

Foreword

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It may sound a little surprising to say that a detailed ethnographic disquisition on such tried-and-tested subjects as “magic” and “kinship” among one of the most thoroughly studied societies in our disciplinary history is bound to raise some anthropological controversy. *Ways of baloma* certainly will, though. And that is a good thing, for an excellent reason: because ethnography is anthropology or it is nothing, as Marshall Sahlins (1994) once quipped, *and* because anthropology is nothing if not speculative, as Tim Ingold recently asserted in his “Anthropology contra ethnography” (2017).

Mark Mosko’s major monograph is a perfect example of how these two very different—at first blush somewhat clashing—proclamations converge. For anthropology is speculation, but not of the introspective kind which lingers on in much of our academic philosophy. It is speculation squared: it takes as its subject matter the speculation of other peoples, other “thought collectives,” to expand a concept from Ludwik Fleck ([1935] 1979). Anthropology is speculative in a radically extrospective, nonspecular sense. If there is any mirroring involved, the mirror, as Patrice Maniglier remarked, “returns to us an image in which we are not *recognizable* to ourselves” (2005: 773–74, original emphasis). This means that an ethnographically informed anthropology must be prepared to jeopardize the master concept of *anthrōpos* (“ourselves”) and the heavy metaphysical baggage underlying the now deceptive obviousness of its empirical referent. To extend

the intension of the *anthrópos* concept to encompass *Homo sapiens* at large was at the heart of a well-known political and epistemological struggle in the history of Western thought, with anthropology at its forefront. It is not certain the battle has been indisputably won, however. This is *one* of the reasons why we need to be aware of the different “senses”—other intensions *and* extensions—that this concept takes in other thought collectives. Our own historical idea(l) of the Human, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights notwithstanding, can no longer hide its serious shortcomings, if the understatement be allowed. It is no longer a viable concept to capture even the mode of existence (of personification) of the official citizens of the West’s well-fortified but quickly crumbling walls. To put things bluntly, let us just state that the “Anthropocene” is the most spectacular end result of such shortcomings.

Anthropology is, then, “speculation with the people in,” to paraphrase a famous definition of the discipline. It cannot but be—to begin by being—ethnography, given the often misrecognized fact that our anthropological theories are nothing more than (by which I mean nothing less than) translative syntheses into the disciplinary vernacular of the day of what the peoples whose life we shared for some time say and do. (By a felicitous coincidence, the relationship between *saying* and *doing*—what certain particular sayings do and how certain seemingly ordinary doings relate to some “extraordinary” enunciative agents—lies at the very heart of *Ways of baloma*.) It is that abstractive, transethnographic effort that allows those anthropological theories to have an inspiring or exemplary role to other, sometimes culturally and geographically quite removed contexts. Theories jump from place to place. And then, of course, when they land in other lands, they get transformed, often eliciting reverse transformations of the original translative synthesis—a movement usually named “comparison.”

The above may perhaps justify the unlikely choice, on the author’s part, to kindly invite an Amazonianist to write the foreword to a book about Trobriand society which discusses virtually all the classic themes of Melanesian ethnology, offering new and daring solutions to some equally classic puzzles this region of the world left to the discipline as one of its treasured polemical heirlooms. What was indeed surprising, to this Amazonianist, was to see how ideas that emerged from the ethnographic (anthropological and indigenous) speculation carried out in that other part of the world could be used to methodically *reshape* Malinowski’s canonical work on the Trobriands in a much more comprehensive way than generations of Melanesianists, particularly those who

did fieldwork on the Massim area of Papua New Guinea, had already done in expanding, correcting, and contextualizing—historically, politically, methodologically—the œuvre of our great forebear. On second thoughts, though, it is not so surprising. My own work on Amazonian “perspectivism”—which implied, among other things, the positing of an absolute ontological and epistemological indiscernibility between those dimensions of any people’s life traditionally distinguished as “cosmology” and “sociology,” or “magic” (or “religion”) and “kinship” (or “social organization”), not to mention the arche-metaphysical anthropocentric distinction in which our discipline is grounded, that between “Nature” and “Culture”—owes even more than I was myself conscious of to the ethnographic and theoretical labor of Melanesianists. In this regard, I should mention above all that of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern, to which I might add some remarks of Alfred Gell lying at the origin of my rather sketchy argument about the magic–kinship “duplex” (to hijack a Strathernian concept), which is brilliantly fleshed out by Mosko in this book. Since *Ways of baloma* explicitly takes as one of its guiding perspectives the so-called NME (New Melanesian Ethnography), a modeling of Melanesian sociality put forth by Strathern in *The gender of the gift*, a book that opened new research avenues all across the ethnosphere, we have here then an “ends meet” situation—a unusually rich version of what was pleasantly dubbed “Melazonia” at a meeting of ethnographers of the two areas some twenty years ago.

