaiming that '*kula* is a waste of time and money' (Peter Wesley, February 2016). As many of the young men are high school graduates, they have not learned to sail a canoe as expertly as the village men and it is too late (or too embarrassing and insignificant) for them to learn it well enough to be safe. They cannot read the winds and sky and rely on their skills. On the other hand, those islanders who can sail lack the cash to be generous hosts in the new terms of rice and canned meat. As those who have the means to sponsor feasts and *kula* events feel that it is not worth the expense, so islands with a low population that are closer to the mainland are having difficulty recruiting talented heirs. Another issue arising is that the winds are 'changing', weather patterns are losing their relative reliability and, therefore, the valuable knowledge of the past is losing some of its credibility and value. The lack of mutual trust between elders and their successors, many men told me, is the main worry of *kula* nowadays, as clever and diligent young men and women are lost to the towns.

Moving in *kula* space, crossing various *mwatui* in the process, used to be reserved for the smartest sons and nephews of a *kula* man. This privilege is now gone, but the prospect of a free meal and a welcoming family at the end of the journey is still a reality. The advantages of *kula* appeal to the current generation of adult men aged in their fifties and beyond, who argued in all meetings that we held in the major communities that they are trying their best to plan to bring back the vanishing pulse of *kula* (*ulai*), to discourage the exchange of small groups but support the festive, competitive, adventurous, celebratory travel as a larger group. This is seen as a means to attract younger people and gives the older men a chance to watch their performance, teach them strategies and educate them about all the things a *kula* master needs to consider.

Local leaders are currently attempting to revitalise interest in *kula* through sports and United Church events. These are now sometimes connected with *kula* by councillors, teachers and elders who have noticed that *kula*-playing teenagers are better behaved; but every Christmas, when relatives from town come to visit, their role in providing resources and assistance works against the need to cultivate strong *kula* ties. In town, *kula* valuables are shifted around, sometimes used as decoration and as sentimental anchors of identity or sold to tourists, art dealers or museum

collectors. *Kula* is currently being converted from a practice of chiefs to merchandise—a ‘beloved brand’, in Robert Foster’s ‘coca-globalization’ sense (2008).

Since 2008, tourism has reached the *kula* region with force, with the arrival of large cruise ships and the marketing of ‘tradition’. For Trobriand Islanders, dancing for tourists, selling simple carvings and even *kula* valuables while neglecting subsistence and education during the tourist visits have become a normal form of income (MacCarthy 2016). On Kiriwina, pickpocketing and a general monetarisation of petty exchanges between family and friends are regretfully accepted side effects. Dobu islanders always feared the Trobriand Islanders because of their magic, and recently I witnessed their worry about the use of battery acid as a means of retribution (I was told a number of times: ‘When in the Trobs, never hang anything on a line over night. They put it [acid] on your clothes and when you wear them the next day, you die from it’). I find the change from fierce ‘Argonauts’ to ‘Shirt of Nessus’ disappointing, as seagoing canoes, and races between them, have disappeared, while clothes on a washing line have gained significance in *kula*-related lore from a Dobu perspective. People on Kiriwina, and increasingly on Kitava, are selling their valuables to tourists and art collectors now, while disinterested partners on Tabetube Island are simply left out by their surrounding partners, as has already happened to other areas such as Boiboi Bay, Muyuwa. The current generation of senior *kula* masters is concerned that their web of relationships will not survive for long as it stretches ever thinner in some places while tattering at the seams elsewhere. Koyagaugau and small Ode (or Ole) Island are now the most important stops in the bottleneck of the Bwanabwana region—a fact that causes frustration, as the heritage of complex *kula* partnership chains and obligations has not been carefully enough maintained since the death of its greatest strategic mind, Mwalubeyai (‘King Kula’), in 1995.

While the established churches, the Catholics and Wesleyans/United Church, accept *kula* as a positive social force, evangelical churches have more recently settled in some *kula* communities and are currently attempting to convince the islanders to give up the ‘satanic’ habit of exchanging demonic objects. So far, their call to burn the objects has not been met with enthusiasm, but some individuals have certainly destroyed their *mwali* and *bagi* in an attempt to quit sinning.

Conclusion

Movements on *kula* paths are manifestations of journeying through space as one of the pillars of humankind—a universal anchor for identity: ‘images of place’ that help to ‘objectify a sense of being and belonging’ (Jackson 1995: 19). To Austronesians, the ‘lived experience’ of travel (Rodman 1992: 641; Kahn 1996: 173), the invisible boundaries of sea spaces and the sensations of routine paths and special events become personal and shared memories through the emplaced and embodied practice of moving between them. Austronesian paths and journeys provide, as demonstrated, a useful vantage point for a comparative analysis of power relations, ecology, subjectivity, questions concerning the dynamics of life as they appear in local concepts of the person, patterns of connectedness with the environment and symbolic meanings of place. Ingold has noted that persons and their movements between places and time are intertwined in lived experience: ‘[P]laces do not have locations but histories. Bound together by the itineraries of their inhabitants, places exist not in space but as nodes in a matrix of movement’ (2000: 219). In a similar vein, Hanlon emphasises the dynamic and ‘porous’ attributes of place (2004: 210).

