ANTHROPOS

114.2019: 417–436

The Many Dimensions of a Kuni Folktale

("How a Flightless Bird Put the Moon's Eyes Out")

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Abstract. – Engaging with a superficially simple folktale from the Kuni of Papua New Guinea, I identify a number of far-flung and quasi-universal themes as well as some widely distributed Melanesian ones. I suggest the main function of the etiological folktale is to obviate aspects of everyday existence, then to restore and reaffirm them. I attribute the grip of etiological tales, more generally, to a human drive for explanation. An added attraction for the Kuni is the sense of solidarity gained in public semi-ritualised retellings. Finally, I analyse some of the 'inside' meanings contained in this tale of Kolukolu and the Moon. *[Papua New Guinea, Kuni, folktales, etiology, obviation]*

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Introduction

What we know about Kuni folklore is largely due to the efforts of Fr Vincenzo Egidi, a young priest of the Sacred Heart Mission. Fr Egidi arrived among the Kuni in 1904, after three years based in the Mekeo village of Inawa. He was not yet thirty years old. While at Inawa, he specialised in constructing the detailed genealogies that were to become the foundations of parish records and the future administration of canon law. In the process, he developed sophisticated listening and language skills, becoming fluent in Mekeo.[1] Among the Kuni, he spent two years occupied with the same task, travelling far and wide across Kuni territory and becoming fluent in the language. In 1906, seeing that his work with the genealogies was well advanced, Fr Egidi turned his attention to the collection of Kuni folktales (known inclusively as *tsitsifa*). In this, he was partly motivated by a desire to improve his language skills, but he also wished to achieve a better understanding of Kuni lifeways – "their way of thinking and acting" (*leur manière de penser et d'agir*; Egidi 1913b: 978). Between July 1906 and February 1907, Fr Egidi took down nineteen "myths and legends" (as he described them), in longhand. After returning to Europe in 1911 he published bilingual versions of all these tales, in Kuni and French, in the journal *Anthropos* in 1913 and 1914.[2] The tales are preceded by an introduction describing his modus operandi along with a valuable sketch grammar of Kuni.

Fr Egidi was intent upon recording stories as accurately as possible. To this end he sought out the best story-tellers (he recorded their names and

1 The term Mekeo in this paper always refers to East Mekeo (earlier known as Central Mekeo, or simply Mekeo). There are three other dialects: West Mekeo, North Mekeo and Northwest Mekeo (Jones 1998).

2 These tales were also published in Italian, also in 1913 (Egidi, 1913a), as "Leggende Papuane della tribu di Kuni", in *Rivista di Antropologia* 26: 349-369; 27: 345-368; 28: 527-562 (1924-1929).

the places they lived). He would first listen to the story-teller without interrupting, simply following the storyline as best he could, ignoring any difficulties he might experience. He would then have the story-teller repeat the tale, but this time he would interrupt frequently to resolve any problems caused by the language or his lack of background knowledge. Next, he would read out all that he had written, while the story-teller corrected any mistakes. And then, as a final check, having made a clean copy of the tale in private the same night, he would read the story out again, to the same story-teller or (if need be) some other Kuni speaker.

Who Are/Were the Kuni?

In the first half of the twentieth century, there were about 2,500 Kuni living in small hamlets perched on steep spurs and ridges in the foothills of the Owen Stanley Range, to the east of Mt Yule. The population has more than doubled since then, with most people living in the mission-created townships of Kubuna and Bakoiudu or further afield in the cities. Kuni speak an Oceanic (Austronesian) language. Their territory overlooks coastal plains where Lala (Nara, Pokao), Toura, Gabadi (Afatsi), Mekeo and Roro speaking communities live in what are for the most part much larger village-type settlements. Although there has always been some trade with these other groups[3] and even intermarriage, travel was difficult across the steep mountain valleys of the Kuni homelands and, in traditional times, dangerous. Hence, while owing something to neighbouring societies, both lowland and highland, Kuni culture had developed along some unique lines of its own. The Kuni domain had been rarely visited by Europeans, an certainly none had remained there, until in 1899 Sacred Heart missionaries embarked upon a determined campaign to bring all of the Kuni into the Catholic fold.

Traditionally, the hamlet was the main residential unit and typically consisted of 5-15 family huts (*luma*) plus a ceremonial chief's house (*kufu*). The houses were arranged along two sides of a narrow ceremonial space, with the chief's house at one end. A hamlet was formed around a type of loosely defined patrilineal descent group called *inau* (Gostin 1983: 22). Generally, three to seven hamlets were affiliated to form a recognised territorial unit that Gostin calls a parish (1983: 17f.). Before the coming of the Europeans, warfare and raiding were endemic. There was some cannibalism, and violence could be extreme. Traditionally, hamlets were built for their protection on the spurs or narrow ridges that divided the steep river valleys, and were typically also surrounded by one or more stockades. After the imposition of the *Pax Australiana*, violence was largely replaced by imported sorcery practices.

The Kuni had borrowed a few practices from neighbouring Goilalan tribes, specifically the Tauade and Fuyughe, which border Kuni territory to the north and northeast, respectively. An example is the use steam baths (to treat fatigue, illness, and for ritual purification). The folktales may also owe something to the influence of these neighbours. Yet the Kuni language shows relatively few Goilalan borrowings. The Kuni are socioculturally and linguistically closer to the Mekeo, Lala, Gabadi and Roro, the Austronesian societies of the coastal lowlands. In particular, the Kuni shared a remarkable system of dual hereditary chieftainship with those societies. Thus each *inau* had a peace chief (*abu jobia-na* – "chief of the lime gourd") and a war chief (*tsivia jobia-na* – "chief of the spear") (Gostin 1983: 29-33). The hereditary nature of chiefly offices seems to have been relatively uncontested within the *inau.* Eschlimann (1911: 270), for instance, graphically describes how a chief's son, however young, was treated with the deference and indeed obedience due to an installed chief (a fact that offended Eschlimann in no small measure). Both peace chiefs and war chiefs came from divinely appointed lines and a peace chief was indispensable for the continued existence of each *inau*. The *abu jobia-na* had an important role in settling quarrels and disputes, but his most crucial duty consisted in organising large-scale mortuary feasts (*nadu*), a sequence of individual ceremonies often lasting for several years. These were occasions that brought together guests from a wide range of parishes and from neighbouring tribes. They used up all of a village's accumulated food resources, leaving people destitute for a considerable length of time. In early days, just before and just after contact, raiding and open warfare had not yet given way to sorcery. This was a violent society, pervaded by a fierce warrior ethic that comes across vividly in the tales.

3 Traditionally, they exchanged feathers, dogs' teeth and stone axes for salt, lime and shell ornaments.

Our Story in Brief

This is the tale of a nearly flightless bird called Kolukolu that somehow flies up to the moon and stops it from burning up the earth. For the moon was shining/burning like a sun, burning all through the night, drying up rivers and springs and ruining people's crops. Moon (*Buya*) was in fact in competition with Sun (*Dia*), to see which of them would be better at burning (*-kala*) the earth. A number of nimble and extremely powerful birds had attempted to reach the moon, to stop it's destructive burning, but none had succeeded. The first bird to try it was a swallow, the last a powerful eagle. In each case, Moon had burned the bird's wings and sent it plummeting to earth where it flapped itself to death. Finally, Kolukolu, a bird that could scarcely fly at all, decided that he would try where every other bird had failed. The other birds abuse and mock him, thinking he cannot hope to succeed where they have failed. Nevertheless, Kolukolu is determined to try. He makes himself a cloak of special barkcloth, Then, wearing the cloak, he leaps from mountain top to mountain top, gathering up speed until, launching himself upward, he attains the heavens. Moon, meanwhile, had been beating barkcloth, but his mallet had broken and he was using a stone to beat the bark on the anvil. Moon greeted Kolukolu civilly enough, then proceeded to attack him with the burning power of its eyes. He seared Kolukolu's barkcloth cape and struck him. He tried everything in his power to burn Kolukolu or otherwise destroy him. But Kolukolu, using his *ifai* (a kind of stick), managed to gouge Moon's eyes out. However, a parting shot from Moon, with the stone he had used to beat barkcloth, hit Kolukolu on the back, ensuring that he would not fly high ever again. Returning to earth, Kolukolu taunts the other birds with his success. However, he is now a flightless bird. Only when hunters tread on him, as they walk through the bush at night, he may manage a short flight to the safety of nearby trees. Below I give a more detailed and more literal version of the story:

Kolukolu Puts the Moon's Eyes Out.

