

## **Kula**

An exchange system among the people of the Trobriand Islands of southeast Melanesia, in which permanent contractual partners trade traditional valuables following an established ceremonial pattern and trade route. In this system, described by the British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, only two kinds of articles, travelling in opposite directions around a rough geographical ring several hundred miles in circumference, were exchanged. These were red shell necklaces and white shell bracelets, which were not producers' capital, being neither consumable nor media of exchange outside the ceremonial system. Kula objects, which sometimes had names and histories attached, were not owned in order to be used but rather to acquire prestige and rank. Every detail of the transaction was regulated by traditional rules and conventions, and some acts were accompanied by rituals and ceremonies. A limited number of men could take part in the kula, each man keeping an article for a relatively short period before passing it on to one of his partners from whom he received the opposite item in exchange. The partnerships between men, involving mutual duties and obligations, were permanent and lifelong. Thus the network of relationships around the kula served to link many tribes by providing allies and communication of material and nonmaterial cultural elements to distant areas.

### **Pacific Islands. Trade and exchange systems**

The regional trading systems of the islands around the eastern end of New Guinea were particularly elaborate. In the Massim--what is now Milne Bay province of Papua New Guinea (taking in the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, the Louisiades, and nearby islands)--the trade of pottery from the Amphletts, canoe timber and greenstone blades from Murua (Woodlark), carved platters and canoe prow boards, and other specialized products was complemented by a flow of yams and pigs from resource-rich areas to smaller, ecologically less-favoured islands. Some islanders, such as those from Tubetube in the southern Massim, did little producing and specialized instead as middlemen and traders. Similar interdependencies and specializations, with some communities acting as export traders and middlemen, occurred in the Vitiaz Straits between New Guinea and New Britain. Through chains of intermediary trading partnerships among neighbouring peoples, trade systems in New Guinea connected communities that were separated by scores of miles of rugged mountains. Such networks carried salt, shell, and other objects from coasts to interiors and forest products, such as blackpalm, from interiors to coasts. They connected specialist communities, such as those extracting salt, collecting ochre, or making blades, to communities far away.

Both Papuan-speaking and Austronesian-speaking zones of Melanesia had highly elaborated exchange systems, in which surpluses of pigs and root crops were used in prestige feasts and ceremonial valuables (usually shell beads or other shell objects, but also including dolphin and dog teeth and a range of other material objects) were exchanged. Elaborations of ceremonial exchange, in mortuary feasts and homicide-compensation payments, bridewealth presentations, and various forms of competitive feasting, were foci of community production, social cooperation, status rivalry, and

political conflict. In some areas, at least, competitive exchanges were a surrogate for warfare (and in some instances they seem to have grown out of homicide compensation).

In New Guinea the most highly developed exchange systems were those of the western Highlands: the Enga tee, the Hagen moka, and other mass exchanges of pigs and shell. Cycles of pig production were orchestrated so that vast surpluses of sweet potatoes were required to feed expanded herds; mass pig kills, or the presentation of live pigs to the leaders of rival clans, were a focus of political rivalry and community productive labour.

In island Melanesia the best-known prestige exchange system was the kula of the Massim, documented by Malinowski. As he described it, the kula entailed the endless circulation of valuables through a network of communities on islands forming a giant ring. Through the network passed intrinsically useless valuables: shell-bead necklaces passed around the ring in a clockwise direction and were exchanged for arm shells, which moved counterclockwise. The exchanges were made between partners in neighbouring communities or, in the most exciting, dangerous, and prestigious exchanges, between neighbouring islands. Research in different parts of the kula zone has shown the exchange to have been considerably more complex than Malinowski was able to see from his vantage point in the Trobriands (as well as highly resilient in the face of Westernization and economic change). Early European penetration did much to change the nature of exchanges and to stabilize a system that was highly unstable because of intercommunity warfare.

Complex systems of prestige feasting, often with a strong competitive element, have been described for many parts of island Melanesia, including Goodenough Island (in the Massim) and the Solomons (Bougainville, Malaita). In precolonial northern New Hebrides, status rivalry was played out through complex graded societies in which men moved to progressively higher grades by sponsoring feasts and presenting valuables and pigs.

Although strung shell beads and other valuables were best known as exchange tokens in the prestige economy, in some parts of Melanesia they served very much like money--as media of economic value and exchange. They were used to buy and sell pigs, fish, craft products, and even land. The tambu of the Tolai of New Britain are well known, and similar valuables were used on Malaita and in some other areas as generalized instruments of value, with standard "denominations" and standard "prices" for commodities.

### **Pacific Islands. Effects of European Contact**

...Among the new elite, cultural nationalist ideologies have tended to focus on "custom" and "the Melanesian way"; cultural revivalism has become a prominent theme. Art festivals, cultural centres, and ideologies of kastom have cast in a more positive light the traditional cultural elements, such as ceremonial exchange, dance and music, and oral traditions, that had long been suppressed by the more conservative and evangelistic forms

of Christianity. The emphasis on traditional cultures as sources of identity has been expressed in the perpetuation or revival of old genres of exchange. In Papua New Guinea the kula exchange of arm shells and necklaces continues in the Massim, carried on through the medium of air travel and among politicians, professionals, and public servants as well as by villagers in canoes. Members of the new elite conspicuously pay bridewealth in shell valuables.

### **Oceanic Arts. The Massim area**

The islands off the extreme southeastern tip of New Guinea were linked by the kula trading cycle, which distributed not only shell valuables--the ostensible motive of the transactions--but also quantities of other goods. Notable among these were carvings in dark hardwood, which was the special product of Kiriwina, the largest of the Trobriand Islands.