

GIFT EXCHANGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

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'Every man has his proper measure'
The Honorary Consul *Graham Greene*

One of the most outstanding features of Pacific cultures is their elaborate systems of gift exchange. Through the giving of gifts and counter-gifts Pacific Islanders affirm friendship, contract alliances and assert or challenge social eminence. Gifts of things are intimately involved in the cultural construction of persons and social relationships. Artifacts, which for centuries were the most prized objects of exchange, such as the fine mats of Samoa, Kula shell ornaments of the Massim and other 'great things', are icons which represent a legacy from gods or ancestors and tie living people to personalities or events from the past. The exchange of culturally encoded objects constitutes an entire social and political discourse. Traditional systems of exchange have for generations been articulated to political and economic forces of the modern world system. Yet, they represent a continuity and resiliency against the depersonalizing effects of the commercial and bureaucratic forces of capitalist states.

Pacific exchange systems early attracted the attention of anthropology. The nature of this gift exchange has preoccupied scholars from Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1954 [1925]) to Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]) and Sahlins (1972). From accounts of Pacific exchange systems have been elaborated theories of the gift

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and reciprocity which are central to the discipline. The understanding of gift exchange has evolved in a dialectical confrontation with the commodity exchange of the researchers' own societies. As the peoples of the islands had to come to terms with industrial wealth and commercial relations, so anthropologists, on their side, had to accommodate observations of indigenous exchanges of things with practices of their own economic system, as they understood them. Gift exchange has been set against the background of commodity exchange — sometimes in contrast, sometimes as similar.

How people relate to things, and to each other by means of things, under different economic regimes, were issues which were central to earlier political economists. The 'confusion of personalities and things' was a problem which preoccupied Marx in his analysis of the commodity as much as Mauss in his essay on the gift. A central issue for both was the disassociation of people from their products with expanding commoditization of the economy. This is the notion of alienation which both Marx and Mauss saw as the pervasive condition of modern society (although Mauss did not explicitly employ the concept). Some recent discussions have stressed the opposite condition of inalienability as characterizing things exchanged as gifts (Gregory 1980, 1982; Weiner 1985; see also Feil, Damon and Gregory 1982). It is argued that in a gift society all, or some, things are so inseparably connected with their owners that their presentation as gifts ensures an equivalent return.

This essay explores these aspects of gift exchange in some Pacific exchange systems. I am especially concerned with the circulation of graded valuables in what I call systems of ranked exchange. With departure in some of my material from Rossel Island, I establish that in such systems one valuable thing often stands for another as its representation or *image*. This suggests a new solution to the famous puzzle of 'the spirit of the gift', the *hau* of the Māori. Such substitutions involve an ambiguous state of debt which gives rise to contradictory claims and strategies by the concerned parties. I show that both on Rossel and in the Kula 'the obligation to return' gifts fairly is stressed, while participants in the actual exchange process often have to accept terms which are far from equal.

As the association between persons and things as images is intimate this has consequences for our understanding of inalienability. In the critical part of the essay I place inalienability in the broader context of reciprocity. My query is especially with the implicit assumption of equivalence often embedded in this concept. I shall argue that the idea of equivalence in reciprocity results from

a transposition of a commodity model into our understanding. Here the notion of equivalent exchange presupposes a contract between equal, independent individuals. The practices of Pacific exchange systems question this simple model of reciprocity and equivalence. They demonstrate that what takes place is rather the negotiation of the personal status and identity of the participants than the assessment of the equivalence of things.

The gift and its representation: the Rossel *kaa*

During my field work on Rossel Island (Louisiade Archipelago, Massim region at the east end of New Guinea) I did some collecting of artifacts for a Danish museum. Once on a patrol around the island I slept in the house of a certain big man. I there discovered a canoe prowboard, carved in the typical Massim style, which I wanted to buy. With the help of my assistants I tried to arrive at a reasonable price for the carving. Rossel people are normally reluctant to set a price. Their usual answer is: "Yourself!" When I, nevertheless, asked the big man to indicate how many dollars would be a fair estimate he, revealingly, connected the artifact to an earlier exchange. Many years ago a friend of his had acquired a canoe from a man on the neighboring island of Sudest. The canoe had been paid with traditional valuables and my big man had made a contribution of one ceremonial greenstone axe (of the kind generally exchanged in the Massim) to his friend's payment. As usual in such cases there was the expectation that this gift or loan should some time be returned. Some years after the man with the canoe died without having replaced the axe. My informant then took the prowboard from the dilapidating canoe and he had kept it ever since. It was the memory or 'picture' — *kaa* — of his stone axe. The axe had been of the size with "four inside" — i.e. equivalent to four of the smallest kind, worth a dollar each. So now I had the knowledge from which I could decide how much I would pay.