From an outsider’s perspective, the ocean space of *kula* travel is more spectacular than digging the ground and weeding the garden spaces, so the ocean space has inspired comparisons with the heroic Greek Argonauts (Małinowski 1922). I have argued that, in reality, yam gardening and management are the backbone of *kula* hospitality and, like canoe travel, depend on a high degree of skill and knowledge about the environment, involving a lifestyle of permanent observation and speculation about the weather brought by the winds. The mutual support of an entire household is what enables a *kula* partner to sit and talk with his visitor; the women and young relatives of a *kula* man form the mostly invisible yet highly efficient system that enables the exchange to materialise.

Using toponyms and named winds, I have aimed at the description and expression of experiential realities, which are, in Feld’s words, ‘deeply linked to the embodied sensation of places’ (1996: 113). They are anchors of memory, as they tell stories of the past as well as of individual travels—roots and routes, as coined by Clifford (1997)—‘mapping place into identity, conjoining temporal motion and spatial projection, re-inscribing past into the present, creating biography as itinerary’ (Feld 1996: 113). Basso has argued that:

place names may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations—associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life. (1988: 103)

This reflects my own experience of researching this topic.

My microscopic, sociolinguistic ethnography does not fully support the notion that Austronesians are ordering their social and physical world into a grid of dualisms: inside/outside, back/front, low/high, female/male (for the Caroline Islands, see Alkire 1970: 66, 70, 1972; Alkire and Fujimura 1990: 75 ff.; see also Feinberg 1988). Anne Douglass has argued that these dualisms are practised by following the rules of respect, in spatial movement and language as well as in relationships (1998: 138). This grid is indeed realised in motion verbs that relate to the physical grid of named places, as I have demonstrated, but when more detail is taken into account, the pairs of opposition do not hold but in fact reveal a more fluid structure that allows for shades of grey. I am therefore reluctant to read binary opposites into my data as I find more complementarities than polarising dual opposites. The sun goes up (*laga*) so as to go down again (*dolo*), crossing over (*abala*) the sky and forming a basic axis of orientation, crossed by the motion *nao*, not to separate but to define a temporal or locative motion.

The Malinowskian notion of the *Kula* 'Ring', widely used in the literature, does not represent the movement of people—and only sometimes of the valuables, as they may be de-routed through affinal exchange obligations within *kula* communities. I was told a number of times that the *kula* network is more like a zone as contrasted to the non-*kula* participants, who may or may not be attached in a secondary way to *kula*. Gordon Lakatani (Mwemweyala village, Dobu, September 2015) phrased this difference aptly when he said the idea of a 'ring' should be understood 'more like a boxing ring in which everything happens inside'. Unlike a boxing ring, or ice rink, however, the boundaries are in reality fluid, with intermarriages and friendships intersecting with *kula* partnerships. This imagery matches the notion of *mwatui* spaces: the *kula* region itself is a *mwatui*.

The network of exchange partnerships provided, and still provides, a sense of an imagined community, revitalised every time the islanders are recounting the names of their partners, their islands, villages and the valuables that were travelling between them, sharing stories about the places and journeys involved in moving the objects from beach to beach in an (ideally) endless double-helix through time and space. The image of a spiral was brought

up by Trobriand playwright and poet John Kasaipwalova, who shared what he refers to as ‘the backbone of any Kiriwinan magic’ (Malnic and Kasaipwalova 1998: 142–43): ‘The centre of the spiral is called *gum* (essence), and stands for “spiral thinking”, the “presence of the past”.’ I was unable to find evidence of this image in the southern part of the *kula* region, where ‘spiral’ is translated as *wasi*, the word (and suffix) that refers to a vortex and anything that goes in circles (as in *sakowasi*, the common Dobu verb for moving around). The *kula* masters from the Dobu-speaking region of the *kula*, in considering the metaphor of a spiral, suggested it is a very secret concept, one that has been lost over time or, most likely, evidence of a different spatial conception in the Trobriands due to that archipelago’s relative position in the northwestern part of the *kula* region. To the other language communities in the *kula* region, not a spiral but a motion of ‘up’ and ‘down’ is used for orientation and linguistic expressions of space.

It is the pulse of movements (*ulai*) of men, women, pigs, *kula* valuables and yams on their *’eda*, their crossings and visiting of *mwatui* spaces, that clusters them as the most relevant living creatures, defining yams as persons and attributing many human characteristics to *kula* valuables (see Kuehling 2005, 2012). This pulse is connected to the seasons and is locally framed as ‘work’ (*paisewa*) that is both required and laudable, creating opportunities for humans to shine and to gain control over resources and the minds of others. The societies of the region have developed *kula* as a system of extraordinary mechanisms of solidarity and mutual assistance based on trust and respect. For five generations, *kula* has persisted, despite the dire prospects and frequent disruptions caused by the cash economy and an education system that privileges an Australian perspective and often discredits institutions such as *kula* as ‘primitive’ or ‘backwards’. In the capital of Alotau and for descendants of people from *kula* islands living in urban centres, *kula* is embraced as a marketing strategy, and wearing a *bagi* necklace has become a prime identity marker. As a lifestyle, however, *kula* does not sit well in a market economy.

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