"Sun and Moon were competing to see which could burn best. One burned in daylight, the other burned at night. The people's gardens, their fields, all dried up, their water all dried up.

Sir Swallow rose up, intending to scratch out Moon's eyes; he rises and rises. Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell to earth, he was killed (*se frappa a mort*). After Swallow, Diu rose up (Diu is a bird that goes *di... di...* in the night); he rises and rises; Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell to earth, he was killed. After Diu, Elèele rose up; he rises and rises. Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell to earth, he was killed. After Elèele, Koema rose up, Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell, he was killed. After Koema, Tumu-au rose up, Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell, he was killed.

Then doesn't Kolukolu say: 'Okay, boys! You went and what have you achieved?' They replied: 'Kolukolu, rot your eyes, are you going to knock him off?' And Kolokolu (says): "Oh! I was just asking." Then he went and made bark cloth from the *limena* and *iliva* trees, and he put this on, draping it down his back. He went and perched on the summit of (the mountain named) Kolukolu. Then he leapt down and stretched out his wings on top of Lume-Popole; then he went and stretched out his wings on top of Onomo-and-Veko; then he rose up and took up and stretched his wings on top of Keva-and-Gaiba. (Finally) he stretched out his wings on top of Kebea-and-Auololo. Then he set off, he went and went and, reaching, he reached the heavens. He arrived beside Moon.

Moon had stripped bark and was beating it into barkcloth. Moon's mallet was broken; he had put it aside and was using a stone. Kolukolu perched on top of Moon's wooden anvil. Moon addressed him: 'My friend Kolukolu, have you come?' Kolukolu addressed him: 'Yes, I have come.' Moon tried desperately to burn Kolukolu, or (at least) to break his neck. Kolukolu took his stick (*ifai*) and poked Moon's eyes out. (Then) Kolukolu fled downward. (But) Moon threw down a stone and broke Kolukolu's back; he broke it, and Kolukolu fell and fell; he plunged to the ground and just lay there. Black ants and red ants and blowflies all clustered around him as he just lay there. (But) he was alive, he got up; he got up and said (to the other birds): "You! You said, 'Kolukolu, rot his eyes, he will not succeed in putting out Moon's eyes.' (Now) do you see?"

Because of that, Kolukolu now walks only on the ground. (Only) when we step on him, does he fly away (a short distance).

Grounding the Story in Geography and Culture

The bare bones of any tale, bereft of details about its original sociocultural or geographical context, the lifeworld from which it has been plucked by

some collector, can only provide a very schematic impression of its narrative content, essentially its plot or structure. In the present section I try to adumbrate some of the context within which this Kuni tale takes on its meaning and significance, "the very associations and elaborations which lend it conceptual elegance and plausibility in the eyes of its creators" (Wagner 1972: 17).

The moon – personified here as Moon – is represented as envious of the sun (here, Sun), much as a younger sibling often envies and resents his elder brother. Moon competes with Sun to see which of them can "burn" the earth better. The verb *-kala* means "shine" as well as "burn" and indeed the sun has two aspects, one benign, the other malign. It is the "big sun" that is widely feared and that causes drought and famine (see Young 1983: 153–155).

Kolukolu probably refers to the New Guinea flightless rail (*Megacrex inepta*). The only other flightless bird in this area is the cassowary. The dwarf cassowary is distributed throughout mountain forests of New Guinea, but is too large – standing at over a metre in height – to be the bird one startles by treading on it (see end of the tale). In any case the cassowary is called *bio*. The verb *kolukolu* appears in the expression *Nua-u i-kolukolu* "I was startled, astonished, scared" (lit. "My *nua* was startled, etc."; *nua* is the seat of emotions, character).

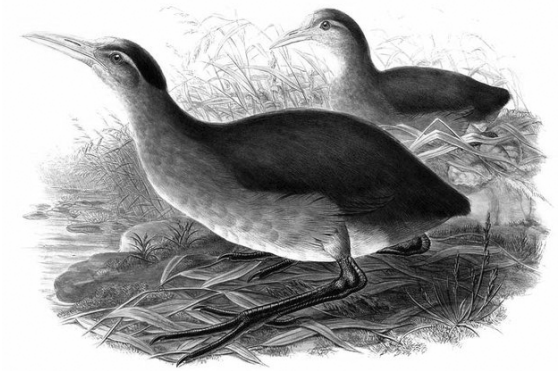


Fig. 1: New Guinea flightless rail (Source: public domain)

Kolukolu is also the name of a mountain. In the tale, Kolukolu gains momentum for his assault on the moon by leaping from one set of mountain peaks to another (mountain names are usually paired). Kolukolu mountain lies in the east of Kuni territory, in the mountainous domain of the Devadeva *inau* (clan). On the mountain there is a hole, some three metres deep, where Kolukolu – as heroic bird – is said to have landed when struck down by the wounded moon. One gathers that Fr Egidi had seen this hole with his own eyes (1913: 989, fn. 4). It is situated behind a small hill on the saddle between two mountain peaks. There was also a small village called Kolukolu. In Egidi's time, the villagers believed that the spirit of Kolukolu still resided there and there was local woman who claimed to be in communication with this spirit. She was consulted by the sick and conveyed to them advice and cures coming ostensibly from Kolukolu.

The pairs of mountains that are named in the story as jumping off places for Kolukolu are: Onomo-and-Veko, Kevà-and-Gaiba, Kebea-and-Auololo. As already noted, these are all identifiable mountains, situated between the headwaters of the Kea and Dilava rivers, which constitute a kind of SE-to-NW chain near the eastern border of the Kuni domain. Further east, across more mountains, lie Fuyughe villages.

These are the birds that attempt to put an end to Moon's burning, but fail:

Felofelo	Swallow
Diu	Kind of night bird (goes di… di… in the night)
Elèele	Green Parrot (its feathers used as insignia of peace chief – *jobia*)
Koema	A type of falcon (Norin 1937 has *koema* = *corbeau*, i.e. 'crow')
Tumu-au	Eagle (Norin 1937 has *tsumu-abu* 'eagle' – a variant of *tsumu-au*?)

The story introduces a number of specialised terms referring, for instance, to the insects that swarmed around Kolukolu's body when he fell to earth, representing no doubt the types of insect that are attracted to a corpse, and secondly, terms connected with the manufacture of bark cloth (used primarily for male loincloths – see Eschlimann 1911).

Insects		Tools for making bark cloth	
kalakala	black ants	yai	wooden anvil on which bark is beaten
ukuluma	blowflies	viko	flat mallet used to beat the bark
itsitsi	red ants		

In the story, Kolukolu gains momentum and uplift by leaping/flying from one set of mountain peaks to another. Mountains like streams or rivers come in pairs – as do the main characters in many folktales, who are pairs of brothers or sisters. The mountain pairs that Kolukolu landed on stretch from his jumping off point in the southeast, at Mt Kolukolu (a single peak), to Mts Kebea and Auololo in the northwest. Along the way he perch-

es briefly on Mts Onomo-and-Veko, and Mts Kevà-and-Gaiba.

The focus on the moon's "eyes" in this story suggest a preoccupation with the dark spots on the moon's face (in reality craters), visible when the moon is full. Eyes figure prominently in idioms used in interpersonal abuse. E.g., *Maka-mu feda-na!* "Your eyes are rotten!" (more idiomatically: "Rot your eyes!").

Grammar Note

Below I present a fully interlinearised version of the story, with each morpheme glossed for meaning or grammatical function. In this I expand upon Egidi's original interlinearised version to try and capture more accurately the morphosyntactic patterning and pacing of the narrative. Interested readers may like to use the list of abbreviations immediately below to interpret the glosses. Kuni is a verb-final language. Lexemes that are functioning as verbs always carry a prefix indicating the number of the subject. Items functioning as transitive verbs may carry a suffix indicating the person and number of the object, or can be marked as transitive (with the suffix *-i*). The verb word may consist of one or two lexical bases, with the second having an adverbial function and indicating directional movement. When a transitive verb consists of two lexical bases, the object marking suffix is always attached to the first.

