They Spear, Hit Again, Bite, Get Engaged and Sometimes Marry: Revisiting the Gendering of *Kula* Shells

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Abstract: This article revisits the ethnography of *kula* exchange and proposes a fresh perspective on gender as a strategy of kula talk. The shell ornaments that are used in kula have often been classified as "male" and "female." Here, I argue that these are not inherent qualities of kula valuables but flexible tropes of kula talk. The wider context of kula exchange rhetoric and gender demonstrates that male and female invoke the imagination of sexual relations, of pleasure, intimacy and consent. Gender symbolism, in kula, is a rhetorical strategy to lubricate the sense of trust between kula exchange partners.

Keywords: Ethnography, gender, exchange, kula valuables, Papua New Guinea

Résumé : Cet article jette un nouveau regard sur l'ethnographie des échanges de kula et propose une perspective originale sur les attributs de genre en tant que stratégie de négociation des kulas. Les parures de coquillages utilisées dans les kulas ont souvent été classées comme « mâles » et « femelles ». J'amène l'argument qu'il ne s'agit pas là de qualités intrinsèques des objets d'échange kulas mais pluôt de figures de langage flexibles, de tropes, dans les échanges kulas. Le contexte plus large de la rhétorique et des genres dans les échanges kulas démontre que les genres mâle et femelle évoquent l'imaginaire des relations sexuelles, du plaisir, de l'intimité et du consentement. Le symbolisme des genres, dans le kula, est une stratégie rhétorique visant à lubrifier le sentiment de confiance entre les partenaires d'un échange kula.

Mots-clés : Ethnographie, genres, échanges, objets d'échange kula, Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée

> "There are, I submit, lessons to be learned still from the old shells of Massim exchange. Are there further lessons to be learned if we take another step backward to include Us in the picture?" [Keesing 1990:158]

Introduction

This article contributes to the discussion of representation and modelling by looking at gender symbolism in precious objects.[1] I am concerned here with a piece of ethnographic detail that relates to gift giving and gender in the kula exchange of Papua New Guinea. Taking up Roger Keesing's challenge cited above, I will demonstrate that these "old shells of Massim exchange" can indeed teach us further lessons about Anthropology as well as about gift exchange and gender symbolism. While the literature suggests that kula shells are constructed as "male"[2] and "female," my own data suggests that this symbolism is a rhetorical strategy of flexible tropes.

Keesing's critique that Trobriand Islanders and their exchange practices are essentialized in social science's discussions of kula (1990:157-9) is examined in this article by paying close attention to the way gender attributes have been applied to the circulating shell ornaments. I contend that our own analytic constructs of gender and materiality may have been leading us to wrong conclusions about principles of gender distinction in kula objects. Furthermore, by assigning certain beliefs to an entire society (the Trobrianders), we neglect to represent specialized knowledge (the kula) as a political tool, which is not equally shared. Such misleading translation "may create not only non-existent entities but spurious analytical problems as well" (Keesing 1985:204). Complex issues can get lost in translation, and kula is a complex system of hundreds of ranked objects, which is mastered only by few of its many participants who speak at least five different languages.[3]

Symbols are clearly "significant for the anthropological modelling of culture" (Wagner 1986:7), but metaphorical images that we encounter during fieldwork may not be

as significant as we believe (Keesing 1985:214; 1987:173). Keesing has cautioned us not to take other people's metaphors at face value, calling for a "more serious engagement with the epistemology of our encounter," arguing that conventional metaphors do not always illuminate our current thinking. Europeans, for example, talk about the sun's setting and rising as if the earth was flat and immobile without truly thinking this way (Keesing 1985:210).

Unpacking the semiotic and semantic qualities of gifts requires linguistic competence as well as tolerance to instances where notions are "deeply ambiguous" (Keesing 1987:162). Rendering "the implicit explicit" (Keesing 1985:202), however tempting, bears the risk of misrepresenting the common sense of others and this is what I believe has happened in the case of gendered kula shells. If culture is a text of social interaction, valuables as signs can be analysed in terms of iconism (resemblance), indexicality (connection), and symbolism (Keane 1997:79, 2005:182; Parmentier 2002:52). In kula, gender is precariously positioned on these three levels, as my data will show.

Kula—An Essentialized Staple in Anthropology

For a century, anthropologists have been fascinated by kula, the exchange of shell ornaments between partners in the Massim region of Papua New Guinea. Introduced to anthropology by Charles Seligman (1910) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1920, 1922), and widely disseminated by Marcel Mauss (1923-24), kula became a prime example of symbolic exchange. Hundreds of texts have discussed its principles, functions, structure and motivations (Macintyre 1983c), but space does not permit a systemic view of kula or an attempt to engage in the many debates on gift exchange in which kula is the "celebrated" example of the Western Pacific (Appadurai 1986:18). Malinowski's ethnography prevails as the key source in many publications, representing kula as it was, perhaps, to the chiefs of Northern Kiriwina at the time of his 1914-1918 fieldwork. We can be blamed for orientalizing and de-historicizing the kula when we rely on Malinowski's ethnography alone, ignoring epidemics, colonial impacts, a world war that outlawed canoe travel, a revival of kula with modified rules in postwar times and the nation-state with its ever-increasing cash economy (Leach 1983; Liep 1999; Macintyre 1983a; Young 1983). Before 1900, for example, Malinowski's "Trobrianders" (Kiriwina islanders) did not kula at all (Campbell 2002:73), and his account that armshells are passed on in pairs was outdated with the onset of World War II when kula was banned by the allied forces. After the war, single *mwali* became counter-gifts for *bagi* necklaces.

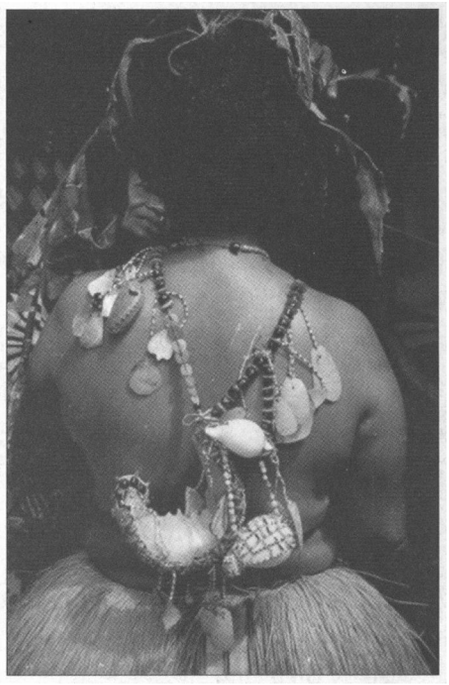
In the 1970s and 1980s, several anthropologists, especially Frederick Damon, Martha Macintyre, Nancy Munn, Carl Thune and Annette Weiner re-studied the kula and refined, re-interpreted and amended his findings. Their research demonstrates that Malinowski's "ring exchange" is better described as a regional system of paths (*keda*, or *'eda*) between islands that feature different hierarchical structures and, in fact, engage in their own styles of exchange practices (Leach and Leach 1983; Damon and Wagner 1989).

