

Cards on Kiriwina: Magic, Cosmology, and the ‘Divine Dividual’ in Trobriand Gambling

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ABSTRACT

Trobriand Islanders adopted card gambling from Europeans in colonial times alongside a growing familiarity with introduced money and commodities. Most ethnographic reports of gambling elsewhere in PNG have concentrated on its secular aspects. Here I focus on its ritual dimension summarized by the notion of laki (‘lucky’) as expressed in the agentic capacities of a new player, the ‘divine dividual’, who synthesizes elements of Sahlins’s ‘divine king’ and the ‘dividual’ of the New Melanesian Ethnography. In accord with the local understandings of spiritual agency, many Trobriand men have adapted pre-existing magical practices for courting, kula, fishing, sorcery etc. to gambling by seeking to encompass the perceived powers of exogenous Europeans, acknowledged as the sources of laki, money and commodities, into their own persons in ways analogous to traditional magicians’ reliance upon baloma spirits. Trobriand gambling thus exemplifies how change following from the introduction of novel Western practices can be effectively accommodated to preexisting religious and cultural practices through indigenous modes of personhood and agency.

Keywords: card gambling, personhood, agency, magic and the sacred, cosmology, Trobriand Islands.

While gambling with playing cards has been adopted widely across Papua New Guinea since early colonial times, there have been relatively few published ethnographic analyses devoted to it (see Brandewie 1967; Hayano 1989; Laycock 1966, 1967; Maclean 1984; Mitchell 1989; Mimica 2006; Rubinstein 1987; Sexton 1987; Zimmer 1986, 1987a, 1987b). With the exception of Mimica (2006) – exceptional inasmuch as he concentrates upon psychoanalytical rather than collective aspects – previous investigators have tended to focus on the more or less secular aspects of gambling (i.e., societal, recreational, economic and/or political), implicitly treating associated notions of *laki*, the Tok Pisin borrowing for English ‘lucky’, in the impersonal mathematical sense of random ‘probabilistic chance’. In this article, I describe card gambling or *pele’i* (literally ‘play’) as practised by Northern Kiriwinans of the Trobriand Islands – people regionally renowned as doyens of indigenous ‘magic’ (*megwa*) and other esoteric arts, concentrating on its sacred or ritualistic aspects. This analysis parallels my accounts of personal agency in gambling (Mosko 2012; see also Pickles 2012) and other contexts of social transformation (commoditization, changing fashions and courting, Christian conversion; see Mosko 1999, 2001, 2002, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2014a, Forthcoming) among the North Mekeo people of Central Province which similarly focus on the magico-religious dimensions of change as well as continuity. Without denying the presence of the secular aspects of gambling that others have emphasized, I argue that with Trobriand *pele’i*, the *laki* of winning and losing is less a matter of pure ‘chance’ than an ingredient of players’ personal esoteric capacities vis-à-vis one another through the recruitment of the powers of *bilu baloma* ‘spirits’ thought to reside in Tuma, the invisible world of the dead, and foreign Europeans.

These materials were gathered over 20 months in the neighbourhood of my Omarakana village research base during 2006–2013. Omarakana is the site of Bronislaw Malinowski's path-breaking studies and the home of the Tabalu 'Paramount Chief' whose authority consists mainly in mastery of the most powerful *megwa* 'spells' of the archipelago controlling agricultural abundance and famine. Although Omarakana retains numerous features of 'sacred tradition' (*gulangula*), many adult male residents are avid gamblers.

Theoretically, this study synthesizes selected elements of Marshall Sahlins's (1985) celebrated structural history programme with the dynamics of 'personal partibility' drawn from the New Melanesian Ethnography (hereafter 'NME') inspired by the work of Marilyn Strathern (1988) and Roy Wagner (1974), among others.

This may seem to some an awkward combination. On the one hand, Sahlins's programme is designed to overcome the antinomies of structure and event, change and continuity, and so on, whereas most applications of the NME have been strongly criticized for their synchronic inattention to historical change (Carrier 1992; Keesing and Jolly 1992; Thomas 1991). Here I seek to adapt the dynamics of 'personal partibility' (i.e., detachment, attachment, elicitation, reciprocation) to the kinds of processes outlined by Sahlins following from people's reliance upon their 'culture-as-constituted' to interpret, respond to and enact events. On the other, the key agent for change in Sahlins's model is the expansive 'divine king' of Polynesia who, in acting, encompasses or incorporates others into his person, whereas agency in NME view is enacted through the opposite trajectory, in the decomposition of 'partible' or 'dividual' persons through elicitive, reciprocal gift-giving. Here as in other treatments of North Mekeo change cited above, I seek to employ Sahlins's general approach through a *partial* substitution of the historical agent who, in NME perspective, is better suited to Melanesian forms of sociality and personhood than divine kings.

I say 'partial' insofar as this issue concerns not only the scale of personhood (i.e., enlarging versus diminishing, expansion versus reduction) but the indigenous content. In what many regard as the NME's foundational text, *The Gender of the Gift* (Strathern 1988), the gendered components of personhood and agency are foregrounded to the near-complete exclusion of the sacred aspects of personhood, so critical in Sahlins's construal of Polynesian agency, even in Strathern's featured treatments of ceremonial exchange and ritual initiation. In the theoretical synthesis proposed here, I replace the NME's secularized 'partible person' and Sahlins's expansive 'divine king' with a new figure, the 'divine dividual', if you will, as the key kind of agent in many contexts of Trobriand social transformation, including gambling. The main advantage of the 'divine dividual' as I see it – a dividual composed of sacred and non-sacred components – is that it captures indigenous viewpoints of how Trobrianders view not only themselves and their relations but also the novel powers of exogenous Europeans and the wealth and practices that they have introduced historically (*cf.* Bashkow 2006).