The case illustrates the difficulties in establishing prices in an economy where things are rarely bought and sold. It also illustrates the bonds established between things, and between people in terms of things, in an economy of what we may call the gift type. It is significant that the estimation of a rate of exchange between me and this man involved a reference to another exchange, one that took place a long time ago, and to a *third person*.

I shall attempt to elucidate what is involved in the notion of *kaa* which the Rosselese usually translate with the English word

'picture'. In this instance we may say that it denotes a *representation*. *Kaa* also means 'shadow', and 'reflection'. It enters into the word for mirror (*kaayiku*). We find it in the term for grandparent or ancestor, *kaakaa*, and in ancestress — *kaapya* (*kaa*-'female'). The connection may here be 'likeness', for children are said to resemble parents and grandparents. But there may be some deeper significance because *kaakaa* also means 'to be proud of something', and as a verb *kaa* stands for 'calling out', 'summoning people'.¹

The notion of *kaa* on Rossel thus involves a range of meanings: 'picture', 'semblance', 'representation'. But it also seems to indicate a deeper bond between representation and the thing represented, something which involves 'participation', identity and, maybe, integrity and honour. Possibly the best translation would be 'image'.

The spirit of the gift: the Māori *hau*

At this moment the reader may sense a feeling of *déjà-vu* and of course there is a striking resemblance between the *kaa* and the notion of the *hau*, the Māori spirit of the gift, made classic through Mauss' "*Essay on the Gift*" (1954). Mauss took his point of departure, when trying to explain the obligation to repay gifts, in a text written by the Māori Tamati Ranaipiri to Best. The interpretation of this quotation has occupied scholars ever since Mauss made it the basis of his explanation of gift return.

Ranaipiri was explaining a cycle of gift exchange of valuables (*taonga*):

"Now, you have a *taonga* which you give to me. We have no agreement about replacement (*uto*) of this *taonga*. Now, I give it to someone else, and, a long time passes, and that man thinks he has the *taonga*, he should give some replacement (*uto*) to me, and he does so. Now, that *taonga* which was given to me, that is the *hau* of the *taonga* which was given to me before. I must give that *taonga* to you. It would not be correct for me to keep it for myself, whether it be a very good *taonga*, or a bad *taonga*, that *taonga* must be given to you from me. Because that *taonga* is a *hau* of the other *taonga*. If I should hang onto that *taonga* for myself, I will become *mate*. So that is the *hau* — *hau* of *taonga*..." (This is a slightly edited version of Biggs' translation in Sahlins 1972: 152).

Mauss understood this to mean that the spirit (*hau*) of the gift

yearning to return to its homeland and owner (to whose spirit (*hau*) it was connected), was a dangerous power enforcing the recipient to return the gift, or its replacement. (Together with Best and subsequent commentators Mauss understood *mate* to refer to "... serious evil... even death" (Best 1909: 439)). Thus, the gift was a spiritual extension of the giver (1954: 9–10). Subsequent discussions have tended progressively to rationalize Ranaipiri's statement. For Firth the force behind returning gifts is economic self-interest and social sanction. He argued that Mauss confused the spirits of things and persons. What people feared, in case of default on a debt, was not the *hau* of the gift but sorcery from the debtor (1959: 418–21). For Sahlins the *hau* in this case just meant the return or product of the first gift, although the meaning was embedded in a broad spiritual concept of productiveness or fertility (1972: 157, 168).

