

“*Masawa – bogeokwa si tuta!*”

Cultural and cognitive implications of Trobriand Islanders’ losing their knowledge of how to make a “*masawa*” canoe

Gunter Senft

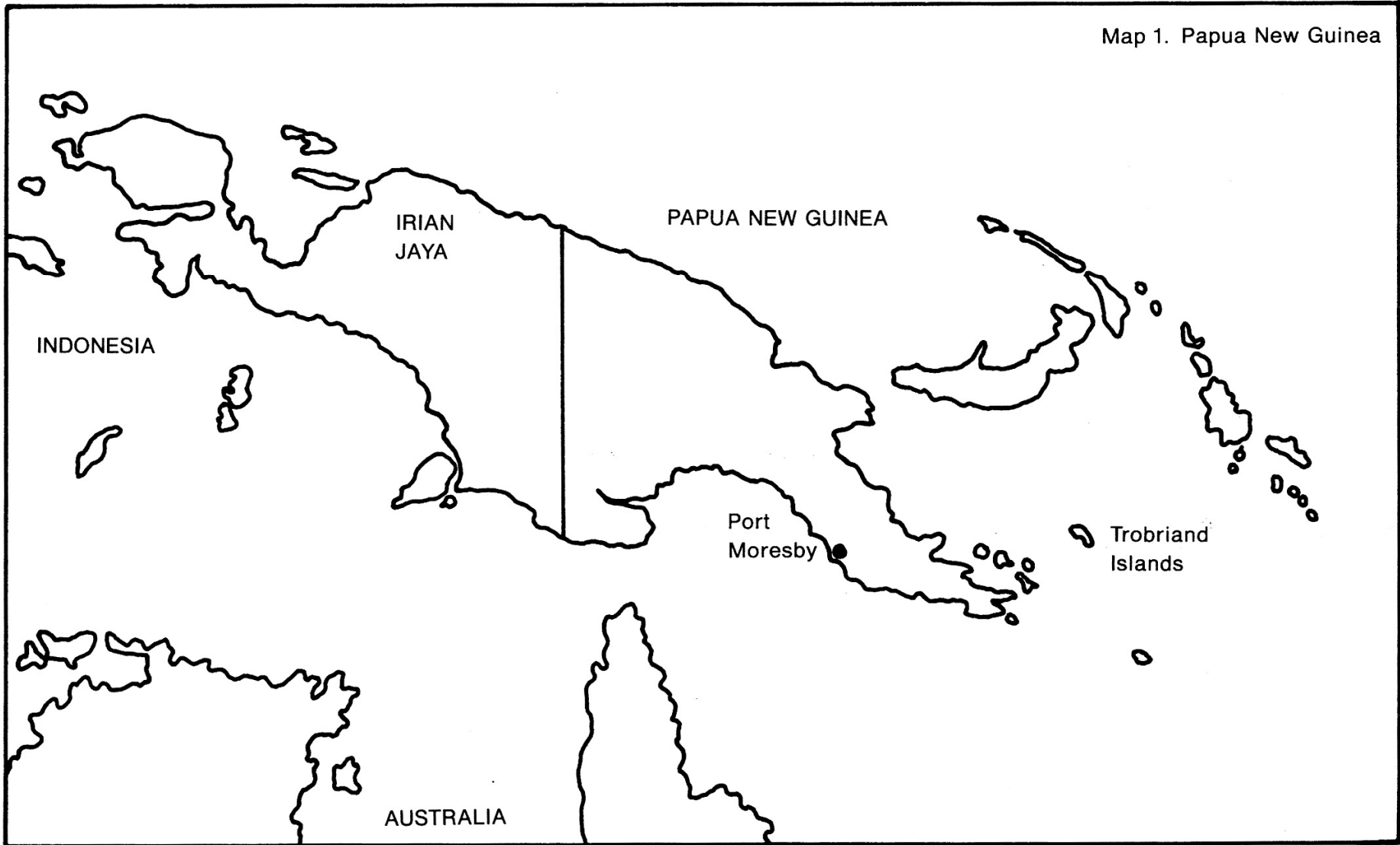


