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Vigilant Signage and the Ephemeral in the Magical Landscape of the Moluccas: An Analysis of Nuaulu Scare Charms

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Vigilant Signage and the Ephemeral in the Magical Landscape of the Moluccas: An Analysis of Nuaulu Scare Charms

Roy Ellen 

Abstract

Scare charms, in Ambonese Malay *matakau*, have long been a feature of the Moluccan landscape, but are little documented. They are erected by landowners or resource-owners either in response to infringements and thefts of property or to protect property from interference and theft. The sanction that makes them effective is the threat of spirit or some other kind of supernatural revenge or punishment. This article's systematic treatment of Nuaulu *matakau* from the island of Seram shows how scare charms work as part of a system of sanctions. Particular emphasis is placed on a landscape perspective that permits us to see them as a spatially distributed set of material objects in relation to other physical signs and spiritually supported institutions involved in both resource and environmental management and social control.

Introduction

When one of the high aren palms was going to be tapped, they hung a little fellow in the tree to watch for thieves. He was cut from rough wood, about two feet long, dressed in old rags, with a moustache and a curly head of black palm hairs, a fire red mouth, black-and-white gleaming eyes; and right through him they stuck a black rattan thorn, almost as long as he was himself and as thick as a finger, with the needle-sharp point sticking out in front. Up there in the high palm tree the little fellow couldn't do much harm, but at times he climbed down the small rattan ladder, quick as a monkey, and pursued someone with his thorn! Then you had to watch out, and hide fast. (Dermoût 1958, 27)

When I arrived on the Indonesian island of Seram in 1970 one of the first physical manifestations of the local belief system that I encountered were scare charms or taboo signs. *Matakau*—the Ambonese Malay (hereafter AM) word I use here to refer to them generically—have long been a feature of the Moluccan landscape, often mentioned and briefly described, but on the whole little analysed (e.g. Martin 1894; Jensen 1939, 1948; Sachse 1907, 102–103; Stresemann 1923, 360–64; Tichelmann 1954).

As far as I could see at the time, they were erected by landowners or resource-owners either in response to infringements and thefts of property or to protect property from interference and theft. The sanction that made them effective was the threat of spirit or some other kind of supernatural revenge or punishment.

There are few comparative data to suggest as much, but I strongly suspect that the Nuaulu people in south-central Seram display, use, and organize such scare charms more than most other local groups, partly reflecting connections between scare charms and certain features of a traditional belief system and set of ritual practices. During an initial fifteen months of fieldwork, and subsequently over a lifetime of return visits, I have accumulated a significant body of information on scare charms. I have not analysed this until now partly because it was difficult to see how I could do so as a coherent set of data rather than simply as a list of different types of charm. Stephen Morris once observed in a conversation with me that he faced a similar situation in making sense of certain Oya Melanau religious practices relating to the spirit world of Borneo (Morris 1967) before the advent of structuralism. But at a stroke, or so he claimed, Lévi-Strauss provided a framework that could make sense of hitherto intransigent and diverse data. In the case of Nuaulu matakau, as I propose to show, it is less structuralism that has transformed my understanding of the system of Nuaulu scare charms than a landscape perspective. Comparable magical objects have in the past tended to be treated individually and not contextually or as part of their immediate surroundings. A landscape approach permits us to see them as a spatially distributed set of material objects, and in relation to each other, and to other physical signs and spiritually supported institutions involved in both resource and environmental management and social control. For a useful review of magical prohibitions supporting resource management in general see Colding and Folke (2001), while Hamilton (2002) in particular addresses how 'resource and habitat taboos' protect trees, groves, and forest. For examples from Seram see Ellen (2016) and Sasaoka and Laumonier (2012).

Ethnographic Background and Methodology

Nuaulu today number in excess of two thousand individuals located in six settlements in the Amahai subdistrict of Seram (Figure 1). My fieldwork in the area has spanned forty-five years and ten separate visits. Most Nuaulu settlements lie within the territorially extensive *desa* (local administrative unit) of Sepa, and the data from one of these, Rouhua (3° 21' S, 129° 08' E), are what I largely discuss here. Other groups of Nuaulu have been located since 1980 in the newly established *desa* of Nuanea around the confluence of the Nua and Ruatan rivers, and in the Waraka and Wae Pia areas of Elpapatih Bay, where they have lived since communal unrest between 1998 and 2002. There is a more linguistically separated group in North Seram (Ellen 2012, 301–304).

Nuaulu traditional subsistence focuses on extraction of *Metroxylon sagu* (sago) palm starch, hunting, swidden cultivation of roots and other crops, and the gathering of forest products. Although there is some freshwater fishing, and a few households

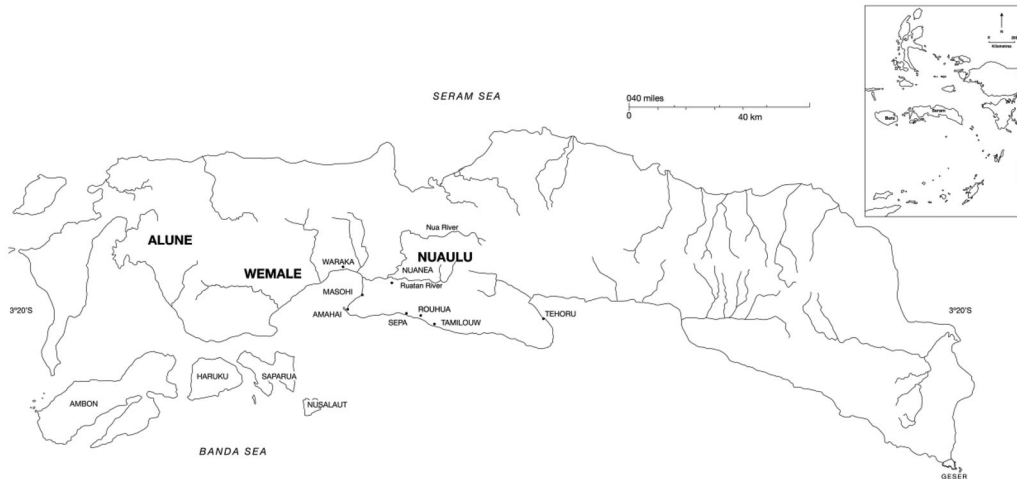


Figure 1. Seram and adjacent islands, showing the main locations mentioned in the text (outline map drawn by Neil Hopkins, modified by author).

engage in marine fishing, the main subsistence orientation is towards the forest and mountains, consistent with their self-conception and history as a people. Although located away from the coast before the 1880s, Nuauulu have long engaged with the world economy. Before the modern period they contributed forest products (timber, rattan, resin) to the regional exchange system, although during the twentieth century they were drawn into a cash economy centred on copra and clove. Cash-making has diversified in recent decades, although these two commodities remain the most important. Most Nuauulu within Sepa adhere to beliefs and practices that set them apart from surrounding Muslims and Christians, with consequences for how they interact with and manage their environment; but all, regardless of religion, respect the force of matakau.

The account and treatment provided here are largely based on a corpus of some 107 individual scare charms and related signs (see [Appendix](#)), the details of which I was able to record. These often included photographs or sketches (forty-seven instances), and at the time or subsequently were discussed with those who made them, or with other people who were aware of them and their power, and who commented upon them. Although my main attention here is focused on scare charms seen around the Nuauulu villages of Rouhua, and to a lesser extent Bunara and Niamonae, as I travelled more widely in the central Moluccas from 1971 onwards I recorded scare charms wherever I saw them and where people were willing to discuss them. It is the physical matakau (and the ethnographic case material associated with it) that constitutes my unit of analysis here, and in some respects the corpus can be treated as we might treat museum objects in a collection or assemblage of material culture. They differ from museum objects, however, in that they are difficult to collect, both because of the ethical issues surrounding them and for practical reasons: they are fragile, rudimentary, and ephemeral objects that quickly deteriorate except under exacting curatorial conditions. They are also

inherently contextual and relational. No wonder they are poorly represented in museum collections of charms.¹

For these reasons I rely here mainly on photographs and occasionally sketches. The original photographs have been deposited in the collection of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in London. Not all are reproduced here, but the identification numbers for all photographs that form part of an individual case are provided in the [Appendix](#). The record number is provided in the text or in figure captions where relevant.

Definitions, Materiality, and Some Conceptual Issues

The Ambonese Malay word ‘matakau’ is usually translated by Nuauulu using the word *wate* (they are also sometimes known as *masinnate*). However, ‘matakau’ is so widely used throughout the Moluccas to refer to scare charms that I use it here to include *wate*. In the languages of Sepa and Tamilouw, the historically dominant polities along the coast of south Seram, and in which most Nuauulu are fluent, matakau are called *wata kau* or sometimes *wawa laio* or *wawa taio*. They are employed by people in all populations to deter theft and premature harvesting or to punish culprits following theft, usually protecting resources in swiddens or groves. Nuauulu will say that *wate* are about *pena*, meaning things you should not do or which anticipate supernatural judgement. As devices to protect and regulate resources they connect and overlap with similar institutions, such as *sin wesie* and *sini* (AM *sasi*), and with other physical signs erected to signify ownership and to dissuade others from certain actions, but which are not necessarily accompanied by supernatural or collectively agreed sanctions (*asinane*, *kakinate*; or simply AM *tanda* [sign]). While matakau are placed in the landscape by individuals (although always as members of descent groups or sacred houses owning them) in response to perceived threats or actual thefts, they often support the functions of both *sasi* and *sin wesie*, which are time-limited controls on harvesting negotiated within a social group. The relationships between these various types of sanction are discussed further in the following. Matakau themselves, however, are ethically neutral—they are made by those with both good and evil intent.

