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WOMEN AND *KULA*: THE INVISIBLE FORCE BEHIND HOSPITALITY IN GIFT EXCHANGE

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the hosting of *kula* partners is an important part of the exchange system that requires more attention. Women's management of their households and resources, their training of children, and the internal networks that provide for a visiting *kula* partner are regarded as the benefits and key motivations ('profit') of *kula*. If the hospitality is underwhelming, a visitor will not continue the partnership and, because he will share his experiences back home, this will negatively affect the future *kula* affairs of that household. By isolating the movements of valuables from the deep experiences of visiting and hosting, the role of women in *kula* is typically misrepresented as marginal and of lower value. *Kula*, to me and to most islanders, is not about the fame of traders, but about the cooperation of families to ensure the services, hospitality, and generosity that are so special to the region.

Key words: *Kula* exchange, Melanesia, gender roles, women, hospitality, ethnography, power relations

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> The *kula*, its essential form, is itself only one element, the most solemn one, in a vast system of services rendered and reciprocated, which indeed seems to embrace the whole of Trobriand economic and civil life. The *kula* seems to be merely the culminating point of that life, particularly the *kula* between nations and tribes. It is certainly one of the purposes of existence and for undertaking long voyages. Yet in the end, only the chiefs, and even solely those drawn from the coastal tribes—and then only a few—do in fact take part in it. The *kula* merely gives concrete expression to many other institutions, bringing them together (Mauss 2000 [1925]: 27).

INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact in the social sciences that the *kula* exchange of Southeastern Papua New Guinea is the business of men. The Trobriand Islanders, as Malinowski famously reported in 1922, are the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*; brave men who travel the Coral Sea by canoe to visit exchange partners in hopes of receiving

ceremonial objects (either shell necklaces or shell armbands). While abroad, *kula* traders are hosted by their exchange partners who will in time come to receive counter gifts and hospitality. In this way, the two valuable objects circulate in alternate directions around the *kula* region. As Uberoi (1962: 10) summarised, 'the red shell Necklaces and white Armshells exchanged in the *kula* are regarded (…) as the most valuable objects that a man can possess.' In anthropology, this system of delayed reciprocity based on trust has become a key example of gift exchange as a human form of interaction. The complexity of different types of gifts, strategies to secure shell ornaments, spheres of exchange, and forms of cheating have been widely discussed in the literature, especially in the edited volume following the first *kula* conference in Cambridge in 1978 (Leach and Leach 1983).

Rather than reiterating the principles and conventions, loopholes, and gray zones of legitimacy of *kula* gifts, this article focuses on a neglected feature of *kula*: the contribution of women.[1] The reader may ask why this is relevant when, to this day, most *kula* transactions are done by men? And, indeed, the precious valuables are passed on through a succession of mostly male hands, such that the names of these men travel with the objects, producing some degree of regional fame for them. Thus, *kula* is generally represented as a male domain in which only some women participate as traders, are masters of weather magic, or travel along with a relative. It is no surprise that Uberoi (1962), in his analysis of Malinowski (1920, 1922), Fortune (1932), and Seligman (1910), looks at the politics of the *kula* ring by exclusively focusing on the work of men. Marilyn Strathern (1988: 133) observed in *The Gender of the Gift* 'one pervasive and near universal fact of life: the apparently persistent misrecognition of women's work as somehow less than work.' Discredited by Malinowski (1922: 49) as 'old hags', women's wisdom was usually ignored in the early days, a perspective not easily unlearned. I admit that I also did not pay enough attention to the teachings of my village mothers.

An increasing number of women actively travel for *kula*, meeting male or female partners, although the majority of women stay home and take care of everything, while the men travel and meet their *kula* partners abroad. Most senior women act behind the scenes as custodians of the shell wealth of a matrilineage and discuss future exchange strategies with their brothers before the men take off for a journey. Men are not deaf to women's words, out of respect as well as a precaution, since, while the men are away, women's inappropriate behaviour can influence *kula* negotiations. The men are aware that women have room for agency even while staying back. Their confidential discussions reflect upon the responsibilities of women as sisters and mothers in these matrilineal societies, where balanced relationships between men and women are the ideal, and the brother–sister relationship is supposed to be marked by mutual respect. However, this perspective does not do full justice to the central female contribution to *kula*, namely, hosting a *kula* partner. While the men sit and talk, the women make sure they are comfortable by creating the *kula*-specific atmosphere of happiness, generosity, and abundance that are parts of its attraction. Men talk about the luxury of being hosted *kula*-style as 'the profit' of *kula*; it is the chance to get away from everyday chores, and just eat and relax into *kula* talk. This hospitality is based on the everyday duties and routine chores of women and children; perhaps this is why it did not occur to ethnographers to write about its importance, complexity, and ingenuity. As I will show in this paper, this is the realm in

which women can strengthen or even break *kula* partnerships.

The ordinary, daily work of island women—such as cooking, gardening, the use of the various cultivars of yams, and raising children—barely receives any mention in the classic ethnographies of the *kula* region. In the Trobriand Islands, Bronislaw Malinowski (1935: 462) admitted he was 'lured by the dramatic, exceptional, and sensational (…) I have also neglected much of the everyday, inconspicuous, drab, and small-scale.' Although he mentions food exchanges many times, his focus is on raw yams and the reader never learns any recipes or methods of food preparation. Rather than the production of cooked food, sexual favours were drawn to the foreground by Malinowski (1922: 53), who states that 'when a visiting party arrives from another district, food is brought to them by the unmarried girls, who are also expected to satisfy their sexual wants.'

The misogyny of early anthropology is striking from today's perspective. In another classic ethnography of the *kula* region, Reo Fortune's (1932: 43–62) account of marital life in the Dobu area centres around incest, adultery, and conflict. That account ignores the sphere of female life in its ordinary, day-to-day activities (other than sex). When describing the 'individual in the social pattern', Fortune (1932: 273–279) only talks about boys. The only time *Sorcerers* features women is as feared witches who endanger canoe travel (Fortune 1932: 74; Malinowski 1920: 100, 104). Fortune (1932: 152), with regard to witchcraft, believes that 'only a woman working with women could tell what the facts are—whether they are really innocent or whether they are putting up a convention counter to the men's. Personally, I suspect the latter.' He admits his lack of data and regrets his inability to penetrate deeper into the female secrets.

> One night and one night only, the women in a body induced the men to get out, and my hut was filled with women all anxious to give information and acquire tobacco. Three or four times Kadi, Alo's daughter, seized a chance when no men were about, to slip into my hut and tell me gossip (Fortune 1932: 235).

From his male informants, he learned that respect, fear, and 'nervousness' are a man's feeling towards his affines, especially his wife and her mother (Fortune 1932: 24, 153). According to his information, conjugal couples are mostly in disharmony, although he admits that 'despite the premium on unfaithfulness and its counterpart, jealousy, there are some marriages that are happily contracted and happily preserved' (Fortune 1932: 249). I am doubtful that, given the ease of divorcing, there were mostly dysfunctional families during Fortune's time of research—that is, 1928—and he seems to contradict himself when mentioning that wives cook food for their husbands. Since couples eat their meals together, sharing the yams of both matrilineages (Fortune 1932: 69–70), men seem to be trustful enough to do so, as 'a native will never accept food except from a few people that he knows and trusts' (Fortune 1932: 137).