MAX-PLANCK-GESellschaft



Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics
Gunter.Senft@mpi.nl

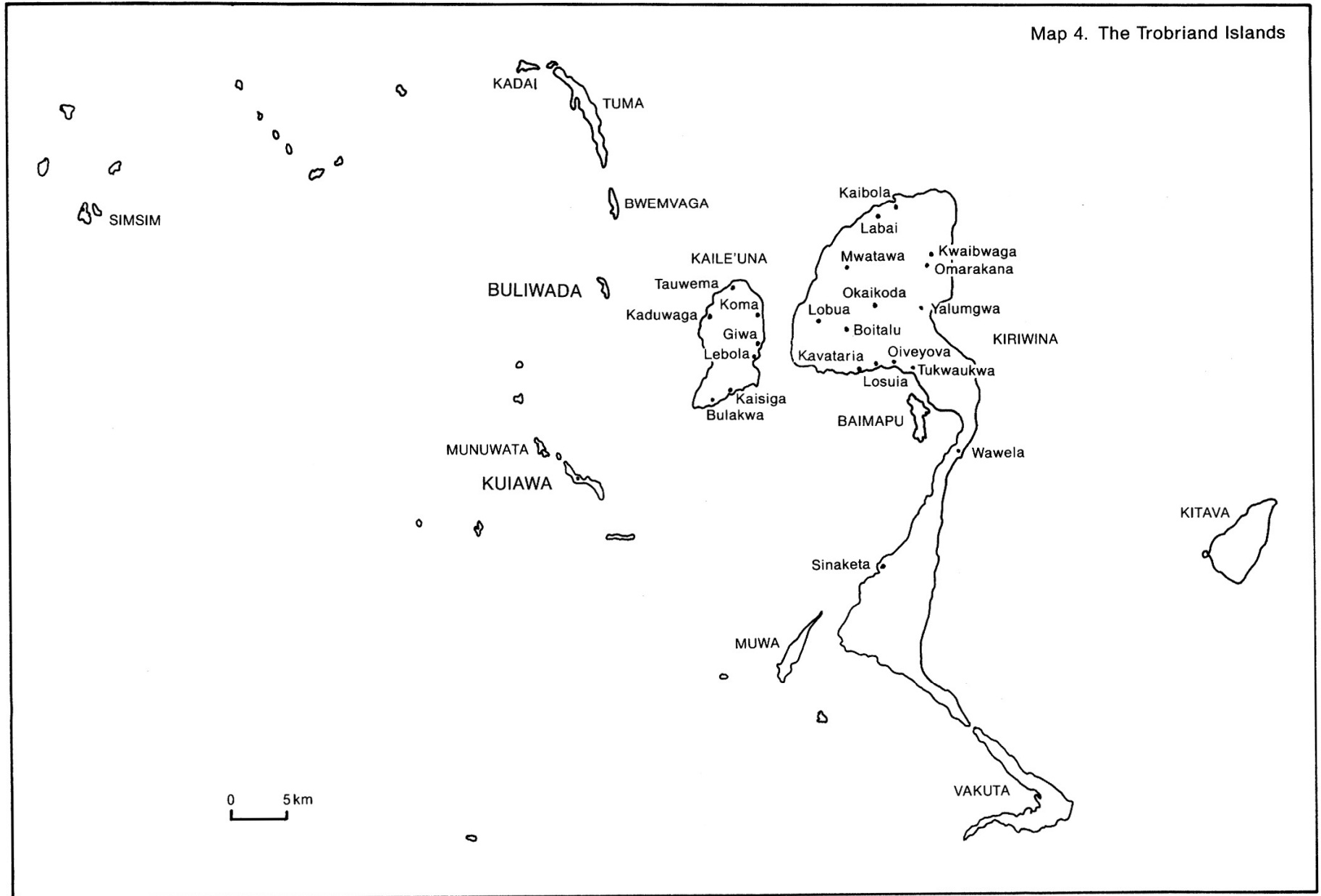
Map 1. Papua New Guinea



Thanks to Barbara Senft for drawing this and the next map.