Despite the conceptual distinctions I draw between 'divine kings', 'dividuals' and 'divine dividuals', it must be noted that all three models stand similarly opposed to the sorts of persons and agents – 'relational individuals', 'individuals' or even 'possessive individuals' – who figure centrally in much contemporary writing on Melanesia and particularly analyses of social change (e.g., Errington and Gewertz 1995; Robbins 2004; Strathern and Stewart 2000; Sykes 2007; *cf.* Strathern 1990). As I have argued elsewhere (Mosko Forthcoming) regarding 'pacification', commoditization, Christian conversion, changing patterns of leadership, dress, decoration and courting as well as gambling among North Mekeo, with the adoption of *pele'i* gambling Trobrianders as dividuals partially composed of sacred features have been able to incorporate in their persons and relations analogous capacities of introduced foreign origin which could be put to the service of reproducing pre-existing forms of magico-ritual agency and sociality. This approach is therefore a response also to the recent literature on 'occult economies', 'contemporary witchcraft', 'modern enchantments', 'millennial capitalism',

‘alternate modernities’ etc. (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Gaonkar 1999; Geshchiere 1997; Kapferer 2002; Moore and Sanders 2001) which tend to posit such contemporary phenomena as the products primarily of the enchantments of modernity and the West, owing little to indigenous forms.

THE DIVINE DIVIDUAL

As posited by Strathern (1988), the Melanesian person can be considered a *dividual* being, a composite formed of relations with a plurality of other persons achieved through reciprocal gift-giving of body-parts or other components. Thus persons’ compositions change through time as they reciprocally attach and detach elements of each other. The transactions composing persons and relations create a history of sequential reciprocities as so many capacities for future agentive action, and thereby a particular identity. Following Gell (1998), I define an ‘agent’ as a person capable of changing the dispositions of some victim or ‘patient’. By acting (i.e., detaching parts of themselves that they earlier acquired as patients from others), agents externalize the relations of which they are, or until then have been, composed. Through acting, partible persons are *decomposed*, anticipating and evincing the recognition of their externalized capacities through the responses of corresponding patients. For me to detach the appropriate part of myself so that it will be effective in drawing forth a desired part of another person (i.e., his or her sister in marriage, a shell valuable, or a ritual spell), I must be able to conceptualize the internal capacities of both myself and the intended patient so that I can strategically externalize that part of me which will be successful in uncoupling the part of him/her which I desire. Through these kinds of elicitations, persons stimulate one another to action and reaction. Every action—or *transaction*—is in this way both conventional and innovative (Wagner 1974) and hence presenting an opportunity for change as well as continuity.

In Strathern’s (1988) original formulation of personal partibility, as noted above, the parts or relations which persons transact in these ways are distinguished in terms of gender – male and female, and same- and cross-sex – to the exclusion of whether those same components are regarded in indigenous terms as possessing additional qualities and capacities of sacredness or its absence. But to no less extent, Melanesians have long been conceptualized ethnographically as viewing themselves, their components and the other beings and entities of the world in terms of their relative sanctity (e.g., Codrington 1891:119–120; Lawrence and Meggitt 1965:6–9; Sillitoe 1998:215–216; Trompf 1991:66, 73–74, 84–87). Importantly, in this regard, Melanesian sacredness has been described as distinct from the classic Durkheimian formulation in that it is immanent in all things rather than constituting a discrete ‘set apart’ sphere. Typically, tokens of sacredness are combined with non-sacred or profane characteristics and attributes in the same beings and entities. My formulation of the ‘divine dividual’ is thus an adaptation of Strathern’s partible person insofar as persons are detaching, attaching, eliciting and reciprocating either sacred or profane components of their persons. This is particularly important insofar as, similarly to Sahlins’s ‘divine king’, attributes of sanctity (and by implication capacities of secularity) carry contrasting implications for interpersonal potency or influence. As I shall describe below, this became particularly important for Trobrianders, as with other Melanesian populations, in their encounters with exogenous and powerful Europeans and in subsequent historical sequences of social change. To Trobrianders today and in the past, Europeans and their exchangeable goods and practices, such as gambling, money and commodities have been perceived as embodying mystical powers of the persons who manufactured them largely in accord with existing understandings of the spiritual aspects of indigenous persons. Moreover, those detachable components of the newcomers’ persons – i.e., ‘commodities’ – could be seen at least in some situations as transactable in a

way not dissimilar to indigenous gifting. And as a result of cross-cultural encounters and exchanges of this sort, the composition of persons and their relations have effectively changed. It is for this reason that I place the divine dividual at the centre of processes of social transformation.

It is important to stress that this model of the divine dividual, similarly to the classic NME formulation, presupposes the absence of the rigid distinction between ‘persons’ and ‘things’, or ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, which is definitive of the atomized, bounded, possessive *individual* of Western ideology. Thus when people from a Western viewpoint might appear to be exchanging ‘objects’, even seemingly ordinary ones – items of food, wealth, knowledge, etc., and nowadays money and commodities – in indigenous Melanesian perspective they are rather transacting over bits of themselves as persons often modulated with capacities of sacredness and the divine.

LUCKY, LAKI, AND KALOTA ‘SUCCESS’

For present purposes I draw upon the Oxford English Dictionary definition of ‘lucky’, particularly its contemporary inflection as concentrating on impersonal ‘chance’ independent of personal worthiness: ‘Of persons: Having, or attended by, good luck. In early use often, Fortunate, successful, prosperous. *Now with narrower meaning: Favoured by chance; successful through causes other than one’s own action or merit*’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2013, emphasis added). According to my Trobriand interlocutors, the indigenous term which preceded the English borrowing, *laki*, and which is occasionally used in reference to winning at *pele’i*, is *kalota* ‘success’. But *laki* and *kalota* are anything but impersonal forces, involving instead results instigated by persons’ own efforts. Returning from a *kula* expedition with the shells you had initially sought from your partner, you are *kalota*, and similarly in eliciting the desired erotic attentions of a particular woman or man, in producing an intended abundant harvest of yams, or as sorcerer in succeeding to kill your victim. Failing in any such pursuits is the opposite of *kalota*, or *nanota* ‘unsuccessful’.

For tradition-minded Islanders, *kalota* and *nanota* are the results of ‘efforts’ (*paisewa*) inclusive of both people’s physical labours and their magical-ritual capacities. However, the latter are commonly adjudged to be the more critical, relying on personal characteristics and powers intimately shared with sacred (*bomaboma*) ancestral and other spirits (*bilu baloma*) and transactable among living persons as dividuals.