The specific NME thesis (for there is far more to Strathernian anthropology than it) pursued in *Ways of baloma* is essentially that of the *partibility* of persons and the associated concept of personification. Mosko complements it with the Lévy-Bruhlian theory of *participation*, which, particularly as revived by Sahlins’ recent redefinition of kinship as “mutuality of being” (2013), is to my mind but the obverse side of the partibility thesis, as both converge to dispel the profound anthropological misconception—an expression of the bizarre politico-philosophical imagination of a certain people who came to dominate the planet—of the atomic and autonomic Self and its spectrally magnified version, the Society as a super-Individual. The crucial innovation yielded by this partibility–participation synthesis, as Mosko argues, is that “the sphere of ‘persons’ critically participating in Trobrianders’ human affairs extends beyond the bounds of living people” (p. 27). The point as such was by no means overlooked by Strathern; but what Mosko wants to highlight in *Ways of baloma* is the overwhelming importance of certain invisible persons who have been given short shrift in almost all previous Massim ethnographies: namely, the souls of

the dead and a host of other *baloma* inhabitants of Tuma, the “spiritual” dimension of this world.¹

A foreword should take care not to contain too many “spoilers”; it is better to let readers follow *Ways of baloma* through to the end so as to fully grasp the wonderfully complex and complete treatment to which Mosko subjects the interweaving of partibility and participation, thereby solving simultaneously two of the more famous conundrums left by Malinowski’s ethnography, or, better yet, demonstrating they are one single problem amenable to an integrated solution. I am referring, of course, to the “magical power of words” and the “virgin birth” debates; more generally speaking, to the role of the *baloma* in the production and reproduction of the material world and to the nature of Trobriand “matrilineality” and its attendant categories and institutions (*dala*, *kumila*, the ethnographically irksome privilege of fathers in this “mother’s brother” society, FZD marriage, etc.). Let me just anticipate that they are solved by a detailed reconsideration of the workings of the asymmetrically perspectival duality central to Trobriand sociocosmology, that between Boyowa, “the visible, material segment of the cosmos that humans inhabit and experience in their waking life” (p. 8, n. 6), and the spirit world of Tuma, the life-source, in many senses, of what is experienced in Boyowa.

Spirits, old denizens of the world that have never gone away, notwithstanding all the witch-hunts (*lato sensu*) promoted by modernity, are back in business then. It is perhaps no accident that at this juncture when “ghosts and monsters” (Tsing et al. 2017) have come to haunt our image of the world, when our symbiopoietic kinship (Haraway) with an untold number of other life-forms that make up the world is acknowledged in both wonder and mourning, and when the geophysical forces and geopolitical influences that have been at work acquire what could only be called a *supernatural* significance, there appears a work such as *Ways of baloma*, which highlights the entanglement—the invisible coextensivity or interpenetration—of spirits and bodies, the visible and the invisible, magic and kinship. This is a book about magic and kinship, again, squared: about the magical relationship between magic and kinship, about the

1. As Strathern once observed, “Many non-literate people appear to see persons even where the anthropologist would not. And kinship may be claimed for relations between entities that English-speakers conceive as frankly improbable” (1995: 15). She was thinking mostly—i.e., not only—of entities that belong in Western ontologies to the “thing” (or “less-than-human”) category, while Mosko’s interest lies in entities of the “more-than-human” category.

intimate kinship between kinship and magic. It is a book about the creative (in the most literal sense) reciprocal presupposition between images (*kekwabū*) and powers (*peu'ula*), words and worlds: how Kilivila words not only express, but are expressed (enunciated) by Trobriander worlds.²