The Trobriand Islands, Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea.

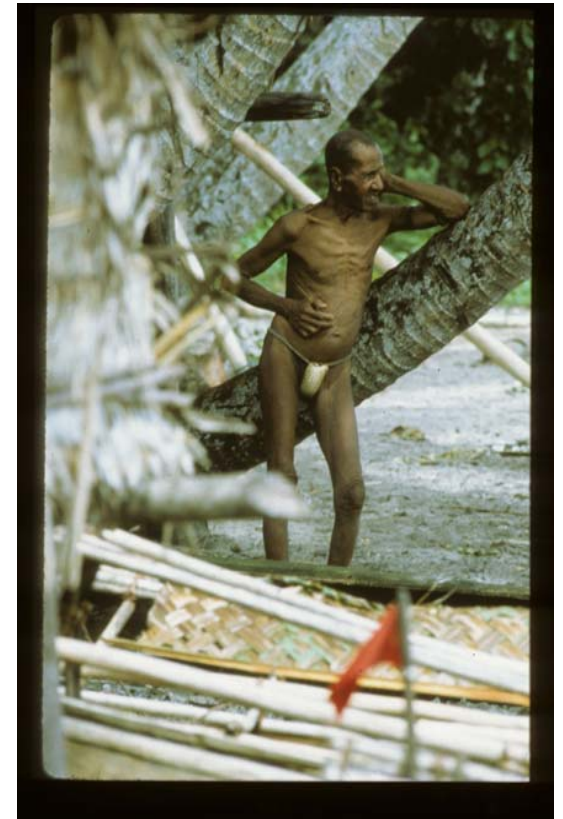
Map 4. The Trobriand Islands



Trobriand Islanders and their language:

North-Massim; gardeners, slash and burn cultivation; excellent carvers, canoe builders and navigators; matrilinear, but virilocal;

Language: Kilivila: Austronesian, West-Melanesian Oceanic
Papuan Tip Cluster



Tauwema



1982: my first “*masawa*” canoe sailing close-hauled to Kiriwina

8 “*masawa*” canoes in Tauwema

1992: 1 “*masawa*” canoe in Tauwema

1996: 0 “*masawa*” canoe in Tauwema



“*Masawa - bogeokwa si tuta!*”

“*Masawa*” canoes – it’s over their time!

In this talk I will first describe:

- how the Trobriand Islanders used to make their “*masawa*” canoes and their sails;
- what forms of different knowledge and expertise they needed to do this during various stages of the construction process;
- how this knowledge was socially distributed; and
- the social implications of all the joint communal activities that were necessary until the canoe could be launched.

Then I will answer the question

- why the complex distributed knowledge of how to make a “*masawa*” has been gradually gotten lost in most village communities on the Trobriand Islands.

Finally I will outline and discuss the implications of this loss

- for the Trobriand Islanders' culture,
- for their social construction of reality, and
- for their indigenous cognitive capacities.



Photograph: B. Malinowski

The “*masawa*” canoe’s sociology:

