

19 'Kevalikuliku': *earthquake magic from the Trobriand Islands (for unshakeables)*

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1 Introduction¹

The Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea have always been famous for being great magicians (see Malinowski 1922, 1935, 1974; Powell 1957, 1960; Senft 1985, 1997; Weiner 1976, 1983, 1988), and their fame has spread far beyond the borders of Milne Bay Province in Papua New Guinea. Until recently Trobriand Islanders used magical formulae with the firm conviction that they could thereby influence and control nature and life. They differentiated between various forms of magic, such as weather magic, black magic, healing magic, garden magic, fishing magic, dance magic, beauty magic, love magic, sailing and canoe magic, and magic against witches and sharks. There were specialists for certain kinds of magic, and all magic was regarded as personal property.

¹ This paper is based on a total of 29 months' field research in the Trobriand Islands in 1982–83, 1989, and in each of the years 1992–97. I want to thank the German Research Society and the Max Planck Society for supporting my field research. I also want to thank the National Research Institute and the National and Provincial Governments of Papua New Guinea for their assistance with, and permission for, my research projects. I express my great gratitude to the people of the Trobriand Islands, especially to the inhabitants of Tauwema; I thank them for their hospitality, friendship, and patient cooperation over all the years.

I first met Tom Dutton on 1 December 1986 in Munich; he invited me and my family to stay in Canberra for a month as a visiting fellow at the then Research School of Pacific Studies in 1989, and ever since then our paths have crossed – we even tried our best once to clean up the kitchen of the ANU guest house in Port Moresby! I have always been deeply impressed by Tom's experience, expertise and knowledge with respect to the people of Papua New Guinea and their languages and cultures. It seems to me that nothing ever ruffles this experienced field researcher and linguist. Thus I would like to dedicate this paper on magic against earthquakes to him, who is for me (and certainly not only for me) one of the unshakeables.

On 12 September 1994 Mokeilobu, one of my consultants and a good friend from my early days of field research on the Trobriands, walked with me from Tauwema down the coast of Kaile'una Island to Giwa. On our way we met Kasiosi, who is the 'towosi', the officiating garden magician of the Koma community (Senft 1997:373-378). He gave me some of his magic in 1989. We briefly talked with him about cultural changes in the Trobriands that obviously had resulted in the decline of the social role of traditional magicians and their formulae (see Senft 1992), and then we continued our walk. Some 20 minutes later, during a brief rest at the Koma-Giwa shore-line, Mokeilobu asked me to get out my tape-recorder and record a magical formula that he wanted to give me as a present, as a token of our long-lasting friendship and cooperation. Twelve years after our first contact Mokeilobu revealed that he was the Tauwema specialist for magic against earthquakes (four of which I have experienced during my stays in Tauwema).

In what follows I will present this formula, comment on it and briefly discuss the role of magical formulae as a form of ritual communication on the Trobriand Islands.

2 Mokeilobu's 'Kevalikuliku' magic

Before Mokeilobu recited the magic he gave me the following explanation:²

Bakau pilatala megwa, Gunter, so bakau

ba-kau pila-iala megwa Gunter so ba-kau

1.FUT-carry CPpart-one magic Gunter friend 1.FUT

'I will carry (here: say)³ a magical formula, Gunter (my) friend, I will carry (here: say)

pilatala megwa, minakwa megwa bakau

pila-iala megwa mi-na-kwa megwa ba-kau

CPpart-one magic DEM-DEM-CPthing magic 1.FUT-carry

a magical formula, this magical formula I will carry (here: say)

kevalikuliku. Tutala kewosi kewosi, bayopi

kevalikuliku nuta-la kewosi kewosi ba-yopi

earth-quake time-its singing singing 1.FUT-put.a.spell.on

earth-quake magic. (When it is) time for reciting for reciting (it), I will put a spell on

tauya kena kupi bayopi kasesau

tauya kena kupi ba-yopi kesasau

conch.shell or long.drum 1.FUT-put.a.spell.on big.long.drum

the conch shell or on the long drum, I will put a spell on the big long drum,

² The Kilivila orthography is based on Senft (1986:14-16). In the morpheme-interlinear transcription I am using the following abbreviations: CP – classificatory Particle (classifier); DEM – demonstrative; FUT – future; LOC – locative; PL – plural.