Recently Weiner has argued that Mauss was right. Mauss distinguished ordinary moveable property from immovable property. The latter is closely associated with the person and the descent group, with ancestry, history and rank. Ranaipiri talked explicitly about *taonga*, Māori valuables, property of the immovable kind. *Taonga* were associated with name- and *hau*-bestowing ceremonies, with death and immortality. Therefore, they were intimately associated with, and took part, in their owner's personality. There was a *hau* of persons, things and land, as Mauss had argued, a force securing the return of presents of *taonga* (Weiner 1985). Now, it appears clearly from her information that some kinds of *taonga* were extensively traded and others were exchanged as presents in kinship ceremonies. Only very high-ranking ones seem to have been truly immovable or inalienable property attached to chiefs and their descent groups (*ibid.* 19–20). As there is nothing to indicate that one of these specific family treasures was involved I find that the meaning of the word *hau* in this context could very well be the same as *kaa* in my Rossel case. The *taonga* returned was a 'representation' or 'image' (in the form of a replacement) of the first valuable. I agree that in Māori understanding this would also have implied an identity of a more spiritual kind, a deeper attachment between the gift, the owner and the return gift. But in this case there need not have been an idea of a dangerous soul-force of donor and gift involved.

Moreover, the word *mate*, which Ranaipiri used about the consequence of defaulting on a debt, has probably been misunderstood in the context. Like *hau*, the term *mate* covers a range of connotations. According to Johansen the basic meaning is 'weakened', denoting "...everything from a slight indisposition to death" (1954: 48). But Johansen notes that in the context of gift

exchange *mate* meant ‘embarrassed’: “... a weakening to the receiver if he cannot assert himself by counter-gifts” (*ibid.* 115). What Ranaipiri referred to was thus *shame*, a condition as serious as physical injury. If he failed to return the second *taonga*, *hau* of the first, he would be ‘finished’ — a dishonoured man. Thus, what in Ranaipiri’s statement was a play on metaphors, one *taonga* standing for another, physical illness for social damage, was interpreted at the same time in a more substantial and a more mystical sense.²

It seems that the *hau* is an amorphous concept with a range of meanings from (vital) ‘essence’ over ‘representation’ to ‘extension’. By the last term I allude to the several instances referred to by Sahlins and Weiner of a contagious aspect of the *hau*. Substances like hair, fingernails, etc., used to work sorcery on a person, were *hau* (Sahlins 1972: 154–55, n.3). Threads of flax from cloak *taonga* were ritually used to transmit *hau* (Weiner 1985: 216–17). It is to this metonymic *pars pro toto* aspect of Rossel valuables I shall now turn.

Ranked exchange of Rossel valuables

Various kinds of valuables are used on Rossel Island. In addition to the greenstone axes mentioned there are several kinds of shell necklaces and, finally, the *kö* and *ndap* — the famous ‘Rossel Island money’. The latter are highly ranked shell valuables. There are more than 20 categories, from commonplace ‘small cash’ to exalted treasures. The ‘shell-money’ is used (sometimes in combination with other valuables) in many kinds of exchanges or payments: as payment for some customary labour services, for houses and canoes, in pig feasts, as bridewealth, in mortuary compensations and, formerly, in compensations to relatives of victims of cannibalism.

The *kö* and *ndap* share many characteristics with valuables elsewhere. The higher ranks derive from mythical deities. They have individual names and histories of past ownership. In olden days they were treated with reverence. The souls (*ghö*) of cannibal victims were supposed somehow to enter the high rank *ndap* paid in compensation. These shells are sometimes referred to by the name of a victim. When they were solemnly displayed at feasts many men held their hands under them to protect them. When a circle of big men were once handing high rank shells around between them at the arrangement of the principal presentation at a pig feast I witnessed, they talked as if the shells were the actors: the top shell “calling out” to ensure that everything was properly done.

Thus, these objects are to some extent treated as persons, they are relics of a mythical past and document personal history.

In many regards these valuables thus resemble the Māori *taonga* although, as a rule, they are not regarded as descent group property and are not associated with descent rank, which is absent on Rossel. Characteristically, they are also progressively inalienable the higher their rank. From about midway up the rank scale *ndap* are now out of open circulation. The upper rank *ndap* are owned individually, they circulate only through inheritance and although some categories are still nominally entering prestations, they are soon returned to their owners again. This immobilization of high rank *ndap* is, however, fairly recent. People say that before the advent of the Europeans all ranks except the very highest were in circulation. The sinister 'man-eating *ndap*' went out of use when the government banned homicide and the ranks lower on the scale followed soon after.³

The exchange of the Rossel 'shell-money' is a characteristic instance of what I call *ranked* exchange. I define this as a form of exchange of valuables where, firstly, the objects involved are differentiated into a number of ranks and, secondly, although notions of equivalence are relevant, the exchange practice involves a complex play of debt relationships with gifts and counter-gifts which *do not* balance. As we shall see the Kula is another instance of ranked exchange.