Abbreviations used in the interlinear notation:

1-, 2-, 3-	First, second and third person subject-marking prefixes attached to the verb word. A singular/plural distinction is generally not marked
-1S, -2S, -3S; -1P, -2P, -3P	First, second and third person suffixes attached to the verb word. These distinguish between singular and plural objects
-1S, -2S, -3S	first, second and third person suffixes on a noun, marking inalienable possession *or* inherent relation to a topic noun
1_{past}-, 2_{past}-, 3_{past}-	Subscript **past** encodes past tense as indicated by the subject-marking prefix which has undergone vowel mutation
1_{pres}-, 2_{pres}-, 3_{pres}-	Subscript **pres** encodes present tense as indicated by the subject-marking prefix, and sometimes present-imperfective tense-aspect
1_{fut}-, 2_{fut}-, 3_{fut}-	Subscript **fut** indicates future tense and/or weak optative mood, as encoded by an *f-* prefixed to the subject marker
1_{opt}-, 2_{opt}-, 3_{opt}-	Subscript **opt** indicates strong optative mood, as encoded by an *m-* prefixed to the subject marker
1_{sub}-, 2_{sub}-, 3_{sub}-	Subscript **sub** indicates subjunctive of wishing/desiring
-TR	Transitive; the suffix *-i* marks a verb as transitive; the *-i* disappears when followed by certain object-marking suffixes
CAUS-	Causative prefix *ba-*; follows subject marker and precedes verb root
-OBL	Stands for 'oblique'; the multifunctional nominal suffix *-ai* marks either locative or ablative case, depending on the context
Q & KA	Q glosses the interrogative enclitic *ma*; *ka* expresses uncertainty/possibility
-NA & NE	Verb-final *-na* functions like 'and/then'; *ne* also seems to mean 'and'

I have added a more comprehensive note on Kuni grammar in Appendix 1. This builds on the grammar sketch contained in Egidi (1913) as well as my own fieldnotes (c. 1981) and my ongoing engagement with Fr Egidi's folktales. Eschlimann (1935) is a somewhat later grammar sketch, recording changes that took place in the language between 1907 and 1935, and that has also been useful.

Tsitsifa Kolukolu

(The Story of Kolukolu)

Dia	*me*	*Buya*	*i-ba-lua,*	*ne*	*i-kala;*
Sun	and	Moon	3past-CAUS-two	NE	3past-burn

Sun and Moon competed in burning

Dia	*i-ilala*	*i-kala;*	*Buya*	*labi-ai*	*e-kala.*
Sun	3past-light	3past-burn;	Moon	night-OBL	3pres-burn

Sun burned when it was light, Moon burns by night.

Wapekau *tsi* *uma,* *tsi* *diaba* *i-ololo-adi,*
people POSS. 3P garden POSS. 3P field 3past-dry-all
The people's gardens, their fields, all dried up,

tsi *vei* *i-kano-adi.*
POSS. 3P water 3past-earth-all
their water all dried up (turned to dust?).

Mukau Felofelo i-duau, *Buya maka-na* *fimi-atsitsi-fou;* *e-dua-duau;*
Mukau Felofelo 3past-rise.up Moon eye-3S 3sub-scratch-burst 3pres-rise-rise.up
Sir Swallow rises up, he wants to scratch out Moon's eyes, he rises and rises up.

Buya i-kala-i-na, *bani-na i-moku,* *kano-ai* *i-deo,* *i-aku-a-bunu.*
Moon 3past-burn-TR-and wing-3S 3past-break earth-OBL 3past-fall 3past-hit-3S-finish
Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell to earth, he was killed (*se frappa a mort*).

Felofelo muli-na-ai *Diu (labi-ai e-da di... di...)* *i-duau;* *e-dua-duau;*
Swallow behind-3S-OBL Diu (night-OBL 3pres-go di… di…) 3past-rise.up 3pres-rise-rise.up
After Swallow, Diu (in the night he goes di... di...) he rose up; he rises and rises;

Buya i-kala-i-na, *bani-na i-moku,* *kano-ai* *i-deo,* *i-aku-a-bunu.*
Moon 3past-burn-TR-and wing-3S 3past-break earth-OBL 3past-fall 3past-hit-3S-finish
Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell to earth, he was killed.

Diu muli-na-ai *Elèele* *i-duau;* *e-dua-duau;*
Diu behind-3S-OBL Elèele 3past-rise.up 3pres-rise-rise.up
After Diu (in the night he goes di... di...) Elèele rose up; he rises and rises;

Buya i-kala-i-na, *bani-na i-moku,* *kano-ai* *i-deo,* *i-aku-a-bunu.*
Moon 3past-burn-TR- and wing-3S 3past-break earth-OBL 3past-fall 3past-hit-3S-finish
Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell to earth, he was killed.

Eléele *muli-na-ai* *Koema i-duau,*
Elèele behind-3S-OBL Koema 3past-rise.up
After Elèele, Koema rose up,

Buya *i-kala-i-na,* *bani-na i-moku,* *i-deo,* *i-aku-a-bunu.*
Moon 3past-burn-TR-and wing-3S 3past-break 3past-fall 3past-hit-3S-finish
Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell, he was killed.

Koema muli-na-ai *Tumuau i-duau;*
Koema behind-3S-OBL Tumuau 3past-rise.up
After Koema, Tumu-au rose up;

Buya i-kala-i-na, *bani-na i-moku,* *i-deo,* *i-aku-a-bunu.*
Moon 3past-burn-TR- and wing-3S 3past-break 3past-fall 3past-hit-3S-finish
Moon burned him, his wings broke, he fell, he was killed.

Baniu *Kolukolu ka* *i-ou-a:* *"Memeo,* *imui* *o-da-da-na,* *o-daba?"*
then Kolukolu KA 3past-say-3S "boy(P) you(P) 2pres-go-go-and 2pres-make/do"
Then, Kolukolu, does he not say: "Boys, you have all gone (there but) what have you done?"

I-ou-a: *"Kolukolu,* *oi,* *maka-mu* *feda-na,* *fo-akù ma?"*
3past-say-3S: "Kolukolu you(S) eye-2S rotten-3S 2fut-hit.3S Q"
They said: "Kolukolu, rot your eyes, will you hit him?"

Ikó Kolukolu: *"Oi!* *Yau* *a-banini-mui* *lakua."*
now Kolukolu "You! I/me 1S-question-2P pointlessly
Now Kolukolu: "You! I question you pointlessly."

Bani i-da, *na* *tsipi* *limena ma iliva* *i-aku-i,*
then 3past-go POSS. 3S barkcloth limena and iliva 3past-hit-TR
Then he went, he beat out his barkcloth of limena and iliva trees,

i-aku-a-uda, *kape-na* *diotsi* *i-ba-da.*
3past-hit-3S-enter back-3S alongside 3past-CAUS-go
he donned it, he draped it down his back.

Kolukolu lai-na-ai *i-aba-au,* *ne i-da;*
Kolukolu summit-3s-OBL 3past-stand-up NE 3past-go
He stood upright on the summit of Kolukolu mountain and off he went;

i-loba-atsi, *i-kole,* *Lume-Popole* *yaka-na-ai* *i-eko-au:*
3past-arrive-down 3past-put Lume-Popole top-3s-OBL 3past-stretch.out-up
he landed, he gathered himself, he stretched out on Lume-Popole (double-peak mountain):

baniu i-da, *Onomo me Veko* *yaka-na-ai* *i-eko-au;*
then 3past-go Onomo and Veko top-3s-OBL 3past-stretch.out-up
then he went he stretched out on (the twin peaks called) Onomo and Veko;

bani i-kole, *i-duau,* *i-da, Keva me Gaiba* *yaka-na-ai* *i-eko-au,*
then 3past-put 3past-rise-up 3past-go Keva and Gaiba top-3s-OBL 3past-stretch.out-up
then he gathered himself, he rose up, he went, he stretched out on Keva and Gaiba mountains,

Kebea me Au-ololo *yaka-na-ai* *i-eko-au.*
Kebea and Au-ololo top-3s-OBL 3past-stretch.out-up
he stretched out on (the twin peaks called) Kebea and Au-ololo

Bani *i-kole,* *i-dada-na,* *i-loba,* *ufa-j-ai* *i-loba.*
then 3past-put 3past-go-go-and 3past-arrive sky-B-OBL 3past-reach
Then he gathered himself, he went and went and, reaching, he reached the sky.

Buya kenai *i-loba.* *Buya* *na* *tsipi* *i-dea-i* *ne i-aku.*
Moon side-OBL 3past-arrive Moon POSS. 3S bark-cloth 3past-strip NE 3past-hit
He arrived beside Moon. Moon had stripped his barkcloth and was beating it.