In elaborating the concept of matakau we need to start with the physical entity ([Figure 2](#)). If charms ‘are objects invested with magical power [which] ... may be of very different forms and for many purposes’ (RAI 1951, 188), then matakau are unlike many charms. They are not concealed like amulets but have to be visible to work. Thus, their materiality is especially significant. However, they are also created quickly from readily available materials and have a short life, beginning to decompose and deteriorate within a few weeks of their manufacture and erection. Little effort is involved in their construction. In this respect they are not unlike other charms that have been reported in the ethnographic literature from around the world and which may serve various purposes: knotted palm fronds, hanging stones, corncobs on a string, pieces of red cloth, combinations of mundane objects (see e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1937, 424–78; and especially Doris 2011, particularly photographs therein). In the wider context of studies of magic and charms in the Malay and Indonesian worlds they are



Figure 2. Types of Nuaulu matakau in the vicinity of Rouhua: (a) frame type, with a sign for the thieved item below the horizontal bar (torch batteries) and the sign for the punishment threatened above, April 1970 (70-05-01); (b) frame type featuring rough images of rats and crabs above the bar to punish a thief for a stolen machete (carving below the bar), March 1970 (70-03-24); (c) split stick type with a piece of sago stem pith as a stretcher, associated with sago extraction, June 1970 (70-06-26); (d) hanging type, in a lime tree, stone supported by fibre string (sketch 13, May 1970); (e) single upright type with bar across the top (for theft of pineapple), February 1971 (71-18-03). All images by author.

seldom encountered. None are mentioned in Skeat's otherwise comprehensive overview. There are a few reports, such as that by Tichelman (1954) on Batak *pohung*, although their distribution is still a matter for empirical demonstration, and Forth (1981, 116) for Sumba. The theoretical interest has been, rather, in underlying and unifying cultural beliefs (Skeat 1965; Endicott 1970). Neither does Malinowski (1965, 151) report scare charms to counter theft in his otherwise comprehensive treatment of Trobriand garden magic. He describes simple magical instruments relevant to other aspects of the agricultural cycle, but not as scarers directed at humans. This may be because they are ethnographically absent.

Physically, matakau mostly comprise a single upright post or a frame that supports the charm itself. Most are freestanding, planted in the ground and resting on one or more uprights; but some may be attached to a tree, hung or stuck into the trunk, or attached to a garden hut or house. Of the matakau that I recorded, eleven consisted of a single upright with attachments. One involved two freestanding single uprights (one for the protected element and one for the protector) and one a single upright with a supporting diagonal post; one was hanging in a tree; fifteen were of the simple frame type, and a few were hybrid (e.g. frames, but with an attached 'bottle matakau'). Often several one-stick types occur together, and sometimes a frame in combination with a stick type, forming an array. Other matakau comprise more complex physical arrangements, with several connected or freestanding forms. A few protected houses or garden huts (Figure 5f), although the *matakau baileo* I recorded for Nolloth on Saparua (Record 79) is not known among the Nuauulu. Another visibly striking form of matakau is constructed with a roof of sago palm thatch or within a kind of 'house' to protect it. The roofed or housed matakau tends not to be used by Nuauulu, but I have seen them used by Sepanese and in nearby Butonese villages. They tend to be associated more with Muslim groups who deploy them in combination with written inscriptions (Figure 7). Among these non-Nuauulu groups the charm element is placed under the roof, usually in a bottle.

Matakau are ontologically and conceptually diverse, an observation which belies their common physical resemblance. For the system to work, people must be able to read the code embedded in the physical signs. The simplest way of understanding how this might be done is to divide the matakau into the component parts, that is objects with properties, each with a symbolic meaning (mostly non-arbitrary) derived from the place assigned to it among other similar parts. This semiological approach, applying ideas from Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, is comparable to that used by Caroline Humphrey (1971, 271 and 274) in interpreting Buryat *ongon*, but has since been much elaborated.

In reading the physical sign, the important feature of a frame type of matakau is that a signifier of a protected or stolen item generally hangs below the bar, while the magical element signifying the kind of punishment inflicted on thieves or would-be thieves is placed above the bar. The materials from which the supporting frameworks are constructed are generally simply suitable pieces that come readily to hand. However, the charm itself or active content of the matakau will vary depending on the theft being anticipated or countered: coconut shells, coir, and fronds for coconut or copra; leaves, stalks, and tubers of swidden crops; models in sago leafstalk (*Nua tope*, AM *gaba-gaba*) of an item stolen, or a threat entertained. The substance composing the inside of sago leafstalk is pliable and easily worked, much like balsa wood or polystyrene. The threat may be represented by a crude model of a pig or other animal made from sago leafstalk, specific abstract shapes made from other materials that signify the punishment to be inflicted, such as by a spear, or bow-and-arrow, or snakebite. The components may vary also depending on the perceived identification of the thief as male or female. Thus, two circles of leaf may signify the testicles, and a long spine placed between them the damage intended. A perception

of the thief as female may be marked by an internode of bamboo with bunches of grass protruding from either end, signifying hair (Figure 5a). Such elements are combined with samples of objects that have been stolen or which the owner wishes to prevent being stolen, such as the leaves and tubers of taro, or a torch/flashlight. Spines and splinters, like so many pins or wooden toothpicks, are a common element, reflecting an imagery and logic found globally in the practice of ‘sympathetic magic’ (Skeat 1965, 570–73). Matakau will often be seen with small pieces of red cloth attached and tied to elements in the construction. Nuaulu call these *karanunu sinte*. ‘Karanunu’ refers to the red cloth that features widely in most important rituals, that is worn on the head and loins of all post-pubertal men, especially when conducting ritual, and which represents the spiritual or magical force of the ancestral spirits invoked. ‘Sinte’ is any decoration that evokes the leaf form of *sinsinte* (the croton *Codiaeum variegatum* that also figures prominently in Nuaulu ritual life). Pieces of the variegated long trailing ribbon-like leaves of one variety will sometimes be used instead of, or in addition to, pieces of red cloth (Ellen 2021a). The construction of a wate protective figure can be seen clearly in Figure 3a: the carving of a dog is made from sago leafstalk with red cloth attachments, one eye of small white stone, and a second white stone pushed into the anus. The white stones are part of the active ingredients.

How Matakau Work

Despite the visual prominence and interactional significance of the physical matakau, the essential ingredient that activates it is intangible, often involving a specific form of words. This type of spell, incantation, or magical formula (generically *toa* or *kasi-kasi*) is also called ‘wate’ by Nuaulu, and a spirit is said to inhabit the physical entity once it has been primed. As Margaret Florey (1998, 207–208) has indicated for the now mostly Christianized Alune of west Seram, Nuaulu incantations are also ‘formulae containing words imbued with the power to bring about certain ends—cures for ailments, social control’, while wate (the word also used by Alune for an incantation) protects designated resources. This cannot happen until the actual structure has been completed and an invocation made to the spirits concerned, usually spirits of middle-ranging (sometimes named) ancestors of the kind summoned by mediums, or the spirits of animals invoked in a spell and physically represented by the material sign. Thus, the term ‘wate’ simultaneously refers to the physical entity and to the ‘oath of prohibition’ or incantation, typically named for a spirit that protects a resource (Florey 1998, 215–16). Charms are then ‘planted’, that is put in place. If a thief admits responsibility but suffers as a consequence of the wate, a follow-up curative incantation can be applied by an owner once a victim has confessed. Thus, a wate causing a stomach ailment can be cured with a counter-spell linked to the original wate that caused the ailment. The structure of the incantations, and the difficulty of translating what is often archaic language and sensitive knowledge, means that it is a struggle to say much about them. However, the language of Nuaulu charms displays the conventions of ritual speech reported for other parts of eastern Indonesia—



Figure 3. Details of carvings used for matakau in the vicinity of Rouhua, south Seram: (a) a protective magical dog made from sago leafstalk with red cloth attachments; one eye contains a small piece of white quartzite, a second has been inserted in the anus under the tail; L = 190 mm without tail (UKC, Ellen 1996.08; IMG-1636); (b) *wate katanopune* (crab), *unu onate* (big head) or *wate enu*, placed by a midden near the shore, to prevent people throwing further rubbish. Violation is said to make the head swell to an enormous size and for blood to pour from the mouth, together with uncontrollable defecation (dysentery) leading to death, July 1975 (75-02-22); (c) *wate rui-rui* (cassowary) in garden hut belonging to Numapena Sounaue-ainakahata, used to protect *kama kamine* (*Canarium asperum*) resin, Yana Ikinge valley, March 1996 (96-12-14). All images by author.

repetition, parallelism, lexical pairing, analogy, synonymy—while addressing an ancestral spirit, the sun, or the moon. Nuauulu incantations often have a tripartite structure, the first element of which is a respectful address to the godhead: *Upuku Anahatana, nante tuamane* (Lord Anahatana, the sky and the earth). Contemporary formulae may be attenuations and simplification of longer traditional formulae.

