

# Ilabova's transformation

Scholarly sources:

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Weiner, Annette (1976). *Women of value, men of renown: New perspectives in Trobriand exchange*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

## Meet Ilabova

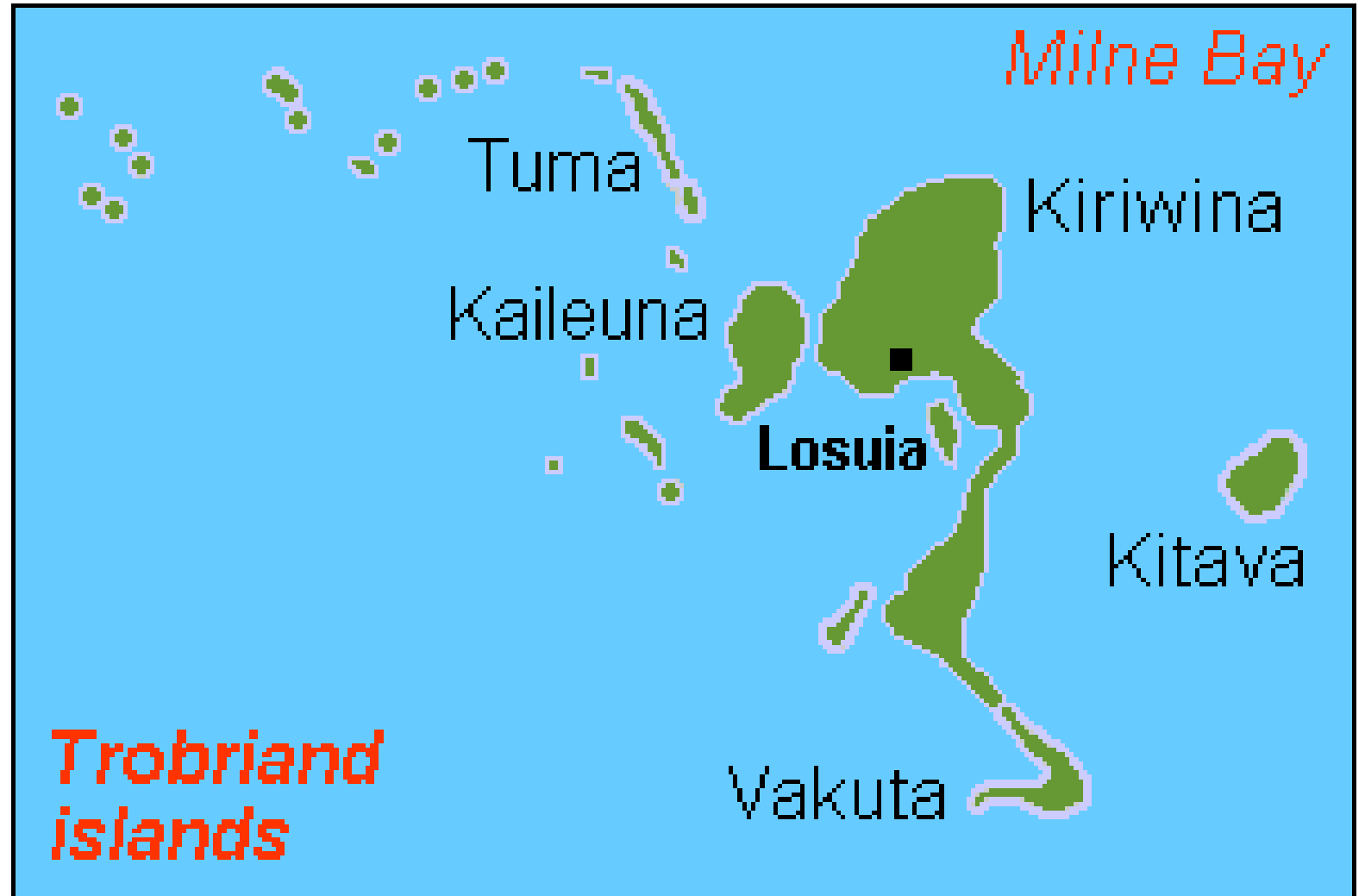
Ilabova was an eighteen-year-old girl living in the Trobriand Islands in 1918. She was wildly in love with a boy from her village, but he complained that she lacked sparkle and beauty. Ilabova was about to do something to change his mind.

But before we get to that, let's learn a little bit about her world.



## Ilabova's world

Ilabova lived on Kiriwina Island in the Trobriand Islands. The Trobriands are located just north of Australia.