Viko *i-ali,* *i-da,* *i-kole-i,* *debo-ai* *i-aku.*
mallet 3past-break/cut 3past-go, 3past-put-TR stone-OBL 3past-hit
(His) mallet had broken (so) he had gone and got himself a stone to beat (the bark with).

Kolukolu *yai* *foka-na-ai* *i-mia-au,* *Buya i-ou-a:*
Kolukolu anvil top-3S-OBL 3past-sit-up Moon 3past-say-3s:
Kolukolu perced on top of his anvil, (and) Moon said to him:

“Kadi-au *Kolukolu,* *o-mai ma?”*
“friend-1S, Kolukolu 2pres-come Q”
“My friend, Kolukolu, you have come?”

Kolukolu i-ou-a: *“Eá,* *a-mai”* *i-ko.*
Kolukolu 3past-say-3S: “Yes, 1pres-come” 3past-say/think
Kolukolu said: “Yes, I have come”. He said.

“Me-kala” *e-ko,* *“me-kala”* *e-ko,*
“3opt-burn” 3past-say/think “3opt-burn” 3past-say/think
“I want him to burn” he thought, “I really want him to burn”.

“Kolukolu hayo-na *me-loe”* *e-ko,*
“Kolukolu neck-3S 3opt-disconnect” 3pres-say/think
“Let Kolukolu’s neck be dislocated” he thought.

Kolukolu *ifai-na-ai* *maka-na* *i-atsitsi-fou.*
Kolukolu ifai-3s-OBL eye-3S 3past-scratch-burst
Kolukolu scratched his eyes out with an *ifai* (stick).

Kolukolu-na i-kapo-a-doa, *Buya debo* *i-labu-atsi,* *kape-na* *i-aku-a-uku.*
Kolukolu-TOP 3past- Moon stone 3past-throw-down back-3S 3past-hit-3S-revenge
Kolukolu he plunged down (but) Moon 3-threw down a stone and smashed his back.

i-aku-a-uku, *baniu* *i-deo,* *i-mai-mai-na,*
3past-hit-3S-revenge then 3past-fall 3past-come-come-and
He smashed it, then he fell, he fell and fell,

Kolukolu *i-kapo-a-doa,* *i-eko.*
Kolukolu 3past-drop-3S-through 3past-stretch.out
Kolukolu plummeted into (the ground and) stretched out (there).

Kalakala *me* *uku-luma* *me* *itsitsi* *i-amo-amo-na,*
black.ant and blowfly and red.ant 3past-adhere.adhere-and
Black ants and red ants and blowflies came in crowds

i-eko-eko, *i-mauli,* *i-ko-itsi* *ne i-ou-a:*
3past-stretch.out-stretch.out 3past-live 3past-jump-up NE 3past-say-3S:
he stretched himself out, he was alive, he jumped up and said:

"'Oi Kolukolu, *maka-na* *feda-na;* *jo-ko:*
You Kolukolu eye-3S rotten-3S; 2pres-think/say
"You, Kolukolu, of the rotten eyes"; you said:

Buya maka-na *atsi* *fe-atsitsi-na,* *a-atsitsi-fou,* *jo-ika-i ma?'"*
Moon eye-3S not 3fut-scratch-burst 1-scratch-burst 2pres-see-TR Q"
he will not scratch out Moon's eyes, (but) I have scratched them out, do you see?'"

Nai aonai *Kolukolu* *iko* *kano-ai-mo* *e-da-da;*
that because Kolukolu now ground-OBL-only 3pres-go-go
Because of that Kolukolu now walks only on the ground;

a-luku-tsile-na, *e-bibi,* *e-da*
1p-tread-hurt-and 3pres-fly 3pres-go
if we tread on him, he flies away.

Themes and Tropes from Near and Far

At the time that the tale of Kolukolu and the moon was recorded by Fr Egidi (August, 1906), there was little likelihood that Kuni folklore could have been influenced by outside sources. The fathers of the Sacred Heart mission had only been among the Kuni since 1900.[4] Moreover, the tale was collected far from the only mission station, in the tiny hamlet of Vale. Yet, curiously, motifs and themes in this folktale echo themes found in myths and folktales throughout the world. There are indeed echoes in this Kuni folktale of well-known themes from ancient Greece, as well as from eastern Indonesia and Melanesia.

1. First, I summarise two tales of a too-bright/too-hot moon from Flores. In each, the moon usurps the sun's role. In the first case, the moon's face is eventually darkened with ash, in the other its ardour is cooled in a stream.

   a) In a complex Nage creation myth from the island of Flores (eastern Indonesia), the sun and the moon are originally very close to the earth (as is the sky itself). An early segment of the myth deals with the separation of 'good people' from 'witches'. After this, the witches want to go hunting for victims at night; however, the moon is too bright, in fact it is as bright as the sun. The witches, therefore, attempt to darken the face of the moon by throwing ash at it. This is said to explain the dark marks on the face of the moon today. In fact, this was insufficient, so the witches severed the huge vine that held the sky close to the earth. The sky floated up, the earth sank down, and we arrived at the present situation where earth and sky are far distant from one another. (Forth 1998: 219f.)

   b) In a later episode of the Nage creation myth, Sun and Moon are sister and brother. Moon wishes to marry his sister, Sun, but she resists this incestuous union. But Sun eventually gives in and brother and sister are married. Now the moon becomes bright and hot like the sun. "The heavenly bodies travel far until they come to a bamboo bridge which they use to cross a river. But while they are crossing, the bridge shakes and the moon falls into the water. The water then starts to boil and the hot moon turns cold. In this way, it becomes the moon that we know today, a moon that shines only at night and is only moderately bright and not at all hot. As for the boiling water, this remains as hot springs found in parts of central Flores to the present time." (Forth 1998: 223).

2. Next, from much further afield, I adduce the myth of Phaeton, whose father was the sun god Helios. When Phaeton usurped his father's role as charioteer of the sun, the earth was in danger of burning up. It was saved when Zeus struck down Phaeton with a thunderbolt.
   Phaethon was the son of, Helios, the sun god, who drove the chariot of the sun across the sky each day. His playmates mocked him, questioning his paternity. At his mother's urging, he asked his father for some proof of their relationship. When the god promised to grant him whatever he wanted, he insisted on being allowed to drive the sun chariot for a day. However, when placed in charge of the chariot, he was unable to control the horses and the Earth was in danger of being burnt up. To prevent this disaster, Zeus struck the chariot with a thunderbolt, in the process killing Phaeton, who fell to earth.
3. Blinding is a common theme in world mythology, and may well stand for real or symbolic castration. It is sometimes a monstrous one-eyed giant that is blinded, and this being may be the god of the underworld in disguise. A type of shaft is commonly used to blind the one-eyed ogre. Kolukolu's use of a wooden shaft to put out Moon's eye(s) recalls how Odysseus blinded Polyphemus, the cannibal giant that had captured Odysseus along with all his men, by driving a fire-hardened stake into his one great eye. Zeus' thunderbolt can be visualised as a similar kind of shaft. Similarly, in a myth of the ancient Celts, the sun god Lugh uses a magic ball to blind Balor – god of the underworld. Lugh was the grandson of Balor, and according to a prophecy, Balor would be killed by his grandson. To prevent this, Balor planned to kill Lugh. Now Balor had an evil eye capable of killing anyone who looked at it. But Lugh had a magic stone ball which he threw into Balor's eye, killing him.

4 Missionaries from Yule Island had made two brief exploratory forays into Kuni territory in 1896 and 1897. In 1900 a tiny station was established by Fr Armand Pages, a native of the mountainous Cevennes region of France, at Obaoba (Dilava). The first baptisms (after 18 months of religious instruction) took place in 1903 and while some of the seven instructed converts returned to their native hamlets, others built new homes at Obaoba.