Matakau work because those who see one in the landscape believe it to be the physical presence of spells activating spirits who can harm them if they contravene the instruction coded in the sign. Alternatively, thieves when they see that a matakau has been erected following a theft for which they are responsible, will ‘know’ that unless they make recompense and admit their responsibility, the threat coded in the physical sign will likely be activated: they will become sick or suffer some other kind of misfortune. How the threat materializes may vary. If the sign, for example, contains a carving of a cassowary, then the thief will at some point in the future be kicked by a

cassowary while in the forest. The threat need not involve the physical animal, but rather a spirit avatar. As Komisi Soumori (for many years the village head in Rouhua) explained to me, if you are a thief perched on an outrigger canoe engaged quietly in fishing then a cassowary spirit may kick you overboard and you will drown; if you are climbing a coconut palm and you fall and break a limb it is because the cassowary spirit has kicked you. This is based on the shared knowledge that the powerful kick of a cassowary can be fatal, and on the belief in the invisible presence of the manifestation of the cassowary in the wate on all occasions when the thief is likely to suffer from it.

To be effective a matakau has to be primed with the spirit entity that is believed to motivate it. Without the spirit, of which it is simply the physical emanation, a matakau, in theory, will not work. However, it is likely that many matakau are erected without being primed in this way, where individuals do not know the spells that are thought to be appropriate, know them incompletely, or know them only in ways that most people would regard as illegitimate. In some cases, signs may be erected that deliberately intend to deceive others that they are matakau, or just to frighten, and which hopefully have the desired deterrent effect without the efficacy. After a matakau has been primed there is a kind of amnesty period, during which a thief may return the stolen goods. In some Muslim communities in the Moluccas, the amnesty period is nine days, auspicious in Muslim calendrics and numerology (Crowder 1996).

Once a Nuaulu matakau has achieved its purpose, either by catching a thief or by preventing theft of a resource that has now been harvested or removed, then the activating spirits need to return to the place where they permanently reside, often a clan sacred house. Physically, they have no permanence, which accounts for their rough and ready appearance. In November 1970 Lohia Peinisa returned to a clan sacred house the spirit of the wate which he had erected some months previously. Similarly, when a 'special' wate is old, broken, and has outworn its usefulness—sometimes there may be no physical trace surviving—the person who erected it must return the spirit to the clan sacred house by wrapping it in a karanunu (red cloth) and presenting it to the guardian ancestral spirits whence it came. Because this kind of wate is associated with a sacred house and activated by the indwelling ancestral spirits, the clan ritual elder who receives it is required to wear the correct ritual attire. These ritual actions of 'returning the wate to the great house' or 'fetching the spirit of the wate' strictly only apply to *wat onate* (*noi num anoi*), the 'great wate of the inside of the ritual house'. The more commonplace *wate inamatane*, 'everyday matakau', do not require the same elaborations as those made for a great house spirit. In some places, matakau can also be deactivated by dousing the physical sign with water, or burning it, practices I have not witnessed for Nuaulu.

Diversity of Form and Purpose

Matakau come in a wide variety of forms, both physically and conceptually, and each requires some person to have acquired the requisite knowledge to create them, both

the material entities and the esoteric knowledge that they embody. They may be classified and named in a number of ways, depending on whether the emphasis needs to be placed on the resource protected or stolen, the threat that it delivers, or the physical form of the charm. A selection of these is shown in Figure 4. Most are designed to protect a user from the theft of produce growing in swiddens or groves (say, taro or coconuts), or of property such as chickens (a *hutu* [nest] charm), eggs, or growing calabashes. While most address the theft or potential theft of grown produce, some are directed at the theft of other kinds of property, such as torches/flashlights (Figure 2a), machetes (Figure 2b), or valuable heirloom ceramics (*mau inane*; *mau-mau* referring to a kind of magic and *inane aie* to *Trochus* shells) (Figure 5b). Others still may protect generic property such as the entire contents of a garden hut or ceremonial house. While it is generally assumed that wate are

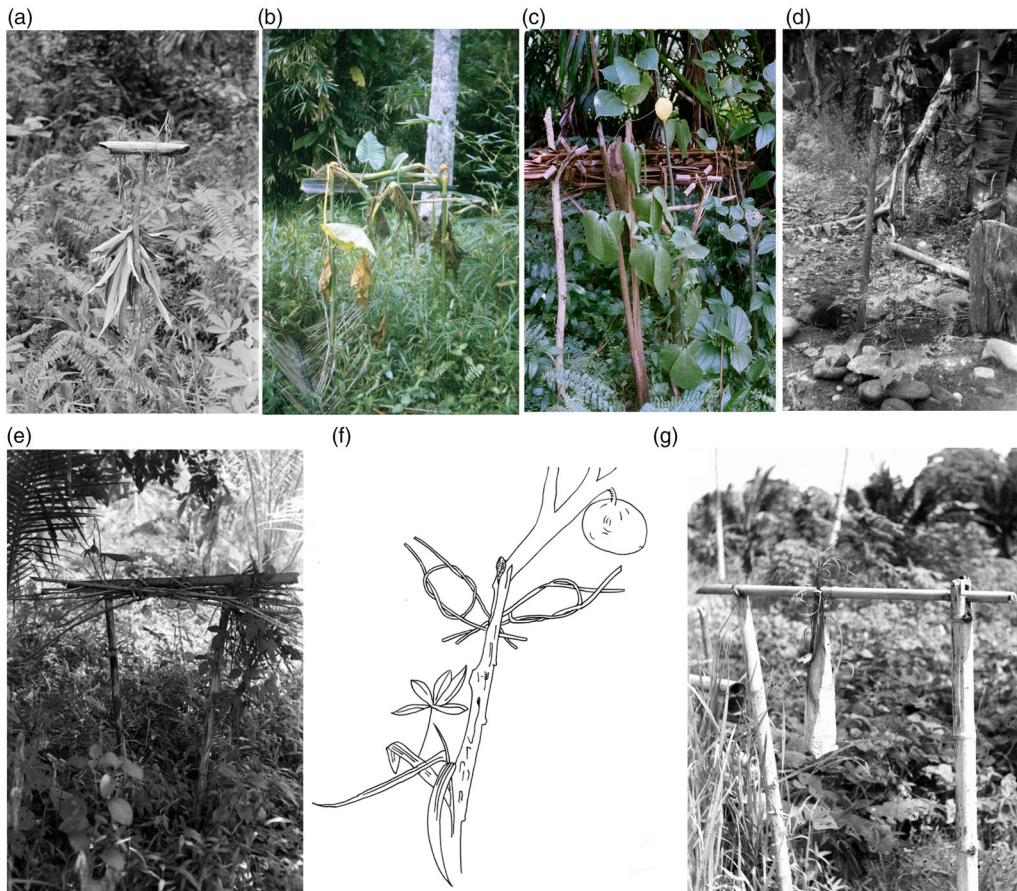


Figure 4. Varieties of Nuaulu wate from the area around Rouhua in south Seram, specified by resource protected or stolen: (a) *wate sesene* (pineapple, *Ananas comosus*), February 1981 (81-04-19); (b) *wate yohoru* (arrowleaf or elephant ear, *Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), September 1970 (70-10-26); (c) *wate hatane* (sago, *Metroxylon sagu*), February 1996 (96-07-14); (d) *wate kanapua* (cotton, *Gossypium barbadense*), June 1970 (70-06-22); (e) *wate kasipii* (cassava, *Manihot esculenta*), August 1975 (75-04-26); (f) *nusi onate* (pommelo, *Citrus maxima*), July 1970 (S70-08); (g) *wate hatane* or *akatanai* (meaning 'very sharp'), specifically for sago, March 1970 (70-28-04). All images by author.

purposed to influence the behaviour of humans, some are directed at supernatural malevolent forces. For example, a *wate sakahatene* is erected to ward off a common kind of evil spirit that takes or tampers with sago. It is typically erected when a sago palm has been felled and has to be left overnight or for longer.