Against the Malinowskian thesis of the “automatic,” magical power of *megwa* spells, which anticipates certain crucial aspects of Austen’s theory of performative speech acts, Mosko forcefully counterposes the efficacious agency of *persons*, both the *baloma* spirits of Tuma and certain humans of Boyowa. The *baloma* end up by having a far more overarching and active presence in Trobriand life than Malinowski granted them. One is led to wonder if this culturally specific correction of what would now be called the “performative” parsing of powerful speech in general may not induce a reconsideration of the universalistic theory of speech acts. Magical words in Malinowski’s sense must be seen as “performative” just as performative utterances in Austen’s sense—in both their illocutionary and the perlocutionary aspects—must be seen as “magical,” insofar as the latter *also* have their “conditions of felicity” in some source of *spiritual* power/authority. In other words, they presuppose the presence of an agency which at the same time *personifies itself* (as a mindful Individual, or as the Law, the Church, etc.) by being identified as the source of the utterance and gives the utterance its world-changing efficaciousness. All in all, the theory of speech acts is strictly dependent on a distinction between the *unreal* notion of an across-the-board “social construction of reality” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and a *real* process of “construction of social reality” (Searle)—a distinction the latter philosopher framed as that between culturally relative “institutional facts” and naturally universal “brute facts” (Searle 1995). But of course, among the Trobrianders, all real facts are “institutional,” insofar as the origin of every causal chain is a personal—i.e., “social”—agency. If that is the case, it makes as much sense to argue that magical beliefs are ideology—justifying real social power, hierarchy, domination—as to invert this classic modernist belief and argue that politico-economic realities are the actualization of magical forces. As Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers (2007) have forcefully demonstrated, for example, capitalism is a particularly lethal form of sorcery.

Then we have the kinship side of the equation established in *Ways of baloma*. Mosko, inspired here both by the NME and by Wagner’s earlier, groundbreaking

2. Kilivila is the official name of the Austronesian language spoken in the Trobriand archipelago.

paper on the nature of social groups in Highland New Guinea (1974), shows the essential imprecision or simplistic reification that generated the “matrilineality” and “virgin birth” themes in Malinowski’s rendition of Trobriand kinship relatedness. To begin with, the role of masculine *megwa* (oral) production and creativity is shown as analogous to feminine bodily (genital) reproduction and procreation, *and vice versa*. Participation joins partibility to illuminate the genderized dimension of Tuma–Boyowa cosmopolitics. The “father” concept penetrates the very core relationship of the “matrilineal” *dala*; nephews become adopted “sons”; the *dala* chief becomes the “father” of his coresidents; husband and wife become analogically assimilated to (and mythically identified with) brother and sister; the FZD marriage is connected to rank and chieftainship strategies and at the same time is shown as “hiding” an actual practice of bilateral cross-cousin marriage.

And then there is sacrifice—exchange (all exchange) redefined as sacrifice—a concept whose presence in Melanesian ethnography is not the least of the surprises *Ways of baloma* proposes to its readers. And there is political diarchy as well. Mosko had already broached these themes in his extensive ethnography of the North Mekeo; he therefore builds, or rather reinforces, that bridge between Melanesia and Polynesia that has long intrigued Oceanic anthropology.

I should stop this already too long foreword here. But I cannot fail to mention what is perhaps the most innovative and likely controversial aspect of the way *Ways of baloma* was crafted. I am referring not to what some might consider the overly harsh treatment that Malinowski’s ethnography meets with in this book, nor to the quite systematic criticism of the most famous of post-Malinowskian Trobriand ethnographies, that by Annette Weiner. Let readers judge for themselves if those strictures are justified. Anyway, they are amply compensated, in my opinion, by the meticulous scholarly justice the author shows in quoting and incorporating the positive contributions of many other distinguished Massim specialists. The truly innovative, and very likely controversial, contribution of the book is its method. *Ways of baloma* is actually the result of an intensive collaborative—should I say a coauthoral?—work, a sustained dialogue with an intellectual elite of high-ranking Omakarana elders deeply interested in keeping alive what they see as the traditional Trobriand life- and thoughtways. In his many periods of collaborative fieldwork with this team of experts, Mosko checked virtually every aspect of the previous ethnographic archive on Trobriand against their own views. In that sense, *Ways of baloma* is a collective enterprise that has adopted a particular point of view, that

of a specific, and in many ways privileged, sociopolitical section of the Trobriand people. So this book is obviously not “the whole story.” But given that there are no whole stories, much less whole ethnographic stories, *Ways of baloma* is one of the most interesting stories ever told about Melanesia.

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