4. The fate of Kolukolu, and before him all the other birds who failed to reach the moon, recalls the the fate of Icarus in Greek mythology. Icarus attempted to escape from Crete on artificial wings constructed by his father Daedalus out of wood and feathers, all held together by wax. However, forgetful of his father's warning, he flew too close to the sun and, the wax having melted, he fell to his death. In much the same way, the wings of Kolukolu and the other birds were broken (-*moku*) by the moon's heat (-*kala*), and they fell to earth. to their deaths. In the Kuni tale, of course, the moon has usurped the burning role of the sun. While Icarus did not set out to actually reach the sun, or attack it, in the Kuni tale, the birds *do* try to reach the moon, with the aim of blinding it and stopping it from burning the earth. As we know, only one of them succeeds. Kolukolu's magic cape protected him temporarily from the heat of the moon, though he sustains a mortal wound. And the bird the Kuni called *kolukolu* supposedly carries a mark on its back where the moon's missile struck.
5. Moon's Parthian shot with a stone in the Kuni folktale recalls the rocks that Polyphemus threw after Odysseus and his men as they fled after blinding him (Apollodorus, Epitome, Book E, Ch. 7. Section 9). Malinowski makes the same connection, in relation to an episode in the tale of Kasabwaibwaireta, a skin-changing hero of the Kula, who throws a stone after his departing relatives when they maroon him on a sandbank.
6. The magic cape that protected Kolukolu from the moon's rays recalls the lion-skin cape that protected Herakles when for his 12th labour he had to capture Cerberus, the monstrous three-headed hound, the guardian of the underworld, without resorting to any of his weapons. Cerberus is the ultimate ogre: "Cerberus who eats raw flesh, the brazen-voiced hound of Hades, fifty-headed, relentless and strong" (Hesiod, quoted in Evelyn-White 1914: 310). Cloaks or caps of invisibility are common motifs in folklore.
7. The fact that Moon was beating out bark cloth, on a wooden anvil, with a mallet, when approached by Kolukolu recalls on the one hand how the Moon Woman (sometimes the goddess Hina/Sina) of Polynesian folklore beats tapa cloth eternally on the moon and, on the other, how Moon Rabbit, in a widespread East Asian trope, is imagined to be pounding herbs (herbs of immortality?) in a mortar, with a pestle.
8. The story of Kolukolu and the moon has two very widespread sub-plots or scenarios in world folklore. In the first place, a succession of characters compete for success in performing some extremely difficult feat. In the second, a hero – a boy or youth, often disowned – defeats a devouring monster, sometimes a cannibal ogre, that threatens the survival of the group. In some cases, the hero is split into a pair of brothers (cf. Wagner 1972: 33f.). Both these sub-plots are familiar from Greek mythology. Here time and again we read of heroes competing for some prize, often the daughter of a king as well as the kingship itself. To gain the woman's hand and/or the kingdom, the hero must perform a succession of nearly impossible feats. An unknown or illegitimate hero, usually a stranger in the kingdom, exiled and disinherited, outperforms all of the others. The other type of tale, in which the stranger hero typically does battle against some theriomorphic monster that threatens the city or the country, and slays it, can sometimes be interwoven with the first, as one of the hero's tasks. For example, accounts of the labours of Hercules weave these two plots together in a single narrative. The tales of the ogre killing child mentioned above represent a widespread Melanesian version of this sub-plot.

   Both of these sub-plots are found widely, albeit in localised versions, across New Guinea and in Melanesian societies more widely. In a first plot type, we have tales of a younger brother (one of two, or the youngest of a specific number) who outwits outperforms and thus shames his older brother(s), who have typically tried to deceive or even kill him.[5] In the second plot type, a young hero defeats an ogre, typically a cannibal, who is devastating the countryside and devouring people. The two sub-plots are in some cases interwoven or combined to form a single unified narrative. But it is significant that they occur so widely across New Guinea, in both Papuan and Austronesian sociocultural contexts.

   In folktales, the story of a youngest son or insignificant hero who, despite all odds, comes out on top, are sometimes told in animal form, where the weakest or smallest bird or animal succeeds where older or stronger animals or birds have failed. One lesson is that seemingly

5 This is of course the gist of Joseph's story in Genesis (Ch. 37).

insignificant or unattractive individuals can in reality be powerful spirits; their secret is that they are capable of assuming the identity of supremely attractive and desirable human beings.

9. The advantage of height is another very widespread motif in New Guinea myths and folktales. In many tales, the hero himself defends his position atop a tall tree or mountain or on a raised platform (sometimes there is a series of platforms and the hero leaps from one to the other). However, in other tales the hero's antagonist takes refuge at the top of a mountain or tree. The antagonist may be some great predatory bird or a kind of mountain dwelling cannibal ogre or monster. Typically, a battle rages up and down the trunk of the tree or on the slopes of the mountain. Usually many attempts are made to dislodge the character that enjoys the advantage of height, and many aspiring heroes fail in their ambitious upward assaults before some unlikely hero (or pair of heroes) appears on the scene to carry the day. The combat itself often involves blow and counterblow before the ascendant is laid low – is brought down to earth where he dies. In the Kuni tale reported here, the moon takes the place of the cannibal ogre in such tales. In Appendix 2, I summarise a tale collected in an East Mekeo village in the 1980s, in which Foi or Eagle – he is what the Mekeo call a 'raw-eater' – is besieged in his tree-top 'fortress' by a succession of familiar birds. They are attempting to pay back Foi for eating Foe's (Egret's) mother. A number of birds fly up but cannot reach Eagle in his eyrie. However, finally, two unlikely heroes – Dove and Gnat – succeed. They bring Eagle down to the ground where he is killed.
10. Many of the stories that were traditionally told in New Guinea and in wider Melanesia can be regarded as allegories of the successful or unsuccessful usurpation of power, its abrogation from an established power-holder, and the use of that power for the benefit of the community or (as in the tale of Kolukolu and the moon) its wilful misuse. Tales of an ogre killing child which Chakravarti (1974) has shown are widespread across the New Guinea area, are narrative representations of the usurpation of power by a wronged or impatient heir, typically in Melanesian contexts the son of a hereditary chief. Typically in these tales, a pregnant woman is abandoned by those who could be expected to care for her, her husband or her brothers. There is often no apparent husband, the begetter of her child. She bears a son who grows rapidly in strength and skill, and who benefits from his mother's secret knowledge. The youth kills an ogre or monster, often a cannibal giant, allowing villagers who had fled from this menace to return to their homes. The youth is hailed as a hero, often receives a woman or women in marriage, and is often made a chief. This narrative trope refers to a type of socio-political process that Wagner (1986) has called "preemptive successorship" – the pre-emptive assumption, real or ceremonial, of rank and position by a legitimate claimant. In the New Ireland society described by Wagner, "pre-emption" is thoroughly dramatized, i.e. ritualised. However, another type of story tells of an illegitimate usurper whose misuse of power endangers the community, or indeed (as in the present story) the entire earth.

Etiology, Obviation and Renewal

Etiological "explanations," like those contained in many myths and folktales, begin with a wilful questioning of everyday reality, especially aspects of the natural world that stand out as arbitrary or unexpected. The tale of Kolukolu and the moon accounts for the generally flightless behaviour of the bird called Kolukolu and its propensity to take flight when trodden on by hunters during the night, as if wounded or hurt. This "explanation" is given in the last lines of the recorded story, where it is revealed as the story's ultimate point. It depends crucially on the initial questioning of why some particular phenomenon was "just so" – a questioning that can seem artfully contrived.

However, the more general aspect of the world that is implicitly queried or questioned by the present story's premise, and subsequently "explained" by the unfolding events, is the fact that the light from the moon does not warm us – as does the light of the sun. The question of the earth's diurnal cycle is at the centre of a class of eastern Indonesian folktales (Schapper 2016; Forth 1992). In the eastern Indonesian tales, two birds engage in an oratorical competition that determines the present order of the world, including the "law" that night and day, moon and sun, must alternate within a twenty-four hour cycle (Forth 1992). For the Kuni, the question appears to be – Why does the moon not 'burn' like the sun?

Keen observation and interrogation of the natural world results in the identification of phenome-

na that appear to be in some way aberrant, an interest first noted in this connection by Levy-Bruhl in 1935; see Levy-Bruhl 1983: 154). For the storyteller (qua shaman, qua magician) the first step towards 'explaining' such features is to imagine a prior world order in which they are not present. That world is often, to some extent at least, an inversion of the current world of sensory experience – as noted by Maurice Godelier (1999: 134). Godelier adduces the widespread trope whereby women are attributed with original powers of which they are then somehow dispossessed by men.

What is going on here? The general principle at work in etiologically designed folktales is to make the everyday extraordinary through processes of impersonation and dramatization. When the everyday is already extraordinary, unusual, or marked, this means construing them as ordinary – or extraordinary in a positive way – within the imagined world of the folktale. Then, within the tale, narrated events somehow bring about the marked state characteristic of the impersonated thing or animal or bird in the everyday world. The final step is when the storyteller explicitly restores the imagined world to everydayness – but now a world in which anomalies have explanations. Anxieties caused by the original riddle, to which the story draws attention, have been banished. A renewed sense of security in the everyday world, of resolved dilemmas, prevails. The first move in the kind of double transformation described here corresponds to the process that Wagner (1978) has called metaphorization (1972) and obviation (1978). However, where Wagner stressed its creative character, I emphasise its transgressive nature. For in these tales the everyday is egregiously distorted before a (marked) normality is finally, rhetorically, restored.