Kula exists in a wider context of valuable objects and practices that are in flux (Liep 2009; Macintyre 1983a). Recently, kula has become a brand name for various purposes within the whole of Milne Bay Province (for example Radio Kula, Kula election circuit, Kula Festival). There have been missionaries who exchanged kula shells; Australian hotel owners have achieved high rank in kula; shells have been moved quickly by catamaran and airplane; townspeople have been keeping shells in hiding; and anyone can buy kula shells on the Internet. I was told that some women are now active players in all kula stations, not only in the Southern Massim as it was in the past. Clearly, kula is changing, as, since 2010, mobile phones have been facilitating conversation without travel in the area. Nevertheless, to date, kula is still alive and well, although, in 2009 some senior kula players from Dobu grumbled about their heir's incompetence and disinterest, threatening not to train them. How do these elements fit into our models? I will now give centre stage to the objects that matter so much to kula players: the armshells and necklaces.

Objects of Desire: Bagi and Mwali

Kula shells continue to fascinate anthropologists for two reasons: first, each valuable is given as credit by the host to the visitor who will, at some later point, as a host, return a gift; and, second, one kind of shell must be exchanged against the other kind. Most undergraduates in socio-cultural anthropology are treated to a discussion of the necklaces (moving clockwise around the exchange ring) and the armshells that move in a counter-clockwise motion. Passed on by partners during their reciprocal visits, these valuable objects evoke passion and despair, create and cement networks and give status to those individuals who excel in exchanging them.

The two kinds of shell valuables look markedly different—one is a thin string of red *Chama* shell discs with a crescent-shaped pearl shell decoration on one end, produced on Rossel Island and named bagi or *soulava*. The other one, called mwali, consists of a ring-shaped slice of a big *Conus* shell with adornments of cowry shells and



Photograph 1: Dobu Island: A Woman Wearing Bagi Receives the Final Touch of Finery Before Climbing the Sagali Platform (copyright, S. Kuehling 1993)

Photograph 2: Koyagaugau Island: The Legendary Kula Master Mwalubeyai Poses with the Most Valuable Mwali of All (copyright, S. Kuehling 1994)

glass beads. These valuables are passed on in opposite directions within the kula area, such that bagi needs to be exchanged against mwali and vice versa. The sound they make is also different; mwali is decorated with nutshells and bagi with fragments of seashells that produce distinctive noises when handled (Campbell 1983b; Kuehling 2005). Such overt distinctions have attracted anthropologists to search for further binary oppositions.

Male and female are attributes identified as one of the distinctions, ever since Malinowski instructed us that, to Trobriand Islanders, "*mwali* (armshells) are women" (1922:356). In his time, gender was not yet conceptualized as a social construct. In the classic field-researcher's manual, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, man is used as synonymous with mankind (Committee 1951:176-179) and women are listed as exchange items (119) and as dysfunctional ("frigid, sterile," 109). What we would nowadays call "gender issues" is listed under "sex and age," a section that begins with the rather positivist statement that "among all people distinctions are made between men and women" (Committee 1951:66).

Male and Female Objects

In anthropological analysis, since structuralism, the symbolic meanings and binary oppositions attributed to material objects have often been used as an analytic tool. Bourdieu's analysis of the Kabyle house and its gendered spheres is an apt example (2003 [1960]). In feminist anthropology, gender was first analyzed in terms of complementary relations in which the domestic, female sphere was seen as subordinate to the public, male sphere (Leacock 1978; Moore 1988; Ortner 1996; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; M. Strathern 1980 and many others were involved in this productive debate).

Until the 1980s, binary oppositions such as male and female remained largely unquestioned for explaining universal power relations and their underlying symbolism; for example, ascribing male and female attributes to spatial domains. The second generation of feminist studies, however, identified gender as an imprecise category and called for more attention to overlapping areas, fluid boundaries, and accepted contradictions, rejecting the male-female opposition as inadequate for gender studies since the late 1980s. The strands weaving arguments about gender as a category of analysis have been unravelling and intertwining for the past 30 years, with no conclusions reached so far. Kula exchange, portrayed as a manly activity in the literature, did not seem to assist the feminist project, although important work on gender relations was published on Massim societies (especially Battaglia 1990; Lepowsky 1994; Weiner 1976). An alternative view from the Southern Massim, where both men and women handle kula objects, exists in the shadow of Malinowski's Trobriand version (Kuehling 2005).

The gender of kula shells is often reported as if it was a "natural fact" (Josephides 1991:158), but contemporary material culture studies have demonstrated that the boundary between subject and object is often blurred. Taking advice from gender studies as well as material culture studies, it appears timely to re-contextualize local expressions of male-female opposition in regard to material objects. Gender construction, according to Tilley, "becomes something endowed on persons and their bodies, artefacts, events, architecture and spaces. Male and female are two principles that constitute society; not distinctive attributes of different bodies, but forms of action" (2002:27, cf. Hoskins 1998, Strathern 1988).[4]

In the following sections, I will review the literature on male and female attributes of kula valuables before I attempt to disentangle the strands of gender discourse that have caused confusion among anthropologists.

Female Armshells and Male Necklaces?

Malinowski's interpretation of the gender of shells rests on one informant's comment that "*mwali* are women" (1922:356). Malinowski could not further elaborate on this statement other than "it evidently includes some idea about the smaller value of the female principle" (1922:356). This swift explanation is surprising as there is little evidence for the lower value of women in Trobriand ethnography. Could it be that a Polish housewife and not a Trobriand woman is lurking behind this idea? Did Malinowski's preconception that women are of lower value provide the foil for his understanding of Trobriand principles of gender and exchange? The male-female opposition in kula valuables, and its implied hierarchy, received no further attention from Malinowski, perhaps because they complicated his argument of reciprocity and equivalence. His brief and sparingly supported statement, however, was enthusiastically reproduced later when it suited "us" well in our theoretical endeavours.