This is Ilabova's house. All the Trobrianders lived in thatched huts.

It was warm all year round on Ilabova's island.





Ilabova's people practiced matrilineal descent. This means that the children always belonged to the mother's family, which is the matriline. In fact, the Trobrianders believed that if someone in the mother's family died, the person became a spirit and went to the island of Tuma in the Trobriands. After some time, the spirit returned to Kiriwina and entered a body of a woman in the matriline. The spirit then grew to become a child.

Ilabova and her family believed that she was actually the reincarnation of a great aunt. In this way the matriline always continued.



Ilabova's people ate healthy. Their main crop was yams. But they also ate a lot of fish, bird eggs, other garden vegetables, and sometimes pork.

Yams gave the people food security because they could be stored for half a year or more.





But yams were much more to the Trobrianders than just a secure source of food.

In each village they also increased the prestige of men who harvested them. The men would store them in yam houses that would be carefully guarded.

Often the man with the largest stock of yams was considered the most important male in the village.



Festivals were also organized around the season of yam planting and yam harvests. These festivals would include days of feasting, music, and dancing.





Kids were full participants in these festivals.

When Ilabova was a small child she went to a festival on the coast, where she first laid eyes on Kasai.



Over the years Ilabova played with Kasai, as well as with other kids in her village.



She watched Kasai as he grew and became an expert at canoeing.





Because of his canoeing skills, Kasai was able to join in the Trobriand kula trade at a very young age. The kula trade was a ceremonial exchange between people in the Trobriand Islands.

Most of the trading involved jewelry. The Trobriand men and women would make lovely necklaces and arm bracelets out of shell and other found items.



These would then be traded in a ring around the islands.

Once an item was gained in a trade, it was kept for awhile and then traded for another item.

The function of the Kula ring was to keep up friendly relationships among all the groups in the islands.



Most of the trades were made when the canoes came to shore.

Items other than the jewelry were traded. But the jewelry had special significance to the Trobrianders because they believed that it made them very beautiful.

And beauty was so important to the Trobriand people.





And over the years Kasai kept getting more and more beautiful. All of the girls desired him. He had romances with many. Ilabova loved him so deeply, but he had no eye for Ilabova.



Alas, poor Ilabova did have a well-proportioned face. Her hair had straightened with age and was very thick like the Trobrianders liked. But her skin was dull and her eyes lacked sparkle.

She knew she had to take drastic steps.



## Ilabova's transformation

The people of the Trobriand Islands believed in beauty magic. Each year, just before the great yam harvest festival, adult women had the role of applying beauty magic to the unmarried children of their brothers.

The day before the previous year's festival, Ilabova's aunt worked as hard as she could to cast spells into coconut oil, apply the oil to flowers, and put the flowers in Ilabova's hair.

But alas, while Ilabova's skin looked nice and smooth, and she wore kula jewelry, she still appeared dull. She failed to attract the attention of Kasai at the dances.





This year, members of Ilabova's family got together to discuss the problem.

"I did the best I could," cried Jacinta, Ilabova's aunt. "But I only had one part of the spell. My mother died before she told me the rest of the spell."

"I believe you," said Ilabova's grandfather. "Our elders like to keep these secret. I fear that only old Bomapota in the forest would still know that spell, and it would take a huge amount of wealth to get her to part with it."

Everyone groaned, thinking about the greed of the frightening old woman.



But the family resolved to help poor Ilabova.

"I have the yams," declared her grandfather.