When female ethnographers began to study on the islands, starting in the 1970s, they experienced a different world of women than that described by their male colleagues. With their privileged access to women's lives, they began to correct this practice. Annette Weiner (1976: 65, 184) studied the Trobriand women's active exchanges of *doba* (banana leaf bundles) and noted the provision of cooked meals during exchange events and rituals. Both men and women 'tend to read each other's thoughts by the way in which objects are exchanged' (Weiner 1976: 87) she noted, so that prepared food

becomes a message of creating and maintaining social relations when presented in such contexts. Martha Macintyre (1983, 1987: 210, 1988: 185) reported that women regularly participate in *kula* and other exchanges involving ceremonial valuables on Tubetube Island in the southeastern *kula* region.

Conspicuously absent in the accounts of female activities is a more detailed analysis of the daily chores of women. Maria Lepowsky noted that the village women she lived with on Vanatinai Island were confidently doing their part, even having fun when working:

> As they became more accustomed to my presence they dropped the silent, reserved demeanor I later learned to recognize as the characteristic response to the few times Europeans or the Papua New Guinean government officerincharge appeared in the settlements. Quite to the contrary, the women were assertive and selfconfident, their voices ringing out across the ridgetop along with loud, frequent bursts of laughter (Lepowsky 1994: 17).

Lepowsky (1994: 115–116) describes in much detail how women can participate in exchanges, but offers only a few paragraphs to detail the weaving, sweeping, cooking, fetching of water and firewood, dishes, and childcare. She mentions the cooking for exchange partners, but leaves out the details (Lepowsky 1994: 192) as her study focuses on the areas where women are part of what can be seen as 'male spheres' in most parts of the world: travel, exchange, and leadership.

> On Vanatinai power and influence over the actions of others are gained by achievement and demonstrated superior knowledge and skill, whether in the realm of gardening, exchange, healing, or sorcery. Those who accumulate a surplus of resources are expected to be generous and share with their neighbors or face the threat of the sorcery or witchcraft of the envious. Both women and men are free to build their careers through exchange. On the other hand, both women and men are free NOT to strive toward renown as *giagia* but to work for their own families or simply to mind their own business. They can also achieve the respect of their peers, if they seek it at all, as loving parents, responsible and hardworking lineage mates and affines, good gardeners, hunters, or fishers, or skilled healers, carvers, or weavers (Lepowsky 1994: 304).

Overall, women received less attention when they did not engage in formal exchanges and merely acted as a confidant. Nancy Munn (1986: 160) mentions female agency but does not go into detail: 'Like Gawan women, women on other islands are seen as influencing their husbands and own *dala* kinsmen with regard to *kula* decisions that the latter must make.' Providing hospitality to the *kula* partner is briefly mentioned as the reciprocal base line, the foundation of a *kula* relationship: 'as one man said: a Gawan can throw a shell to a partner one year and then not throw [shells] (…) for a time, but he will still eat at that man's home' (Munn 1986: 55). While Munn acknowledges that the cooking and caring for *kula* visitors impacts the husband's success in *kula*, women appear less important in *The Fame of Gawa*: '[S]ince she does not directly transact *kula* shells and create partnerships herself, she cannot acquire the fame created by handling shells with their long-term, extended circulation beyond Gawa' (Munn 1986: 53). Fred Damon treated the hospitality and gifts of raw and cooked food

as 'secondary, lower exchange sphere' (Damon 1993: 238).

Yet, it is the quality of a woman's performance as a parent and housekeeper and her success in managing family, household, and garden that grants women a high status, balanced gender relations, and permeable boundaries of gendered work. According to John Kasapwailova ('John K'), a Trobriand writer and active *kula* man, a successful *kula* man needs a 'female focal point', a wife, sister, mother, or favourite daughter (Malnic and Kasaipwalova 1998: 33). In contrast to most ethnographic descriptions of *kula*, he remarks that:

> For a simple and widebased definition of the *Kula* we must get away from talking about *mwali* and *soulava*. They are objects created to civilise and enrich. In the process of exchange they gain a life, a presence and a force of their own. That presence prompts people onto a plane where they can act and react, where they can create substantial human experiences (Malnic and Kasaipwalova 1998: 36–37).

We have a wealth of information about the actions of men in *kula,* but, so far, the role of women is underrepresented. Yet the hospitality of *kula* is not at all 'inconspicuous, drab, and small-scale', as Malinowski saw it. It enables the sharing of resources in a wider region and creates the need for surplus production for hosting purposes. For the islanders of the Bwanabwana region, in the southeast of the *kula* region, harvests were periodically spoiled by drought or cyclones, such that long visits at *kula* partners and their gifts of food helped them to survive. Macintyre reports that these visits could last for months. The earliest source, Marist Father Carlo Salerio, honours the importance of hospitality:

> The Woodlarkers also impose enormous sacrifices upon themselves in order to maintain their pride regarding hospitality. Foreigners from all parts, hungry wanderers, land on Muju (Woodlark/Murua) every season. All families contribute to feed them and, even though they are suffering from hunger themselves, they are content and proud to show off their generosity (Salerio 1983 [1858], cited from Macintyre 1983: 254).

The labour force, provisions, and motivation to care for such long-term visitors are no simple tasks; and this 'focal point', in John K's words, is needed to provide the safe space for *kula* talks between the men. To 'be ready 24/7' for a visitor makes up much of the pride of a woman, builds her status, and challenges her gardening efforts. Thus, the essential contribution of women lies hidden from us behind a veil of our male bias. The female part of *kula*, the role of hostess for a man's *kula* partners, is a complex task that has been undervalued in the *kula* literature thus far. Anthropologists have not yet done justice to the complexity of women's role as hosts, creating the impression that *kula* is for men only, for the Argonauts.

Based on my longstanding knowledge of *kula* in the Dobu area and extended to the other parts of the region during two recent boat expeditions in 2016 and 2018, I believe that our view of *kula* needs adjusting to take account of the female labour it requires. While visiting most islands of the *kula* region and discussing *kula* matters in more than 60 formal meetings facilitated by a research team of *kula* men, we also had many informal meetings with *kula* practitioners, or '*kula* players', as they call themselves in English. Consistently, both men and women, in group discussions as well as during interviews, emphasised that women

are by no means only an exception (or their faithfulness a liability) in *kula*. Instead, they fulfil an essential role that can make or break partnerships. These islanders did not refer to women who travel on *kula* expeditions or manage the valuables of their matrilineage; in their view, women are 'essential' in *kula*, because men cannot replace their critical role.

This article gives voice to contemporary *kula* participants from all the islands of this exchange system such that '*kula* is impossible without the work of women' (Kuehling 2020). The 'work of women' is a translation that first needs to be unpacked as a central moral principle. Secondly, the work of women is discussed as a succession of chores in times of *kula* visits and in preparation for these encounters. I show that the work of women is at the heart of *kula*, just as it is at the heart of society. Women provide the key resources and practice the key virtues to read their visitors minds, anticipating and satisfying their needs and wishes, going out of their way to direct a performance of the happy, selfless generosity of the entire household. Finally, I discuss how this part of *kula* is threatened by introduction of values that privilege male activities, cash, and store goods, encourage the physical punishment of children, and combine to make the hospitality work 'heavy' for the hostesses and her helpers.