Mauss was inspired by the metaphors of Trobriand kula, wondering if there was an "orientation myth" to explain the female quality of mwali (1990:26, n53). His reasoning about gender symbolism rings of romantic ideas from France rather than the Massim: "Another symbolic expression is that of the marriage of the *mwali*, the bracelets, the feminine symbols, with the soulava, the necklace, the masculine symbols, which stretch out towards each another, as does male towards female" (1993:26). Based on these two texts, the kula became a prime example of gift exchange in social theory and no subsequent Massim ethnographer could ignore the proposed symbolism, which gained popularity as functionalism declined, and structuralism rose in the 1970s. The femaleness of mwali and maleness of bagi were, however, only confirmed by rather shaky sources. Macintyre confirms this gendering for her field site, Tubetube Island in the Southern Massim (1983b:373), but cautioned that her account was based on preliminary data after one month of fieldwork (1983b:379) and, to my knowledge, she did not revisit the topic. Campbell reports that the decoration of one end of the bagi is called "testicles" (1983b:234) but remarks in a note (247, n6) that this may also be the name of this kind of shell. Scoditti and Leach briefly mention that Lalela people in eastern Kitawa also regard the mwali as female and the bagi as male: "The *raison d'être* seems to be that necklaces represent cumulative knowledge, prestige and wealth as acquired by men over a kula career, whereas armshells represent, by contrast, static non-expanding value" (1983:271).

Male Armshells and Female Necklaces?

Interestingly, other Massim ethnographers have been told otherwise by their informants, leading Jerry Leach to comment on the "intriguing transformations in the contrastive male-female symbolism of the shells around the system of the 1970s" (1983:24). Leach learned that "armshells like men like to move around the most and seek out their more sedentary opposites" (1983:24). Shirley Campbell politely questioned Malinowski's version of gendering, admitting that the shape of the valuables is suggestive. Indeed, if we search for "genitals" of shell valuables, we could argue that the armshell has a hole and the necklace is long and red, with a dangling decoration called "testicle." Apart from such interpretation based on resemblance, Campbell's informants suggested that the gender of kula shells may be derived from their connection to adornment, so that armshells are male because they are worn by men and necklaces are female because they are worn by women (Campbell 1983b:247,n5, see also 2002:175). While this is a valid argument, one should keep in mind that valuables are rarely worn at all—they are usually kept inside the house and, when displayed in public, they are hung on a wall, placed on a pile of yams, or lined up on a pole. The necklaces are worn during mortuary feasts where some valuables may also be decorating the platform used for food distributions, and where the occasional kula shell may change hands in the process of ceremonial gift-giving. I only saw mwali worn by men when they posed, at a feast or for my camera (as in Photograph 2).

A symbolic explanation that elaborates on parallels in the everyday exchanges of men and women is often cited in ethnographic texts. Kula shells travel on routes (*keda*, or *'eda*) ideally circulating clockwise and anti-clockwise

through the island region. As nearby islands can be visited more easily, social relations are often more intense, and kula exchange is likely to happen with more ease and frequency. But on a larger scale, beyond the Trobriand version, the entire kula area can be constructed in these symbolic terms, as there are two styles of kula exchange, the southern kula *Dobu,* which is characterized by more competition and cheating, and the northern kula *Massim,* which is faster and more predictable (Munn 1986:159). Campbell was told that "obtaining a *mwari* was likened to the day-to-day distribution of betel nut between men; whereas obtaining the *vaiguwa* was likened to the far more difficult procedures in soliciting sex from women. It was found to be easier to obtain *mwari* from Kitawa than *vaiguwa* from Dobu" (1983b:247, n5). Armshells, according to this symbolic reasoning, are male because they move quicker and necklaces are female because they require more "wooing" and are acquired on more dangerous kula journeys.

It is interesting to note that the necklaces remain reluctant and stubborn items of exchange even after reaching the Trobriand Islands and entering the area of "lighter" kula. Nancy Munn, in her influential study *The Fame of Gawa,* reports that:

> Necklaces, always described as female, are regarded as being slow and tight—more difficult to obtain—because, as men explain, it is difficult to persuade women to accede to masculine wishes (as for instance, in sexual matters, the example usually drawn in this context). Conversely, armshells are male because they are more readily moved; since they travel fast, they are like men, the more mobile sex in contrast to the more sedentary women. [1986:157]

Munn draws the image of a gendered regional model for the kula area in which the south appears as female because their version of kula is more sophisticated and competitive while the northeast, including Gawa, is male because their kula is quicker, easily accessible, and more regular in its movements. She asserts that bagi are female and mwali male and that this gendering is closely linked to other binary patterns (1986:157). Contrary to Malinowski, however, Munn argues for an ideology of male subordination or, at least, "the equality of the male and female principles" (1986:162):

> [w]hat comes to the fore in the gender definition of the kula shells is the model of the political relation between men and women, namely, that men must influence women in order to gain their agreement to masculine ends. The female element is thus envisioned as the independent locus of control that has to be influenced. In this context, the implicit superordination of the female element becomes overt. [1986:158]

The argument of female superordination, in life as in kula shells, is countered by Scoditti (Scoditti and Leach 1983). He disagrees with Malinowski's statement but offers an explanation that suggests male superordination for his impression that in western Kitawa, mwali are male and bagi female:

> The Kumwageans saw the armshells metaphorically as male and the necklaces as female. The reason given was that the armshells represented the ideal state of complete knowledge attainable only by men. Ipso facto, necklaces, as a residual converse, must be female. It is, however, also clear that armshells have much greater non-kula usage on Kitava (sic) and are also much more dominant sociolinguistically. [Scoditti and Leach 1983:271]

Thus, according to Scoditti, Kitawans entertain the prevailing idea that maleness represents superior knowledge, but they ascribe it either to the bagi (in eastern Kitawa) or to the mwali (in western Kitawa).