Forth was perhaps thinking along similar lines when he wrote (in 1992) that "variants" appearing in etiological tales (Forth's "myths") are alternative manifestations of a "temporal flux", a flux that, in eastern Indonesia, is often represented by alternating periods of light and darkness as well as spatial patterns of alternation. While these narratives "vary in the degree to which they provide an account of a series of events leading up to, and resulting in, the present order of the world", they typically describe "two positions as to what the proper order of things should be, before declaring that one was accepted and the other rejected" (1992: 423). But Forth does not sufficiently stress that one order is imaginary, the other real. In fact the core move in all etiological accounts is the introduction of an imagined state-of-affairs that, in being rejected, reaffirms the validity of the real. Meanwhile, before being rejected, it floats an alternative reality – a potentiality – that retrospectively enriches the everyday one we are left with.

Communal and Ritual-Affective Nature of Recitals

The grip of folktales upon the imagination is indisputable, as evidenced by their persistence. Turner (1975, 1982) would explain this persistence in terms of "root paradigms," Meletinsky et al. in terms of "formulae" (1992: 98) that express important cultural themes and values, and Kanuft (1993) in terms of "permutations on basic dominant themes." In more traditional times and settings the public telling of myths or folktales can produce a remarkable raptness of joint attention that was described by Egidi for the Kuni (1913b: 980):

> Les contes d'ailleurs sont du domaine public. Tout le monde les connaît, pas assez peut- être pour les raconter, mais assez pour en suivre tous les détails et, au besoin, les rectifier. Il n'est pas rare, en effet, de voir tout un groupe d'indigènes assis sur un rocher découvert, au milieu du village, au clair de lune, ou à l'intérieur d'une kufu par les soirées obscures, suspendus aux lèvres du conteur, prêts à le corriger s'il se trompe, à l'aider s'il se brouille ou s'il hésite.
>
> [The stories are moreover public. Everyone knows them, perhaps not well enough to recount them, but well enough to follow all the details and, if necessary, correct them. It is not unusual, in fact, to see a whole group of natives seated on an exposed rock in the middle of the village, by the light of the moon, or inside a kufu [clan house] on dark nights, hanging on the lips of the storyteller, ready to correct any mistakes he might make or assist him if he is muddled or hesitates.]

From Egidi's brief account, it seems that storytelling among the Kuni amounted to a type of impromptu communal rite and one can suppose that, in the conjoint production of a *tsitsifa*, an intense feeling of mutual attunement was achieved, a type of rapt shared attention reminiscent of Durkheim's (1912) notion of religious experience and, more recently, Collins's (2004) theory of emotional energy. Even more aptly, perhaps, it evokes the "joint spontaneous involvement" described by Goffman (1967: 113), a type of "socialised trance"

that marks the achievement of social solidarity as a lived experience.[6]

Explanation and the Sense of Understanding

Folktales, myths and other genres of this type fulfill a deep need for meaning – for accounts of the natural world and social order that legitimate them, representing them as necessary, non-contingent, part of an unchallengeable world order. The grounds of that order are represented as *stories*, narratives involving actions, emotions and reactions. Such stories typically elaborate or play upon a number of dominant themes (as noted by Knauft, 1993 – see above). In the same vein, Wagner (1972: 17) maintained that there is always "a systemic core" constraining the mythopoetic output of an ethos or culture and giving myths their "explanatory or ideological value". Echoing Eliade (1963) and Levy-Bruhl (1983), he argued that origin myths translate systemic paradigms, or propositions, into temporal events, "archetypical incidents that serve as precedents, or set the conditions, for the present situation." (1972: 17). One is reminded that a knowledge of origins is often believed to be the source of supernatural power in the present-day (Eliade 1963; Levy-Bruhl 1983). Explanation here is thus primarily an account or origins – within a thematically constrained (and emotionally charged) mythopoeic order. However, more generally, a sense of understanding – whether illusory or real – is an intensely pleasurable phenomenon and is a common response to any satisfactory explanation (Gopnik 2000).

An "Inside" Meaning of the Folktale – Denial of Death

Most folktales and most myths are thickly laminated textual constructions, susceptible to interpretation on multiple levels. There are typically several layers of meaning attached to any individual trope, and some are relatively more "outside" than others. Knowledge of the "inside" interpretations is usually restricted to special individuals. Howard Morphy (1991) has demonstrated this arrangement very convincingly in relation to Yolngu bark paintings. So, we may ask, what are the inside meanings of this Kuni folktale?

Repetition and renewal in the natural world symbolise, on a largely unconscious level, the renewal of humanity across generations. On the one hand, we have the celestial bodies like the sun and moon that die and are reborn, over and over, in cycles made up of regular periods. On the other hand we have snakes and arthropods, insects and crustaceans, which shed their skins or exoskeletons in order to renew themselves and grow. These mysteries suggest that death is not inevitable. And yet ordinary men, and women and children, do die. That contradiction is at the bottom of many mythopoetic imaginings. Wagner points out (1972: 9) that many of the most ambitious constructs in a given culture reflect efforts to become reconciled to the inevitability of personal death within a periodically self-renewing social and natural universe. As he puts it (ibid.), "the most powerful innovative constructs will be those that achieve their force against this kind of human limitation." This is the force of explanation (Gopnik 2000), providing accounts that satisfy on several levels simultaneously, both cognitive and affective. Thus, the deeper meaning – the inside message – of all tales of transformation and transformations reversed is that death is only a part of the story, that it is on an important level "contradicted" by the transpersonal workings of time. LeRoy (1985: 182) puts it succinctly: "the central paradox of existence – that life requires death – through metaphor, impersonation and enactment, can be *symbolically denied* by substituting the renewal of skins for that of generations" (1985: 182; emphasis added). Rhetorically, this is a type of explanation. LeRoy, commenting on one particular *ramani* ("true story") that he collected among the Kewa, wrote that "it alludes to the conception of order out of an earlier inchoate condition, and it explains the origin of that paramount discontinuity, death, out of a pre-existing continuity" (1985: 182).

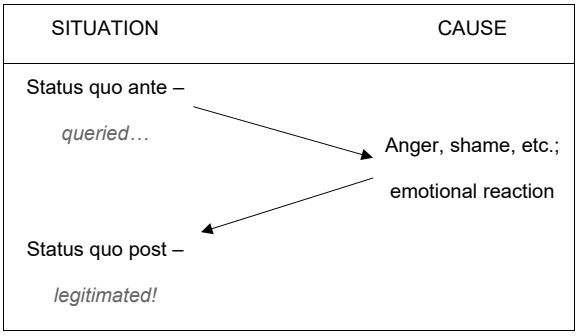
Reaffirmation and Legitimation of the Status Quo – Uku

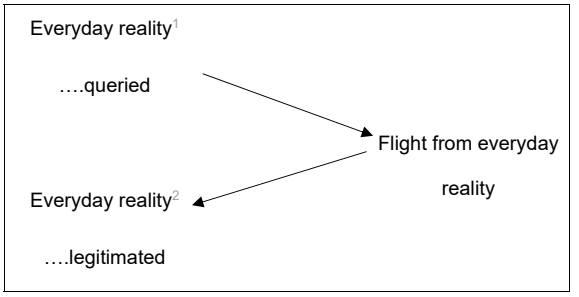
We see in the tale of Kolukolu and the moon a dialectic in which certain themes and thematic motifs, emblematic of everyday existence, are in a first step first symbolically denied (see Wagner 1972: 34; 1978: 26; LeRoy 1985: 182). However, this obviation or denial is always followed by a second move in which the selected elements of everyday life are *restored, legitimated and revivified.*

6 What Goffman described pertains chiefly to dyadic face-to-face situations, but has obvious links with types of collective effervescence experienced by social assemblies where individuals are emotionally united in the daily semi-ritualised "performance of interdependence" (Duranti 2015: 241).

This process is experienced, it seems, as an affirmation and enhancement of everyday reality.