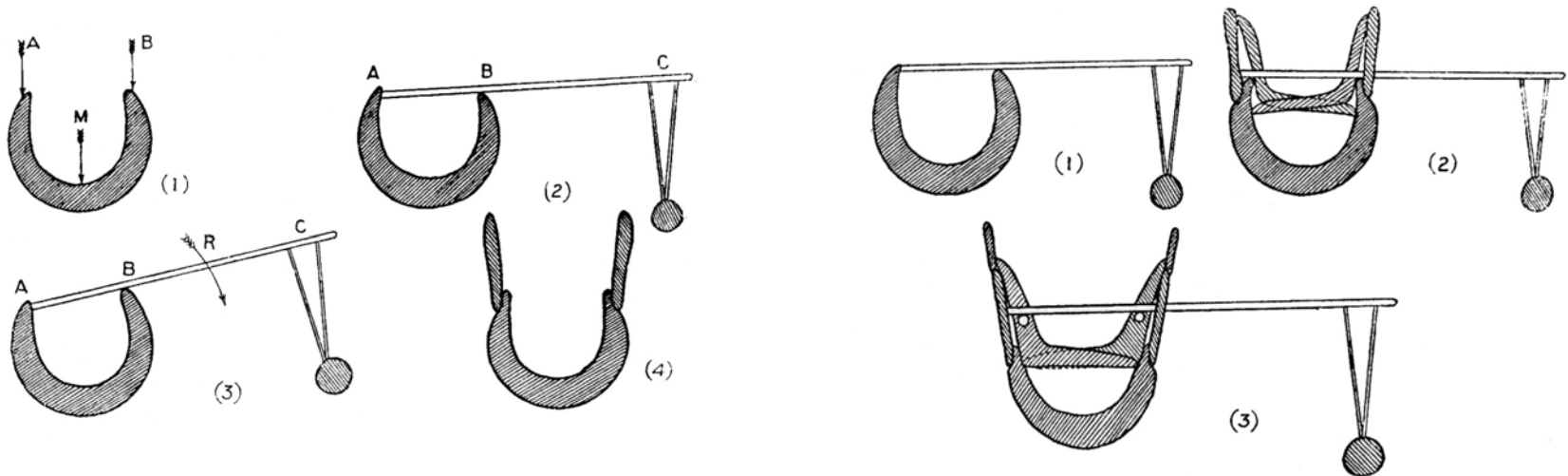
Canoe owner – “*toliwaga*”:

- no longer privilege of chiefs only (Malinowski 1922:114), but of respected persons with influence and authority in their village;
- still solely responsible for building their “*masawa*”,
- initiates the building and acts as spokesman in everything that has to do with the construction and the sailing of the canoe;
- selects expert craftsmen and magicians and has to be able to pay them;
- has to accumulate enough food and other wealth items (stone blades – “*beku*”; belts – “*kaloma*”; necklaces – “*kuwa*”; etc.);
- selects the crew for his canoe;
- makes sure that all magical rites that go with the construction of a “*masawa*” are properly performed.

Essentials of the “*masawa*” construction:

6 – 10 m long **dugout** with pointed massive ends, watertight, immersible, and able to carry heavy loads.

- Lateral **stability** provided by **outrigger** construction: however, float provides asymmetrical stability only – stability when (wind) forces press down on side of canoe body then outrigger is lifted out of the water: therefore **float always windwards!**



Diagrams: Malinowski (1922)

- Stability also increased by volume and depth of the dugout (planks added; closed by prow boards that break waves) and by distance between dugout and float (usually a quarter of the length of the dugout, covered with a platform)

The making of a “*masawa*”

phases/protagonists/activities/magical rites/meals & prizes (sponsor toliwaga)



1.) “*Toliwaga*” searches for several days for a tree
(*calophyllum inophyllum*? Helfrich 1984:47)
for the dugout.

It should be slightly bend to give dugout its sickle-like shape,
transport to village should not be too difficult / cumbersome



2.) “*Toliwaga*” publicly announces his intention to build a “*masawa*” and invites all his fellow-villagers to a common meal (“*katuyuvisa*”) – one day



3.) Next day: the “*toliwaga*” and helpers (kinsmen & friends) clear the bush around the tree.

The “*toliwaga*” or an expert magician offers a gift to the “*tokway*” (dwarf-like being living in trees) and performs the “*tokway*” magic.

“*Toliwaga*” invites helpers for a picnic at another place.

“*Toliwaga*” or expert magician whispers magic on axes; the men fell the tree, measure it, trim it, lop off branches, start cutting it into desired length (6 – 10 m) and into the rough shape of the dugout.

All this is done on one day!

3.) Next day: the “*toliwaga*” and his helpers finish their cutting of the log into the rough shape of the dugout.

On the same day the “*toliwaga*” again sponsors a communal meal for all villagers.



5.) A few days later: the “*toliwaga*” and his helpers go to the tree again to bring it to the village.