Fred Damon has described the gendering of kula objects in Muyuw (Woodlark Island) as male (armshell) and female (necklace) (1990:96), however, he is the first ethnographer to point out that the issue is more complex and depends on the status of a valuable. There are various ways to attach gender to objects, as "gender differences carry the culture's dominant transformative role. Muyuw's most encompassing periodicities are defined by the temporal metamorphoses of male and female labor" (Damon 1990:96). Damon reports that, in the larger picture, kula shells appear as male and explains in detail the differences between "male things" and "female things" (1990:97-98) in local exchanges called *takon.* This kind of exchange between cross-sex siblings uses kula shells as "male things," to be given to a man by his sister in exchange for "female things" like yams and pigs. Damon does not see imbalance, or evidence for metaphorical subordination, in the gendering: "Although men tend to talk more about the food, the female things, they give away to their sisters, in fact the male things they receive are as important or more important. They allow one to be productive and to capitalize one's productivity" (1990:50-51).

According to Damon, there are in fact three gender categories for kula valuables: "male armshells, female necklaces, and *kitoum*" (2002:119). *Kitoum* are kula shells that are free of debt and that are temporarily owned by an individual. Both armshells and necklaces can be someone's

kitoum and in local exchanges such as mortuary ritual, where kitoum are used, it does not matter which type is given. To complicate the gender issue further, Damon explains that the exchange of women between the four clans (2002:111), and the kitoum gifts that they entail, leads to further gendering:

> "[w]omen" too are converted into *kitoum*. For a man to be a man he must take his spouse to his village to complete the gender definition of their marriage process, and in so-doing, as long as the woman's brothers have fulfilled their obligations, he becomes obligated to replace her by a *kitoum* upon her death. [111]

Here, Damon is vulnerable to Weiner's critique of the concept of women as objects of exchange. According to Weiner, women's reproductive power cannot be regarded simply as a biological resource at men's disposal. Based on her fieldwork in Kiriwina, Weiner argues that it is not the case that, "women were one object among the many objects that moved between men" (1982:60). She was told that "a kula shell is like a young girl; she looks over every man until she decides which one she likes best" (1976:218). Campbell believes that to Vakuta islanders, the original marriage is symbolically between the partners (a male visitor and a female host) and the shells copy this connection by seducing others into this segment of a path (2002:166-171).

In *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), Marilyn Strathern approaches kula gifts from a different angle, regarding gender as a temporal mode of transaction rather than a symbolic attribute of a class of objects. What Massim people think about the gender of kula shells is not relevant to her argument that kula partners are conceptually male and the objects of exchange female. She states that, " [b]eing 'male' or being 'female' emerges as a holistic unitary state under particular circumstances. In the one-is-male mode, each male or female form may be regarded as containing within it a suppressed composite identity; it is activated as androgyny transformed" (1988:14). Her model ignores the contradictive literature on female and male kula shells by simply stating that they are "conceived as a pair of male and female valuables" (1988:199). The model may work well for the northern part of the kula ring but I am doubtful that it would hold for the entire exchange system, as gender roles are expressed differently in regards to local exchanges and kula in the matrilocal South (see also Macintyre 1995).

I believe that one reason for these contradictory observations is the method of stationary fieldwork, participant observation and deep immersion. A more object-centred ethnography may elicit better data on the metaphors of exchange (cf. Hoskins 1998:2). Since exchanges never happen according to schedule and can take years of planning, we cannot possibly participate fully in the complex and very slow motion of kula. No one has ever followed the objects as they move around the islands, and this lack of participation limits our view. As Macintyre remarked, "people [on Tubetube Island] are not given to scholastic musings over comparisons between male and female power, nor do they present arguments about separate and complementary domains" (1987:222). Battaglia likewise noted that on Sabarl Island, words are "unreliable and unstable vehicles of memory in the local view" (1992:5). Scoditti remarked, "[t]he gender symbolism of kula shells (Malinowski 1922:356) is relatively insignificant to Kitawans. Information on the topic never came forward spontaneously but could be elicited by questioning" (Scoditti and Leach 1983:271).

Talking about gendered objects in a Massim language is difficult. My consultants and I tried to find answers to the difference between mwali and bagi, but sometimes we were lost in translation. Wagner constructs the linguistic dimension as a frame within a symbolic frame, consisting of "grammar, syntax, and usage" and reproducing "images of convention" (1986:7). Keesing describes the grammatical elements of language as "webs of loosely overlapping meanings" (1989:65) and speaks of the "traps" that complicate an understanding of subtleties (65; see also Rosaldo 1980:23-24). In Dobu there are adjectives for male (*me'oloto-*, literally, person-men [plural]) and female (*mewaine-*, literally person-woman [singular]) but neither sex (other than words and euphemisms for sexual organs) nor gender are linguistic concepts or grammatical categories.[5] A gender distinction can be constructed with gender markers of male or female to qualify the noun, as in *gwama mewainena* (child – female), *lakua me'olotona* (mud crab – male), or by direct reference to either man/men (*tai/oloto*) or woman/women (*waine/iine*), as in *iine idi paisewa* (women their gender role/work). The literal question that we ask, "Is this *mwali* like a man or like a woman?"(in Dobuan: *mwali nina atua meolotona nai mewainena*?), can elicit many possible answers.

While questions of gender subordination are central to anthropology, Massim islanders construct gender around different key metaphors, emphasizing balance rather than opposition, as it is reflected in the idea that "women 'grow' babies, men grow gardening products and the two genders need each other for reproduction" (Montague 1983:38-39). In Kaileuna, according to Montague, there "is no sense of unbalance, and the spiritual properties of men and women are of the same basic stuff" (1983:40). As elsewhere in the kula region, the solidarity

of the matrilineage is a core value; the support of a mother is a natural given but a father needs to be compensated for his love and assistance. Macintyre observed the difference between brother-sister and husband-wife relations in Tubetube, where "[i]deas of harmony, unity and equilibrium are analogically expressed as things being *meduna* ('cross-sex siblings together'). Irreducible difference is also expressed in gender terms but the male and female are then husband and wife" (1987:209). The metaphorical use of sex and marriage in kula discourse on Gawa (Munn 1986:148) draws on this difference while at the same time emphasizing, almost romanticising, a principle of balance, of equivalent rank between sexually involved partners. "The most notable asymmetric complements to which the marriage metaphor is stereotypically applied are the kula shells. Armshells and necklaces 'marry' each other when shells of equivalent rank are exchanged" (Munn 1986:149-50).