MALINOWSKI ON GAMBLING, LUCK, AND MAGIC

This is not the view of Malinowski, at least on first inspection. For him (1932:290), indigenous ‘magic’ (*megwa*) and introduced gambling were connected, being similarly dependent upon the functions of probabilistic chance rather than spirits (see Mosko 2014b). Magical operations were instead reactions in those areas of activity where villagers experienced significant uncertainties as to outcome (1992a). In this regard, magic resembled gambling where chance played a key role. Writing of *kula*, for example, he noted,

. . . we have a type of enterprise where the *vast possibilities of success are very much influenced by chance*. A man, whether he be rich or poor in partners, may, *according to his luck*, return with a relatively big or a small haul from an expedition. Thus the imagination of the adventurers, *as in all forms of gambling, must be bent towards lucky hits and turns of extraordinarily good chance*. (1922:328, emphases added)

But Malinowski qualified this reliance of magic upon chance by attributing success and failure also to practitioners' personal capacities: 'The Kula myths feed this imagination on stories of extreme good luck, and at the same time show that it lies *in the hands of man to bring this luck on himself, provided he acquires the necessary magical lore*' (1922:328, emphasis added). Elsewhere, he described these abilities in terms of 'a force residing in man, transmitted to him from generation to generation through the medium of tradition' (1932:290), specifically through agencies inherited from spirits of various kinds. However, in still other writings, Malinowski (1922:398, 404, 451, 1935b:213–250, 1992a:201) attributed the efficacy of indigenous magic to words spoken in *megwa* spells rather than from the agency of the spirits verbally named and invoked by magicians. In the course of the following analysis, I shall sort through these diverse perspectives with the aim of identifying those which can be best viewed as deriving from unwarranted Western assumptions.

THE GAMES

Malinowski reported the presence by 1917–18 of 'a newly invented system of gambling' (1935a:211–212), which likely included card playing. According to current Omarakanans, *pele'i* is recognized as originating with Europeans (*dimdims*) and imported by returning plantation and road workers after World War II. However, villagers often collapse recollections pertaining to the World Wars and intervening years. Nevertheless, villagers universally attest that the main objective of *pele'i* is not simply the winning of cash and store-goods through *laki*, any more than the procuring of shell valuables is an end in itself with *kula*, but the particular kind of *butula* 'fame' or 'renown' that success generates.

By now, several card games have been established, some appearing to retain the rules of their European antecedents while undergoing modification. Winning and losing in all instances are said to be the result of players' *laki* (i.e., *kaloka* or *nanota*; see above). The quality of interaction among players in all games is typically relaxed and informal, but for reasons to become clear below gambling adepts tend to play with marked concentration.

Tri lif

Tri lif or 'three leaf', a local variation of '21', 'black jack' or 'baccarat' known in some other parts of the country as *laki* (Pickles, pers. comm.) was the first game to gain popularity. Each player contributes a bet to a central pot, usually 20 *toea* to 1 or 2 *kina* per play. Players take turns as dealer, handing out three cards face-down to the 4 to 8 participants. After examining their cards, in no particular order they reveal their *agu pele'i* 'my play' (i.e., 'hand' in English). There is no opportunity to request additional cards, so from a Euro-American perspective, no detectable skills, only impersonal 'luck' or 'chance', are involved. The cards are scored in rank order with three 'aces' as the top, then *ful haus* ('full house', i.e., three face cards of the same suit) followed by similar combinations of mixed suits, then combined numerical scores of the three cards coming closest to multiples of '10'. In this last counting, for example, a '5', '4' and an 'ace' counting as '1' equals '10', or two '3s' and a 'king' worth '0' or '10' equals '6'. If two players have the identical scores, they split the winnings (*win*). In recent years, there may be a game owner who deals the cards, taking the equivalent of one man's bet from each pot and awarding to the winner of a set number of games a *prais* ('prize', some commodity purchased with money, such as a tin of fish, bag of flour, a smoked fish, bunches of betel nut).

Wan Shot

Another early-adopted game is *wan shot* ('one shot') which also seems to involve mere chance. After contributing equal bets, each player receives from the dealer a single card

face-down. After inspecting their cards, the players simply reveal them, the one with the highest card winning the pot, which is split if two men reveal cards of the same value. *Wan shot* often seems to be played intermittently as a brief break in the playing of other games. For this reason, it rarely involves *praisis*.

Las kard

This game ('last card', also called *halide* or 'holiday') is nowadays very popular. Each of seven players places an equal bet, usually between one or several *kina*, the winner taking all. After players receive three cards face down, the dealer places a single card face-up in the centre of play, for example, '5 clubs'. Each player in rotation seeks to discard another 'club' of a different numerical value (e.g., '7 clubs'), or a '5' of a different suit (e.g., '5 diamonds'). The subsequent player can put down a card matching that played by the previous player in terms of number or suit. If he does not hold a card enabling him to play on the card showing, he must draw cards one by one from the deck until he can do so. The winner is simply the first player to exhaust his cards.

Additional rules complicate play. When an '8' or 'jack' is played the next player skips his turn, hence the name *halide* or 'holiday'. If someone throws a face card, the next person must draw three more cards from the deck. When a '2' is thrown, the next player must pick up two cards. If a player at any point can drop a '10', the next player must pick up six cards. But if that person instead has a '2' to play, then the player following him has to pick up four cards. And then if the player coming after him plays a matching '2' also, then the next person will have to pick up six cards.

With *las kard* there is no game owner and no *praisis*. Players take turn shuffling and dealing. Given the numerous junctures where players decide which cards to play, outcomes are recognized as resulting from 'skill' (*kabitam*) and 'thought' (*nona*) as well as *laki*. Bets are typically larger than with *tri lif* and *wan shot*, and with the increased number of plays involved, the pace of winning and losing is much slower; hence the game's popularity with older players.

Faiv Handred

Faiv hundred is supposedly the most recently introduced version of *pele'i*. After betting, five players receive seven initial cards with one central card displayed face-up. Usually, the owner-dealer does not himself play but takes the value of one man's bet as his share of each pot and provides *praisis* at the conclusion of a set series of games. Players in turn draw one card either from the top of the down-facing deck or from the pile of face-up discards, then adding one card from their hands to the discard pile. To draw from the pile of discards, the player must be able to show from his hand three or more cards in numerical runs of the same suit. If drawing instead from the deck he can assemble such a three-card sequence, but he must wait until he can gather another one by drawing from the discard pile; then he can lay down or reveal both sequences. Play continues until one player is left with a single card that he can play on one of another player's revealed sets, adding a '5', for example, to someone else's '6' to '8' run of the same suit. At that point, other players put down cards remaining from their hands that similarly extend one another's already-displayed sets. Then players' numerical scores are totaled. Single-digit cards count for five points, and '10s' are worth ten points. Face cards and 'aces' in sequences of 'queen-king-ace' are worth 15 points. 'Aces' used as '1s' in runs of '1' to '3' are worth 5 points. The player with the highest score takes the bets as his *win*. Additional games are played until one player reaches a cumulative score of five-hundred points – hence the game's name – at which point he receives the *prais*. As with *las kard*, winning and losing are viewed as matters of skill and mental activity as well as *laki*.