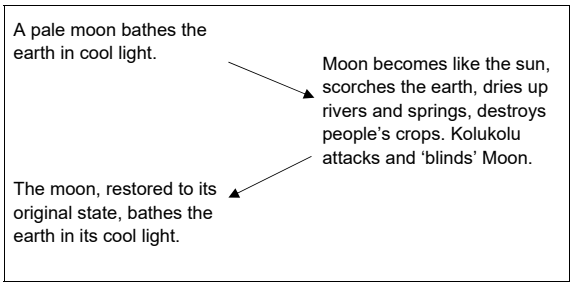
This narrativized dialectic resonates with a principle known as *uku*.[7] *Uku* – or reciprocation – is a principle that reflects a longing for a prior state of harmony or balance and often a demand that that state be restored. It is demand for the revival or renewal of past statuses and equalised relationships. *Uku* is best known to anthropologists as "payback" (Trompf 1994), i.e. as a dialectically constructed ongoing process, a chain of actions and reactions. But, synchronically, *uku* describes equalised obligations, a state dependent upon achieving precisely balanced actions or prestations.



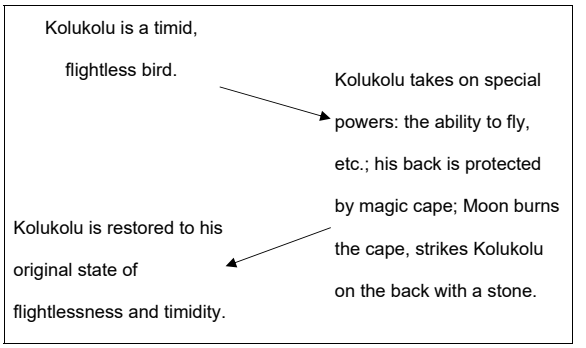


In the present tale, Kolukolu, the flightless bird, and the placid, unthreatening moon have been rhetorically and poetically transformed into powerful and/or dangerous entities, effective inversions of their everyday selves, which are then restored and take up their natural place in the everyday scheme of things. The difference is that now we view them differently. Their everyday being has a new dimension, a richness and also a rightness about it, and perhaps also again a sense of danger averted.

1. Benign moon becomes malign Moon, devastates the earth and all its people. Kolukolu attacks and "blinds" Moon, restoring the moon to its original state and role.



2. Kolukolu, a timid, flightless bird, takes on special powers, the ability to fly, etc.; his back is protected by magic cape; Moon destroys the cape, strikes Kolukolu on the back with a stone. Kolukolu is restored to state of flightlessness and timidity.



It is usually assumed that reciprocation – the practice of *uku* – is driven by a desire to restore some lost state of balance in what one individual or group owes to another. Yet there may be deeper motives. Gillison (1993) has argued at length that exchange of objects is a metaphor for the exchange of bodies, and more fundamentally (in terms of deeply felt affect) a metaphor for the exchange of accusations and admissions (see Gillison 1993), expressing perhaps, alternately, senses of violation and a sense of guilt.

Deeper Motives Still

While obviation is a typical initial move in folktales, it is in fact a principle and a force that applies to numerous orders of symbolic representa-

7 This principle seems part of the cultural heritage of all Oceanic peoples, and the term itself recurs across the Pacific, in languacultures as far apart as Hawai'i and New Zealand. Jones (2015) analyses Mekeo reciprocation as a "generative principle."

tion. Wagner (1978: 22) spoke of "a vast range of ordering elements" that permeate and structure and enable a given sociocultural complex, from phonology to vocabulary, from narrative to scientific analysis. All of these "conventional" types of symbolic order are susceptible to refutation, subversion or denial. Together they constitute the hidden laws, the *symbolic order*, of a society. Against this conventional order there is typically resistance and rebellion from those at the social and cultural margins but also a more playful obfuscation from those embedded within it, with clear statuses or recognised institutional roles, who distort convention temporarily and playfully, e.g. rhetorically, for specific purposes. Wagner postulated a dialectical interplay between the two orders, or modalities (1978: 26; 1972: 34), and understanding echoed by LeRoy (1985). However, none of this explains the *grip* that the obviative move has upon the imagination, its affective charge.

There seems to be a deep-seated human drive to reject the status quo, to invert it symbolically, and then – as we saw above – symbolically to restore it. Through participation in the recital of a folktale or myth, the audience can legitimately enjoy the illicit delights of transgression, of turning everyday reality – and implicitly the sociocultural order – on its head, but then, in another exercise of symbolic power, restoring it. On its deepest level that first move is a rejection of symbolic order (as glimpsed by Wagner, 1978, who wrote in terms of *convention*).[8] Such rejection gives the audience a sensation of temporary release from everyday constraints. However, paradoxically, via the second rhetorical move, it also works to ensure the acceptance of social-structural conflict and, on another level, the existential limitations of human existence.

Acknowledgements

My analyses of Kuni language and folklore would have been impossible without the enterprise of Sacred Heart missionaries over one hundred years ago, the hardships they endured, and then the care they took to jot down spontaneous utterances, analyse the grammar of these utterances, and finally to record extended texts, all with the ultimate aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the Kuni life-world. I owe a special debt to Fr Vincenzo Egidi who collected nineteen Kuni folktales.

8 Wagner was also fascinated by the type of social transition he termed "pre-emptive succession" (1986), when the presumptive heir to a title adopts that title and status pre-emptively, as it were on his own initiative.

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Appendix 1: A Note on Kuni Grammar

As in almost all Oceanic languages, there are two classes of nouns in Kuni, one representing *alienable* objects, i.e. things that can be exchanged or given away, the other naming parts or aspects of a complex whole that are inherently *inalienable*. The latter are prototypically body parts and kinship categories, i.e. they are relational concepts. The former are optionally preceded by an enclitic particle marked for the person and number of a possessor or disposer. Inalienable nouns, on the other hand, are obligatorily "possessed", that is, they always carry a suffix indicating the person and number of the whole of which they are a part or aspect.

Kuni like other members of Nuclear West Central Papuan linkage (NWCP) is a head-marking language. Verbs have an obligatory prefix indicating the person and number of the subject (and identifying the lexical base as a finite verb). Most bases capable of functioning as verbs can be either intransitive or transitive. In the latter case, they may carry an object-marking suffix, indicating the person and number of a grammatical object. This is obligatory in 1st and 2nd persons but optional for 3rd person objects. Verb forms with elided 3rd person objects are often marked as transitive by the suffixed morpheme-*i*. When a verb base ends in *-a* or *-o* and is followed by the 1st or 2nd person object-marking suffixes *-au* and *-o,* the transitivity marking *-i* becomes *-j-* between the two vowels, giving verb forms ending in *-jau* or *-jo*). (I note that mission linguists like Egidi and Eschlimann always represented the subject-marking prefix as a separate particle.

Kuni distinguishes between a past tense and a present-imperfective by varying the vowels of the second and third person subject-marking prefix (see Table 1). The present-imperfect is further distinct in having marked word stress on the subject marking syllable, though the rule is not always observed with polysyllabic verb words. However, this means that even when there is no morphologically marked distinction between past and present, speakers can still signal present-imperfect tense-aspect phonologically, i.e. in speech. There is also a future tense (albeit with optative-hortative uses) as well as a subjunctive of willing/wishing. Subject markers for past, present and future paradigms are illustrated in Table 1. Note that Kuni subject markers do not distinguish between singular and plural number, nor do they index the gender of the subject. In having a past-present distinction, Kuni differs from Motu and Mekeo (which have no past-present tense distinction) and groups together with Roro and Waima (which do have this distinction but use quite different morphological means).

Table 1. Tense-marking subject prefixes for 1st, 2nd and 3rd person singular/plural, plus 1st person inclusive (plural forms for 1st, 2nd and 3rd persons are identical to the singular ones).

	Affirmative				Negative			
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st incl.	1st	2nd	3rd	1st incl.
Present	a-	o-	e-	ka-	tsa-	tso-	tse-	tsaka-
Past	a-	u-(o-)	i-	ka-	tsa-	tsu-	tsi-	tsaka-
Future, weak optative	fa-	fo-	fe-	faka-, feka-	atsi fa-	atsi fo-	atsi fe-	atsi faka-
Subjunctive	fama-	fomo-, fumu-	fimi-	fakàma-				
Strong optative	ma-	mo-	me-, mi-	maka-	atsi ma-	atsi mo-	atsi me-	atsi maka-

The most important tense distinction in our present text is that marked on the 3rd person subject marker where (*i-*) indicates past tense and (*e-*) indicates present. Thus, *e-mai* is 's/he comes, is coming; they come,[9] are coming' while *i-mai* is 's/he came, they came'. As already noted, this distinction is also marked on the 2nd person subject marker, though not on the first. 1st and 2nd person subject markers are of course characteristic of spoken interactions; hence, they only occur in the present text when one actor is represented as addressing another actor.