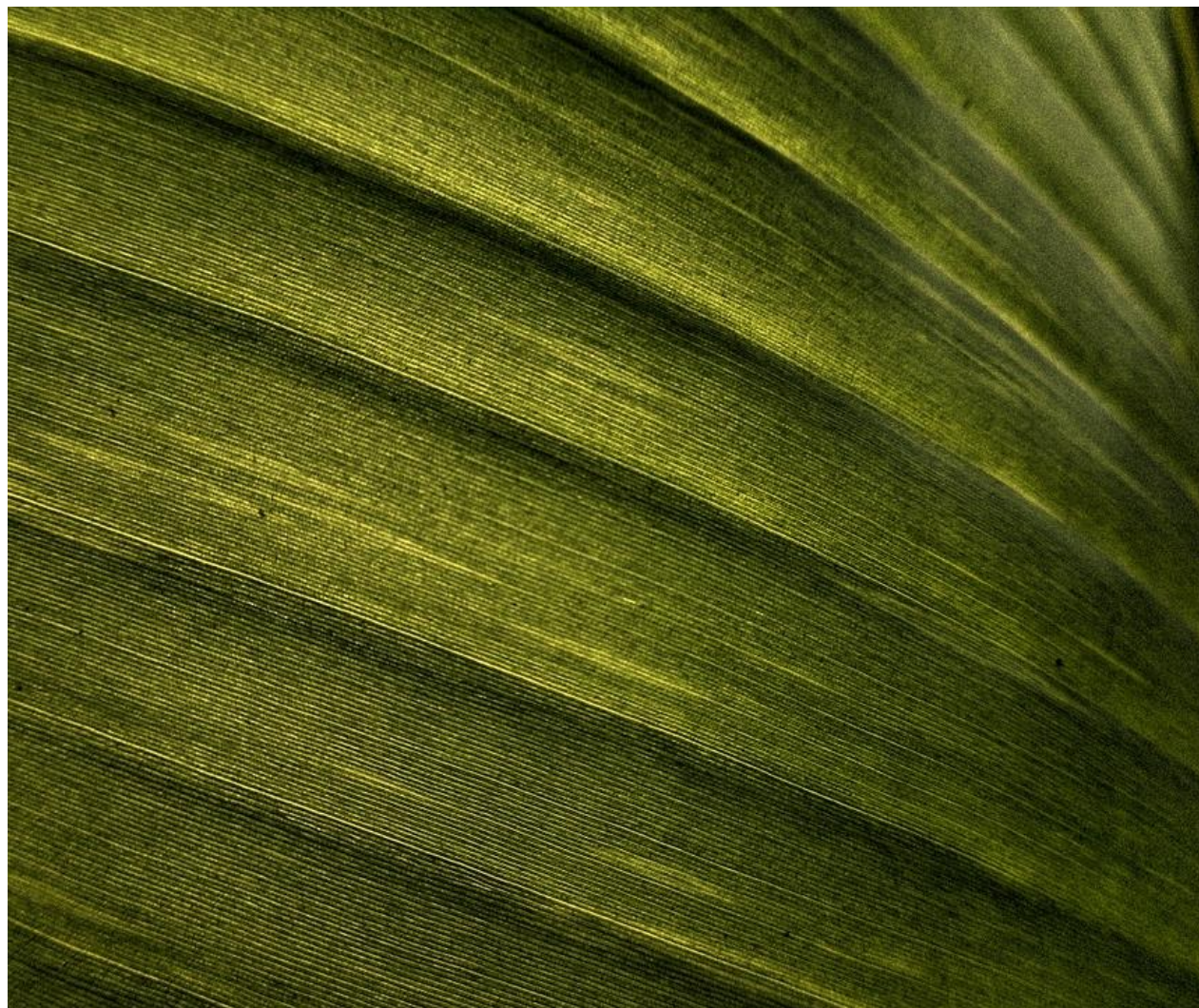
See, yams, as well as Kula ornaments, were considered "men's wealth" in the Trobriand Islands. Both could be used as money.

And Ilabova's grandfather surely had a stockpile of yams. His yam house was one of the largest on the island.





"And I have the bundles," declared Ilabova's mother. She was referring to bundles of banana leaves.





See, in the Trobriands, banana leaves were "women's wealth." The leaves were cut from banana trees, dried, and either bundled or made into skirts. The skirts and bundles were also used for money.

The family gathered together all the yams and bundles they could manage and began negotiating with old Bomapota over the spell for the beauty magic.



Finally the family struck a deal.

And on the night just before the yam harvest festival, Ilabova left her village and wandered deep into the forest where old Bomapota lived in a hidden cave.





Inside stood Bomapota in the poor light, looking every bit as frightening as Ilabova remembered her as a small child.





"You are indeed a grey-looking girl," Bomapota smirked. "Let's get this work done."

She pulled a vial of coconut oil from her basket. She'd once traded with an Australian. She gave him a spell and he gave her a supply of white man's vials, mirrors, and jars.