'HARD WORK': *PAISEWA* AS A MORAL PRINCIPLE

From an islanders' perspective, the contribution of women to subsistence in the entire island region is valued no less than men's work as the islanders live in '[s]ocieties where women own and inherit land, live with their own kin after marriage, and not only produce but allocate culturally valuable resources, controlling their distribution beyond the household, tend to treat men and women more equally' (Lepowsky 1994: 46). For both genders, Lepowsky's description of nearby Vanatinai (Sudest) Island applies to the *kula* societies as well:

> Nobody can make you share, short of stealing from you or killing you if you refuse them. You have to want to give: your nurture, your labor, your valuables, and your person. This is where persuasion comes in. It comes from the pressure of other people, the force of shame, and magical seduction made potent by supernatural agency. Vanatinai custom supplies a final, persuasive argument to resolve this paradox: by giving, you not only strengthen your lineage and build its good name, you make yourself richer and more powerful by placing others in your debt (Lepowsky 1994: 305).

In order to unpack the work of hospitality that is managed and organised by women, with the assistance of the entire household and other relatives, I had to unthink my own notion of household chores as of low value. But, as I argued in my dissertation (Kuehling 1998), the notion of work certainly entails the labour of women as a highly valued part of exchanges. Hospitality during *kula* negotiations is part of the exchanges, an extremely relevant aspect of *kula* that has so far been mostly ignored. Women build their status by raising a prosperous and industrious family trained and motivated to go out of their way to offer perfect hospitality (Kuehling 2005, 2017a). By describing in detail how the 'hard work' of women contributes to *kula*, I focus on the principles that guide them in the complexity of their chores and give them both pride and prestige.

The word *paisewa*, always translated as 'work', occurs in all of the languages of the *kula*

region. It refers to a semantic field that includes the labour done, the pain felt, anger masked by friendliness, the smile on an exhausted mother's face, the sweat poured, sleepless nights, contributions to feasts, volunteering in teamwork, the passing on of *kula* valuables, and similar activities performed for the sake of the matrilineage. When elders point out that *paisewa i loiloina* (lit. 'work sets the rules'), they mean that the pigs killed for a family and the contributions to feasts and daily activities like sweeping and weeding a place all combine to form a strong argument in times of conflict about resources. *Paisewa* is performed best without showing negative emotions; it is most valuable as work that is energetically, freely, happily given, no matter one's true feelings. Both men and women are praised as 'hardworking' when their households are peaceful, subsistence activities are prosperous, and the distribution of surplus is satisfying.

Activities for the church, the school board, and similar community groups are also classified as *paisewa*, but I often felt that there was a somewhat lower status connected to families who did not grow enough yams, even if they worked full-time as public servants. Disobedient teenagers or the death of a child were often explained as the product of insufficient *paisewa* from parents. Similarly, if a parent spent too much time with church groups or on other community activities, it was sometimes counted against him or her when their family had problems.

The virtue of presenting a friendly façade and hiding negative thoughts and emotions is not restricted to the *kula* region but reflects a wide-spread concept of personhood. For *kula* people, the word *paisewa* bears the meaning of self-discipline, generosity, and humbleness (or 'respect'), the central ethical rules used to talk about others and determine their social standing. 'She is the root of hard work', (in Dobu, *paisewa alena*) represents praise of the highest order, describing women who build a large stock of yam seeds, raise well-mannered family, and stand out as friendly, cooperative, generous, and efficient.

THE CHORES OF WOMEN

In the *kula* region, as in many places, a women's day begins before dawn and ends after dark. Children usually wake up at dawn. While babies roll over to their mother for the morning feed, others mostly take off, use the toilet, and roam around looking for fruits or just to play with others. When the baby is satisfied and in fresh cotton diapers, mothers begin to sweep the compound with a short coconut broom, moving slowly across the area, back bent as they swish brooms across the dirt on the ground until all the dry leaves and droppings from chickens and dogs (sometimes also pigs) are heaped up. When asked, children help by fetching water, sweeping, lighting the kitchen fire, boiling water, or doing dishes and scraping the aluminium pots with sand or 'sandpaper' leaves to remove the soot from last night's dinner. Everybody is up at sunrise and women are busy preparing lunch, consisting of roasted yams, fried leftovers, banana chips, fried flour balls, or whatever is available. Some food is set aside for school lunches and hot water or tea is shared between household members. Everybody retreats with some food and drink for an informal breakfast in relative solitude. After the children leave for school, the adults decide on their daily chores and usually inform others of their plans. Women oversee a range of tasks, most importantly they take care of the food and wellbeing of the children. This involves gardening and managing supplies, helping other women, and accepting help, and cooking meals for different

purposes, which often consist of slightly varied ingredients.

The complexity of preparing island meals may escape an ethnographer's attention (Sutter 2010–2011: 93), but errors will not go unnoticed by local consumers. The meal needs to contain the right amount of protein, the appropriate type of yams, the perfectly balanced mix of various other root crops and bananas that add to the yams, the right choice of savoury herbs and greens, and coconut cream needs to be added at the end just before everything is cooked, so that they can flavour and add grease in a delicious manner. Salt from the sea water, combined with juices from the food, turns into a soup that is drunk with the meal. The complexity and art of cooking to perfection all these vegetables in one pot, with nothing over- or undercooked, over an open fire that constantly needs to be controlled and adjusted to the right temperature, can only be appreciated by people who have tried to cook a pot of quality food (*buyo*) for feeding helpers, or prepared a simple evening dish for the family with sufficient leftovers for breakfast, school lunches, and perhaps a treat for a pig or a dog. Planning the evening meal dictates some of the daily chores; most women go to their gardens once a day to pick some bananas, tapioca (that is, manioc or cassava), taro, greens, or whatever is ripe.

A visit to the garden takes up time, as some weeding and tending is always required. Women usually go in small family groups, often walking for over half an hour to reach the garden, traversing slippery stones, climbing steep hills, while carrying a toddler on their hip and guiding young children along. They usually do the garden work speedily, sweating in the heat, and return to the house for a much-needed rest. After dropping the heavy load of vegetables, firewood, a couple of coconuts, and smaller children, women first take a bath, since washing removes the little insects like mites that cause skin irritations that can turn into sores. Part of their routine is to also wash the children who visited the garden with them, using scraped coconut as soap and body lotion, and to kill any head lice. A woman returning from the garden, with her basket balanced on her head, a toddler on her hip, two or three coconuts tied together by their fibres, and a few sticks of firewood in her hand, may not seem a spectacular sight. But, when I tried to join the women, I realised that my ignorance and incompetence added to their tasks as they now had to look after me in addition to everything else. It is easy to get hurt in the bush, on the slippery footpaths, or by accidentally touching somebody's protective magic (*tabu*) from which various dangerous diseases are thought to develop. Thus, women act like shepherds when they direct a group of children (or anthropologists) through the terrain.

Women are in charge of fetching water and can often be seen carrying buckets or pots on their heads to bring home the precious liquid from a tank or a clean well. Young women sometimes compete in carrying a fuller vessel and spilling less than others. Women also bring home sea water for cooking in lieu of salt. Food and drink for the family are managed by the senior women and carried out by all females with the occasional assistance of men.