As I will demonstrate, talking about of the objects' gendered activities like marriage is one of the rhetorical strategies that assist in creating an atmosphere of mutual trust between kula partners. Such imagery also provides useful scripts for actual sequences of exchange, but it does not indicate that kula shells are constructed as gendered persons (as, for example, recently argued by Godelier 1999:81). I will now offer a new reading of the gender trope, based on my own, Dobu-centric perspective.

Multiple Metaphors, Flexible Tropes: Playing Kula in the 1990s

During my field research on Dobu Island (1992-94, 1997), I was privileged to join kula traders on their journeys and to discuss their views as we waited for boats or rested on our trekking to a partner's village, feasted on our overseas hosts' verandas and experienced the hardships and luxuries of kula (Kuehling 2005). Within this frame of practice, I enquired about the notion of gender and the differences between bagi and mwali with kula experts from Bwaiowa, Dobu, Duau and Koyagaugau, the key stations of the southern kula region. The results were surprising to me. When asked about male and female principles, informants did not come up with an answer unless I prompted by citing from the literature. They began to ponder the question and offered comments aimed at helping me to answer this—in their view rather insignificant—question. Alfred Lazarus from Kwanaula/Duau (Normanby Island) boldly stated that gendering was not done at all, while Mwalubeyai from Koyagaugau (Dawson Island) said that in the past, armshells were seen as male and necklaces as female (counter Malinowski, supporting Munn), but today's generation did not know or care about it[6]. Both possibilities were taken seriously as statements of anthropologists, but when prompted, informants on Dobu volunteered specific reasons for a Malinowskian gendering. Based on the resemblance of valuables, they speculated that on Dobu, mwali are female because the decoration of the mwali shell is called "women's skirt" (*dobe*) while the red, long string of bagi could perhaps be interpreted as a penis (Kuehling 2005:104, 107). They also tried to make sense in terms of regional differences when they stated "*mwali* may be female because they come to Dobu from the weak (left) side. The right side is stronger as the right hand is stronger."

The latter argument resonates with Munn's findings of southern kula being tougher. It indicates a constructed, gendered imbalance in spatial perspective that is reflected in deixis: in the Dobu language, kula valuables are perceived as different classes of objects which is reflected in the verbs that qualify their motions. The anti-clockwise movement of armshells is named *upwards* (*laga*) and the clockwise movement of necklaces is described as *downwards* (*dolo*) (Kuehling 2005:189, cf. Damon 2002:122-123 for a similar concept on Muyuw, located at the opposite side of the kula area). The possessive markers also differ, as armshells carry the marker of objects that are very close (an object that I wear or carry on my body, *agu mwali*) while the necklace is talked about as alienable (an object that I own, *igu bagi*) (Kuehling 2005:109). Such grammatical constructions are widespread among Austronesian-speakers and certainly not meaningless, as linguist John Lynch has shown in his comparative study of possessives in island Melanesia. He noted that "a different relationship between possessor and possessed, or a different attitude of possessor towards possessed, is implied" (1973:76). My kula teachers did not know why they used different possessive markers for bagi and mwali; they had not thought about it before but agreed with me that it was odd.

When I persistently kept asking people about the differences between mwali and bagi and their ideas on gender in kula valuables, Lakatani Aisi, one of my kula teachers from Dobu, looked at me as if I had not heard him well and patiently said, pointing to the genitals of a pig that was running around: "Look. Pigs are male and female, but not shell valuables" (*U itai. Bawe me'olotodi be mewainedi, ta bagi be mwali nigeya*). This comment points to the difficulty of enquiry, as I had no way to distinguish between gender and sex in the vernacular. The comment made me wonder if he had understood my question and if he believed that I was a bit crazy. Other anthropologists' interviews on the topic may have gone into similar directions by accident, too, when the subtleties

of iconism, indexicality and symbolism were muddled in translation.

Linguistic challenges notwithstanding, these inconsistencies are rooted, I believe, neither in misunderstanding nor incomplete data collection, as Trobriand anthropologist Linus digim'Rina also received contradictory statements when he asked kula specialists, including his own father (personal communication 1995), on his home island. How can this ethnographic muddle be explained? Certainly, kula shells are very significant objects of wealth in the Massim, in fact, it is known by everybody that "people die for them" and, in spite of this threat, there are many kula traders of all levels of skill and wealth trying to rise to the top and claim the fame.

Damon is, I believe, correct when he challenges the view that gendering refers to a permanent state of kula valuables or a curious way of distinction between necklaces and armbands. In spite of their linguistic construction as different in their closeness to persons (evident in the alienable vs. inalienable possessive pronoun) by Dobu speakers, shell valuables can assume either gender in the process of kula negotiations when they are characterized in terms of both maleness and femaleness. Gender is a well-established element in the creative process that forms the genre of kula talk (*ona 'une* in Dobu). Metaphorical reference to sexual desire is often used for building an atmosphere of conspiracy, arousal and cooperation, which is supported by extreme hospitality. The practice of *woiwoila* (*wooing* or *greasing* as Dobu Islanders say in English) aims at seducing a partner by evoking images of kula valuables as sexually driven individuals, of longing lovers and matching mates. Damon has observed this on Muyuw, where "kula and kinship can be seen as mirror images of each other. The structural complementaries ... have their representations in the extensive use of gender/kinship metaphors in kula discourse" (1990:96). I was told that "greasing for kula shells is like greasing for sex," and experienced many of these conversations, usually as an observer but eventually as an apprentice for the mwali Ulilaba as the student of late Alexander Harry Meleodi, a kula master of highest standing. It never ceased to fascinate me how the "twisting of the partner's mind" was orchestrated. These were some of the arguments of a Bwaiowa man who tried to persuade me into giving him my bagi at a different kula occasion:

> A *mwali* suits your beauty much better, because *mwali* are female; just imagine the feeling of going back to your university telling your supervisor that you have kula partners yourself; for the *mwali* that I will give to you, you will get an even larger *bagi* in Duau; kula is about exchange, so why don't you participate properly; if you make me happy today, I will make you happy later and we will both be happier than before ..." [Kuehling 2005:211, see also Campbell 2002:166-170]

Certainly, to Dobu Islanders, gender is not a category for assessing the value of individual shells. The focus is both on the size and beauty of the object and on its path; the line of the past, present and future persons holding a kula valuable are the most important issues when the shells are discussed locally (Kuehling 2005). In local exchanges (as kitoum), the necklaces and armshells are joined by pigs in the category of *'une* (big gifts), a term that also refers to the act of giving during mortuary ritual and the interisland exchange that anthropologists call by its Trobriand name, kula.