The “*toliwaga*” or an expert magician put the “*kaymomwa’u*” spell on the log to make it lighter.

The log is brought into the village:





The log is brought to the village.

During this heavy work the “*toliwaga*” distributes food, betelnuts & pieces of cooked pig. These gifts – “*puvaya*” are announced like prizes distributed during harvest competitions.

All this is done in one day.

6.) The following day the “*toliwaga*” cuts off the rope with which the log was pulled to the village. Then he starts hollowing out the log first with his axe, then with his “*ligogu*”-adze.

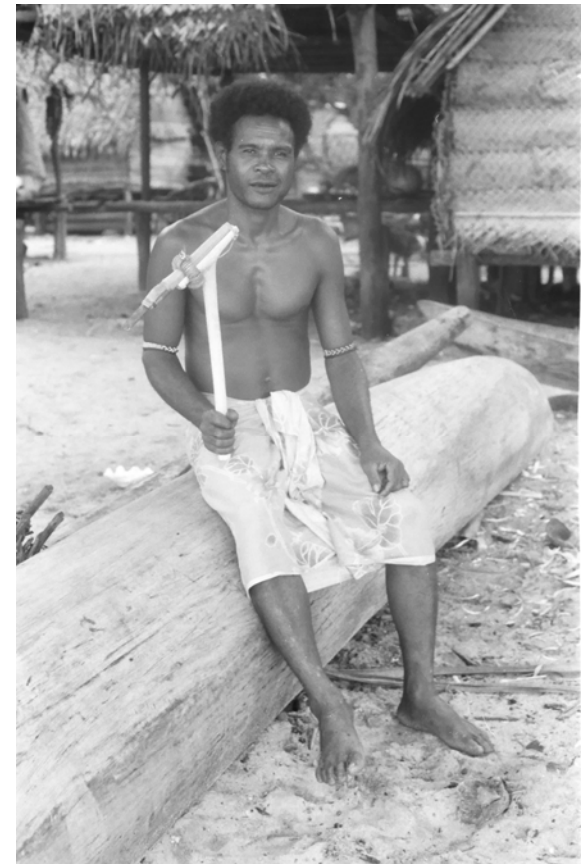
The “*toliwaga*” or an expert magician whispers several times “*ligogu*”-magic (the “*Kapitunena Duku*” spell) over the adze, as soon as he has started to work with it.

This process may last for several months.



During this time the helpers of the “*toliwaga*” construct a shed for the dugout.

When the outside of the dugout has received its final polish, the “*toliwaga*” takes a different kind of adze (“*lali*” or “*kavilali*”) which is inserted in a handle with a movable part. He then hollows out and cuts the inside of the log. Another “*ligogu*”-spell is recited over these tools.



The dugout is hollowed out and polished.

Now the “*toliwaga*” or an expert master-carver (“*tokabitam*”) carves the canoes “*pusa*” and “*talapwapwa*” decoration patterns at both ends of the dugout.

To do this he must use carving magic.



7.) In the following months the “*toliwaga*” and his helpers make the other parts of the canoe:

the “*gelu*” – L-shaped ribs

pairs are put together (form U-shape)

for holding the side planks

4 broad long planks to form the gunwale

long poles for longitudinal support of the ribs and for the outrigger platform and short poles needed as transversals for the platform and as supports for the outrigging

small sticks which connect float with the transversals



Then the “*toliwaga*” or a mastercarver has to carve 4 prowboards

2 *lagim* and 2 *tabuya*



All this done:
End of 7th phase

8.) Now the “*toliwaga*” organizes another communal meal and a get together which lasts for one day.

On that day the “*toliwaga*” also pays the expert craftsmen and magicians and his friends for their work and support.

9.) The “*toliwaga*” and his helpers then start making the float & the outrigger construction and ensure that all parts of the canoe are ready for being bound together.

This takes about two weeks.