CONTEXTUAL AMBIGUITIES OF *PELE'I*

From an outside perspective, winning at *pele'i* is at least partly the result of random, impersonal 'luck' as understood in ordinary English. And while *las Kard* and *faiv hundred* seem to require acquired skills, strategizing and decision-making, there is nothing of a 'magical', 'ritual' or 'supernatural' stripe involved.

From the viewpoint of players, however, gambling outcomes are interpreted in terms consonant with indigenous practices tied to ritual forms inaugurated at the time of cosmic creation (*kavila*) by ancestral and other spirits and deities (*bilu baloma*). The ritual forms relevant to *pele'i* involve certain contextual ambiguities pertaining to classifications of gender, time, space, *dala* 'subclan identity', and *ketota* 'rank'.

Since its introduction, *pele'i* has been monopolized by men, especially youths and the middle-aged. This is consistent with men's traditional possession and performance of most varieties of *megwa* or 'magic', particularly the spells and associated rituals for courting, *kula*, fishing, hunting and sorcery which have been adapted to gambling purposes.

As I have recently documented (Mosko 2014b), men's mastery of magic places them in intimate relations with spirits who serve as the ultimate agents of the spells. Knowledgeable men are thus intermediaries between the visible world of the living, Boyowa, and the invisible spirit world of Tuma. Women, it should be noted, through giving birth and participation in mortuary rites also mediate between the worlds of the living and the deceased in ways analogous to men's magic.

Nearly all gambling is concentrated during the months of the annual yam harvest (April-October) when today as in the past most festive socializing, informal and formal, takes place (e.g., *kula* expeditions, *milamala* festivals, *sagali* feasting, fighting, *kayasa* ritual competitions). This is the liminal phase of marked *mwasawa* 'happiness', *momova* 'life' and 'lightness' (*gagabila*) that interrupts the periods of intensive 'labour' (*paisewa*), 'sadness' (*ninamwau*) and 'heaviness' (*mwau*) likened to 'death' (*kaliga*) lasting between November and March. The former period coincides also with time of heightened interaction between living humans and *bilu baloma* spirits of Tuma who are foci of traditional ceremonies and who partake of the same enjoyments. *Pele'i*, like most forms of courting, is chiefly done at night, a time associated with Tuma.

Omarakanan gambling is also predicated at points of interstitial location. Most regular nightly gambling occurs at a nearby market placed at the junction of the island's main road linking Northern Kiriwina with the administrative centre, Losuia, to the south. Over decades, many households have established new hamlets on lineage-owned garden lands straddling this road that connects village life with modernity. Similarly, while women take centre-stage at mortuary feasts that link the living and the dead, small groups of men can be found gambling in the ceremonies' peripheries.

Low ranking 'commoner' (*tokai*) men tend to dominate *pele'i*. Although 'chiefly' (*guyau*) men continue to monopolize the most powerful forms of indigenous magic and nowadays occasionally gamble, commoners are acknowledged as the most *laki*, earning the most proficient among them proportionate fame. In the historical contexts of local government leadership, church, business, higher education and electoral politics, the initial bias towards chiefs has similarly gradually shifted so that those areas are now accessible, 'open' or 'free' for commoners to assume positions of responsibility and renown. The current dominance of commoners in *pele'i* is thus one element among several where modernity has offered new avenues to authority and influence to commoner men.

How those opportunities have been grasped by commoners, however, is not a straightforward matter of increasing secularization and/or individualism. On the one hand, proficiency in *pele'i* is recognized as a type of *kabitam* 'knowledge' or 'expertise' which relies on

particular aptitudes of clear *nanamsa* ‘thought’ that are closely tied to the powers or capacities of a certain class of magical spells called *sosewa* (see below) that may be, but are not necessarily, transmitted along genealogical lines over the course of extended apprenticeships. According to the traditional system of politico-ritual rank as explained to me at Omarakana and elsewhere, the status of *tokabitam* ‘man of knowledge’ provided certain select commoner men with opportunities to achieve considerable fame and ‘authority’ or ‘distinction’ in particular competitive arenas, separate from those of *guyau* chiefs but nonetheless relying on ritual mastery. Expert canoe carvers are the most ethnographically well-documented *tokabitam* to date (Campbell 2002; Scoditti 1990). But traditional *towosi* ‘magical experts’ in gardening, fishing, warfare, dancing, singing, etc. are acknowledged as *tokabitam* for those specific activities, and women who possessed exceptional skill at weaving *doba* skirts and funerary distribution are acknowledged as *nakabitam* ‘women of knowledge’.

On the other hand, the indigenous social system provided commoners, singly or as *dala* lineage groupings, with certain opportunities to elevate their politico-ritual rank by virtue of forceful (*keveka nona* ‘big head’, literally ‘determined mind’) defence of claims to ritual prowess to which they are not hereditarily entitled – a process termed *kobala*. The ethnographically most dramatic instance of *kobala* is the pre-colonial rise to chiefly status of the commoner war-like Toliwaga *dala* of Kabwaku and Wakaisa villages through the wielding of certain spirit-impregnated weapons and the magic associated with them; the Kabisawali Movement of the 1970s (Leach 1982) and the recent successes of commoner men and women in government, church, education and business are others. Thus the historical tendency for accomplished gamblers, *topele’i*, to emerge from commoner ranks fits comfortably with indigenous patterns of temporal, spatial, societal and, I shall outline below, ritual ambiguity.

Finally, money (*moni*) and the prizes over which men gamble are similarly viewed as structurally ambivalent and thus associated with sacred capacities (see Mosko 1999). While Westerners tend to treat those articles as common-place ‘things’, Trobrianders view them as ‘strange’ or ‘foreign’ (*makava*) items lacking the ‘reason’ (*nona*) of their customary experience. This is partly because they originate with people and places of which only few Islanders can profess great understanding. What people know and understand with confidence about money, European wealth and the *laki* involved in their acquisition and use is still largely shaped by the sacred traditions inherited from *bilu baloma* spirits who, although they are not perceived as foreign or strange in the same way, are viewed as inhabiting a world, Tuma, separate from the visible, familiar one.

