

The jumping stones*

Bronisław Malinowski[†]

Let us return now to our Sinaketan fleet, moving southwards along the barrier reef and sighting one small island after the other. If they did not start very early from Muwa—and delay is one of the characteristics of native life—and if they were not favoured with a very good wind, they would probably have to put in at one of the small sand islands, Legumatabu, Gabuwana or Yakum. Here, on the western side, sheltered from the prevalent trade winds, there is a diminutive lagoon, bounded by two natural breakwaters of coral reef running from the Northern and Southern ends of the island. Fires are lit on the clean, white sand, under the scraggy pandanus trees, and the natives boil their yam food and the eggs of the wild sea fowl, collected on the spot. When darkness closes in and the fires draw them all into a circle, the Kula talk begins again.

Let us listen to some such conversations, and try to steep ourselves in the atmosphere surrounding this handful of natives, cast for a while on to the narrow sandbank, far away from their

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homes, having to trust only to their frail canoes on the long journey which faces them. Darkness, the roar of surf breaking on the reef, the dry rattle of the pandanus leaves in the wind, all produce a frame of mind in which it is easy to believe in the dangers of witches and all the beings usually hidden away, but ready to creep out at some special moment of horror. The change of tone is unmistakable, when you get the natives to talk about these things on such an occasion, from the calm, often rationalistic way of treating them in broad daylight in an ethnographer's tent. Some of the most striking revelations I have received of this side of native belief and psychology were made to me on similar occasions. Sitting on a lonely beach in Sanaroa, surrounded by a crew of Trobrianders, Dobuans, and a few local natives, I first heard the story of the jumping stones. On a previous night, trying to anchor off Gumasila in the Amphletts, we had been caught by a violent squall, which tore one of our sails, and forced us to run before the wind, on a dark night, in the pouring rain. Except for myself, all the members of the crew saw clearly the flying witches in the form of a flame at the mast head. Whether this was St. Elmo's fire I could not judge, as I was in the cabin, seasick and indifferent to dangers, witches, and even ethnographic revelations. Inspired by this incident, my crew told me how this is, as a rule, a sign of disaster, how such a light appeared a few years ago in a boat, which was sunk almost on the same spot where the squall had caught us; but fortunately all were saved. Starting from this, all sorts of dangers were spoken about, in a tone of deep conviction, rendered perfectly sincere by the experiences of the previous night, the surrounding darkness, and the difficulties of the situation—for we had to repair our sail and again attempt the difficult landing in the Amphletts.

I have always found that whenever natives are found under similar circumstances, surrounded by the darkness and the imminent possibility of danger, they naturally drift into a conversation about the various things and beings into which the fears and apprehensions of generations have traditionally crystallised.

Thus, if we imagine that we listen to an account of the perils and horrors of the seas, sitting round the fire at Yakum or Legumatabu,

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we do not stray from reality. One of those who are specially versed in tradition, and who love to tell a story, might refer to one of his own experiences; or to a well-known case from the past, while others would chime in, and comment, telling their own stories. General statements of belief would be given, while the younger men would listen to the tales so familiar, but always heard with renewed interest.

They would hear about an enormous octopus (*kwita*) which lies in wait for canoes, sailing over the open seas. It is not an ordinary *kwita* of exceptional size, but a special one, so gigantic that it would cover a whole village with its body; its arms are thick as coconut palms, stretching right across the sea. With typical exaggeration, the natives will say: '*ikanubwadi Pilolu*,'... 'he covers up all the Pilolu' (the sea-arm between the Trobriands and the Amphletts). Its proper home is in the East, '*o Mnyuwa*,' as the natives describe that region of sea and islands, where also it is believed some magic is known against the dreadful creature. Only seldom does it come to the waters between the Trobriands and Amphletts, but there are people who have seen it there. One of the old men of Sinaketa tells how, coming from Dobu, when he was quite young, he sailed in a canoe ahead of the fleet, some canoes being to the right and some to the left behind him. Suddenly from his canoe, they saw the giant *kwita* right in front of them. Paralysed with fear, they fell silent, and the man himself, getting up on the platform, by signs warned the other canoes of the danger. At once they turned round, and the fleet divided into two, took big bends in their course, and thus gave the octopus a wide berth. For woe to the canoe caught by the giant *kwita*! It would be held fast, unable to move for days, till the crew, dying of hunger and thirst, would decide to sacrifice one of the small boys of their number. Adorned with valuables, he would be thrown overboard, and then the *kwita*, satisfied, would let go its hold of the canoe, and set it free. Once a native, asked why a grown-up would not be sacrificed on such an occasion, gave me the answer:

A grown-up man would not like it; a boy has got no mind. We take him by force and throw him to the *kwita*.

Another danger threatening a canoe on the high seas is a big, special rain, or water falling from above, called *Sinamatanoginogi*. When in rain and bad weather a canoe, in spite of all the efforts to bail it out, fills with water, *Sinamatanoginogi* strikes it from above and breaks it up. Whether at the basis of this are the accidents with waterspouts, or cloudbursts or simply extremely big waves breaking up the canoe, it is difficult to judge. On the whole, this belief is more easily accounted for than the previous one.

The most remarkable of these beliefs is that there are big, live stones, which lie in wait for sailing canoes, run after them, jump up and smash them to pieces. Whenever the natives have reasons to be afraid of them, all the members of the crew will keep silence, as laughter and loud talk attracts them. Sometimes they can be seen, at a distance, jumping out of the sea or moving on the water. In fact, I have had them pointed to me, sailing off Koyatabu, and although I could see nothing, the natives, obviously, genuinely believed they saw them. Of one thing I am certain, however, that there was no reef awash there for miles around. The natives also know quite well that they are different from any reefs or shallows, for the live stones move, and when they perceive a canoe will pursue it, break it up on purpose and smash the men. Nor would these expert fishermen ever confuse a jumping fish with anything else, though in speaking of the stones they may compare them to a leaping dolphin or stingray.

There are two names given to such stones. One of them, *nuwakekepaki*, applies to the stones met in the Dobuan seas. The other, *vineylida*, to those who live 'o *Muyuva*.' Thus, in the open seas, the two spheres of culture meet, for the stones not only differ in name but also in nature. The *nuwakekepaki* are probably nothing but malevolent stones. The *vineylida* are inhabited by witches, or according to others, by evil male beings. Sometimes a *vineylida* will spring to the surface, and hold fast the canoe, very much in the same manner as the giant octopus would do. And here again offerings would have to be given. A folded mat would first be thrown, in an attempt to deceive it; if this were of no avail, a little boy would be anointed with coconut oil, adorned with arm-shells and *bagi* necklaces, and thrown over to the evil stones.