Women produce baskets and mats for the family's use, as gifts for visitors, and sometimes for fundraising events, such as basket-for-basket exchanges in school, sales for the Women's Fellowship, or to sell on the tourist market. Baskets are made from the flexible, light green fronds of coconut palms which are also used by both sexes to weave quick multipurpose mats used as thatch, folded as rough baskets, and as the most modest of seats. When their short lifespan is over, mats are usually turned

into rubbish containers used when sweeping the place and to hold scraps when peeling vegetables. Coconut fibre baskets are woven into various sizes: tiny baskets are made for little girls to train their balancing skills early on, while the largest baskets can easily hold over twenty kilograms of large yam tubers needed for exchange events. Weaving baskets is one of the tasks senior women often perform while they sit under a house in the shade, with both legs stretched out and back straight, a position that I could only hold for a couple of minutes when I was in my 30s. To make a basket takes an hour or so and women like to finish a basket in one sitting. Because younger women are frequently called to help someone in the household, they are rarely able to complete a basket without having to drop the work-in-process a couple of times before completion.

While making baskets is not deemed an extraordinary skill, work with the pandanus fibre to create finer mats used for sitting and sleeping is highly valued. I tried to learn how to weave these mats but did not have the strength needed to weigh down one side with my leg while holding the strips tight and pushing the crossings down to prevent gaps. It was confusing for me to remember the support needed on the edges. But the most challenging aspect of the work was its physicality, since the weaver's body controls the loose strips of fibre that must be folded and bundled, crossed and added, while the product must not shift. Making pandanus mats takes time, and once a woman sits down to work on a mat, her sisters usually try to allow her a few hours of time without having to get up and risk loosening the weaving. The thick mats for sleeping can last for years, although over time they become thinner and damaged along the sides. Finer mats, more decorative and often elaborately patterned, adorned with fringe and strips in bright colours, are mostly produced as gifts or for sale, as are the small hand baskets made from pandanus strips. While the weaving of pandanus mats is not in every woman's repertoire, there is usually at least one woman in a family who supplies others with sleeping mats. Preparing the pandanus leaves for weaving is considered an easier task, and I often saw younger women bringing bundles of freshly cut leaves to the village, boiling and drying them in the sun repeatedly to bleach them, scraping and cutting the leaves to remove thorns, finally creating even strips that are rolled up into a 'moon' shape—a round disk that can be sold and gifted as well as used. In the Northern *kula* region, between the Trobriand Islands and Woodlark, special mats are a customary gift to the wives of *kula* partners, as Pauline from Gawa Island told me.

On the tiny islands of Ware and Tubetube, and the Amphlett Islands, many women are skilled in making clay pots for cooking food. These pots also flow into the exchange circles with the larger islands as gifts. How to cook in a clay pot was one of the lessons that my village mothers insisted I had to learn, from proper loading to cooking times and heat, when to add which ingredient, and how to cover it with banana leaves. I also learned the different uses for different sizes, stylistic differences, and how to clean and store clay pots.

Laundry has become a growing workload for women, requiring one day per week at a minimum. Young mothers need to wash diapers every day, and bleach and detergents are not always available, which means more scrubbing and kneading. Many buckets of well water must be carried on laundry days, and I heard that male and female teenagers and some husbands wash their own clothes to share the burden of laundry. In the past, when skirts were made from coconut leaves and men wore pandanus leaves, the production was mostly in women's hands.

In 1993, I often witnessed the last old lady in Losina village casually stripping coconut leaves while chatting when working on a new skirt in one or two evening sessions. Compared to this meditative activity, laundry is time-intensive and bone-breaking; in addition, the need for soap cuts a hole in many families' budgets.

The least visible but most demanding task of women is the raising of healthy, strong, obedient, skilful children. I cannot do justice to the complexity of mothering in this short article (Lukere and Jolly 2002; Jolly and Macintyre 1989), but the continuous care of their (often many) children in a world without electricity and plumbing keeps mothers on their toes at all times. As senior women are typically challenged by the physicality of many female chores, they are often found sitting at a central spot where they are mostly watching their daughters work, advising and directing them. By watching each person's performance, senior women determine the distribution of chores among women in the lineage. Ideally, they find the perfect task for every woman. But, as relationships are not always ideal, young women in unhappy families can end up being ordered around by their mothers and aunts or mother-in-law for many years, until their own daughters are grown up enough to lighten their mother's burden. Many times, female friends told me they were suffering in secret, from abusive husbands or painful injuries, grieving deceased children or feeling bullied and treated unfairly. Yet, they displayed perfectly happy faces when our tearful conversation ended and we returned to the others. The strength of these women, I came to realise, is nourished by the performance of strength, with only occasional moments of sisterly encouragement helping to balance emotions. They do their *paisewa* as they juggle a vast number of responsibilities, seemingly effortlessly with a happy face.

Pregnancy is also classified as *paisewa*. Yet, women continue their daily chores until reaching full term, when they would give birth as silently as possible under their house. Although they are not always convinced that the aid post or hospital is a better place to deliver, most women are now dragging themselves to a health station shortly before giving birth. The boat trips often required to reach such stations can be horrendous in rough seas, but the relative safety of a hospital is viewed by many as preferable to a birth where the mother is responsible for anything that goes wrong ('why did she not go to a hospital?'). Another reason for avoiding home birth is the traditional restricted diet for new mothers (*bodaita*), who need to stay inside the house with the infant for several weeks (called 'roasting'), and the medical care that women hope to receive for themselves and their baby (Fiti-Sinclair 2002). Mothers often name their babies, and when a high-ranking *kula* valuable is currently in their house they are likely to pass that name on to the newborn. In this manner, valuables create a chain of namesakes in their movement, like a trace linking individuals by a special bond, a form of direct identification. 'I am Kibu', said Jerome Banasi from Gawa Island, a man named after this famous *mwali* because his father held it at the time of his birth.

Upon leaving the post-partum seclusion period, mothers typically breastfeed on demand. Mothers or other relatives usually carry small infants until they fall asleep. Then, they place the sleeping baby on a mat with an older child to watch and chase flies away. More recently, hammocks made from a cotton sarong have become popular cradles that can also be swung to pacify an upset infant. Babies are not supposed to cry, so a sick or teething baby is often breastfed through the night to keep it calm. Until a child can express that he or she

needs to urinate, normally at 1–2 years, it is rarely set on the ground but carried around or placed on a veranda to crawl or try to stand up. Until this point in the child's development, a woman should not become pregnant again or she will be talked about. Since husbands often find this period too long, domestic arguments about sex are not rare and many mothers of young children have told me that they see it as work to satisfy their husbands' desires. Mothers want to leave space between their pregnancies so their bodies can 'become dry' again to prevent sickness. They also want to be good mothers to all their children, which may well include indulging unreasonable demands to pacify an upset toddler in situations where a European mother would likely set her boundary and leave it at 'no'.

> My friend Julie once scouted over the entire island of Dobu with her toddler, Roger, on her hip, because little Roger was crying for rose apples that were not yet in season. She had hoped that some other trees were already bearing the juicy red fruits, but when she returned after three hours, Roger was still upset and she had not found any tree with ripe fruits. Nobody in the village thought that she had been overly spoiling her three-year-old son, wasting her time, or procrastinating from doing laundry. They all responded with praise that she was a good mother (field notes, 1994).