To comprehend the various dimensions of ambiguity associated with *pele’i* and particularly the source and nature of *laki*, it is necessary to grasp how Islanders construe the cosmological character of their relations with the inhabitants of Tuma. It is through this digression that the coefficients of divine dividuality and *pele’i* ritual and agency become most evident.

HUMANS, SPIRITS, DALA, AND PERSONS

In Malinowski’s (1992b) and others’ accounts, Tuma, the invisible ‘world of the dead’, is variously located beneath the ground of Boyowa, on the surface of Tuma Island to Boyowa’s north, or at specific underground locations on Tuma Island. Statements given to me add that the two realms are the visible and invisible mirror images of one another such that every animal, tree, stone, house, beach, and so on of Boyowa has an invisible immaterial counterpart in Tuma. My more knowledgeable Omarakana informants including the ‘Paramount Chief’, Pulayasi Daniel, stress, however, that Boyowa and Tuma critically interpenetrate. The invisible ‘images’ (*kekwabu*) and associated ‘powers’ (*peula*) which animate the inhabitants of Tuma, in other words, are internal components of their visible Boyowan manifestations.

Also, Boyowa and Tuma do not correspond with the worlds of the living and the dead, for both domains and their occupants are viewed as saturated with *momova* 'life' or the 'essence of life' in accord with immaterial but embodied *kekwebu* images and associated *peula* potencies (cf. Scoditti 2012:67–69). Here Trobriand notions deviate profoundly from Western understandings of life and death. The images and powers of Tuman *baloma* ancestral souls, for example, are the animistic life-giving source (*u'ula*) of their living Boyowan human descendants just as the invisible *kekwebu* and *peula* of animals, plants, stones, celestial objects, etc. render them their visible, tangible qualities.

Living humans, ancestral *baloma* and other categories of non-human spirits (*tokwai*, *itona* or *tauva'u*, etc.) are critically distinct from other inhabitants of both dimensions by the possession of the images and powers of 'mind' or 'reason' (*nona*) which enable them to communicate with each other through the internal generation of 'thoughts' (*nanamsa*) and the external exchange of ritualized 'words' (*biga*) as in magical spells. Animals, plants, stones and other features of the seemingly 'natural' world, while embodying Tuman images and powers that lend them their characteristic features, lack the constituents of mind unless they happen to harbour invisibly mindful spirits – typically the non-human *tokwai* spirits labeled 'nature sprites' by Malinowski. From this perspective, the capacities of humans and spirits for mutual thoughtful communication thus qualify them as exclusive kinds of occupants at the Tuma-Boyowa boundary.

Living humans can communicate with spirits through words and thoughts insofar as they are mutually constituted of the same images and powers which identify them with particular *dala* 'lienage' or 'sub-clan' identities. Contrary to Malinowski's (1932, 1992b) original reports, Trobriand children embody certain critical images and powers of *both* parents, though the contributions of the two differ in character (Mosko 1995, 2014b). While people have 'souls' (*baloma*) distinctive to their separate persons, they share certain images and powers with all other persons of their mother's and father's *dala* identities – *veyolela* and *tubulela*, respectively – including ancestral *baloma* and non-human spirits who participate totemically in those groupings.

The term *tukwa* designates the images and powers intrinsic to a given *dala's* initial ancestors (*tabu*) as ordained at the time of cosmic creation (*bubuli*) and transmitted through succeeding generations. A *dala's* *tukwa* includes all beings and entities that incorporate the images and powers that identify it: human members (i.e., children of *both* female and male members whether living or deceased), their lands and reefs, the animal and plant species ancestrally connected with it, its rank, its ceremonial insignia and responsibilities (*koni*), its songs (*wosi*), its taboos (*kikila*) and, of particular importance in the present context, its *megwa* spells. Therefore all beings and entities partaking of a given *dala's* *tukwa* are 'sacred' (*bomaboma*) to one another, making them 'closed' (*katuboda*) to members of other *dala* (or, in anthropological jargon, 'inalienable'). *Dala* is thus not merely a corporate group of people as presupposed by some investigators but includes all the beings and entities of Tuma and Boyowa possessed of the same *tukwa* images and powers.

As Malinowski described (1992b), non-human *tokwai* 'nature spirits' invisibly inhabit specific locations of the land- and seascape. Composed of the same identifying *tukwa* images and powers including the capacities of mind as resident *dala* humans, the names of major *tokwai* spirits are often voiced in spells, and those *tokwai* are understood to join invoked ancestral *baloma* in producing the magician's desired results.

The *butula* fame that results from consistent success in *pele'i*, as with all valued enterprises, must also be appreciated as consisting of potent *kekwebu* images detached from winners' persons that circulate widely in the knowledge internalized by persons far afield. Having invisible effects on those distant others, fame therefore shares many properties with *megwa* spells, and in its invisible expansiveness it mediates between peoples' knowledge of

the familiar and the unfamiliar analogous to the relations between Boyowa and Tuma. But this is just a specific instance whereby, on the basis of shared *dala*-specific *kekwabu* and *peula* and processes of mutual elicitation, detachment and attachment, persons (both human and spirits) have the magical potential to affect the thoughts and actions of one another, qualifying them as divine individuals.

MEGWA SPELLS, KIKILA TABOOS, AND KIBOBUTA PERSONAL CORRECTNESS

There are three main procedures through which men are understood to be *laki* in the achievement of success in any customary activity: by the correct performance of spoken *megwa* ‘spells’ as partly described thus far, by the observance of *kikila* ritual ‘taboos’, and through the achievement of a state of personal *kibobuta* ‘correctness’. All three continue to operate in *pele’i* and other contexts where villagers seek to harness the images and powers of foreign Europeans.

Megwa ‘Spells’

With *pele’i* as with other activities where magic is employed, *laki* is regarded as the result of magicians’ personal skills and knowledge not only in the playing but in the demonstration of the requisite capacities to acquire *megwa* from elders and others in the first place. This is fundamentally different from Western ‘luck’ as ‘successful through causes other than one’s own action or merit’.