10.) When all parts of the canoe are ready:

Expert magicians perform the

“*kapitunela nanola waga*” rite = “cutting of the canoe’s mind”
(the shaping of the canoe’s determination);

- this magic makes the canoe sail with high speed – and the

“*katuiliva tabuyo*” rite over the prowboards

the “*toliwaga*” inserts the “*lagim*” and “*tabuya*” into their grooves

and he and his helpers then make the gunwale and
lash the planks together.

This is done in one day.



11.) After this everybody rests for four days.

12.) Expert magician recites “*wayugo*” spell over ropes and lianae used as lashing creepers.

“*Toliwaga*” and his helpers then tie the planks together.

They construct the connection between canoe & float.

They harden the float in fire and clean it in the sea.

They make the outrigger platform and connect the float to the platform (canoe’s windward side).

They tie all parts together (knots have names).

Helpers build a shed (*buneyova*) for the canoe.

This lasts for a few days.



The outrigger is hardened in the fire.



The parts are tied together

- 13.) The “*toliwaga*” and his helpers now make the “*kebas*” substance (out of a root) for caulking the canoe.



An expert magician recites the “*kebasī*” magic over the substance (scraped parts of the roots mixed with water).

The “*toliwaga*” or another expert caulk the canoe with utmost care! This lasts for a day or two.



14.) The “*toliwaga*” organizes a communal meal for his helpers.

15.) The next day the “*toliwaga*” and his helpers make colors, paint the canoe, its planks, prows, and boards, and decorate the canoe with cowrie shells, sticks and pandanus streamers.

An expert magician performs exorcisms against evil influences.

This lasts for a day or two.

- 16.) One of the brothers of the “*toliwaga*” goes to the bush, cuts trees, brings them to the canoe shed, and builds a slipway from the shed to the sea.

This lasts for a day.

This night the “*toliwaga*” sleeps in the shed – he will hear whether the canoe was tied together properly.

- 17.) The next day the “*toliwaga*” and an expert magician all day long recite magical formulae over the canoe, the slipway, the pandanus streamers and the conch shell to make the canoe lighter (done before first 4-5 trips).

18.) The canoe is launched for the first time.

An expert magician crawls under the outrigger platform and performs magic to make the canoe light.

Then the “*toliwaga*” names his canoe.

After this he holds the conch with the magical spell in front of the canoe and strong men pull it into the sea.

The magician blows the conch and the villagers come, inspect the new canoe and comment on it.

The “*toliwaga*” and an expert magician wash the canoe and put a spell on it to make it fast.

The “*toliwaga*” and his crew paddle the canoe and try it out on the reef at high tide.



The “*toliwaga*” and his crew paddle the new canoe ashore.

The villagers attack them and throw things at the “*lagim*” until it breaks (therefore the first “*lagim*” is cut thinner than the “*lagim*” proper!)
A broken “*lagim*” = a positive sign wrt the canoes quality.

Then the canoe is pushed up into its shed.

The “*toliwaga*” donates a pig to the person who broke the “*lagim*”, then organizes another communal meal for the whole village community, and distributes valuables to his helpers.

The villagers honor the “*toliwaga*” by singing “*kopaka*” songs.

19.) The “*toliwaga*” and his helpers make

a sail (a triangular ‘Oceanic lateen’ sail),
a mast and its support,
poles for the gaff, and
a lot of rope.

When all this is done the “*toliwaga*” invites his helpers for
a communal meal.



20.) The “*toliwaga*” and his crew do a short distance trial run:

“*i-valakola-si tolilamila*”

they will try out the strenght of the outrigger

sailing the canoe for a few hours clause-hauled

21.) After the first 4 or 5 runs an expert magician performs a special magic to make the canoe light and fast.

His activities last for half a day.



The social distribution of knowledge:

Constructing a “*masawa*” a “*toliwaga*” needs the help of:

- his kinspersons,
- expert craftsmen (carpenters, sail-makers, etc.)
- expert magician(s) [more than 10 forms of magical rites are performed]
- mastercarver(s), and
- the village community.

This distributed knowledge needs to be integrated!