Alternatively, *wate* can be classified and named by the punishment they inflict (Figure 5); for example a *wate hatu* ('stone matakau') causing hardness and pain in the stomach and an inability to eat, a *wate rari-tiga-tigane* causing malaria and cut feet, or a *wate teke onate* delivering a nasty snakebite. Other *wate* inflict mosquito bites, the swelling of internal organs, infection and inflammation of various kinds, or pain through the agency of chilli piquancy, or they threaten arrow wounds. There are *wate poro-poro* (bringing a plague of the tree frog *Litoria infrefrenata*), *wate tahu anai* (a swelling of the testicles), *wate aswan* or *wate rui-rui* (the kick of a cassowary), *wate matakopue* (eye infections resembling the slime produced by a land snail), *wate nimo anai* (threatening elephantiasis), *tinasmui* (earache), *loka uni* (headache), *hatan totue* (backache), and *kamane* (sepsis resulting from an abrasion). A *matakau tombong* is likened to a mortar or cannon exploding, and can bring about swelling and stiffness. A particular animal species may be chosen because it is totemic for the clan owning the matakau (e.g. *wate enu*, referring to the marine turtles *Dermochelys coriacea* and *Eretmochelys imbricata* respected by Neipani-tomoi), but in general terms the severity of the punishment chosen is an attempt to match estimates of the damage done.

Scare Charms as Part of a System of Social Control

Nuulu scare charms are associated with clan-specific beliefs and are often totemically connected. As Marcel Mauss (1972) famously argued, magic, although performed by individuals, only makes sense when considered as a 'social fact'. Today, we might say that magic is fundamentally 'relational', requiring not only a practitioner and a recipient, but also an audience, congregation, or social context of others who can assess its effectiveness, and learn and reproduce its functionality for succeeding generations. Charms of all kinds, and not especially matakau, can be owned and used by particular clans (see Table 1), either of the two complementary sacred houses (*numa*) that normally comprise each clan or by individual descent lines. For example, in 1970 Surita Matoke-pina and all his offspring possessed the *wate nunu unte* (sea shell) or—its synonym—*wate matakopue* (literally 'putrid eye', but also the name of kind of land snail, referring to its sticky emission), which induces an eye infection. Many clan heads prefer not to talk about the matakau knowledge they possess. Thus, each clan has the power to send sickness of a particular kind designated by a particular name. It alone also has the power to remove the spell. The words used to describe particular *wate* are also used in everyday speech as expletives, which itself may instrumentalize magical power.

Use of a particular *wate* is not, however, restricted to those who own it. For example, Figure 5f shows a *wate kamane*, borrowed by Poli Matoke-pina from the clan Soumori to prevent theft from his Makoihiru garden house. Owners may permit



Figure 5. Types of *wate* organized in terms of the punishments they deliver: (a) *wate tahu anai* on new garden belonging to Maineo Neipani-tomoien on lower reaches of Mon river: threatens a punishment of swollen testicles, August 1973 (73-05-14); (b) *wate mau inane* (lit. curse [to retrieve a stolen plate]), on the Sepa path but near and belonging to Bunara. The figures represent a crocodile or monitor lizard and signify that the person who has stolen the plates will be bitten by one and might be killed. The man, when he sees the *wate*, may return the plates or pay some equivalent in cash, Bunara, August 1975 (75-03-25); (c) *wate tahu anai* (see caption to [Figure 4a](#)) protecting coconuts on the Awao, August 1970 (70-08-24b); (d) *wate mnanate*, belonging to Lohia Peinisa (*mnanate* = death adder, *Acanthophis antarcticus*), September 1970 (70-11-15); (e) schematic pig with red cloth strips, April 2015 (15-1852); (f) *wate kamane* (delivering a small cut or abrasion that turns septic) borrowed by Poli Matoke-pina from the clan Soumori to prevent theft from his Makoihiru garden house, August 1973 (73-05-22). All images by author.

Table 1. Examples of Nuaulu wate grouped by owning clan.

Clan	Type of wate	Threat	Physical form
1 Matoke-pina	wate poro-poro (tree frog, <i>Litoria infrafronata</i>) wate tahu anai (testicles) wate matakopue (land snail numu matakopue) wate sonane (celibacy)	Itching and stomach-ache Swollen penis and testicles Eye infection, kopue = rotting, decaying Sexual malfunction	Crude images of tree frogs made from sago leafstalk Two circles of sago leaf, one for each testicle pinned with sago leafstalk splinters Rolled kinawane leaf (<i>Agave cantala</i>) with spines removed, placed in split stick Bamboo and sago leafstalk
2 Soumori	wate nimo aiai (ghost of a child corpse) wate kamane (damar resin)	Swollen limbs and stomach (lymphatic filariasis) Small cut or abrasion that turns septic	Length of rattan with a knot in each end and eight coconut leaves placed in between Wrapped resin of <i>Agathis dammara</i> , <i>Shorea selanica</i> , <i>Canarium asperum</i> , or <i>C. decumanumum</i>
3 Neipani-tomoien	wate tinasumai (stabbed ear) wate nutu inae (to fall down dead) Wate loka uni (pinching sickness) wate hatan totue (sago leaf) wate kamane (damar resin)	Earache Broken back, hip, pelvis (<i>sitai</i>) Headache, 'makes you feel half-dead' Backache, body ache Malaria, cough	Piece of shaped sago leafstalk with projecting sharp slivers of bamboo (for male thieves) Piece of sago leafstalk placed in split stick Two coconut shells hung together with rattan, in which are placed a few stones Leaf of sago placed through a split stick Package of small pieces of resin with slivers of deer legbone, hung in roof of garden hut
4 Peimisa	wate mnanate (death adder, <i>Acanthophis antarcticus</i>)	Fatal snakebite	Death adder figures carved from sago leafstalk, carving of machete hanging below
5 Sounaue-ainakahata	wate aswan or wate rui-rui (cassowary, <i>Casuarius casuarius</i>) wate (so)kakatene (kind of evil spirit)	Kick, either by a real cassowary or by its spirit form Backache, spinal sickness via spirit attack	Crude models of cassowaries made from sago leafstalk inserted above bar of same material, in garden hut Piece of <i>dhutaune</i> (<i>Calophyllum inophyllum</i>) bark placed in split bamboo

others to use magical incantations and objects on request; for example, amulets that protect the health of young babies, or charms to encourage the frizzy hair of some girls to straighten and grow lanky. But material objects so used can only be activated by the presence of spirit power introduced by the person who owns or has access to it. Magical charms including wate, if not the knowledge that activates them, are therefore in continuous circulation, a resource for exchange and networking, both between Nuaulu social groups and within the wider multi-lingual community. Since Nuaulu are reckoned to be especially knowledgeable in the realm of matakau, they may frequently be sought by non-Nuaulu to achieve a particular purpose. For example, Om Piet Tutuarima, a good friend with whom I would regularly stay in the port village of Amahai during the early 1970s, an educated man with an interest in Moluccan separatist politics, on one occasion requested a matakau from Komisi to protect his banana orchards which were constantly the subject of theft.

Given the small size of the Nuaulu community and its social integration through in-marriage, there are other sanctions at the disposal of individuals, both supernatural and otherwise. Matakau alone are not necessary to protect property nor to seek retrospective justice following theft. However, Nuaulu themselves generally argue that the greater threat comes from the non-Nuaulu living among them and in close proximity. Since 1970 the size of this group, and especially the number of incomers from other islands, has grown markedly. It would seem that the use of matakau has grown accordingly as Nuaulu have felt more threatened. There is a widespread belief in the efficacy of matakau on Seram which cuts across religious affiliation. In a modern context they are a way of avoiding police involvement, which can escalate a dispute, assuming that police resources are available.

Viewed from a conventional social anthropology perspective, matakau and other kinds of scare charm function, therefore, as part of a system of social control. They are activated by individuals, or by groups on behalf of individuals, to prevent theft or to seek revenge, punishment, or recompense following a theft; they are either preventative or restitutive measures, or both, usually fully visible in the public domain. If a person suffers as a result of going against the will of a matakau, or where matakau are erected to catch a thief who admits guilt, they are said to be possessed by the spirit of the matakau. Once possessed, an individual can only rid or 'cleanse' themselves of being captured in this way by paying a fine to the individual or group that owns it. The fine varies in form depending on the severity of the offence acknowledged and the kind of matakau, but indicatively comprises one metre of red cloth, one large plate, and two rings. Such items are the traditional currency of ritual fines throughout Seram. For Nuaulu, the red cloth represents ancestral spirits; the plates represent the house, clan, or descent group that owns the matakau; while the rings are said to symbolize its all-seeing eyes. Following payment, the guilty person is required to drink as much water as possible and wash the body thoroughly to completely remove all influence and contamination.

Often, matakau are simply erected as a matter of course without conscious thought—there are hundreds of them, not in all but certainly many gardens and groves. In other cases, it is a clear response to a deliberate threat or to an actual

theft, or recent experience of theft. A degree of uncertainty in how to respond to matakau is reflected in the widespread acceptance of ‘tolerated taking’ (Blurton-Jones 1987) of resources by others. Resource owners are often accused of being miserly (*aumene*: AM *isi kikir*) for not allowing others to take small quantities of coconuts, fruit, wood, and so on, and where this happens on any scale the perception may be that the owners are being taken advantage of. No doubt, some thieves use the cultural tolerance of taking small quantities as a pretext for wholesale harvesting. What, then, should a person do who has taken some small amount and then finds themselves subject to a matakau, sorcery, or some other kind of spirit attack? We must conclude that there is an evident tension between the customary acceptance of tolerated taking and seeking revenge following accusations of theft.