The spells themselves are typically structured according to a four-part formula – a botanical metaphor of wide occurrence across the Austronesian-speaking sphere – characteristic of virtually all contexts of human agency; that is, an initial *u’ula* ‘base’, ‘origin’, ‘cause’ or ‘source’, a *tapwala* ‘body’ or ‘middle part’, followed by a *doginala* ‘tip’, ‘end point’ or ‘result’, from which *keyuwela* ‘fruit’ or ‘offspring’ are generated. The opening *u’ula* base serves as an invocation to named *bilu baloma* spirits including the released souls of the magician’s deceased predecessors. The spell’s *tapwala* contains the instructions for what the spirits are to do on the magician’s behalf with respect to the patient. The *doginala* tip indicates the change that the magician wishes the patient to undergo. The final *keyuwela* fruit consists of the spell’s actual results as manifested in the patient but also, in many instances, in the fame generated from such achievement in the minds and actions of others. The spells employed by successful gamblers for the purpose of winning that are part of their respective *tukwa* are said to conform to this exact pattern.

Tukwa spells are understood to work when the beckoned spirits receive the spell’s *tapwala* instructions for transmitting the indicated images and powers to the patient where they reform or restructure (*ikuli*) the configuration of identifying *kekwabu* and *peula* previously constitutive of that person. Consequently, the patient’s bodily, mental and emotional dispositions are transformed so as to conform to the magician’s desires. In the case of courting spells of attraction (*mwasila*) adapted for gambling, the thoughts, feelings and actions of rival players are accordingly modified to render the magician’s play *laki* and their own unsuccessful. In other spells (*bulubwalata*) adapted from malevolent gardening, fishing, *kula* and courting magic, the invoked spirits block or spoil the *megwa* of the magician’s opponents so that they fail to win.

With many of these and other categories of traditional spells that have been adapted to *pele’i*, the invoked spirits themselves are induced to embody particular objects in such ways that they can affect the outcome of games. Malinowski described these procedures as ‘rites of transference’ or the ‘rubbing’ or ‘impregnation’ of the spell into an ‘object’ which in some circumstances serves to transfer the spell’s potent images to the patient (e.g., 1922:406–408;

1935a:93ff; 1935b:158). My informants describe these actions as *yopu'oi wodila*, literally 'put into something with mouth'. In some spells, for example, the spirits can enter the deck of cards and re-sequence (*ikuli*) their order so as to enable the magician to win; in others, the spirits enter betel-nut, tobacco or food, a comb, a lime-stick, etc. enabling them to spoil the performance of the players who consume or come into contact with them. As I shall describe below, this sort of magical empowerment is directly relevant to additional aspects of *laki* in gambling.

Tukwa spells for gambling as well as the traditional activities as depicted by Malinowski are ideally hereditary between persons sharing *dala* identity. As such, *tukwa* spells are regarded by people of the same *dala* identity as sacred and among their most valued possessions. As such, they are normally transmitted only to the sons of female and male matrilineally-defined *dala* relations as described above, and the fruit and fame variously enjoyed by persons of specific *dala* and their leaders are mainly based upon their capacity to affect the results intended by their *tukwa* spells. But also, according to my informants, those persons *and only they* are ordinarily capable of successfully using the *tukwa* spells of their mothers' or fathers' *dala*. This is because the words of which *megwa* consist are among the potent internalized *kekwabu* images that differentiate persons according to *dala*. For example, all Tabalu people and spirits include among their distinguishing characteristics those *kekwabu* and *peula* named in the *tukwa* spells of Tabalu *dala*, even if they have not been indoctrinated in the spells' exact wording. This means persons identifying with other *dala* (i.e., whose *dala*-specific image and powers are different from Tabalu) will not be able to use Tabalu *tukwa* spells successfully if they come to know and enunciate the words correctly (but see below). As explained to me by Pulyasi Daniel and others, the ancestral and other spirits of Tabalu *dala* will listen and respond to the *tukwa* spells uttered only by living Tabalu people with whom they identify, 'turning their backs' on all others. When gamblers in modern times had adapted the *tukwa* spells of their mothers' or father's *dala* for *pele'i*, their *laki* is attributable to the magical powers of *dala*-specific spirits.

There is another category of *megwa* spells termed *sosewa*, translated for me as 'collected' or 'collecting'. Unlike *tukwa*, *sosewa* spells are not restricted to persons of a particular *dala* identity; hence they are not sacred or closed in the manner of *tukwa* spells but are relatively 'open' or 'free' (*itugwali*) so can be exchanged among and used by persons of mixed *dala* ancestry or with foreigners including, importantly, Europeans (see below).¹ *Sosewa* spells thus approximate the anthropological notion of 'alienability'. The spells associated with the well-documented *tokabitam* expert canoe carvers qualify as *sosewa*, not *tukwa*, since they apprentice and initiate potentially any young male regardless of *dala* identity. Partly for this reason, *sosewa* spells are adjudged to be relatively 'light' (*lgagabila*) as distinct from the 'heaviness' (*mwau*) of *tukwa* spells, and accordingly they are considered to be generally weaker. Even so, the effectiveness of most if not all traditional *sosewa* spells still relies on the agency of *bilu baloma* spirits as described above.

Unbound by considerations of *dala*, *sosewa* spells can circulate widely – another indication of their comparative lightness. Kin and others who establish close relations have numerous ways of exchanging *sosewa* spells, and even strangers can transact over them through payments which Malinowski (1922:412) rather appropriately characterized as 'magical adoption'. A good share of *sosewa* spells for gambling and other activities circulating in Northern Kiriwina is assumed to have been imported from other islands or unknown parts of Papua New Guinea.

Normally, only a single man of a given *dala* will know the words and be capable of using a given *tukwa* or *sosewa* spell. Men as fathers and maternal uncles ordinarily pass on each of their *megwa*, especially *tukwa*, spells, which they earlier acquired by similar means, only to the one son or nephew who successfully elicits that knowledge through substantial, often extended donations of the fruits of their efforts (food, betel-nut, tobacco, etc.) as detachments

of their persons. Although the requisite images of a *dala*'s *tukwa* spells are inherited from conception and birth as identifying components of all *dala* members, only they who exhibit the personal capacities of eliciting *megwa* from knowledgeable elders will be able to activate those spells' powers. Also, when a son or nephew receives a spell from his father or uncle, it is thought that the identities of the two are merged, just as when an elder assimilates the fruit of his son's or nephew's elicitive labours. Through these relations, personal identities are fused. People become sacralized parts of each other. Through further extension every magician becomes the embodiment of his *bilu baloma* spirit predecessors, constituted of the same images and powers.