This integration is the central function of the common meals and the distribution of valuables and gifts:

Communal meals & distribution of valuables and gifts:

are strategies of rank striving and self presentation in the highly competitive Trobriand society; they increase the status of the “*toliwaga*”, confirming that he is economically and politically influential and thus able to afford the building of a “*masawa*” canoe.

With their bonding function as rituals of reciprocal care & unification they maintain at the same time group harmony amongst the villagers, integrating experts and other helpers of the “*toliwaga*” as well as all his fellow villagers into his canoe building enterprise.

Thus group harmony is secured:

All parties involved accept:

One of them – the “*toliwaga*” – demonstrates his rank as an economically powerful person

a person who is willing and who can afford – to re-distribute a relatively high amount of his accumulated wealth to them!

(picnic, 4 meals for helpers, distribution of valuables to helpers and experts, other payment for experts (including pigs), 3 meals for the whole village community, during last meal distribution of valueables and donation of a pig for the person who broke the “*lagim*”)

It is not who you are but how you give that counts in Oceania!

“*Masawa - bogeokwa si tuta*”

Making of a “*masawa*” canoe is a complex enterprise which has many social implications for all parties involved.

Knowledge and expertise for doing this is distributed.

Why got this knowledge lost?

Implications of this loss for Trobrianders?

Reasons why...

“*Toliwaga*” must be an economically powerful person.

1983: Government transformed their national economy systems
– mostly barter systems – into a
modern capitalist money economy.

1989: politics highly successful: much money on the Trobriands!

Buying dinghy & outboard engine => cheaper than
making a “*masawa*” canoe

(Petrol and oil were relatively cheap then, too)

Tauwema:

1982: 8 “*masawa*” canoes, (1 dinghy – research team)

1989: 7 “*masawa*” canoes, 3 dinghies

1992: 1 “*masawa*” canoe, 7 dinghies

Consequences of this change:

Expert craftsmen, master-carvers and magicians
were no longer needed => most of them could not find
apprentices any more who paid
them for bequeathing their
knowledge to them.

This knowledge lost its value.

Today: Most of these experts have died –
and with them their knowledge!

Change supported by local missionaries to get rid of their rivals:
the influential and powerful magicians.

Today the “*tomegwa*” have almost completely lost their power.

Globalization:

Growing oil prizes made it expensive to use outboard engines!

Most dinghy owners cannot afford to use their boats any more
⇒ they use the “*ligataya*” or even the small “*kemolu*” type canoe

making these canoes requires a minimum of ritual knowledge
and no knowledge of magical formulae – but they are
not suitable for distant travel!

(done by airplane)

25 years cultural/social changes initiated by a growing capitalist economy and catalyzed by missionaries and by globalization effects => loss of the complex, distributed knowledge of how to make a “*masawa*” and its sails.



Implications of this loss:

Socially: making a “*masawa*” tested and controlled security & stability of a village’s social network
communal effort – cooperation – communal feasts

⇒ loss of technologies and skills + loss of social events

= rituals of social bonding with ritualized speeches having their specific pragmatics

Verbally: knowledge of specific language use is also lost – as well as expert vocabulary in the lexicon and the text category “canoe magic”.

Loss of importance of magic:

Conviction that magic is a means to control nature & incidents affecting ones personal life is lost.

Loss of belief in the magical power of words =>

Political & ritual power vacuum - used by “*misinari*” for their means and ends.

1992 the magician’s ritual and political power substituted by the missionary’s ritual and political power

2009: the register “*biga megwa*” is moribund.

Consequences for the Trobrianders’ capacity to memorize forms of indigenous knowledge (magic + oral history !).

Every generation had to learn & memorize this knowledge.

People who no longer practice to retrieve extensive “chunks” of memorized texts soon lose this capacity – this implies the loss of all forms of indigenous knowledge and oral history!

This will have important consequences for the Trobriand Islanders, their individual & social/cultural identity, their self-evaluation and the complex construction of their social reality.

Loss of knowing how to make a “masawa” is only a small facet within the massive processes of culture change on the Trobs!





Thank you!