Matakau are often portrayed as being related to ‘sasi’, that is collective agreements to delay or limit harvesting within a particular jurisdiction, announced by erecting signs that to the casual gaze often resemble matakau. The sasi sign, however, is clearly different to the experienced observer, comprising a large frame in which stripped coconut fronds hang below the bar with coconut husks placed on the top of each upright (see Ellen 2016, 13, figure 2). Moreover, as we have seen, the focal meaning of matakau (*wate*) is as a scare charm used to protect in advance or to exact punishment following theft of property. Although often supporting sasi or *sin wesie*, matakau are mostly used by individuals to protect personal and household gardens, through clan-specific supernatural sanctions. T. Volker (1925, 294) long ago noted the terminological slippage between ‘sasi’ and ‘matakau’. In 1970 Komisi in Rouhua placed a Nuaulu *wate* under the heading of ‘sasi’, saying that one was for individual and other for collective action. For von Benda-Beckmann et al. (1995, 5), working on Ambon in the 1980s, matakau was a kind of ‘private sasi’. But there is another difference. Whereas a sasi sign is a warning against harvesting and theft, and a threat that any infringement will result in supernatural punishment, a matakau sign may be both a preventative measure and follow theft, to exact retribution. More significantly, terrestrial sasi pertain to collectively held *dusun*, that is plantation land (usually coconut, clove, or nutmeg), while matakau usually pertain to individual trees (e.g. betelnut), gardens, and groves, rather than to *dusun* in this sense. Also, inland fishing rights are more likely to be protected by matakau than sasi.

The Nuaulu concepts of *sin wesie*, *sini* (‘sasi’), and *wate* undoubtedly overlap, but the focal meaning of each is different. I have argued elsewhere (Ellen 2016) that matakau can be differentiated from other forms of resource regulation in a number of ways. To elaborate: first, both matakau and sasi usually operate for the duration of the harvest, say two weeks to several months, whereas *sin wesie* operate over a period of years. Second, matakau operate at an individual and household level rather than in a more inclusive grouping (although different types may be ‘owned’ by clans), are arranged quickly, come and go without much coordination, and apply to areas of no more than a hectare. Third, matakau focus on either a particular species or on a restricted space (say, all cultigens in a swidden). Fourth, protection of ordinary swiddens, and annual root or seed crops, is usually vested in matakau instituted by an individual. Fifth, matakau can in theory be used to protect any

owned or processed resource, but swidden crops—such as yams or taro—are more likely to be the focus. Last, matakau may regulate both cash crops and crops for home consumption, and they are more likely to protect resources that take the most time and effort to produce.

Scare Charms in the Spatio-Temporal System

The empirical observation of events, and the traits by which we access all belief phenomena, are distributed differentially through space and time: they have, if you will, a ‘natural history’ and vary in their occurrence depending on other socio-cultural factors. This has, for example, been shown for the study of witchcraft, where under the influence of positivist social anthropology, and particularly exponents of the Manchester school, a quantifiable case-study approach was influential during the 1960s and 1970s, using both contemporary and historical records (Marwick 1967; Macfarlane 1970). My analysis is based on 107 records, summarized in the [Appendix](#), that might be plausibly treated in a similar way, although of course they are not sourced from official written records. While we can accept Marwick’s (1967, 242–43) cautionary advice not to confuse rates with raw frequencies, and recognize all the other methodological hazards of quantifying instances of belief, it is not unreasonable to treat the physical manifestations of Nuauulu wate as a proxy for individual cases, and a point of entry into the intangible and social world of matakau.

The distribution of Moluccan matakau over historical time is the most difficult dimension to access, but they are referred to in several nineteenth-century ethnographic accounts (e.g. Riedel 1886, plate xiii; Martin 1894, 2: 52 and 303). Those described by Karl Martin ([Figure 6a](#) and [6b](#)) are essentially the same in their material form as those made by present-day Nuauulu, and can be seen to be related to various kinds of warning sign backed by ‘superstitious beliefs’ and ‘sasi’ reported for different parts of the Moluccas over the longer term (Martin 1894, 2: 52 and 303). The edifices described by Henry Forbes (1885, 395) as matakau for Buru seem to function differently from the scare charms described here, being more repositories of sacred objects. No doubt ‘matakau’ has served as a useful portmanteau term for a number of different structures that involve objects that can be manipulated magically to deliver certain ends. However, the thatched roof of the structure described by Forbes resembles what I call here a ‘house matakau’. There may well be some convergence in terms of generic design of ritual structures where objects have to be protected. The account provided by Adolf Jensen (1939; 1948, 260–61) for the Wemale of West Seram suggests organizational and functional features much the same as I have described for the Nuauulu, including a list of types named according to different kinds of aggressive animal accompanied by the consequences for a victim (crocodile > limb injury, cassowary > insanity, chicken > insanity, wild pig > stomach-ache), and so on.

It is difficult to know the extent to which the use of matakau might have fluctuated since these earlier reports. Certainly, during the 1970s matakau were extremely common, and I have not noted any diminution in their use since then. In fact, with population growth and a stream of new settlers, whether spontaneous

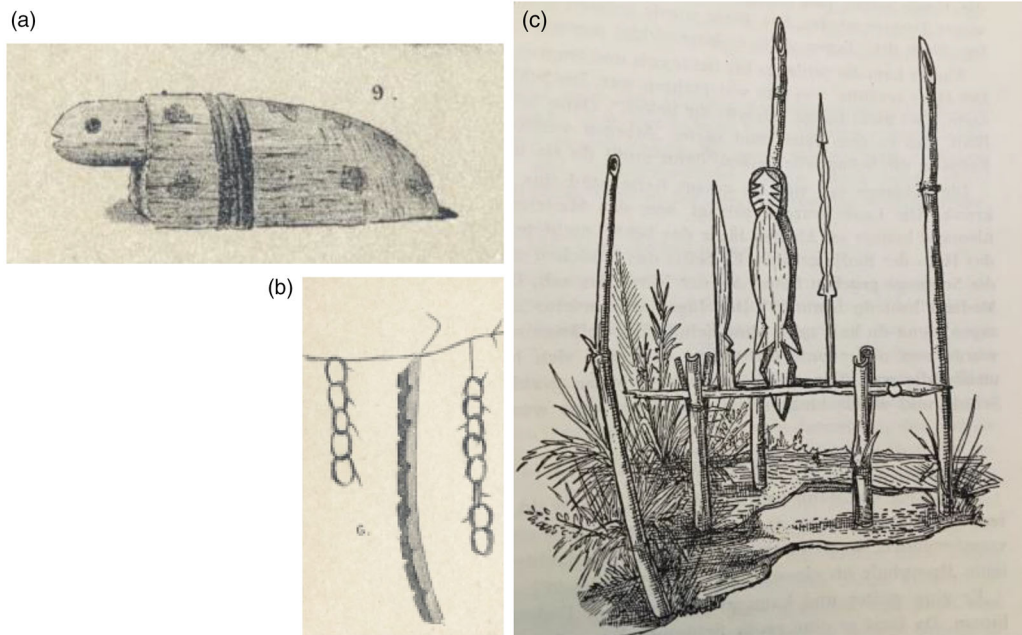


Figure 6. Representations of matakau in earlier writings: (a) in the form of a turtle on Buru (Martin 1894, plate viii); (b) two types of matakau from Wablon on Buru (Martin 1894, plate xxxii); (c) Wemale, west Seram (drawing by Albert Hahn in Jensen 1939, 151). Image copyright and courtesy Frobenius Institut, Frankfurt.

migrants or those arriving under the auspices of government transmigration schemes, it is likely that tension and incidents of theft and perceptions of malicious intent have risen, and consequently the conditions for implementing matakau. Widely in the Moluccas, matakau have survived conversion to Christianity and Islam, and are everywhere part of a syncretic complex of ideas that also includes sorcery, divination, magic, and the veneration and fear of ancestors, most likely since before the sixteenth century. Distributional and interview data suggest that matakau are more likely to be found in Muslim areas where the dominant strand of Islam remains syncretic. Christian churches, especially of the Protestant variety, appear to have been more disapproving. This was the pattern at least until the period of communal conflict between 1999 and 2003, and the ascendancy of stricter Wahabi interpretations of Islam. There is no direct evidence to support the claim, but I think it also likely that use of matakau peaked during the period of communal unrest between 1999 and 2003, as state and community-level forms of social control proved inadequate, but as levels of experienced insecurity rose (see e.g. Ellen 2004).