³ The following phrases refer to activities of magicians:

<i>ekau</i> (short for: <i>ekauke'ula</i>) <i>megwa</i>	s/he is carrying/saying magic
<i>epaisewa megwa</i>	s/he is working/doing magic
<i>emegwa</i>	s/he is doing magic
<i>emigai megwa</i>	s/he is whispering magic
<i>eyopi</i>	s/he puts a spell on (something/someone)

bami... bamigai. Avetuta bitagina tauya

ba-mi... ba-migai avetuta bi-tagina tauya
1.FUT-whi... 1.FUT-whisper.magic when 3.FUT-resound conch.shell
I will whi... I will whisper magic. When it will resound, the conch shell,

tomwota gala tetala bisili o kaukweda bikam.

tomwota gala te-tala bi-sili o kaukweda bi-kam
people not CPhuman-one 3.FUT-sit LOC veranda 3.FUT-eat
no person will sit on the veranda and eat.

Uvasi makala siginagana bivesi,

uva-si makala siginagana bi-ve-si
body-their like small.mosquitos 3.FUT-come.to-PL
They (their bodies) – like small mosquitos – will come,

biseyalasi besobesa. E minikwa megwa

bi-seyala-si besobesa E mi-ni-kwa megwa
3.FUT-walk.around-PL everywhere and DEM-DEM-CPthing magic
they will walk around everywhere. And this magical formula

ekebiga makawala:

e-kebiga makawala:

3-say like

he is saying as follows:

After these introductory remarks Mokeilobu recited the formula. In these brief comments the magician explains that he performs the magic either with the help of a big long drum or with a conch-shell on which he recites his formula repeatedly. After these first recitings he will blow the conch or beat the drum. These actions have a double effect. The first one is explicitly described here: all of Mokeilobu's fellow villagers will become really concerned now; seized with fear they will leave their houses and run through the village – like mosquitos – having lost their bearings. While we translated the formula Mokeilobu mentioned the second function of blowing the conch or beating the drum: the sounds will address the earthquake and both support and increase the power of his magical words. While reciting – or rather whispering and murmuring – magical formulae, the magician's accentuation of words and phrases creates a special and characteristic rhythm. Short but clearly audible pauses which the magician makes while reciting the formulae can be interpreted as text formation signals. Malinowski (1935:213) and Weiner (1983:703) rightly praised the phonetic, rhythmic, alliterative, onomatopoeic and metaphorical effects, the various repetitions and the thus prosodically so specific characteristics of the language of magic. It is especially the phonetic, suprasegmental and poetic characteristics that mark the special status of magical formulae as a text category of its own. Moreover, although parts of these formulae represent a variety of Kilivila that is easy to understand for every Kilivila speaker, the formulae contain a number of so-called magical words and loan words from other Austronesian languages the meaning of which is unknown to the layman (and sometimes even to the magician); there are also many words and expressions the semantics of which are known only to the owners of these formulae. The Trobriand Islanders refer to the specific register for magic with the metalinguistic expression *biga megwa*, which can be glossed as '(the) language (of) magic' (see Senft 1997:370). Because of these specific features and

characteristics of the *biga megwa*, I have dispensed with a morpheme-interlinear translation of Mokeilobu's magical formula and present only the translation I did in cooperation with him. The formula runs as follows:

- 1 *Boliku, boliku, boliku – waga ugawawaga.*
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – canoes (with their) crews (will come).
Kaitou kaitou, kaitou – ugawawaga, ugawawaga.
 Surprise, surprise, surprise – the crews, the crews.
Gwasawa, gwasawa, gwasawa – ugawawage, gwasi – ugawawage.
 Praise, praise, praise – the crews, praise – the crews.
Baliku, baliku, baliku – kalibulibu.
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – boats (of the whites will come).
- 5 *Baliku, baliku, baliku – Kemyuva.*
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – (at) Omyuva village (on Woodlark Island).
Baliku, baliku, baliku – Kegumagawa
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – (at) Gawa.
Baliku, baliku, baliku.
 Tremor, tremor, tremor.
Baliku, baliku – Kegumaiwa.
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – Iwa.
Baliku, baliku, baliku – Kektava.
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – Kitava.
- 10 *Baliku, baliku, baliku – Vayoya.*
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – (in) South-East.
Baliku, baliku – o bwalimila.
 Tremor, tremor – in the South.
Baliku, baliku, baliku – o bomatu.
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – in the West.
Baliku, baliku.
 Tremor, tremor.
Baliku, baliku, baliku – o yavata
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – in the North.
- 15 *Baliku, baliku – o kwebwaga.*
 Tremor, tremor – in the South-East.
Baliku, baliku, baliku, baliku.
 Tremor, tremor, tremor, tremor.
Baliku, baliku, baliku – o taoli
 Tremor, tremor, tremor – at the horizon.
Baliku, baliku, baliku, baliku – o popewa.
 Tremor, tremor, tremor, tremor – in the rubbish from the deep sea.

- Baliku, baliku, baliku – vaga... vagolina*
Tremor, tremor, tremor – (in the) big whi... big white waves.
- 20 *Baliku, baliku, baliku, baliku – vagana.*
Tremor, tremor, tremor, tremor – (at the) beach front.
- Baliku, baliku, baliku.*
Tremor, tremor, tremor.
- Baliku, baliku, baliku – o bukubaku*
Tremor, tremor, tremor – in the village-centre.
- Baliku, baliku, baliku.*
Tremor, tremor, tremor.
- Baliku, baliku – o kadumalaga*
Tremor, tremor – at the main road of the village.
- 25 *Baliku, baliku, baliku.*
Tremor, tremor, tremor.
- Boliku, boliku, boliku – waga ugwawaga.*
Tremor, tremor, tremor – canoes (with their) crews (will come).
- Gwasawa, gwasawa, gwasi – ugwawaga, ugwawaga.*
Praise, praise, praise – the crews, the crews.
- Ketonu, ketotu, ketotu – ugwawaga ugwawaga.*
Surprise, surprise, surprise – the crews, the crews.
- Ugwawaga gala agu togigisa.*
The crews (are) not my spectators.
- 30 *Agu togigisa nupiyagwa – galaga agu togigisa.*
My spectators (have) small breasts – oh no, my spectators.
- Agu togigisa nu'ulavola –*
My spectators (try to) enlarge their breasts holding them up in their hands –
- gala agu togigisa gisi.*
no, my spectators' sight.
- Agu togigisa mipipisi. (= nupipisi)*
My spectators have small underdeveloped breasts.
- Igovasi, igovakesi kadumalaga.*
They shout out of joy, they are noisy (on) the main road of the village.
- 35 *Ituvasi, inuvakesi bukubaku.*
They shout 'ui', they shout 'ui' (in) the village-centre.
- Yam biligalagisasi, bogi bipuvalisi.*
(During the) day they will celebrate, (during the) night they will sit together in circles.
- Bogi bipuvalisi, yam biligalagisasi.*
(During the) night they will sit together in circles, (during the) day they will celebrate.

The formula begins with the repeated mentioning of the earthquake. In a kind of leitmotif the tremor is topicalised and addressed here – note that we find this kind of topicalisation and addressing of the tremor in 24 of the 37 lines of the formula.⁴ In the first four lines the formula refers to canoes with their native crews and even to boats of white people who will be attracted by the force of the magic to the place where the magician recites it. These lines already present one of the results of the formula: it is so powerful that to the surprise of everyone it will save people who are at sea during an earthquake and might get in trouble if the quake also causes big waves. Line 3 also points out that these crews have to be praised because of their seamanship (and probably also for their confidence in the magician's power).