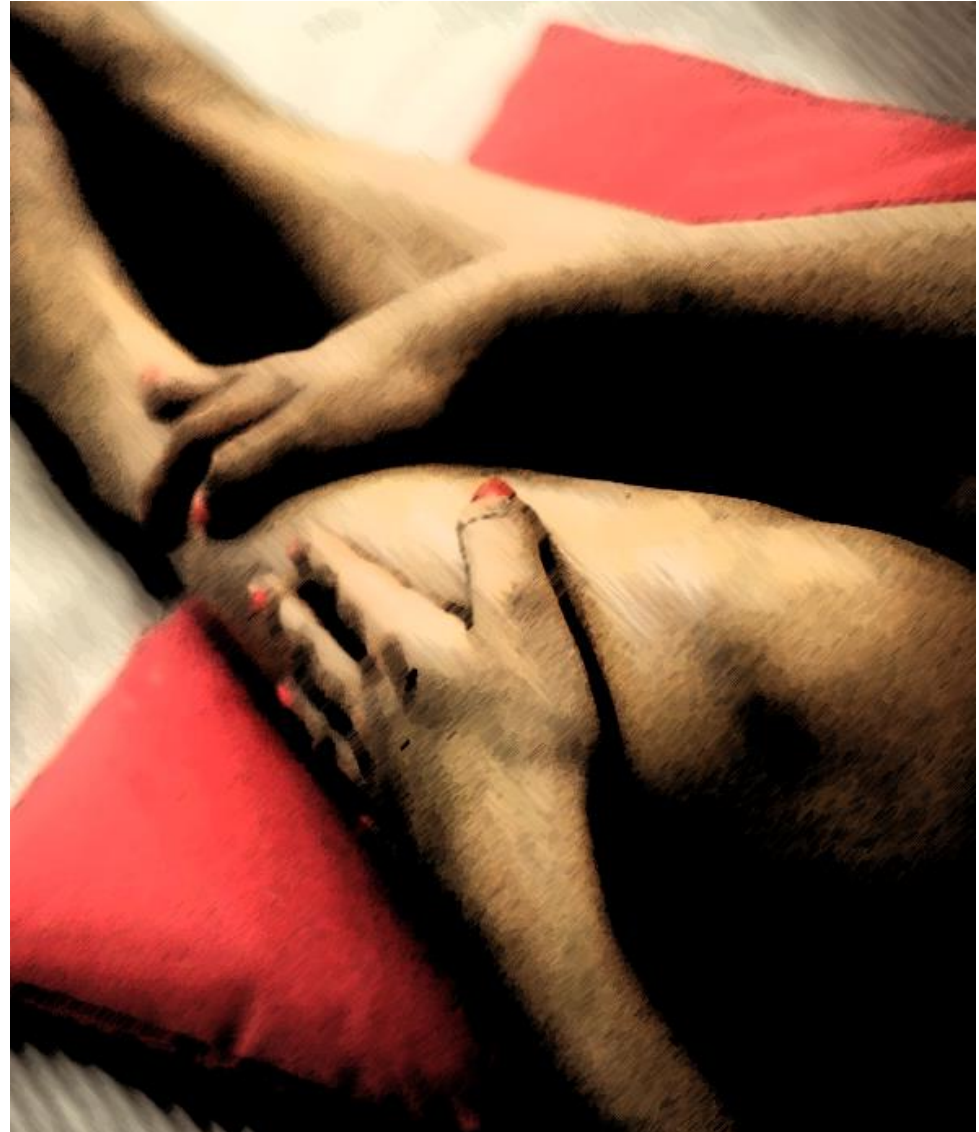
Bomapota lit a fire for light and began chanting her spell into the vial. Ilabova recognized the words from the time her aunt had said them.

"My head, it flares up, it flashes, my red paint, it flares up, it flashes! My facial blocking, it flares up, it flashes! My aromatic paint, it flares up, it flashes! My little basket, it flares up, it flashes! . . . "

But then, just as the chant was about to end, Bomapota added words that Ilabova had never heard: "My head is made bright, my face flashes. I have acquired a beautiful shape, like that of a chief. I am the only one. My renown stands alone."



Ilabova began to develop confidence in Bomapota. She took the vial of coconut oil that now contained the spell and began rubbing it all over her body. She felt something tingly, something changing.





Bomapota handed her a looking glass. "Now, do you see it? Do you see what I have done for you?"