In 1997, women Dobu islanders of my age told me that 'mothering is hard work, but we don't talk about it.' The implied meaning was that I was 'complaining too much' about my own toddler's adventures when I had him with me in Dobu. At 20 months, my son had just learned to run fast, and as I chased behind him, my friends smiled at my inexperience in guiding him to do less dangerous things. Sometimes, they called their older children to look after him, thereby giving me a break. But when my son got sick with malaria, many criticised me for taking up such offers, as they saw it as the reason for his sickness—an envious witch had attacked him. Others believed that my impatience could have affected him physically. Ultimately, being offered help is a double-edged sword for a mother. She is never free from responsibility and, if anything happens to her children, it is always her fault. At age five, children are often very helpful and obedient, they can do simple tasks when told to without complaining. They are not praised for cooperation since it is deemed a natural thing to follow the orders of adults. 'You come and blow the fire' is sufficient instruction to a four-year-old child to rekindle the cooking fire. As soon as a child can manage to place a baby on their hip and walk, they can be trusted for a few minutes to watch and amuse a little one.

After a long day, women prepare the evening meal, wash the small children, and get the bigger ones to fetch water and wash themselves, frequently under protest as the water is cool and a bath signals the end of playtime. Some women paddle out to add a few small reef fish to the meal if there is no other protein available, but they often receive fish from a male relative, neighbour, or in-law. Obviously, boiling rice and mixing some greens with instant noodles and a can of fish or meat cuts down the preparation time by hours, although households cannot afford these desired dishes very often (which is likely positive since their nutritional value is low). When dinner is cooked, it is dished out on a big plate, placed on the mat on the veranda, and everybody picks their share, typically eating without looking at others. Babies chew on a piece of yam as soon as they have teeth, and, usually, they are breastfed

as well, at least until they can walk. Darkness, at around 6 pm, keeps people near their house if possible, with only the young men roaming around at night, searching for erotic adventures. Married couples may sit and chat until 10 pm or so, depending on the moon and weather, while the children chat or just listen until slumber overwhelms them around 9 pm.

Seasons greatly determine the work of women. Generally, from April to September, the time of cold nights and strong winds from the south, is the time of harvesting and feasting, when obligations that had to be postponed until the harvest was over are fulfilled. Mortuary feasts and affinal exchanges require large yams of specific cultivars exclusively used for special purposes and stored over the year to last for all those occasions when they are needed. During this time of plenty, *kula* visitors are less likely to land, as the winds and their home obligations keep them from *kula*. From October to January, when the hot season's easterly winds begin, the men are too busy to travel as they cut, burn, clear, and plant their new gardens. When the gardens are ready and only require weeding and last year's yam harvest is nearly depleted, the time of scarcity begins. *Kula* activities increase, and the women must be prepared to feed their hungry visitors for as long as it takes, for weeks even, while tending their yam gardens and taking care of their ordinary chores.

KULA AS WOMEN'S WORK

To village women, *kula* means entertaining relative strangers on short notice, serving a fluctuating pulse of visitors from two neighbouring *kula* regions. The visitors are *kula* partners of a woman's lineage plus all the other households, where she is expected to fulfil her role as hostess or as a helping hand. As everybody in the *kula* region knows, when they return home, visitors will talk amongst each other about the quality of their accommodation and catering, and this information influences potential strategies of exchange. In brief, a generous, prosperous, cheerful household with a comfortable place to sleep and perfect catering will highly motivate others to visit such households, while a stingy, unfriendly place is avoided and consequently misses out on *kula* opportunities. When *kula* traders return from a journey and report poor hospitality, others will also avoid that household, whereby the flow of valuables to such a family ebbs down. As Millicent Laibobo pointed out, dysfunctional families and casual hospitality cause discomfort and scare *kula* partners away, effectively damaging the household's reputation and *kula* success.

When a *kula* partner arrives in a village, everybody's tasks, challenges, and chores are accelerated and multiplied, as the perfection of hosting is classified and appreciated as 'significant work' by all observers. A well-functioning household showcases the quality and resilience of a family. Thus, women train their children to assist them with age-appropriate roles that they should perform without much ado when all hands are needed. The moral standing of *kula* families is generally higher due to their readiness to jump into immediate action when a visitor arrives. Not just partners, but their larger families are warmly welcomed, based on the principle of *kula* that 'you get everything for free' (Millicent).

When a visitor arrives, all adult women rush to collect laundry from the lines, light the fire, and quickly sweep the place, so they are ready to welcome the visitor to a clean place, offering him a new pandanus mat to sit on. Meanwhile, the boys grab their foot strap rope to tie the feet together and, while one climbs for green coconuts to drink, others climb for

betelnuts and pick betel pepper (*piper betel*) fruits from a vine for chewing. Ideally, the husband of the household just sits and talks with his visitor, entertaining him, while tea and light refreshments are served within half an hour. The personal preferences of the guest are taken seriously—if he loves (and is not allergic to) crayfish, hosts on Dobu Island will try to find batteries for their torches and get some young men to spear crayfish for their guest, preferably more than one so that he can take the delicacy home. Some young men paddle out to the reef to look for a nice seafood dinner, while the women bring their prized yam tubers of a special cultivar from their yam storage huts. While carefully peeling this yam, some of which is bright purple, the women supervise the smaller children, directing the girls to look after the kettle or do some dishes, nurse their babies if they are too fretful and cannot be calmed down by the girls, all the while keeping an eye on the veranda where the visitor is sitting. Does he need a pillow and who can lend us a nice, clean one? Does he wish to smoke, and who can spare some tobacco and newspaper? A child is sent to show him the toilet and where to wash. Children are sent to fetch water and collect firewood, bring ripe coconuts, and husk them before dropping them in the kitchen hut. Later, they will split and scrape the coconut meat from them, to be squeezed over the simmering pot of quality food some 15 minutes before it is ready. Some older teenagers are sent off to bring larger bundles of firewood, as the cooking fire will not go out until the visitor leaves.

Other children are sent off to the store to bring noodles and flour, sugar, and oil, often buying on credit because groceries are very expensive in Papua New Guinea compared to income and the prices of market sales. *Kula* is a noble reason to ask for credit, such that storekeepers face the dilemma of either being seen as hard-hearted or running out of finances (Kuehling 2005). If the household is small, sisters and mothers will come and help as the senior woman of the household orchestrates the hospitality. Most of the women on Dobu are in some way responsible when *kula* partners appear; they are supposed to go and help, bring some yams, fetch water, mind children, and generally be on stand-by. Senior women gain high prestige when they demonstrate how well they mastered the art of directing whatever hands are there with a happy face. They make sure that everybody follows orders and refrains from noisy play or activities that bring up dust or splash water (if it rains), all the while keeping babies from crying, cooking a sequence of meals over the day, serving and cleaning up, sweeping the place, and entertaining the visitor from time to time for short moments, such as to give the husband a chance to go bathe. There may be a group of visitors at the same time, or they may arrive in succession, whereby the household of a *kula* family must be ready any time, day and night, in times of plenty and in times of hunger. The special yams need to be stored and managed well; the surplus production must match the family's *kula* needs. A chicken or even a pig will be slaughtered for the guest, a bandicoot or turtle would also be nice if the young men can be persuaded to dedicate the night to hunting instead of amorous adventures.