Some *sosewa* spells are distinctive in that the names of previous possessors are often not included in the opening *u'ula* invocations. For these spells, it is assumed that the spirits formerly associated with them as *tukwa* participated in their initial transfer outside of the *dala* of their origin, thereby lending legitimacy to subsequent recipients. This is also how some villagers explain the relative weakness of *sosewa* relative to *tukwa* spells (but see below). And given their greater transportability, it is *sosewa* spells used in gambling and other activities which have given commoners greater access to sacred powers and increased capacities for creating personal fame in modern circumstances.

***Kikila* 'Taboos'**

The question remains, how can *sosewa* spells be efficacious when the names of spirit predecessors have been deleted from the opening invocation? The answer is, through the observance of *kikila* 'taboos' or 'ritual avoidances' that were tied to the spell from the time of its cosmic origin as *tukwa* for another *dala*. By observing the taboos of a *sosewa* spell, in other words, a magician comes to replicate in his person the *dala* images and powers of the spell's predecessors. I was told that sometimes *sosewa* spells include only the name of the spell's first *tabu* originator or possessor. By observing a *sosewa* spell's taboos, the magician in a sense becomes partially assimilated to that *dala* and associated spirits do not turn their backs on him.

In fact, all spells require the correct observance of specific *kikila* to be effective. The taboos consist in food and other behavioural prohibitions. Typically, the beings and entities containing the *kekwa* images and *peula* powers that are mentioned in the spell are the items which are tabooed. For example, if black clouds, a species of black fish, and the black millipede are mentioned in a specific spell for rain-making, the magician must avoid their material ingestion. As such, those images and powers of blackness are components of the magician's personal identity and the identity of the spirits with whom the spell mythically originated. Failure to observe the *kikila* of a spell one has internalized renders the magician *komsugwaia* 'polluted' similarly to the effect of forbidden 'incest' (*suvasova*). As noted above, when someone might attempt to use the *tukwa* spell of a *dala* different from his own without having observed the requisite *kikila* restrictions, the invoked spirits will not recognize him.

Members of chiefly *dala* are typically obliged to observe more *kikila* taboos, and more stringently so, than commoners. This is because chiefly *dala* include among their respective *tukwa* numerically more *megwa* magical capacities, and *megwa* of greater powers, than is the case with commoner *dalas*. Indeed, it is through the violation of their *kikila* taboos that the ancestors of many previously chiefly *dala* have been effectively reduced to *tokai* commoner status with thereby greatly impoverished *kikila* responsibilities and magical powers. In general, then, commoners are relatively 'free' (*itugwali*) of the burdens of *tukwa*-based taboos as compared with chiefly *guyau* persons unless they happen to become *tolivalu* 'leaders' of their communities. But this does not release them from the requirement of observing the taboos associated with *sosewa* spells that they acquire.

***Kibobuta* ‘Personal Correctness’**

The correct observance of the definitive *kikila* taboos of one’s mother’s and father’s *dala* even in the absence of knowing or performing either *tukwa* or *sosewa* spells can also affect one’s success in gambling and other enterprises. *Laki* on this basis is called *kibobuta*, and it also is predicated upon the personal agency of magicians through their relations with *bilu baloma* spirits.

To be successful on the basis of *kibobuta* in the absence of *megwa* performance, one must not only observe the *kikila* taboos distinctive to the *tukwa* of one’s parental *dala*, all dimensions of one’s personal life must be in good order. My informants translated *kibobuta* in this sense as ‘correctness’ or ‘completeness’ in one’s personal affairs such that there are no disturbances that might distract one from unhindered concentration, for example, in the course of gambling. To be *kibobuta*, one must ensure that all of one’s social relations are in harmony – no suspicions of adultery or stealing, no unrequited debts, no recent deaths, no feelings of shame, etc. Also, one must maintain harmonious relations with the spirits which whom one identifies by thinking and behaving in accord with their thoughts and actions, that is, with their *kekwebu* and *peula*, when they were alive. The root of *kibobuta*, *lbobuta*, means ‘round’, as something with no corners or interruptions. Personal disturbances engender the opposite of *kibobuta*, the internalization of inappropriate images and powers, rendering one *ikaligaga’i* ‘incomplete’ or ‘incorrect’.

Achieving *kibobuta* in one’s relations thus results in ancestral spirits of Tuma completely identifying with one’s thoughts and desires to the point of affecting them in the visible world of Boyowa as if they were their own, even in the absence of explicit verbal instructions. The gambler who knows no *megwa* but plays in a state of achieved *kibobuta* with the support of his wife, children and kin can thus expect to be *kalota* and win, while the *ikaligaga’i* player who is disturbed by his relations will predictably be *nanota* and lose. Since commoners are typically burdened by fewer *kikila* restrictions and less complicated political ties than chiefs, they are thought to have a certain advantage for success strictly on *kibobuta* grounds.

GAMBLING MAGIC, EUROPEAN WEALTH, AND THE AGENCY OF *DIMDIMS*

In several ways, then, the transactability of *sosewa* spells and the *kikila* taboos associated with them have disproportionately benefitted the more populous commoners who have availed themselves of the new opportunities of travel and exchange (including gambling) presented by colonialism, national independence and urbanization. The Trobriand repertoire of *sosewa* spells for gambling as well as other practices (especially courting) has accordingly expanded considerably, particularly as Islanders have encountered peoples of other cultural traditions.

Of course, the games of *pele’i* are recognized as originating with colonizing Europeans, but so also are the money and manufactured wealth (*guguwa*) that are taken up in gambling. Villagers have applied much the same logic of their traditional magical capacities to these foreigners and the items they have imported. Many Islanders have told me that they really don’t understand money except that they can appreciate that it is powerful (*peula*). From numerous conversations, it seems that many people regard money and market commodities as incorporating the *kekwebu* images and thus the *peula* powers of the unknown persons who manufactured them, similarly to how villagers’ *tabu* ancestral spirits created the people, wealth and traditions of the *dalas* of Boyowa. Although many adults have experienced Europeans directly, they still see them as essentially foreign or distant beings, in that respect nominally similar to the enigmatic inhabitants of Tuma. Even fewer villagers claim to have any familiarity with the creators of money and the many forms of *dimdim* wealth. Trobrianders know that *dimdims* do not carry *dala*-like identities as they do, but they nonetheless attribute

the relationship between *dimdims* as persons and their wealth to something closely akin to *tukwa*. Money and commodities are the *tukwa* of Europeans, I was told on many occasions.