In lines 5 to 9 the repeated addressing of the quake goes with the names of four islands, Woodlark, Gawa and Iwa in the Marshall Bennett group, and Kitava, the easternmost of the Trobriand Islands. All these islands are south-east of Kiriwina and Kaile'una Island. It would be interesting to check whether there is any tectonic evidence indicating that earthquakes on the Trobriands originate in this area.

The next seven lines present the formula's leitmotif together with the mentioning of wind names that – so to speak – represent our compass directions. This part of the formula – interrupted (line 13) and finished (line 16) with the mentioning of the tremor first twice and then four times – emphasises that once there is an earthquake tremors are to be felt everywhere.⁵ This topic is elaborated in the next nine lines. The quake comes from the horizon via the deep sea, it stirs up the deep sea and together with big waves it reaches the beach, the village centre, and the main road of the village. This description refers most probably to the gradually increasing intensity of tremors during an earthquake. The fright caused by the tremors advancing on the village(s) is emphasised in lines 21, 23, and 25 – where the formula's leitmotif is repeated again without any further reference to localities, directions or persons.

Lines 26 to 28 present an almost identical repetition of the first three lines – and a confirmation of the magician's and the formula's lifesaving and protecting powers.

From line 29 to the end the formula refers to spectators, the magician's fellow villagers, that observe (and also rely on) the magician's actions. After a repeated reference to the crews that managed to reach land during the earthquake, the formula mentions these spectators observing the magician. It is rather interesting to note that lines 30, 31, and 33 refer to the breasts of the spectators. All adjectives that are used here to describe the breasts refer only to the female breast – thus we can infer that these spectators are all females. In lines 30 and 33 the spectators' breasts are deplored (see the negative 'oh no' in line 30) as being 'small' and even 'underdeveloped'; however, line 31 points out that the women hold up their breasts trying to make them appear bigger, and now the 'no' in line 32 may indicate that the sight of these women presenting their breasts may cause pity or even fright. Such an interpretation agrees with ethological studies with respect to breast display as a female appeasement gesture or as an apotropaic gesture (Devereux 1981; Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1984; Eibl-Eibesfeldt & Sütterlin 1992). If this interpretation is right then we can assume that the female spectators and their breast display mentioned in the formula help either to appease or to frighten away the powers causing the earthquake. In line 33 Mokeilobu actually made a mistake (as he confessed

⁴ Note that the expression '*boliku*' and its variant '*baliku*' is three times repeated in 16 lines, is repeated twice in lines 8, 13, 15 and 24, and four times in lines 16, 18, 20.

⁵ For cardinal points and compass directions in Kilivila see Senft (1986:467).

during translating his magic): he produced 'mipipisi' for 'nupipisi', a mistake that would have doomed the formula to be useless. The power of the magic depends on the correct reciting of the formula: it will not have the desired effect if the magicians do not always recite it in the same unchanged wording in which it was passed to them by their first ancestors.

At the end of the formula lines 34 and 35 describe the joy of the women who realise that they are not harmed by the earthquake and lines 36 and 37 point out that all villagers will celebrate the end of the tremors day and night, night and day.

3 Magic as ritual communication

I have pointed out elsewhere (Senft 1997:388ff.) that magic is a cultural phenomenon that is extremely important for the Trobriand Islanders' *Weltanschauung*, that magical rites have to follow and obey clearly defined conventions and rules, and that the magical formulae, the central components of magic, are (or were) to be stereotypically recalled, remembered, and verbally reproduced by the acting magicians.

Many of the structural and stylistic components of Trobriand magic, and especially the claims that the formulae have to be stereotypically reproduced, remind us of the biological concept of ritualisation (Huxley 1966). However, before I discuss this aspect of Trobriand magic, I will first describe the speech situation in which magicians on the Trobriand Islands find themselves engaged.