Egidi states that subject marking prefixes for 1st, 2nd and 3rd person singular as well as 1st person inclusive appear with a palatal onset. He is hesitant about assigning a definite meaning to these forms (which appear from time to time in his texts). Based on Eschlimann (1935) and my own fieldnotes I suggest these forms are indicative of an ongoing sound change of the kind that, in East Mekeo, resulted in *l-* accretion to subject markers beginning with *a* and *o*. Judging by Eschlimann (1935), accreted *j-* became the norm over time on 1st person singular and 1st person plural exclusive subject markers (which thus became *ja-*), in both the past and present paradigms, while 2nd person present became *jo-*. Table 2 displays the range of object marking suffixes appearing optionally on transitive verbs.

Two commonly used derivational prefixes are *bai-* with reciprocal and intensive meanings, and *ba-* with a range of meanings, the main ones being causative, intensive and simulative.

The nucleus of a verb word may be simple, consisting of a single lexical base, or it may be complex, consisting of two lexical bases (the second base is an adverbial and typically indicates directional movement. The object marking suffix follows the first base.

Table 2. Object suffixes for transitive verbs; these are optional and may or may not preserve the transitivity marking suffix -i before the object marking suffix.

Singular			Plural			
1st	2nd	3rd	1st incl.	1st excl.	2nd	3rd
-au, -jau	-o, -jo	-a, -ja	-ka, -ika	-mai, -imai	-mui, -imui	-tsi, -itsi

The non-terminal nature of a verb in a series of verbs is often indicated by the suffix *-na*, identical to the 3rd person singular suffix of inalienable possession, as shown in *kadi-na* 'her/his younger sibling'. E.g. *N i-mai-na, a-da*, 'N came and I went' or "N having come, I went'. The suffix *-ko* (which is homophonous with the verb *-ko* 'say/think') is attached word-finally to a full verb form (i.e. one with person/number and tense/mood marking affixes) and indicates perfect aspect.

Appendix 2: An East Mekeo Folktale

Below is an English version of the East Mekeo story of Foi (Eagle) and Foe (Egret). It was told by Mr Ongongo Aeongai and was written down by Mr Andrew Aopai in 1980.

How Egret's Mother Cuscus Was Eaten by Eagle

Foe, or Egret, lived with his sister, Ailema, or Waterhen. Egret built a house for his mother Aifuifu, i.e. Cuscus. He made it with six walls (*pou*) for protective purposes. After installing his mother in the house, he went on a foraging expedition to Gulf Province. He went to eat sago. Meanwhile, Waterhen, thinking her brother had died, covered

9 In fact this verb would be pronounced *è-mai* with stress on the subject-marking prefix.

herself with black ash. Egret's mother sang this song (*mau'u*)[10]:

Aifuifui kunokunoa wawakoe
oanionu oanionu wawakoe
kuno kunonie kunonie,
Aifuifui kuno kunonie.

Egret remained in Gulf Province and his mother Cuscus stayed in her new house. She sang this song.

Aifuifui kunokunoa wawakoe
oanionu oanionu
waioku kuno kunonia kunonia
Aifuifui kuno kunonia.

She went on living there till, one day, Eagle flew down and, while he chopped away with his beak at the first wall, Ikelekele (Willywagtail) perched on the roof and began to sing. Egret's mother called out to Ikelekele, asking: "Who is it that sings on my roof?" He said: "It is Willywagtail that sings." She addressed him and said: "My child, your elder brother has gone to Gulf Province, you should go there, you should address him and say: 'You, remain here in Gulf Province but Eagle has descended, and he is chopping away at your mother's walls and soon he will eat her.'"

Willywagtail flew off but he spotted some *ufua* fruit and didn't go any further, he didn't tell Egret the news, the old woman just stayed as before. She waited a while and Epea (another bird) flew down and she addressed him and said all the same things she had said to Willywagtail. Epea flew off but he spotted some *aupua* fruit and didn't go any further. Egret's mother waited a while more and then Keke (another bird) came along and perched on top of the house. Cuscus raised her voice and addressed him as before and, when she had said her piece, Keke flew off and did as the other birds had done. When Keke had flown off, the old woman again struck up her song.

Aifuifui kunokunoa wawakoe
oanionu oanionu
waioku kuno kunonia kunonia
Aifuifui kuno kunonia.

The old woman sang like that until Kekeaufa'a (another bird) flew down and raised his voice in song on top of the house. "Who are you?" she asked. He spoke and said: "I am Kekeaufa'a." She addressed him saying: "Ah, Egret, your elder brother, has gone to Gulf Province, he has gone on a foraging expedition, you must go there and say to him: 'Eagle has come down and chopped at your mother's walls and soon will eat her.' Like that you must say," she said. So Kekeaufa'a flew off to do her bidding but he spotted some *aupua* fruit, commenced eating it and didn't go any further. The old woman stayed as before and again struck up her song.

Aifuifui kunokunoe wawakua
oanionue oanionue
wawakue kunonia kunonia
Aifuifui kuno kunonie.

In the evening of the following day Eagle flew to the top of a huge *apani'i* tree. "Kekekeke," he said. He said "I will eat your mother, I will eat your father." The next day he flew down and attacked the walls again. Panguako (another bird) flew down and, perching on top of the old woman's house, he began to sing. She called out: "Who are you?" He said: "I am Panguako." "Ah, lad, you must go (and) say to your elder brother: 'Now the walls are almost chopped through, soon Eagle will eat your mother.' Panguako flew off and when he saw some coconuts he commenced to eat them and didn't go any further. The old woman stayed as before. Nothing happened. She slept. And Eagle, perched on the *apani'i* tree, sang his own song: "Kekekeke, I will eat your mother, I will eat your father." Cuscus slept. In the evening of the following day Eagle flew down and once more chopped away at the walls.

Now Evinongo (another bird) flew down and perched on top of the house and raised up his voice in song. "Who are you?" the old woman asked. He said: "I am Evinongo." "Ah lad, you must fly away to your elder brother and say to him: 'While you stay here foraging for food, Eagle has demolished all your mother's walls, he is tearing away at the last one, therefore I've come to remind you.'"

Now Evinongo, that rascal, he flew and flew and, arriving in Gulf Province, perched on Egret's canoe-pole. He told Egret the whole story. Egret lifted up his canoe-pole and he poled and poled, he poled up into the river-mouth and eventually he arrived at his mother's house.

Now Eagle flew up and perched on the top of the tall *apani'i* tree, singing as before, but now in the past tense: "Kekekeke. I ate your mother, I ate your father."

10 *Mau'u* is defined in Desnoës's Mekeo dictionary (1941) as a spell for trapping game. In my experience it refers to a verse inserted into the recitation of a myth or folktale at specified intervals. Such verses are deliberately obscure and often reputedly give the teller/singer control over supernatural forces.

Then Egret knew that his mother had been eaten. He cut bunches of areca nuts. He called all the birds together, and when they arrived, he gave each a hand of areca nuts. He then addressed them saying: "Since Eagle has eaten my mother, I want you to kill him. For that I have given you areca nuts." So, all the birds attempted to attack Eagle; they flew up and up but could not reach Eagle atop his *apani'i* tree.

Egret broke off more areca nuts and he went and gave them to Vaisapu (Dove) and Minguminggu (Gnat). He addressed them saying: "Since Eagle has eaten my mother, I want you to kill him." Dove and Gnat just said: "Go and we will follow." When they arrived at the spot, the other birds said, "As for us, we found the tree and we tried to do it, but we couldn't succeed." Then Gnat and Dove, the two of them, they flew up. But, those two, they didn't go straight up as the other birds had done, they circled around and around the great tree and in that way succeeded in getting to the top. They flew up and up and, while Gnat was distracting Eagle, flying now this way, then that, Dove struck Eagle a mighty blow. Eagle fell to the ground and was beaten to death by the assembled birds.

Egret made a small feast and there was a big gathering. And because of these events, the cuscus now has little flesh on its back. And as for Waterhen, because she painted herself with black ash, to mourn for her brother, the waterhen's feathers are now black.

Here is the meaning of the song that was sung by Egret's mother:

Egret you have gone on a foraging expedition, you go hither and thither,
But as for me, Eagle will eat me.