Both mwali and bagi may also assume a male gender role when tropes of warfare are employed. Fishing and hunting metaphors are often used when discussing kula processes, for example when valuables are referred to as "bait" (see Campbell 1983b:241; Munn 1986:158). Notions of "bait" and "calling," or of "building a fence" around a valuable, depend on context and rhetorical strategies that certainly differ among the societies around the kula ring; as Damon points out, "kula varies by place and so must our accounts" (2002:110). Sophisticated rhetoric strategies and the most powerful magical practices are employed to create a bond between comrades when partners discuss how to lure certain valuables into their network. In this context, kula shells hit (*unuwa*), spear (*logita*) and hit again (*unuwa'ila*), trying to push an exchange partner into offering a desired counter-gift. These terms are also used when parting with a shell (pushing off, throwing, *pela*), in the often provocatively aggressive, dominating style that is typical for Dobuan kula. "This is your *mwali* named Maikala. It spears the *bagi* Likudomdom." Being "speared" in this way means marriage between the shells (and it is tempting to think Freudian here)—it is, however, of no importance who speared/hit whom. This counters an overarching gendering, as women do not carry spears (*gita*), but both mwali and bagi can "spear" as gifts. Digim'rina reported that one of his informants in Kiriwina said that "*mwali* is sent to look for her husband" while another one stated that "*mwali*, like all men, are always moving, searching and travelling far and wide to find a woman to marry" (personal communication 1995).

Apart from being penetrating, kula shells can also be presented as needy and defensive. In a soliciting gift called *pokala* (betrothal), a shell of lower value is sent out to beg for a future gift of high value. Pokala gifts are frequent in the entire kula region, indicating the giver's keenness in receiving a particular shell, "begging for sex," as Alexander put it. The receiver has to reciprocate the

betrothal gift but is not obliged to agree to the future transaction. It is legitimate to keep kula shells out of circulation, behind a fence (*'ali*) and to ignore the call (*bwau*) of a partner's shell. Dobu people say that certain shells are hiding (*kwaikwaiya*) and they complain about others that are hard or tight (both *pa'ala*). Unlike Gawa, the active (*'une paisewa*, literally kula-work) and passive (*'une 'eno*, literally kula-sleep) actions of kula shells are not gendered in Dobu, as people associate them with the human kula player whose strategies encompass both directions of exchanges: a protective owner will move more slowly, keeping the shells "behind a fence" so that they appear as hard and tight, no matter if bagi or mwali are concerned.

Talking honestly about the future paths of specific kula valuables is a prerequisite to successful kula. One way to achieve a relaxed atmosphere of secretive bonding is talking in sexual references, artfully invoking images of desire, lust, sex and marriage. Kula deals are often lubricated by sex talk as well as actual encounters and many references to sex could be understood as gender metaphors. From a Dobu perspective, kula shells enjoy a range of sexual activities as they travel on their paths: they meet (*elobaloba*), get betrothed (which implies having sex), give pokala quite often, sometimes they get married (*'ai*) and, very rarely, become widows (*kwabula*). Until we can draw on systematic data of such kula discourses, I propose that we interpret the tropes of gendered valuables in the context of wooing, taking into consideration that sex, as Malinowski has discovered long ago, is a secret but socially accepted activity.

Sexual metaphors and practices of the Massim can hardly be represented solely by a romantic image of longing lovers, conjured by Mauss, in which male "stretches out towards female" (1990:26). In Massim societies, prenuptial promiscuity is regarded as a privilege of teenagers as "village girls are free" and adolescent boys "cannot be controlled." Macintyre states that:

> [s]exuality is rarely spoken of in terms of dominance and submission. Sexual intercourse epitomises equal, balanced exchange and is one metaphor used when alluding to a perfectly matched transaction where valuables of equal rank are exchanged between partners of equal renown. Seduction is the art of persuasion and agreement, not conquest and surrender. [1987:213]

So when kula shells "have sex," they are interacting in a socially acceptable way, changing their sexual partners at their convenience as they are exchanged against this or that kula shell of the opposite kind. If soliciting gifts for a valuable (pokala) are accepted from a number of partners, there may be complaints that the kula shell has sex with too many partners (in Dobu called *sogala*) without moving on to a more stable relationship. To be sogala (adulterous, highly promiscuous) is a gender-blind practice, which is not viewed, as negative as long as there is no suffering, jealous spouse.[7] Marriage is a social setup of adults that follows from a promiscuous adolescence, characterised by a visible relationship including the setup of a household and all the obligations that this entails. While kula shells are said to have sex when they are given in exchange for the other, the long-term aim is for them, as for people, to grow up and engage in more permanent relationships, based on equality, mutual trust and on-going exchanges that regulate each spouses' work and expenses so that, ideally, it ends in a state of balance (either after a divorce or when the second spouse has died). Damon reiterates this idea: "a good Kula relationship should be 'like a marriage', lasting until its debts are completely over" (1980:283). These allegories not only provide rhetorical strategies, they are also scripts for successful kula exchange that are easily understood by people who live in a Massim kind of marriage.

Massim marriage does not easily translate into English. Phonetically, the Dobuan word for marriage is identical with *eating* (*'ai*) as eating together in public signifies the public revelation of the married status and continues to be central in the marriage. For kula shells, this means that the exchange of two matching shells becomes more regular, or takes place publicly. When shells get "married," their value is matched with another shell and I learned of a number of shells that climbed, or dropped, in rank through such a "marriage." The mwali Maikala, for example, gained higher value by getting married to the *dagula* bagi Likudomdom. In spite of being relatively new, Maikala could "marry up" and thereby establish its rank. "Marriage" is an appropriate metaphor for the conflicting emotions of greed and fear, trust and doubt, hope and worry, lust and sexual desire that are central to kula exchange practice.

When kula shells are referred to as married, this discursive context clearly marks that they are of different substance (of different clans and opposite sex). But kula shells are also constructed as one inclusive category when their quality of local ownership is emphasized. Damon's distinction between personally owned kitoum shells from armshells and necklaces as a third category (2002:119) is important with regard to the fact that kitoum are not having sex, nor do they marry, because in their kitoum stage, necklaces and armshells are not exchanged against each other. As gifts between affines or within the matrilineage, kitoum are not ranked or compared (matched) in the

same way as they are in kula. Kitoum stand for solidarity between (or within) matrilineages—and in this context, talk about sex is forbidden.