A common form of matakau in Muslim areas (Figure 7) is the ‘bottle matakau’ (e.g. *watu botal*, in Warus-warus, east Seram) where a verse—koranic or from some other sacred text—or some other magical formula is written in Arabic or *jawi* (Malay in Arabic script) on a piece of paper placed in a bottle (mainly to protect the inscription from damage). The bottle is then placed over a cut stick and stuck in the ground near the resource to be protected. Sometimes these bottle matakau are found with a thatched cover (hence ‘house matakau’), and sometimes a plastic bag may be placed

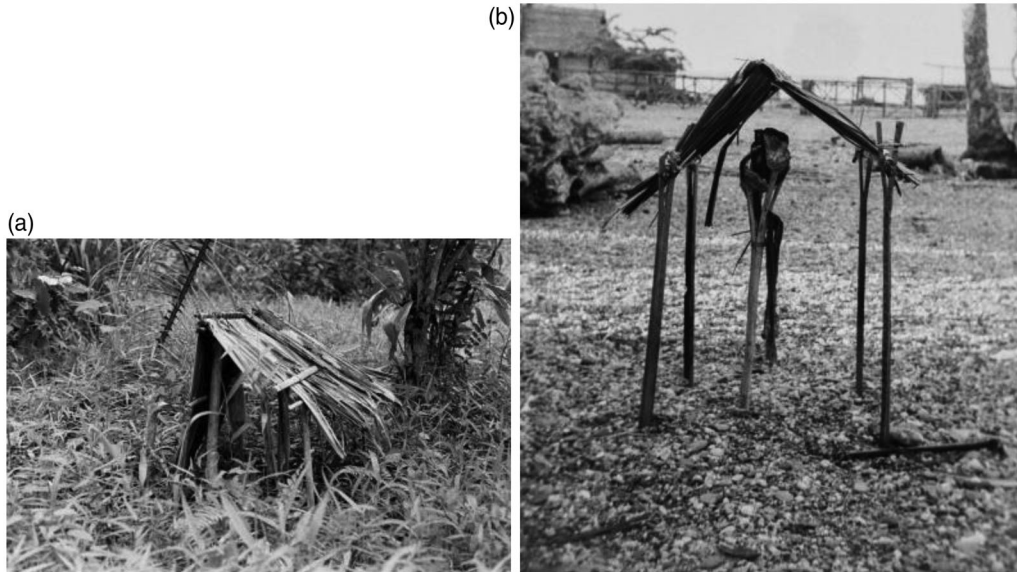


Figure 7. Bottle matakau: (a) Fanta bottle in which a piece of paper has been inserted bearing an inscription in Arabic characters, probably Butonese, along the Upa valley of south Seram, February 1981 (81-04-18). A plastic bag has been placed over the bottle and tied with a piece of bamboo; (b) bottle matakau with thatched roof, Yainuelo. The uprights of the structure are about 46 cm high, with a roof of sago thatch. The active element consists of a bottle, a clamshell and piece of red cloth in a forked stick. Butonese settlement, March 1970 (70-02-21). All images by author.

over the whole and tied at the neck with bamboo thread. Bottle or house matakau are part of a long tradition in the wider Malay world of harnessing the power of Islam—together with the potency of the written word—in societies with restricted literacy, using charms to effect magical ends and cures (e.g. Gimlette 1971, 106–17; Skeat 1965; see also Goody 1968). Sometimes areas where matakau are in operation will be advertised using written signs proclaiming *awas ada matakau* (danger, here be scare charms!). Matakau are also found in areas where Christian churches assert their incompatibility, although different denominations and individual priests and pastors vary in their tolerance of magical practices. As with *sasi* (see Ellen 2016), matakau can even be harnessed to serve the institution of the church, as in the *matakau negeri* made of a coconut frond, a circle of rattan, and wood, and kept in the ‘baileo’ (custom house) at Nolloth on Saparua island in 1970 (Record 79). We have already noted how members of Christian and Muslim communities may acquire the use of a matakau from Nuaulu or from other unconverted groups. Crowder (1996) describes matakau made by a *dukun* (healers or shamans who generally do not charge for their services) on the north Moluccan island of Bacan, and the importance of God and Allah in making matakau effective. Both Christian and Muslim prayers and biblical or koranic verses can be crucial both for the effectiveness of such matakau and to counter their effects. One belonging to Sepa and placed along paths to a Nuaulu settlement in 1973 was erected by a man who went into the forest and never returned. After about two or three months it was destroyed as it had manifestly failed.

In explaining fluctuations in matakau appearances over time, we are on safer ground when looking at distributions along recurring socio-ecological cycles. From my own data it is clear that evidence for the use of matakau varies seasonally, depending on what plant foods are being harvested. Particularly sensitive to matakau use are crops with high market value, both international (clove, copra, nutmeg) and local (durian). Of the total number of records, most relate to the protection of coconut palms and harvested nuts during the copra season. In places, intense economic activity during the copra season can result in a perfect ‘epidemic’ of matakau, as in the area around Tamilouw and Ampera (predominantly Muslim settlements) during early April 1970 (Records 7–37). Coconuts can be harvested eleven to twelve months after flowering, and harvested every two to three months, but the period of harvesting nuts for copra is less determined by when the nuts are mature (which is continuous) than by the annual rainfall cycle. Thus, in south Seram, copra harvesting and processing tends (on the basis of my data) to fall between January and April, although October to December are also possible harvesting months. Certainly, the rainy season of May through to September will be avoided. It would not provide optimal drying conditions, and in the past rain and monsoon conditions also influenced the use of vehicles on tracks and the availability of sailing boats. Thus, market factors such as the availability of buyers also determines copra activity. Post-harvesting processing is quite lengthy. Social factors such as the Islamic calendar can influence harvesting agreements in some areas, and are often regulated through *sasi*. Clove is less likely to be subject to matakau, since harvesting and processing flower buds and stalks is a complex and labour-intensive process, therefore less susceptible to opportunistic theft, although post-harvest drying can present thieving opportunities. Thus, the number of matakau in a landscape reflects the ecology of plant maturation and fluctuating economic demand, and the overall economic importance of crops.

Matakau in the Context of Landscape Semiosis

The Nuaulu landscape is full of signs, magical and otherwise, not only those associated with matakau, but others that do not carry the same semantic load or come with potential supernatural sanctions. Matakau, *sasi*, *sin wesie*, and also more secular signs (*tanda*) need to be understood as part of a single system at a landscape scale, both semiotically (e.g. as a system of Saussurian signifiers and things signified) and ecologically (in terms of their objective consequences in the environment). In this system there are many different kinds of intentional sign in addition to those so far mentioned: *asinane*—wayside signs signifying a blocked path, or indicating a route, or someone’s previous presence; marks on trees (*sapu*); signs indicating recently butchered animals that re-connect their spirits with the ancestors (*asunaete*: Ellen 2021b, 201–203, figure 9.1); *sin wesie* signs marking boundaries of areas of mixed forest reserved for resourcing ritual events. There are signs marking temporary piles of firewood to be later removed by an owner; signs preventing the tipping of rubbish on unauthorized middens or middens that have exhausted their capacity; signs warning of the presence in the vicinity of spear-traps (*supana siaia*) (Figure 8);

protective fencing (*kokone*) around young plants or around sacred plants, such as *Cordyline fruticosa*; signs constructed to attract cuscus (an arboreal possum) required for sacrifice following the death of a stillborn child in some clans (*kiha tiha*); felled trees placed across a path to prevent access to a clove or coconut grove (Record 98); or a coconut frond placed against a boarded-up door of a house temporarily vacated. Other human-made signs are inadvertent (smells, footprints, crushed grass and broken branches, and other indications of previous presence). These all have to be understood as part of a single predominantly visual sensory system, an environment intrinsically imbued with spiritual forces and infused with magic. All are additionally evidence of individual agency and control in a vegetal environment that is constantly trying to restore and re-assert its dominance over human intrusion.

But phenomena not the result of deliberate or inadvertent human intervention can still be 'signs' and no less symbolically mediated. Animal prints, scat, scent, and other traces are important in hunting. Fallen trees may be ominous, a bird appearing in a particular way at a particular juncture, or a snake lying across a path (*tamneane*) may be the result of spirit intervention, foretell danger, and dictate avoidance behaviour. I argue here that it is instructive to look at the relationship between a suite of signs that operate in any one location with regard to the ritual regulation of environmental



Figure 8. *Supana siaia*, warning sign indicating the presence of spear traps in which the pointed piece of bamboo indicates the direction in which the trap is located, May 1970 (70-06-09). Image by author.

relations, rather than focusing on just one type. All parts of the experienced landscape are invested with and interpreted through cultural meanings from the perspective of the perceiving individuals or groups (after the fashion of Jakob von Uexküll's 'Umwelt': see e.g. Kull 2010), and each has a distinct socio-ecological impact with different consequences. Such a holistic spatial view is consistent with other theoretical frameworks visualizing landscape as a sign system or a text (Lindström, Kull, and Palang 2011).