On Rossel prestations of valuables are amassed with contributions from many 'helpers'. Persons who contribute shells of all but the lowest ranks usually do so only on the deposit of another shell of lower rank. This shell is referred to as the *ngmaa* of the higher-ranking shell (the meaning of the word *ngmaa* will be explained later). Thus, we have a notion of links between ranks. For each rank of shell there is a customary expectation as to what rank below should be a proper *ngmaa* for the first one.⁴ This procedure is used in organizing chains of debt between several participants who each contribute a higher-ranking shell and receive a lower-ranking *ngmaa*. In this way shells of high rank may be released through a series of shell movements, each involving only one or a few levels of rank. When Rossel people explained about these shell movements stepwise up the ladder of rank they talked as if the same shell was 'turning' each time, transforming itself into successive higher ranks.

Thus, chains of debt are formed, successively shells of higher rank are involved, each being released on the deposit as *ngmaa* of a shell a step below on the ladder. Informants stressed that the holder of a *ngmaa* can present it to the person who gave it to him and get his original shell, or a replacement, back. According to such

statements the *ngmaa* is a 'pledge'. This happens quite often. Recipients of medium to higher rank shells frequently have to return the shell they received at a prestation and must accept a lower rank substitute because the contributor of the original shell wants it back. The substitute is often the next shell in the chain but sometimes they have to 'step' down several steps. This substituting of a 'reduced replacement' must of course always take place in the case of the high rank *ndap* which are now out of open circulation. But it is also frequent with *kö* where all ranks (except the very highest) may still change ownership.

The word *kaa* (which I compared to the *hau*) appears also in connection with these rank metamorphoses. The substitute, just mentioned, which is given in replacement of a high rank shell is called *kaa-pee* (*pee* = 'half, 'side', 'piece') — a 'part representation'. Lower again on the chain is *kaa-wo-ndap* (*wo* = 'stalk').⁵ The lowest shell is *kpa-wu* ('on top' — 'seed'). Thus from a higher-ranking valuable there is a stepwise series of progressively more reduced 'images'. It is like the Russian doll which contains a series of diminishing dolls, each inside the other. But note also that seen the other way round, from bottom to top, there is a metaphor of plant growth employed about transformations across ascending ranks. There seems to be a notion of some intimate relationship between the shells in such a series. As already mentioned, there is also the idea that a lower-ranking shell given as *ngmaa* to the former possessor of a higher-ranking shell represents a claim on its higher-ranking associate. It is a part of a whole that should later be restored.

I observed a dramatic illustration of these notions when I once participated in a house-paying feast on Rossel. I caught sight of a man who was sitting on the ground occupied with crushing his basket with a stone while he gave vent to loud expostulations. When I asked what was the matter I was told that the man had given a medium rank *ndap* several years back to a certain big man and received a lower rank shell as *ngmaa*. Some time before he had presented this shell to the big man and told him that he now was in need of his former shell and wanted it back.⁶ Since then he had repeated this claim on several occasions but the big man had neglected to repay him. It should be noted that the basket of a man or woman on Rossel is a personal possession which is usually close to the possessor and is carried around everywhere. People carry shell money and small necessities such as tobacco and betel ingredients in their baskets. The basket may thus be regarded as a 'projection of the self' of the owner (cf. Evans-Pritchard on Nuer spear symbolism, 1956: 233). Through the public destruction of this

intimate belonging the man was, as I see it, announcing that he himself was being damaged, just like his basket, through the fault of the big man. When he intermittently had been pounding away on the basket for about an hour the big man, very annoyed, made arrangements with another big man friend of his to produce the shell. He then showed it around for all to touch as witnesses. Finally, he angrily tossed it on the ground towards his creditor who afterwards showed it to several people, asking: "Was it the one he ate?" (His satisfaction was only to last for a pitiful while. The big man went on scheming with his cronies and they succeeded in locating a new debt — this time of a *kō* and with 'the man with the basket' as the debtor! Thus, shortly after, he found himself presented with the *ngmaa* of the *kō* and urged to procure that shell).