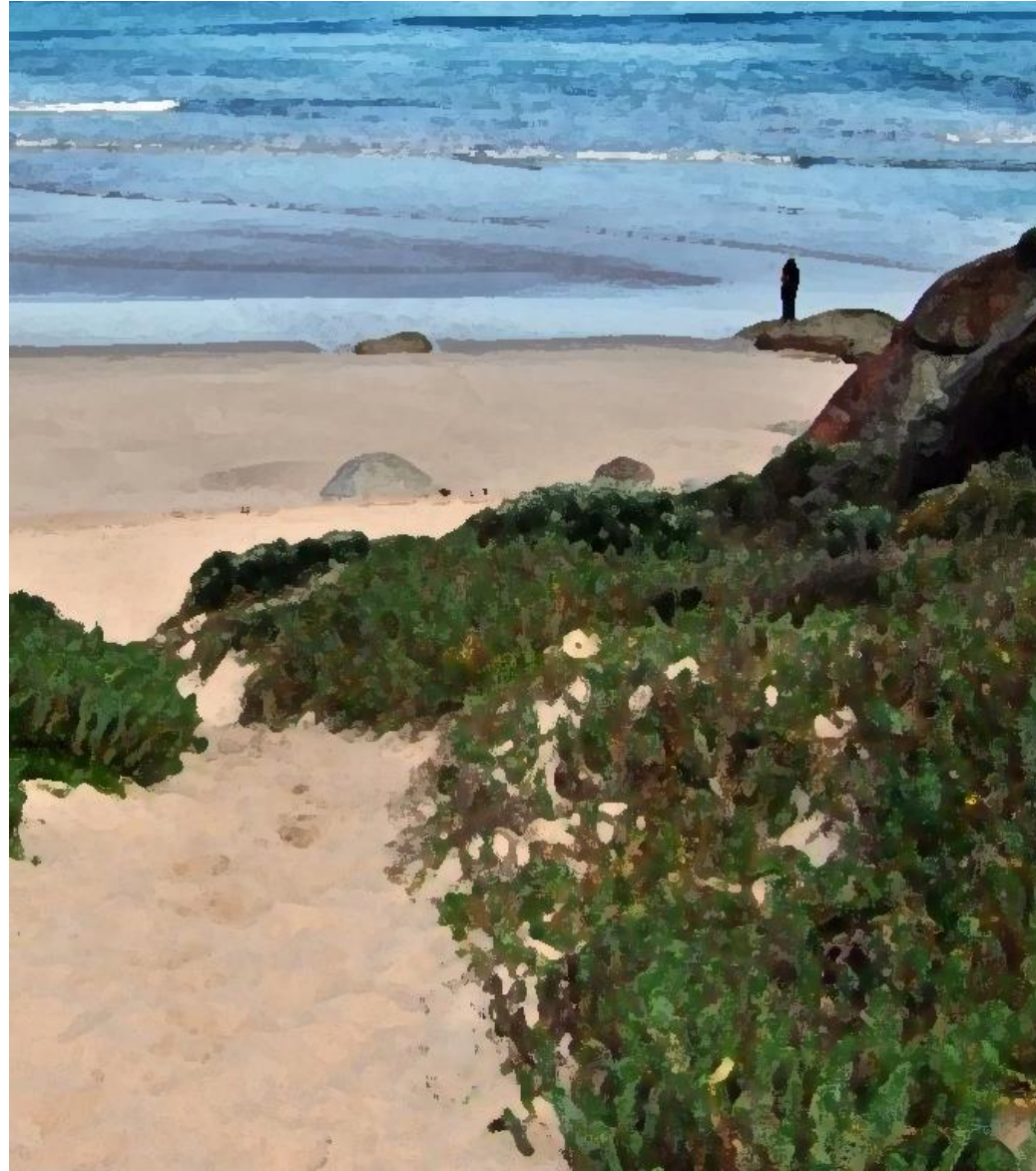
Ilabova looked. She looked again. She thought there was something—perhaps a bit of a glow. Her eyes looked larger. Her skin looked rosy.



The next morning Ilabova woke up in her own house. She followed a path to the shore to see her reflection in the ocean water.

"Yes," she uttered. "I am beautiful."

Hour by hour her confidence grew. She felt aglow. "I will go to the dance and Kasai will notice me."





And she was right. As soon as the yam harvest feast began, the men's dance started. The women's dance followed. Ilabova was fully decked out in her Kula ornaments and banana leaf skirt. When the two groups approached each other, Kasai and all the men stared at Ilabova in amazement.

But Ilabova had eyes only for Kasai.





As day turned into night, the young people began to pair up. This time Kasai chose Ilabova as his dating partner. He could not keep his eyes off of her the entire night. Kasai was completely smitten.

But, Ilabova wondered, would the spell last? Would he make a commitment to her, or would the spell only last for one date?

She'd know the answer the next day.



And in the morning, there it was.

Kasai had sent a gift of Kula to her house. It was a tradition in the Trobriands that the man would send a gift if he wished to propose marriage. Once the gift was sent, it was up to the girl's matriline to accept it.

Ilabova's relatives came to inspect the gift. Yes, it was a kula bracelet—a good gift. They accepted it on Ilabova's behalf.



And so it was that Ilabova and Kasai became a couple. They eventually built their own home and they had a long life with three sons together.

Ilabova remained beautiful in Kasai's eyes for the rest of her days.





The end  
Let's talk!!!