According to Mokeilobu and all the other magicians that presented me with, or sold me, their formulae, magicians engage in a kind of conversation with their addressee(s). The addressees of their formulae are personalised and have to behave like partners in a conversation (see Senft 1985:88), at least they have to take over the function of listeners – because the power of the magical words just force them to do this. Thus, the interactants in the communicative situation of magic are the magicians who are addressing their 'vis-à-vis' verbally, and the addressees of the magical formulae who have to react non-verbally. To emphasise this *emic* view once more: the Trobriand magician talks to an addressee, the addressee listens and reacts, and therefore both are engaged in a special type of (verbal-non-verbal) conversation.

The addressee of Mokeilobu's formula is the earthquake. Although it hits the village it has to react as described (or prescribed) in the formula: it will neither damage the village nor harm the people in the village or at sea just because this formula says so and because its reference to the breast display of the female villagers will appease the earthquake or frighten it away.

It is taken for granted that "magical acts are ritual acts" (Tambiah 1985:60).⁶ This brings us back to the concept of ritualisation mentioned above. A general definition of 'ritual' as "institutionalized, expressive action" (Werlen 1984:81) certainly encompasses Trobriand magic with its emphasis on speech-action, too. Like many other rituals Trobriand magic serves the function "to ritualize man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear" (Malinowski 1974:90), especially with respect to his fear of nature and its forces. If we thus take Trobriand magic as a form of ritual, is it also possible to characterise

⁶ For a critical discussion of Tambiah's position with respect to Trobriand magic and his remarks on Malinowski and Cassirer see Senft (1997:386ff.).

the verbal manifestations of this ritual – the magical formulae – as a form of ritual communication?

I have pointed out that the Trobriand Islanders take the interactions of the magicians with their addressees as a form of a special verbal–non-verbal conversation (see also Senft 1997). It is characteristic for discourse and communication on the Trobriands to use linguistic vagueness and ambiguity as a stylistic means to avoid possible distress, confrontation, or too much and too aggressive directness in everyday speech situations (see Senft 1991:237, 1997:389). However, magical formulae like the one presented here clearly contradict this observation. With their formulae Trobriand magicians explicitly want to force their will on their addressees – and sometimes even far-reaching requests are expressed verbally without any moderation. This sort of directness, which strips away the ambiguity and vagueness with which one can normally disguise one's own thoughts, is characteristic of a variety that the Trobriand Islanders call *biga pe'ula* 'heavy language' or *biga mokita* 'true, direct language' (Senft 1991; see also Weiner 1983:693, 696). The use of this variety, however, demands action that for either party involved in such a speech event may be dangerous or even fatal. But we have to keep in mind that magical formulae are regarded by the Trobriand Islanders as constituting a language variety in its own right, namely the *biga megwa*, the 'language of magic'. The explicit stylistic marking of the magical formulae as something extraordinary, the characteristic definition of the *biga megwa* variety is a means to signal the addressee that these speech acts are different from speech acts constituting general everyday speech situations, and that they will and inevitably must put a great strain on the communicative interaction between the magicians and the addressees of the magical formulae. Thus, the formal characteristics of magical formulae serve the function of a pronounced signal: by the means of the formal verbal domain the license is sought to strain the communicative interaction in the verbal domain with regard to contents. The *biga megwa* concept utilises this licence to relieve the tension in this critical situation of social interaction and to ward off any possible consequences of the strains that affect the communicative interaction which takes place in magic rituals – according to the Trobrianders' conviction, of course (see Senft 1991:244).

If we define 'ritual communication' as a type of strategic action that serves the functions of social bonding and of blocking aggression, and that can ban elements of danger which may affect the community's social harmony within the verbal domain just by verbalising these elements of danger more or less explicitly and by bringing them up for discussion (Senft 1991:246), then magical formulae certainly are a form of 'ritual communication'.

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