In his compelling study of Nigerian scare charms (Yoruba *aale*), David Doris (2011) describes how rudimentary human-made objects exercise power in social relations and serve as power points in a landscape. *Aale* work as assemblages of natural and person-made objects (Doris 2011, 4), objects that animate the landscape much as *matakau* and related signs do on Seram. While in an obvious sense 'folk art', they are less an art-form than an 'anti-aesthetic' (Doris 2011, 14), objects which acquire their power from 'the ontology of the broken' (2011, 217). As physical signs, both *aale* and *matakau* signal the actions and potential actions of spirits, spirits that are natural entities in a landscape no less than are animal species, and like them in terms of perceptual overlap in the ways they are cognized and linguistically organized, and interact with humans (Ellen 1993b, 176–79; Boyer 1993, 129). This sometimes makes their meanings tricky to interpret. It is helpful in understanding how Nuaulu and other inhabitants of Seram navigate and negotiate their physical landscape to treat it as a unified field of objects for which the motivations to cause harm cannot automatically be assumed to be the same. And just as human mundane interventions in the landscape marked by signs are not uniformly distributed, so are the interventions made through magic and spirits. We can see in the Nuaulu data on *wate* an irregular and asymmetric distribution both geographically and temporally. Geographically, *wate* are less likely to be found within the village and in very remote locations where only Nuaulu, and Nuaulu belonging to particular resource-use groups, visit. They are more likely to be found along heavily used paths, in areas where swiddens and groves belong to people from different clans, villages, and language groups, and in areas where high-value market crops grow. Certain places display a greater or lesser density, sometimes resulting in arrays, thickets, or veritable forests of *matakau*, and elsewhere empty spaces. In the Appendix I report an enormous number of records for 8 April 1970 (54) in the Tamilouw–Ampera–Makoihiru area, at the height of the copra harvesting season, and across several different linguistic and religious groupings. In other situations, *matakau* may serve as a kind of magical or supernatural fence in a landscape, and it is perhaps not surprising that the large number of records just referred to occur at several boundaries between groups. Moreover, *matakau* may act in tandem with other kinds of signpost, for example an *asinine* indicating the theft of taro can be linked to a *wate poro-poro*, threatening a plague of tree frogs; or be deployed in multiple arrays around nutmeg trees, or protecting a coconut grove on the Yoko River. Record 37 notes the combination of a *sasi* with a *matakau*, and Record 61 combines a *sapu* sign (a mark on a tree) with the accusation of sorcery.

The overall subjective experience for an indigenous participant in such a landscape is reminiscent of descriptions of magical realism in literature (Spindler 1993). By this I

have in mind an assumption of matter-of-factness regarding the fluid juxtaposition and interconnectedness of the natural and supernatural, or of the physical and spiritual. Accepting the reality of such matter-of-factness and fluidity in the lives of ordinary people is hardly new, evident in much of the anthropological treatment of apparently inexplicable causation, from Evans-Pritchard (1937) to its present incarnations in ethnographic manifestations of ‘the ontological turn’ (Ellen 2021b). We can also see the influence of magical realist worldviews in the indigenous and colonial literatures of Indonesia (e.g. Dermoût 1958), as well as in some recent anthropological interpretations that evoke inhabited ‘landscapes’ animated through the political economy of uncertainty. In such landscapes there are often a variety of plausible explanations of misfortune, ways of seeking revenge and of achieving justice, and where the overlaps between crime, witchcraft, divination, and other supernatural interventions are frequent and taken for granted. One such is the subject-matter of Nils Bubandt’s (2015) account of Buli in Halmahera, but for the Moluccas see also Dieter Bartels (1979) or Ellen (1993a). This, then, is the wider context in which Nuaulu matakau must be understood. As Malinowski (1965; see also Gell 1988) taught us, magic is a kind of technology, for many peoples no different from other essential ingredients for getting things done. Like much Nuaulu material culture, the components of their matakau are ephemeral, vegetal ‘minimal tools’. Their physical presence is often difficult to discern in the landscape, merging with competing vegetation and eventually returning to it through the process of decay. The difficulty of visual identification is testified to in many of the photographs used in this article, where the eye has to adjust to differentiate focal object from background. The utility of matakau lasts no longer than their material life. Their permanence is neither ecologically nor socially necessary and were they to persist it would anyway undermine their effectiveness. Indeed, their impermanence is vital to their performance.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

[Supplementary data](#) on records of scare charms and related signs examined in this analysis. Column 8 abbreviations: S70 = 1970 field sketch; BM = British Museum accession number; UKC = University of Kent Ethnobiology Laboratory.

Record	Date	Location	Owning person or group	Items stolen or protected	Response indicated or threatened	Physical form and other notes	Photograph, sketch or specimen
1	03-02-70	Yaimuelo (Tanjong)	Butonese	Undisclosed personal item	Islamic derived curse	Bottle matakau: uprights of the structure about 46 cm high, roof of sago thatch; active element consists of a bottle containing a written charm in Arabic script, clam shell, and red cloth in a forked stick	70-02-21
2	02-03-70	Rouhua	Nuaulu: Iako Matoke	Maturing calabashes	Plague of frogs	Rattan image of frog hanging in tree	
3	00-03-70	Makolhiru	Nuaulu: Saute Neipani	Young fruit from coconut palms	Stomach-ache (stones)	Coconut shells heaped with stones, frame over pile with coconut shells, fronds and stones hanging; also stones set in split sticks	
4	16-03-70	Niamonae	Nuaulu	Sago	Attack by something sharp	Akatamai: apical stem of sago palm hanging from frame	70-28-04
5	24-03-70	Sepa	Sepanese	Machete	Attack of rats and crabs	Rough images of rats and crabs and a carved machete	70-03-24
6	00-04-70	Rouhua	Nuaulu	Torch batteries	Attack of turtles	Frame with rough images of turtles on top, torch case below	70-05-01
7	08-04-70	Ampera	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Machete attack	Stylized machete of bamboo hanging from basic frame	
8	As 3						
9	08-04-70	Ampera	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Attack of crocodiles	Frame with coconut shells hanging below with fruit stem core, stylized crocodiles on top of the structure	
10	08-04-70	As 3					

(Continued)

Record	Date	Location	Owning person or group	Items stolen or protected	Response indicated or threatened	Physical form and other notes	Photograph, sketch or specimen
11	08-04-70	As 5					
12	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Hanu (<i>Hibiscus tiliaceus</i>)	Tanda	Sticks with <i>H. tiliaceus</i> leaves	
13	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Tanda	Sticks with another placed across the top	
14-27	08-04-70	As 13					
28	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Sasi	Tuft of coconut fibre set in split stick	
29	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Sasi	Fruit stem core set in stick	
30	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Machete attack	Two carved machetes sticking out of coconut spathe	
31	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Sasi	Coconut husk and frond set in stick	
32	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Machete attack	Stylized machete set in coconut spathe	
33	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Sasi	Coconut shell on stick	
34	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Machete attack	Stylized machete, coconut shell, and frond on stick	
35	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Tanda	Stick placed in incision made in tree trunk	
36	As 35						(Continued)

Record	Date	Location	Owning person or group	Items stolen or protected	Response indicated or threatened	Physical form and other notes	Photograph, sketch or specimen
37	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Machete attack	Elaborate sasi sign reinforced by matakau	
38	08-04-70	Makoihiru	Nuauulu; Saute Neipani	Honeycomb	Tanda	Stick set in tree	
39-47	08-04-70	As 38					
48	08-04-70	Makoihiru	Nuauulu; Saute Neipani	Coconuts	Sasi	Frame with hanging coconut fronds	
49	08-04-70	As 34					
50	08-04-70	As 34					
51	08-04-70	Makoihiru	Nuauulu; Saute Neipani	Coconuts	Sasi	Frame with hanging coconut fronds	
52	08-04-70	As 48					
53-57	08-4-70	As 51					
58	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Firewood	Tanda	Rattan circle set on stick	
59	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Coconuts	Sasi	Coconut shell on stick	
60	08-04-70	Tamilouw	Sepa-Tamilouw speakers	Cut wood left overnight/for a few days	Tanda	Grass placed in split stick	
61	08-04-70	Makoihiru	Nuauulu; Saute Neipani	Undisclosed personal item	Tanda + <i>kaosane</i> (sorcery)		
62	11-04-70	Sepa	Sepanese	Torch + batteries	Crab attack	Frame with stylized crabs above bar and old torch cartridge hanging below + a cloth package simulating a battery	70-05-01
63	11-04-70	Sepa	Sepanese		Sasi	Bamboo in split stick and grass sticking out of either end	

(Continued)