Not surprisingly, therefore, money and manufactured goods are regarded as ‘hot’ (*yuyiyavi*) and powerful, not only as the *tukwa* of *dimdims* but as *sosewa* items to the Islanders who have the demonstrated faculties to acquire them. People appreciate that those articles incorporate images and powers which are different from those which they inherited from their ancestors, such as the *tukwa* and *sosewa* spells and the *kibobuta* capacities outlined above. But because European wealth and money are easily exchangeable, they are classified as *sosewa* upon entering Islanders’ possession. Those commoner Trobrianders who have most benefitted from European wealth and knowledge are seen to have done so by adopting those goods and practices as their ritual *sosewa*.²

Above I noted how with many spells, spirits are enticed to occupy certain objects so that their images and powers can later be transferred via contact to intended patients. According to my Omarakana informants, European money and wealth have analogous capabilities; that is, they are thought to embody the *kekwebu* images and *peula* powers of their foreign creators even though it is not always necessary for those who now possess them to recite *megwa* to activate them. Also, there is no need to observe particular *kikila* taboos since Europeans do not appear to do this either as a prerequisite to success. Like bespelled traditional articles, the wealth of Europeans is ‘hot’ and powerful, but different in that the personal identities and capacities of its originators (and not of subsequent possessors) are assumed to stay attached to those items as they pass between persons. In this regard, the powers of European wealth resemble those of *sosewa* spells where the names of magical predecessors are typically dropped. One’s money and *guguwa* wealth are ‘hot’ with the ability of influencing others’ thoughts, feelings and actions only so long as those articles remain in one’s possession, similarly to the ‘*laki* charms’ I have reported for North Mekeo (Mosko 2012). Once passed along by me to others, for example, those items retain the images and powers of their creators only, thereby enhancing the personal capacities of the recipient but no longer of me.³

Since European goods and the ideas underpinning them are still considered to be new to Islanders, Omarakanans and others claim that they are ‘light’ as compared with the ‘heaviness’ of traditional wealth. This is partly because money and commodities, like *sosewa* spells, are much more easily moveable than yams, pigs, shells, *tukwa* spells, land, etc. However, over the years that I have been conducting enquiries, it is clear that money and commodities are becoming viewed as progressively heavier. The acquisition of foreign cash and manufactured goods has itself become an indication to others of people’s embodiment of European *laki*. Villagers who successfully acquire significant amounts and qualities of that wealth, in other words, thereby demonstrate their possession of the personal images and powers requisite to that end. And that is what gamblers and others, by their own admission, strive for – the *butula* fame of having internalized and mastered some of the ritual images and powers of foreign persons in ways not dissimilar to earlier relations with spirits. Money and manufactured wealth, as my friends frequently proclaim, are the *kevau kemwasila* or ‘new attraction magic’ for Trobrianders.

CONCLUSIONS

Trobriand *laki* does not correspond with Western notions of impersonal ‘luck’. By extension, I suggest, studies of gambling in Melanesia which neglect the analogous magico-ritual dimensions highlighted here thus risk imposing Western notions of impersonal chance or good fortune upon indigenous phenomena which are overwhelmingly personal.

Pele’i has been accommodated into indigenous practices largely in accord with pre-existing categories and relations as generally postulated in Sahlins’s model of structural

history. *Pele'i* thus constitutes an instance of cultural change while representing the continuity of many indigenous concepts and interactional patterns. But as regards change no less than continuity, in *pele'i* the partibility dynamics of the sacred components of persons are pivotal. With *pele'i*, men's efforts are being transacted in ritual relations between themselves and as regards spirits through their mutually constitutive *kekwebu* images and *peula* powers, and partly so even with the case of cash and manufactured goods that are not simply viewed as anonymous secular commodity objects separate from people's persons. Despite the extent to which *pele'i* has accompanied wider processes of commoditization, Trobriand gamblers remain fundamentally divine individuals as distinct both from the relational individuals of secularized Melanesia and from the bounded individuals and possessive individuals of the West which have been typically assumed to accompany such processes (e.g., Macpherson 1963; Sykes 2007; cf. Mosko 2013).

As regards other indications which apply particularly to the Trobriands, the courting and other ritual procedures which have been adapted to *pele'i* demonstrate that ancestral *baloma* and other spirits, not chanted words alone, serve as the principal agents of spells. But also, *pele'i* illustrates how ritual practices such as *megwa*, *kikila* and *kibobuta* are currently viewed as necessary elements even in novel pursuits of production, exchange and consumption. As for magic generally, possibly *all* cultural agency, not just the activities which islanders experience with anxiety over uncertainty and chance as posited by Malinowski, consists of a conjunction of ritual and practical components – essentially, contributions from mindful beings residing simultaneously and intimately in both invisible Tuma and visible Boyowa. So even here in seemingly chancy areas of activity villagers see themselves as wielding personal influence. Therefore, the exogenous distinction between chancy and not-chancy situations simply does not apply. Put as simply as I can, Trobriand *laki* has little to do with 'luck'.

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NOTES

1. Very likely, Malinowski's (1922:412–413, 370, 1935a:153–156, 446) distinguishing between 'official', 'systematic' and 'public' versus 'independent', 'occasional' and 'private' magical rites was intended to capture the contrast between *tukwa* and *sosewa* discussed here. However, many of the spells of Malinowski's 'private' type are classified as *tukwa* as long as they should remain within *dala* bounds.
2. Commoners have demonstrated disproportionate success also in adopting other ritual dimensions of European sociality, most notably Christianity. Nearly all male church officials in United Church, Catholic and Pentecostal congregations across the island have been recruited from commoner stock, for reasons similar to those outlined here in connection with gambling even though persons strongly affiliated with Christianity do not gamble and condemn those who do. The topic of Christian conversion goes well beyond the current issue, but it is perhaps suggestive to note that nowadays church deacons, pastors and catechists are frequently enlisted to perform public prayers in people's gardens at specific points of the agricultural cycle much along the lines of traditional *towosi* specialization.
3. Here perhaps Trobriand views of European wealth closely approximate Macintyre's (1984) notion of 'semi-alienability'.

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