This happening illustrates several important points. Firstly, it shows how a 'reduced image' of a shell, given as *ngmaa* or pledge, may actually be used to reclaim a former possession. Secondly, it also shows that this is not an automatic procedure. The claim had been only a claim if it had not been dramatically pressed through. Thirdly, it shows the intimate 'participation' of these valuables with the identity of people. The big man had incorporated the shell like food. The creditor's image had, through want of a replacement of his valuable, been crushed like his basket.

The Rossel valuables are clearly not freely alienable. Thus, the instance of a pig feast, where one may observe the exchange of slices of pork against pieces of shell, cannot be regarded, in isolation, as a complex way of selling pork. Although each contributor of a piece of 'shell-money' is given a piece of pork corresponding in size to the rank of his contribution, the participants will assert that their contributions are not 'squared' with the meat. They say that they have a right to have their shells returned some time in the future. Indeed, pig transactions are often arranged on a reciprocal basis with a delay of some years. The former sponsor of the payment of the first pig will now fatten a pig, and the former pig's owner who, together with his associates, received the payment, will organize the second payment. In this way the flow of valuables goes the opposite way and everybody should, ideally, be 'squared'. Similarly, there are prestations among the mortuary compensations which are returned when the surviving spouse of a couple dies. But, on the other hand, there are many other occasions, such as bridewealth payments and payments of houses or canoes, where there is no reciprocation of the prestations.⁷ Here the shells tend to 'go for good' and if a contributor demands a return a replacement must be found. As the shells have often been engaged in transactions with third parties

it becomes 'hard work' to regain them.

The confused ethnographer, therefore, finds himself confronted with a welter of contradictory statements about these shell 'loans'. On the one hand, my informants asserted that on presentation of the *ngmaa* a debtor must return the original shell contributed, or, if that is unobtainable, a replacement. If he is 'a good man' this should be a shell of slightly higher rank. On the other hand, the original shell is often 'lost' and debtors are often reluctant to find a replacement.

I shall now reveal the true meaning of the word *ngmaa*. It means 'a dodge' or 'to dodge' — such as one would do to avoid a spear (the word *nuö*, 'point', is used about a debt). Thus, from the point of view of a shell 'borrower', the *ngmaa* he has given a contributor is a dodge by means of which he may keep his creditor 'floating', as they say, for an indefinite period. Many informants told me about contributions which they had tried for years to retrieve. The same men would (at other occasions) grinningly tell me that a man, who had obtained a shell and given *ngmaa*, did not need to worry about his creditor: he had the *ngmaa*! In this connection I was told about an alternative strategy for seeking replacement. One may lend the *ngmaa*-shell to a third person. In this case the borrower should return a higher-ranking shell. By two, or three, such transactions one should be able to regain a shell of the rank of the original contribution — or an even better one. Careful inquiries showed that this does indeed sometimes succeed. But, as often as not, even the *ngmaa* was lost in this way. Again, the person who has had a higher-ranking shell in a payment replaced by a lower-ranking substitute claims that he can take this kind of *ngmaa* (or *kaapee*) and lend it. If the identical shell is not returned he must be repaid a shell of the rank of the initial high-ranking shell. But how could such a claim be effective in the case of the higher echelon *ndap* which have passed entirely out of circulation?

In any case, people often grumble about the complexity of the exchange system with its withdrawals, substitutes etc. Some say that in the old times exchange was simple and easy: "Just like store". I often heard men complain about debts which were not met, shells they had lost etc. One also hears bitter remarks about the tricks and 'joking' of the big men, the elders who are skilled exchangers.

In summary, the interpretation of the Rossel exchange system gives rise to ambiguity and contradiction both to its participants and to the researcher. Several conflicting models of the system may be constructed. To a superficial observer it looks as market exchange of commodities with a monetary medium. This was

Armstrong's interpretation (1924, 1928, for a refutation see Liep 1983b). Another, hierarchical, model represents the system as one where generous repayment allows one to 'climb' the ladder of shell ranks or, as they say, one may let a shell 'grow itself'. A third model sees the system as one of delayed reciprocity in kind: the movement forth and back of identical shells. This is the model of true inalienability which becomes increasingly adequate towards the top of the *ndap* rank scale. Here the individual and common interests of controllers of high rank valuables have resulted in an 'enclavement', so that these shells are only nominally engaged in prestations. The only strategy available to obtain these shells for young men is to make themselves so attractive to the owners that they may hope to *inherit* them. Finally, there is the 'statistical model', so to speak, which reveals the underlying 'leak' of shell alienation as some men find themselves losing shells and retreating down the rank scale while others advance. A look at the classic Kula exchange will serve to stress the same *problématique*.