The highest achievement in kula is to receive a widow (*kwabukwabula*)—this is the name for the completion of an exchange within the realm of the few crowns (*waniai*) or second-highest ranking shell valuables of both kinds (*dagula*). A widow is the gift for which other shells have been biting, spearing, and spearing again in a slow process that cemented mutual trust between the partners. Most kula traders never get anywhere near this realm and nobody could explain to me why this final gift is so clearly named after women (the term for widower is *kumatai).* Perhaps the term refers to the immobility of the valuable: a widow does not move much in space and such a kula shell is likewise free of exchange obligations since it is the final counter gift for a kitoum shell.

Gender-blind metaphors include the notion that kula shells of low and medium value should flow like water (*pilipili bwasi nadigega*), moving swiftly between islands, wearing themselves out in constant motion and thereby increasing their value. The discomfort of their travels, visible in rounded rims and changed colours, broken and repaired decorations, parallels the suffering of the human travellers who, as I was told, cause the host to feel sympathy and act more generously.[8] Some valuables, for example a mwali named Kabisawali (created by the Trobriand businessman John Kasaipwalowa and named after a short-lived community project on Kiriwina Island), are associated with death and it is regarded as a great risk to even ask for it. Those who hold the shell fear the witchcraft inherent in the object, but while witchcraft is regarded as a predominantly female power, none of my kula-teachers would say that Kabisawali, the *werabana* (witchcraft) mwali was itself female but rather that it attracts witches.

Such data suggests that flexible tropes are at play as a valuable can be male in one discursive context and female in a different one, because the kula partners are not talking about gender qualities that belong to a specific shell, or a category of valuables, but about the crossing of paths, about matching value in spite of physical difference. The metaphors of marriage may also differ among the individual islands of the region. Unlike in the northern Massim, where women live virilocally and do not often participate directly in kula, the southern Massim is predominately matrilocal and both women and men control and produce food and are free to engage in the exchange of valuables (Battaglia 1992:5; Lepowsky 1994:46-47, 304). The women of the southern Massim are particularly feared as witches who bear a fire inside their reproductive organs and can use their powers to kill and eat people (Kuehling 2005; Macintyre 1987:207, Lepowsky 1994). On Tubetube, an important kula area in the southern Massim, "people do not have a concept of personhood that embodies an ideal, individual autonomy. Social identity and personhood are initially and ultimately conceptualised within the ideology of matrilineal integrity" (Macintyre 1987:208). Based on this principle of sameness, power relations are constructed within the matrilineage for both men and women in terms of age, exchange relations and work ethic (Kuehling 2005; Macintyre 1987:223). Being male or female is a permanent state of existence, which defines the roles of a person, but the gender of kula shells is a temporal state, because valuables can only "have sex" when they are on the road of interisland kula. No matter what gender attributes and metaphorical qualities a particular shell has been assigned, when the object is used as kitoum in local exchanges such as mortuary ritual, there is no counter-gift, no soliciting, and no sweet talk.

Gender attributes are not helpful to determine rank unless a relative scale is employed (having once been married to a famous object will raise the value of a newer, less established valuable). The art of kula exchange includes stories of pairings of the past, narrations about objects that may not have spent a single night under the same roof but crossed each other's path as honest-faced promises, delicious fantasies and rhetorical strategies. Negotiating the value of kula shells is nevertheless by no means restricted to a discourse on sex and marriage. There are hundreds of kula valuables in circulation, each one individually sized and shaped, decorated and transacted. Only the experts know how to match them in an advantageous way, because there is usually only one object at hand and the other one is "on its way" or "left at home." Knowing the names and values of many objects is crucial, as kula shells, like humans, are judged according to their "outside" and "inside" qualities and the way these are presented in public. A high-ranked shell valuable carries both an attractive outside shape (form) and a long history of its accomplishments as an item of exchange (fame).

In inter-island kula, all the available indicators of size are considered whenever a larger number of valuables of one kind is collected in a group expedition. In a ritual (called *tanaleleya*—literally "handbag-same" on Dobu), the shells are put on a pole and sorted according to value by the most senior members of the expedition. Later, the individual kula persons collect their shells, but the public display at tanaleleya creates a re-evaluation of value that sticks to the object as it is narrated by the witnesses and passed on between partners.

If gender did matter as a distinguishing marker in kula, the way I learned about the estimating of value would further confuse the issue:

> I went to Lakatani and we sat down on his veranda. He had promised to explain the kula to me and I wondered why he stretched out, lifted a part of the sago leaves of the roof, and took a pack of playing cards from their hiding place. He went through them, sorting out the high cards and putting them into hierarchical order. He explained that the relative value of the cards was the important trick: "Ace with ace, king with king, queen with queen, jack with jack, that is how we do kula." [Field Notes, Kuehling 2005:108]

The image of overlapping and contradictory attributes and categories of gender that I have drawn here underlines feminist concerns with rigid attributions. Symbols, in Wagner's words, "are certainly not something that 'the natives' have told the anthropologist about" (1986:1). Perhaps we asked the wrong question about male and female, had trouble understanding the answer, and interpreted the responses so that they made sense in anthropological theory.

Conclusions

The gendering of kula valuables in the anthropological literature has changed considerably during the last century. From evolutionist, diffusionist and functionalist fascination with "ceremonial money" to structuralist, Marxist, and interactionalist fascination and postmodern deconstruction, kula valuables and their gender have found their way into our theories and ethnographies. Being "classical savages" since Seligman, Malinowski and Reo Fortune, the islanders took their share in misrepresentation. Keesing provocatively stated, "we have populated the tribal world with mystical philosophers and brooding paranoids, situated them in experiential worlds so different from ours that anthropology has had to be a translation of the radically alien" (1989:469).

I have demonstrated that the larger context of local practice, cosmology and agency reveals layers of symbolism beyond simple dichotomies, and that gender is neither a permanent quality nor seen as physically manifest in shell valuables, but is a flexible trope that facilitates exchange negotiations. Kula valuables are assigned gender in rhetorical constructions, which depend on the strategies of exchange and not the qualities of the objects.