Since Malinowski's times, many generations have passed, all of them raised with corporal punishment in various, sometimes barbaric ways. The formerly appropriate way of teaching children, mostly by example or lecture, has been replaced by 'belting' and similar practices. Reforms of this method have yet to reach the *kula* region, where parents complain about the obstinance of teenagers without recognising that this may well be the result of too much beating and too little lecturing and

teaching by example. A grown teenager does not have to fear his mother since she cannot beat him any longer, as I witnessed in 1993, when a desperate mother was calling the police on her own son Stephen for having stolen a chicken from her again. 'What else can I do?', she lamented when I showed surprise at her decision. 'Maybe a bit of jail time will teach him.' Aisi, one of my *kula* mentors from Dobu Island, explained to me when discussing Stephen's mishap that teenagers often do not respond to lecturing when it was not previously a primary means of discipline. 'Stephen only knows *sapi* (beating), so now he cannot hear words (*ona*).' Like many teenagers today, Stephen clearly was not tuned in to read his mother's mind and automatically do his best to fulfil his chores to support her, attitudes that are engrained in *kula* households and, as many islanders say, 'make better people'.

The principle that 'happy pregnant women make happy babies, and happy babies turn into happy adults', which I was told a number of times, requires women to not only fulfil their chores, but to do so with a happy face. This is socially expected, displaying a pleasant personality, no matter how exhausted or sick, overburdened or abused a woman is (Kuehling 2017a). To be a responsible wife and mother, sister and daughter brings prestige as the years go by, and I admire the strength and resilience of the women who taught me to 'stop complaining and get stuff done'. A senior woman who can get everybody, even the male teenagers, to contribute to the hosting of *kula* partners is praised by her own community as well as by both neighbouring communities; and she actively contributes to the fame of her male counterpart who does the traveling on behalf of the lineage and enjoys the benefits of *kula* hospitality which she has helped to build. Her competence and engagement are honoured by *kula* partners who may give a special present to the wife of their visitor. Such gifts can be a clay pot, a piece of clothing, a mat, a bundle of sago, or whatever they know she will appreciate.

THE BENEFITS OF HOSPITALITY

I have so far outlined the 'work' of women, the complex tasks and challenges faced by women in everyday life and in the time of *kula*. The chores that need handling competently and patiently to give prestige to a woman, her household, and her matrilineage. In all the *kula* households that we visited, among all the main language groups (Dobu, Trobriand, Gawa, Woodlark, Nasikwabu, Egom, Bwanabwana), the quality food, the gifts of betel nuts, the clean mats, and the welcoming atmosphere were very similar. Women worked hard to make us feel welcome, often killing a chicken or rushing to catch some fish to go with the special yams. In Asagamwana on Fergusson Island, fresh garlands made from coconut leaves and flowers decorated our meeting space. On Gumawana Island, I received a beautiful clay pot as a departure gift. On Iwa Island, they entertained us with songs, they cooked and distributed a pig on Koyagaugau, and I am still in awe of the speed-sweeping skills of the women on Gawa Island who finished their work in a whirlwind. Once, a senior woman rose during a meeting, crying and shedding tears as she profusely apologised that we had not received bunches of betel nuts from them. The reason, she explained and which we all knew, was that the trees were not bearing fruit at the moment; but she was so terribly sorry for this breach of protocol that she just wanted to apologise to us again.

To further illustrate my points, I cite three women from three different regions to further flesh out the pride that women feel about their role in *kula*. Eunice is in her 40s

and from Bwegise Island, west of Woodlark. An active *kula* traveller herself, she relies on her daughter when she hosts her partners. In 2016, she recognised me as a partner's 'relative' from Dobu, and invited me and my friends to dinner, giving us a taste of her generous and smooth hospitality. Her father was a 'number one *kula* man', she said, and, by listening while serving the men, she picked up basic knowledge that impressed her father enough to teach her by taking her along and giving her some small valuables to start her own *kula* network. Speaking in her language, she emphasised that '*kula* is love' and that 'in *kula*, everything is free', given out of sympathy and empathy. When explaining this, she mentioned free drinks, food, tobacco, betel nuts, and a newly woven mat for sleeping. Passing on the *kula* valuables to the guest at the end of his stay is the triumphant final gift, not the only exchange that is worth documenting when describing *kula*. I have heard this list many times, when people spoke about the benefits of *kula*, suggesting that to *kula* players, as to Eunice, the ideal of generosity and not of delayed reciprocity stands in the foreground. Women are the ones who display ultimate generosity since they do not even receive a gift in return. They stay back, expecting nothing other than a thank you, knowing that their work opens doors for all of their relatives when they travel within the *kula* region.

The second woman, Pauline, is from Gawa Island. Recently, her late brother (a local politician) was murdered on Gawa and she fled to neighbouring Kweyawata Island, where we met in February 2016. In her 30s, she had enjoyed a good education, spoke fluent English, and was very familiar with the tasks and chores of *kula* hospitality. She pointed out the role of hospitality and showed her virtue by emphasising that it is joyful to cater to the every need of a partner, even when this involves non-stop cooking, finishing all supplies, and going hungry.

> As soon as canoes arrive, we as ladies have to cook and bring food in coconut baskets or dishes to our partners. We are happy to cook our special yams for our visitors, maybe we don't eat ourselves but it is a joy to cook for our partners. They share and eat and later climb up to the villages to stay in the houses of their partners. We cook in the morning, for lunch, in the afternoon, and give food to everyone who comes for *kula*. It is up to our visitors how long they stay, sometimes it is over a month. Where we find food to feed them is our problem. They came for *kula* valuables. When we do not have enough food, we have to pass the valuables to them fast so that they know and leave. We never tell them that we are running out of food, that is a taboo, but they understand.
>
> When they come from a place without money, we may give them cash, kerosene, and so on, they don't need to ask, we know. And when I travel, to Iwa Island, for example, my brothers' *kula* partners will feed me, accommodate me, do anything for me, even if I don't actively exchange *kula* valuables myself. I think *kula* is very important, because as *bagi* and *mwali* go around the *kula* ring, they buy food, they buy accommodation, they buy friendship, they bring people closer together, and so *kula* also brings peace (Interview, March 2016).

The third woman, Millicent, in her 60s, is an old friend and has been 'mother' or 'older sister' to me since 1997, when I lived in her household with my young son. Then, she was

headmistress at the Dobu school; now, retired, she lives on Fergusson Island on her family's land. Displaying a friendly façade despite feeling otherwise is a central moral value in the *kula* region and beyond. *Kula* puts this virtue to the test. Raised in a *kula* household, Millicent points out the importance of self-discipline when attending to a *kula* visitor who turns up at the house without prior notice, at any time during the day or night:

> the[T]he role of the mother is to cook, and she should have a clean, a pleasant face [meaning a relaxed expression]. When the *kula* partner comes and she asks her husband to help her in the kitchen to 'come and scrape the coconut and then come back and talk' or, to 'chop our firewood first,' the *kula* partner would just know that the mother is not happy. Just by doing that [asking for assistance], she shows she is not happy. So, the *kula* partner can just get up and say, 'my friend, I will walk around and come back.' But when he goes, he will not come back. Whatever food she cooks, he will not eat it. And when he goes back to his place, he will tell his people or his wife that this *kula* partner is not good (Interview, March 2016).