Record	Date	Location	Owning person or group	Items stolen or protected	Response indicated or threatened	Physical form and other notes	Photograph, sketch or specimen
64	11-04-70	Sepa	Sepanese	Pineapple	Matakau	Shell on top of stick, pineapple stem in split	
65	11-04-70	Sepa	Sepanese	Pineapple	Matakau	Shell, coconut shell, and pineapple stem	
66	11-04-70	Sepa	Sepanese		Matakau	Stylized rat with red cloth attached	
67	11-04-70	Sepa	Sepanese	Coconuts	Sasi	Coconut shell on stick	
68	24-05-70	Rouhua	Nuauulu	Limes	Matakau	Stone hanging from lime tree on fibre string	S70-13
69	07-06-70	Rouhua	Nuauulu	Food stored in house	Earache, blood from ears	<i>Wate tinasumai</i> : piece of shaped sago leafstalk with projecting sharp slivers of bamboo (for male thieves)	BM 1972 As 1.245
70	07-06-70	Rouhua	Nuauulu: Sounaue-ainakahata	Food stored in house	Earache, blood from ears	<i>Wate tinasumai</i> : piece of shaped sago leafstalk with projecting sharp slivers of bamboo (for male thieves)	BM 1972 As 1.246
71	07-06-70	Rouhua	Nuauulu	Food stored in house	Matakau	<i>Wate tihute</i> : for female thieves	BM 1972 As 1.308
72	09-06-70	Rouhua	Nuauulu: clan Neipani	Cotton plant (<i>Gossypium barbadense</i>)	Matakau	Single upright with carved sago leafstalk figure with bamboo slivers; note stones round base of plant	70-06-22
73	10-06-70	Rouhua	Nuauulu	Sago (<i>Metroxylon sago</i>)	Matakau	Piece of shaped sago leafstalk or sago pith in split sago stick	70-06-26
74	07-07-70	Rouhua	Nuauulu	Pomme lo (<i>Citrus maxima</i>)	Attack of tree frogs (<i>Litoria infrafrenata</i>)	Rattan frog	S70-8
75	22-08-70	Awao, Rouhua	Nuauulu: clan Matoke-pina	Coconuts	Swollen male genitals	<i>Wate tahu anai</i> : two elements, one for each testicle, made from sago leaf and pinned with splinters of sago leafstalk	70-08-24b
76	22-08-70	Awao, Rouhua	Nuauulu: Tuisa Matoke	Coconuts	Matakau	Piece of coconut frond in cleft upright stick	70-08-25

(Continued)

Record	Date	Location	Owning person or group	Items stolen or protected	Response indicated or threatened	Physical form and other notes	Photograph, sketch or specimen
77	21-09-70	Rouhua	Nuaulu	Yohoru (<i>Xanthosoma sagittifolium</i>)	Matakau	Several yohoru plants attached to frame comprising two bamboo uprights and a coconut petiole	70-10-26
78	29-09-70	Rouhua	Nuaulu: Lohia Peinisa	Heirloom ceramics	Attack from death adder, <i>Acanthophis antarcticus</i>	<i>Wate mmanate</i> : death adder figures carved from sago leafstalk, and carving of machete hanging below	70-11-15
79	14-10-70	Nolloth, Saparua	Christian Saparuans		<i>Matakau negeri</i>	Placed in Nolloth 'baileo': of coconut frond, ring of rattan and wood.	70-12-15
80	02-11-70	Rouhua	Nuaulu		Matakau	Pineapple stalk and clamshell (prob. <i>Tridacna maxima</i>)	70-13-05
81	31-12-70	Path between Sepa and Rouhua	Sepanese	Coconuts	Unspecified animal attack	Basic frame, coconut husks on each end, empty infructescence hanging from bar, and carved animal stuck in top	70-15-10
82	02-02-71	Path between Sepa and Rouhua	Nuaulu	Pineapple and banana	Matakau	Bar of sago leafstalk across top of single upright with pineapple and banana leaves below	71-18-03
83	19-02-71	Rouhua	Nuaulu		Matakau	<i>Wate maminata</i>	UKC 1971.519
84	23-02-71	Path between Sepa and Rouhua	Nuaulu	Coconuts	Matakau	Basic frame with items above and below bar	71-21-10
85	23-02-71	Mon, near Rouhua	Nuaulu	Nutmeg	Tanda reinforced by matakau		71-21-07
86	24-03-71	Yalahatan	Yalahatani	Hunting taking place in area	Tanda	A-frame with stylized bamboo bow and arrow	71-23-01
87	09-03-71	Between Sepa and Rouhua	Nuaulu	Coconuts	Arrow wounds	Immature coconut trunk across basic frame with hanging 'arrows'	71-22-13
88	24-03-71	Yalahatan	Yalahatani		Arrow wounds	Stylized bow and arrow in forked stick	71-23-01

(Continued)

Record	Date	Location	Owning person or group	Items stolen or protected	Response indicated or threatened	Physical form and other notes	Photograph, sketch or specimen
89	18-08-73	Rouhua	Nuauulu: Maineo Neipani	Taro	Swollen testicles	On new garden on lower reaches of Mon river	73-05-14
90	22-08-73	Rouhua	Nuauulu: clan Soumori	Damar resin (prob. <i>Agathis dammara</i>)	A small cut or abrasion that turns septic	<i>Wate kamane</i> : borrowed by Poli Matoke-pina from Soumori for use at Makohiru	73-05-22
91	03-08-75	Bunara	Nuauulu	Ceramic dish	Crocodile or monitor lizard attack	<i>Wate mau inane</i> : figures represent crocodile or monitor lizard. The thief when he sees the wate may return the plates or pay some equivalent in cash	75-03-25
92	03-08-75	Sepa	Probably Sepa		The culprit will be beaten	<i>Wate mau inasesene</i> , probably belonging to someone from Sepa; sticks indicate punishment by beating	75-03-26
93	06-08-75	Kamna ukuna	Nuauulu: Tapone Sounaue	Sugarcane	Matakau	<i>Wate tohu</i> : sugar cane placed across two forked sticks with stylized arrow or spear hanging below	75-04-25
94	07-08-75	Rouhua	Probably Sepa	Cassava	Matakau	<i>Wate kasipii</i> : basic frame with carved figure of bird above bar and cassava stems strapped to underside	75-04-26
95	27-07-75	Rouhua	Nuauulu: Hotena Neipani	To prevent people throwing further rubbish	Swollen head with blood pouring from the mouth	Set up by a midden on path near shore; possibly <i>wate katanopune</i> , <i>wate unu onate</i> , or a <i>wate eru</i> , violation of which gives rise to uncontrollable defecation or death through dysentery	75-02-22
96	02-02-81	Rouhua	Nuauulu	Pineapple	Matakau	Bamboo intermode with attached <i>Codiaeum variegatum</i> leaves (a female matakau), and pineapple leaves hanging below bar	81-04-19
97	02-02-81	Rouhua	Nuauulu	Pineapple	Bottle matakau	Bottle matakau	81-04-18
98	02-02-81	Upa and Rouhua	Butonese		Islamic derived curse	Bottle matakau with charm in Arabic characters affixed; plastic bag placed over the bottle and tied with a sliver of bamboo	90-02-25

(Continued)

Record	Date	Location	Owning person or group	Items stolen or protected	Response indicated or threatened	Physical form and other notes	Photograph, sketch or specimen
99	02-02-81	Rouhua	Nuaulu	Coconut grove	Tanda	Felled clove tree placed across frame in coconut grove	81-04-20
100	19-02-81	Warus-warus	Geser-Gorom speakers		Islamic derived curse	Bottle matakau (<i>wā tu botal</i>)	81-07-25
101	19-02-81	Warus-warus	Geser-Gorom speakers		Islamic derived curse: snakebite	Bottle matakau (<i>wā tu tekis</i>)	81-07-26
102	19-02-90	Yoko, near Rouhua	Nuaulu	Coconut grove	Monitor lizard attack?	Array of many matakau, mainly of single sticks with stylized monitor lizards	90-04-12 > 14
103	25-02-90	Rouhua, between Mon and Perusahaana	Ownership unknown	Coconut	Islamic derived curse	Bottle matakau: small bottle hanging underneath sago thatch roof, wrapped in cloth and tied with red cloth, and in turn hanging over stone	90-07-17
104	19-02-96	Upa valley garden area, Rouhua	Nuaulu: Heunaka Sounaue	Standing sago palms	Matakau	Sago palm leaves places across two uprights with models made of sago leafstalk of unknown design	96-07-14
105	04-03-96	Yana Ikinge valley, trib. of Upa, nr Rouhua	Nuaulu: Numapena Sounaue	<i>Kama kamine</i> resin (<i>Canarium asperum</i>)	Cassowary attack	<i>Wate rui-rui</i> : cassowary scare charm in garden hut: crude models of cassowaries made from sago leafstalk inserted above bar of same material	96-12-14
106	00-00-96	Rouhua	Nuaulu		Dog attack	Figure of dog made from sago leafstalk with red cloth attachments, one eye of small white stone, second white stone pushed into anus; L = 190 mm without tail	UKC 1996.08, IMG-96-1636
107	11-04-15	Yoko river, 0.5 km N Rouhua	Nuaulu: Nihua Soumori	Coconuts	Matakau	Piece of coconut stalk with red cloth strips	15-1852

Note

¹ The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has run a project on charms and amulets in its collection ('Small Blessings', <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/amulets/>). However, none of the objects listed meet the criteria I have here given for scare charms, or that might suggest an affinity with matakau. The Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden has a few records of matakau, but only one Moluccan object (RV-1900-152), from Sula.

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