Unfortunately, our "old shells" deny us the satisfaction of neat theory and accurate modelling. Their "gender," once unpacked, is messy and inconsistent (cf. Hoskins 1998:16). Qualities of maleness and femaleness are not symbolically tied to either kind of objects and there is no agreement on such object-centred gendering within the Massim region. The "gender" of kula shells can refer to gendered shells, or the gender of those who exchange shells, or the exchange style of regions and, in each case, the gender may be different; male, female, or neutral, depending on the kind of exchange work that the object is used for and the kind of explanation work that we engage in.

While linguistic structures may well be similar in the kula region, other features of social life are markedly different. The Massim, the kula area, or even the kula exchange itself, are not closed entities (Damon 2002:110). My own bias for the southern Massim in this discussion is based on my research on Dobu, offering a counterbalance to the predominant representation of Trobriand, Gawa and Muyuw (Woodlark Island), due to a high concentration of excellent ethnographic fieldwork on these islands. We cannot assume that all people believe in, or refer to, the same symbols, or that the gender of kula shells makes sense to everyone.

Given that gender is an open-ended and dynamic category, we have no reason to expect that there is a uniform attribution frozen in time and space. We know from other regions in Melanesia that "gender symbolism in trade and friendship relations can vary enormously between trading partners from different areas" (A. Strathern and Stewart 2000:36). We can also expect that the gender of objects changes according to context within societies, as in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, where:

> [a]lthough the pearl shell was a marker of male prestige and was kept mostly in the male sphere, women often decorated themselves by wearing the shells of their husbands, thereby sharing in the prestige of these shells and in the expressions of agency impressed in them. Shells in fact stood for both male and female identities at the same time. [A. Strathern and Stewart 2000:48]

Following Keesing's reminder to "take Us into the picture," includes the careful translation of local concepts into English, avoiding the selective prism of disciplinary fashions and the temptation of reading too deeply in cultural texts that we find appealing, thus "depicting cultures as radically different from ours and from one another" (Keesing 1987:162). Symbols cannot be taken out of their overall context, and kula shells "do" so much more than being gendered, having sex and getting married. The almost person-like agency of kula shells is not in question here as kula shells are talked about as actors, in metaphors of need and greed, caution and communion. These images are carefully composed to distract an exchange partner from distrust, playing against the well-known fact that the valuables are in reality not acting on their own behalf but are sent around in the context of

intense scheming. This social context of kula shells can be experienced on kula journeys, when informants reflect on their personal gain, the life span of partners, the chances to find transport, the strategies of persuasion, the need for cash to host the partner or pay for a boat, the joy of being away from the monotony of everyday life and work and, perhaps, on the sexual encounters that are a "bonus" of kula journeys (Kuehling 2005).

Kula shells are powerful political tools; they give a person the right to speak up in public, can remove shame, lighten the burden of grief, acknowledge solidarity and co-operation, provide people with land and pigs, and help a matrilineage shine in glory and frugality during mortuary feasting. All kula shells can do all this, no matter what gender they may be given in the oratory that accompanies their movement; these are the qualities that matter to the men and women in the Massim who employ male and female as forms of discursive action when they talk, plot and think about exchange. I agree with Keesing that "the old shells of Massim exchange" can teach us more lessons—one of which should focus on the various ways "objects hold meanings within encompassing cultural systems" (Barker 2001:360).

The question about the gender symbolism of kula shells, as I have demonstrated, is an anthropological one. A kula specialist does not perceive one kind as male and the other as female, although "kula varies by place and so must our accounts" (Damon 2002:110). Kula varies by individual, too, as he or she may assign gender to a specific object in the context of rhetorical strategies—to convince a kula partner, or, perhaps, to make an anthropologist happy by talking about the kind of things that he or she wants to hear.

Keesing has pointed out that at best, anthropologists come to speak the local language with "far less than full fluency, certainly with far less than a full native command" (1989:460) and although I do claim fluency in Dobuan to the point that I can be funny and dream in it, I would not have written this article if Trobriand anthropologist Linus digim'Rina's inquiries in Kiriwina had not confirmed my initial doubts. Asking about metaphorical gendering of objects in the vernacular is never an easy task, as finer details are likely to get lost in translation and interpretation. The case of kula is further complicated by the complexity of the system and the sophistication of its experts. The gender of kula shells is a window into exchange practice, an index for ethically appropriate giving and taking (cf. Keane 1997:79). By focusing on symbolism and iconism while neglecting this indexicality, anthropologists have not yet asked enough questions about the old shells of the Massim.

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Notes

1 This paper began as a presentation in an inspiring session of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) in 1999 (Materializing Oceania: Why Things Still Matter, organized by Joshua A. Bell and Haidy Geismar). Fieldwork was carried out 1992-1994 and 1997 as a PhD student at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Department of Anthropology, The Australian National University. An early draft of this article was written as a visiting scholar at the same institution in February 2008. I am very grateful to Harry Beran, Linus S. digim'Rina, Michael W. Young, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments.

2 These terms are used critically but the quotes have been omitted from the text for clarity.

3 The number of languages depends on who is counted as actively participating in kula (the Amphletts, for example, were a kula station in the past but are mostly left out today). I have counted the languages of Dobu, Trobriand, Woodlark, Koyagaugau and Duau. All of them have a number of dialects.

4 Appadurai regarded the kula as the "paradigm" of his "tournaments of value" (1986:21), although very little information on the actual value of the objects has been published. He ignored the literature on gender of kula shells since they were not helpful for his deconstruction of subject-object relationship (Küchler 2005:209).

5 I can only think of one example for implicitly gendered nouns: the words for widow (*kwabula*) and widower (*kumatai*).

6 Alfred ('Alipi') Lazarus is a well-known kula trader and, as an informant of anthropologist Carl Thune, he spent a decade thinking about kula from an anthropologist's perspective. Mwalubeyai was "the big chief" in kula until his death in the late 1990s. When Alipi exchanged one high-ranking valuable in two to three years, Mwalubeyai moved five to six of them per year because he had so many partners and was active in two top-ranking partnerships (*eda*). While the average kula player has one or two partners on each side of his *eda*, Mwalubeyai had 30-40 partners in Duau and about 100 on Woodlark Island, exchanging actively with up to 300 partners at a time.

7 I was on Dobu when Lady Diana died in 1997. The news spread quickly and the tragic death was discussed in a number of ways. One woman remarked that Diana was sogala, "but so was her husband Charles, so that was ok."

8 Empathy, pain and self-discipline are central to kula, as I have argued elsewhere (2005). Jason Throop has recently discussed the close relation between power and pain in Yap, Micronesia (2010).

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