KULA: IN TOUCH WITH OTHER ISLANDS

Kula events trigger activities and group cooperation, which is also called upon during other rituals and feasts, thereby reinforcing the ethically appropriate way of life by giving time to practice the central activities that enforce the social fabric. Death rituals, marriages, harvest festivals, boat launchings, conflict resolution through gift giving, and other events are opportunities for individuals and lineages to put their virtues on display. Local events are different between the islands of the *kula* region, and islanders may well find the custom of their partners a little strange:

> Patrick Antonia told us about a widow from Gawa Island who felt so much grief about her husband's death that she cut off his penis, dried it, and wore it around her neck as an ultimate sign of respect. Patrick added that she wore it until the family of her late husband released her by presenting her a first-class *kula* valuable, one that usually is reserved for the inter-island exchanges. My team members from Dobu and Duau were surprised, amused, and a little shocked about this form of mourning, but, they mused, it was not unusual to keep a bone as memento where they were from (Interview, Alotau, February 2018).

Visitors often do not really know all the customs of their partner's place and are notoriously fearful when in strange territory. Unfamiliar spirits and physical dangers may be encountered, and deaths are known to occur during *kula* expeditions and later following people's returns home when envious neighbours are believed to secretly harm successful *kula* players. Women are chronically suspected as potential witches, and while they are not likely to attack a *kula* visitor whose exchanges are always matching his promises, they can be dangerous hostesses when the exchanges do not flow as planned. Sorcery and the use of poison are often mentioned as the effect of broken exchange chains, and misdirected valuables of high value are known to have a trail of deaths, triggered by their movements from hand to hand (Kuehling 2017b).

Despite these uncertainties, *kula* provides opportunities for travel without the need for cash. The name of a relative involved in *kula* is

the key to *kula* hospitality, as all three women emphasised. Munn may be correct in assuming that such a name brings 'fame' to a *kula* player. But, for these women, these names provided food and shelter in strange places. Fame appears as a collective benefit when the name of a *kula* player is 'loud like thunder', meaning that many people can use it to enjoy safety and comfort on all the other islands of the region. A less thundering name may not carry as far, and, hence, not trigger *kula* hospitality further from home than beyond one or two *kula* stations.

THE CHANGING WORLD OF *KULA*

Certainly, Malinoski's *Argonauts* were a product of last century's ethnography, and while it is possible that many things have changed since then, I am certain that the work of women for *kula* has remained very similar. The challenges of hospitality, however, have been impacted by the global market economy and the impact of school and church teachings (see Jolly and Macintyre 1989 for a collection of papers addressing such changes). Technological improvements to women's chores since Malinowski are minimal, and while men can now use motorised tools and motorboats if they have access, women cook on fire, carry water buckets, and wash by hand. A rake for sweeping seems to be one of the few tools some women use to speed up their morning routine.

On the other hand, the burden of earning cash in order to provide perfect hospitality has increased within the last 30 years. Back in the 1990s, I was often asked to provide a little tobacco, tea leaf, sugar, or kerosene for a visitor to my neighbours. There was only one *kula* valuable associated with cash, the *mwali* Kabisawali, created by Trobriand playwright John Kasaipwalova in the 1970s, named after the Ponzi scheme-like activities that he had triggered. This *mwali*, so the story goes, needs lots of store-bought food to satisfy a partner, and several men have died as they were unable to pass it on without causing someone to use sorcery on them.

More recently, cash is reportedly offered to lure a high-ranking valuable away from its carefully planned route. For instance, 1000 Kina was offered to Ruth from Dobu for a *bagi* named Lepoyata II by a man who had no rights to this *bagi* but sufficient funding from his relatives in Port Moresby. Boat owners may offer free passage worth hundreds of Kina, in addition to the appropriate counter-gift of a valuable, to draw a valuable to their hands. Partners may leave from a visit without eating anything when the food that is served contains no canned protein and rice. In addition, with prices for tobacco sky high, many men have responded by smoking the strong, homegrown tobacco (*kasia*), rolled with store-bought newspaper, even though in the hierarchy of tobacco, store-bought sticks (mostly by the brand of Spear) is more appropriate for a good host. When *kula* visitors appear, women immediately send an older child to find either some coins or store goods to use among their relatives or explore which trade store has supplies and is willing to accept a later payment. If the timing is unfortunate, for example just after a funeral feast has depleted everyone's cash reserves, the hostess will fear that the visitor is as embarrassed as she is and will leave.

In a capitalist sense, it sounds counterintuitive that this hospitality is regarded as 'the profit' of *kula*, as there is no surplus in reciprocal hosting. The profit, however, is that through these visits a *kula* household is bound to a stricter ethic of solidarity and acceptance than places that have no *kula* ideology. As Digim'rina, a late *kula* master from Okeboma, Kiriwina

Island, said, 'people need *kula* so that they grow more yams' (according to his youngest son), and the many *kula* households I encountered were certainly very resourceful with stored food and fast in actively pursuing some of the fresh or store-bought items that they thought we would like. Today, many people regard *kula* households as the role model for everybody, but, as I was told many times, the burden of finding cash to please a *kula* partner is increasingly pressing and demotivating. In this context, Eunice's statement that 'in *kula*, everything is free' refers to the fact that *kula* visitors do not pay money for any of the good things they receive, in contrast to restaurants, hotels, and stores. Oftentimes people marvelled at the notion that the relatives of *kula* partners are included in this broad and truly outstanding hospitality as their contribution to hosting is well understood throughout the region. When Pauline told us that *kula* valuables 'buy' food, accommodation and friendship, she means the same thing.

For almost a century now, the smartest young people have been sent to school and to work in towns so that they can help their parents with their remittances for school fees, medical costs, taxes, and other essentials. Four generations of semi-attached islanders have resulted from this continuing brain-drain. As life in towns is extraordinarily expensive compared to most incomes, this plan has not resulted in much joy on both sides and many young people returned to Dobu after completing grade 10, sometimes with a wife from elsewhere, to claim land and make a garden, as if this was an easy task. I believe that the romantic notion of the simple life in paradise that many islanders in urban centres share on Facebook pages reflects their ignorance of the hard work required of them as junior men and women at the peak of their strength. Perhaps they are even open to the colonial narrative of primitive island life, lacking first-hand experience. Women who cannot make baskets or mats, men who cannot sail a canoe, families where the division of roles and chores is disputed and contested are now residents in small villages where, lacking training, skills, and motivation, they cannot contribute appropriately. The skills that they learned in school do not translate into *paisewa*, as reading, writing, drawing, or composing songs are usually frowned upon as 'being idle'. Playing a guitar or games with a cell phone or tablet, or watching a film, the privilege of a few, surely do not count as *paisewa* either. Although I have not heard negative comments about such activities, which are called *gewana* in the Dobu language, the word, meaning irrelevant, useless play typical for children, are activities that do not qualify as *paisewa*.

Until after World War II, when schools became the preferred road to wealth, the smartest son was handpicked to become the next *kula* player for the matrilineage. The knowledge required to even understand the strategising and scheming represented the most academically challenging part of *kula.* There are hundreds if not thousands of words, mostly names that have no other meaning than referring to a person, a place, a passage, a valuable, a method of exchange, a vessel, or a mythological story. For example, this sentence makes perfect sense to a *kula* player and evokes many images and memories:

> Setepani went by Kwantas to Oiau and Mwasiuna hung up Kibutokuneseya so they now see if Sinodi in Loboda can get Teleiponi for them to marry, thereby turning Kibu from *bulubulu* to *dagula*. When Tamagu goes to Duau, Sete will start to *poala* for Teleiponi.

Understandably, it takes many years to learn the names and the concepts and objects, persons and places needed for *kula*. Being an apprentice for a decade marks a superior *kula* player, and senior players like Mwasiuna (from Fergusson Island) speak with pride about these years of obedience, hardship, and learning that led to their heritage of reliable partners and high-ranking valuables. Women, while cooking, serving, peeling, and sweeping, listen to some of the conversations and pick up a lot of what is said. In some cases, such as that cited by Eunice from Bwegise above, they understand enough to actively advise their husbands or brothers or to manage their own chain of *kula* partners.

Young people, on the other hand, have learned that knowledge is not a gift worth enduring through a hard apprenticeship, but is a source of school pressure and competition for good grades. *Kula* knowledge is private and secret, while modern knowledge is forced down their throats. Those teenagers who went to boarding school missed out on the first learning steps of *kula:* for women, weaving, and details related to gardening and cooking, and, for men, sailing and building. Both genders arguably received less training in 'showing a happy face' and working hard in spite of a strong desire not to do so. Consequently, today's adults are desperately searching for young men or women who qualify in their eyes as the future *kula* player of their lineage. As Papu Pika, a *kula* master from Dobu, put it in a meeting (in Sawa'edi, Fergusson Island, 2015): '[M]y sister's children are white-skinned.' Indeed, they were raised in Australia, even though these children of classificatory sisters could have been chosen to fill the gap if they had received his blessing. He picked his son for his heir, thereby transferring the *mwali* Kabisawali into a different matrilineage, diverting it from its route and aggravating a number of *kula* players, especially its creator, John Kasaipwalova, who wanted to return it to his own chain of partners. Shortly after announcing his heir, Papu Pika passed away, leaving a troublesome heritage for his son and his wife's family, who now must host with special care and handle the fear surrounding this *mwali* 'witchcraft'. Last year, John K also died.

The role of women in *kula* becomes even more essential now, as their good example helps to train the next generation of young adults to cooperate and perform when asked to do so. In some families, the most interested and intellectually capable men live and work in faraway towns and use their telephone to direct their sisters or nephews on *kula* exchanges that are sponsored by their wages. They may provide a boat when needed for a group expedition and they may even buy a dinghy to speed up exchanges. Others lack such advantages and may be less successful, whereby resentment spreads for a variety of reasons that are caused by cash, an imperfect education, and evangelist churches. With soap operas from the Philippines and cartoons on TV, the nonstop presentation of different, more egocentric values is shifting older notions of empowered womanhood. I have spoken to girls from the islands who spend time babysitting and housekeeping for a relative in town, who now find it hard to return to the often rather harsh life of village subsistence as a junior woman under the strict eyes of mothers and sisters. They begin to think of themselves as 'too thin', 'ugly', or 'stupid', and I have seen many desperate Facebook posts from young women who return to the village and feel overworked and depressed after a period of mostly sedentary living with constant TV in the background, as is typical for urban families.

The hard work of island women gives them status and meaning for a reason: it is complex and challenging, just as important and relevant

for the community as men's work. For *kula*, the work of women is certainly essential; while women can take up the role of men and actively travel to their partners, men alone cannot provide for their partners. They need sisters, wives, daughters, and mothers to contribute and provide services. As women strive to make their hard work look 'easy', they risk being overlooked—not by their own menfolk, who are highly aware of what it takes to fulfil the female role, but by foreigners from a patriarchal background, who are used to seeing housework as lower order than men's work. *Kula* hospitality is a good example for our bias, as even seasoned feminists like Nancy Munn and Annette Weiner ignored the work of *kula* women in the 1970s.

The fame of male *kula* players opens up the potential for hospitality to all his relatives, especially the women, as their contributions to his fame are significant and acknowledged by all *kula* families. Yet, anthropologists have so far missed this point, likely due to our spatial metaphor of public/domestic, the structuralist equation of public:male::domestic:female, 'very slippery terms indeed' (Jolly and Macintyre 1989:2), with spatial metaphors that privilege the public and see domestic chores as not very revealing. The lives of women, as long bemoaned by feminists since Simone de Beauvoir's book (*The second sex, 1949*), have remained hidden with regard to the most time-consuming and skilful activities that the women orchestrate when they display perfect hospitality. Marilyn Strathern (1988: 207) proposes that, to 'Melanesians', male and female are the two principles that form society because it is based on male and female labour. Carrying the metaphor further, she regards bodies as being metaphorically constituted of both male and female elements and suggests that gender is not an attribute but a form of action. Depending on context, one gender moves to the outside and determines the activity which can be either male or female. Gift-giving is an important form of such detachment, as it requires an activation of one part of the person. In Strathern's (1988: 191f) words, 'exchange is essential to the processes of personification through which persons are separated by the social relations between them.' When we include the hospitality during *kula* as a gift, it makes sense that the participants see it as the 'profit', the motivating factor in *kula*—in most cases, this is surely more significant than the hope for fame, which is notoriously linked to the few matrilineages that legitimately circulate the valuables of highest value (called *dagula*, 'head-decoration' in the Dobu language and beyond).

As Judith Squires has suggested recently,

> dispensing with the language of dichotomous spheres would allow for either a fuller exploration of the notion of multiple separate spheres, or the rejection of spatial metaphors altogether allowing for a greater focus on the meaning of privacy and publicness, disentangled from the prejudices of geographic tradition (Squires 2018: 141–2).

The social significance of food, according to Marshal Sahlins (1972: 215), is that it is 'life-giving, urgent, ordinarily symbolic of hearth and home, if not of mother', is part of the exchange sequences of *kula*, not only motherly but also political and outward-oriented. Reo Fortune somewhat noted female agency in *kula*:

> Old women possess the incantations for making and for lulling hurricanes. They keep this superior magic closely to themselves, and the men admit that the women possess the ritual that is most needed by sailors. The women cannot

> make the *kula*. They are jealous of it, and are gifted with the power that can break it. They are not of the kind that easily allow their men a free hand upon the seas or in strange ports' (Fortune 1932: 214).

Thus, it can be argued that women do indeed make or break *kula*, not only with esoteric means but simply by displaying or refusing their hospitality. When everything is perfect, they strengthen *kula*, as many potential partners will be attracted by stories of her hospitality. When the children cry, the place is dirty, the food of low value, and the faces unfriendly, the *kula* partner will excuse himself and never return, damaging the *kula* of the matrilineage since he will describe his bad experience with his peers.

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To my father, Jürgen Kühling (1934–2019)

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NOTES

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