Kula, *kitoum* and inalienability

In the following I shall assume some familiarity with the basic features of the Kula: the ceremonial exchange between partners on a ring of island communities of armshells passing one way around the ring and necklaces the opposite way. Like Rossel and Māori valuables, these objects are to some extent personalized: the higher-ranking ones all have a name and a history.

Although he wrote a book of more than 500 pages about it, Malinowski regarded the actual Kula exchange as "... a very simple affair" (1922: 86) — a delayed exchange of items of equivalent value. He pictured the ceremonial Kula as a closed-off circuit. He described partnerships as lifelong relationships and the valuables as incessantly moving around the Kula ring: "once in the Kula, always in the Kula" applied to valuables and Kula partners alike (*ibid.* 83). Recent research (especially Leach and Leach 1983) has questioned this model and shown that the Kula, in fact, is a very complex phenomenon. I sum up our contemporary knowledge of the Kula in the following points:

1. Kula valuables continually pass in and out of the Kula to enter internal exchanges in the Kula communities where they are instrumental in kinship payments, transfers of rights to land, pigs etc. This means that they are essential in the manoeuvring

- for power and status in the local context.
2. Outside the Kula the valuables may thus be directly exchanged for other items (e.g. pigs) or be acquired in kinship exchanges. But even in the Kula there are conversions (such as Kula valuables for canoes).
 3. Conversions upwards in the Kula may also be engineered through *pokala* ('offering') of pigs or solicitory gifts between partners.
 4. The Kula is an instance of ranked exchange as defined above: there is a ranked order of valuables, and debt relations are created through gifts and counter-gifts of different rank.
 5. The aim of Kula participants is to produce a 'name' (fame and renown) by advancing in the Kula — i.e. by handling valuables of increasing rank.

Through series of gifts Kula partners aim to build up lasting chains of debt relationship ("paths") by expanding the volume of valuables flowing between them. Very important in this process are the subsidiary gifts (*basi* or *logit*) — lesser-ranking valuables given to attract higher-ranking ones into paths or, as gifts of acknowledgement, signifying that one is "working" to find a high rank counter-gift for a gift received earlier (Campbell 1983: 210–11; Damon 1980: 279). As Damon points out (*ibid.*) the aim is not just to meet an 'opening' gift with a 'closing' gift (this would mean a closing of the path) but to keep the path open through continuous mutual gift giving.

Although the overall structures of the Kula and the internal Rossel exchange system are different there are significant similarities, especially in the techniques of forming debt chains and in the feature of lower-ranking 'images' of higher-ranking valuables (respectively *basi/logit* and *ngmaa/kaa*). Another parallel is the increasing inalienability of the valuables towards the top of the rank scale. Although the highest-ranking Kula shells are not completely immobilized as are the high-ranking Rossel *ndap*, their movement is "tight" and restricted to a very narrow circle of outstanding big men (Munn 1983: 304; Weiner 1987).

A very important feature of the Kula, the notion of *kitoum*, was overlooked by Malinowski and Fortune (1932) but has been stressed by modern researchers (see especially Weiner 1976: 129, 1983; Munn 1977; Damon 1980, 1983). A *kitoum* is a valuable (armshell or necklace), usually acquired outside the Kula. It may have been bought for cash or acquired in exchange for a pig or in a kinship exchange. The valuable is an individual property of the owner who may do what he wants with it. If he invests it in the

Kula, as an opening gift, the closing gift eventually replacing it will now be his *kitoum*. This valuable may be 'thrown' as a new opening gift (in the opposite direction of the first), or it may be withdrawn from the Kula and used in internal exchange. Damon reports that in Muyuw (Woodlark) they regard all Kula valuables as somebody's *kitoum* (1983: 324). Owners of large *kitoums* tend to hold on to them for a long time. They want to build a 'strong' path with reliable debt relationships before they release them against a pre-arranged counter-gift (*ibid.* 331). Informants assert that a *kitoum* is the owner's possession until he has received an equivalent replacement and that he has the right to get it back if this should not succeed (Damon 1980: 282).

Gregory argues that the concept of *kitoum* shows that a person has an inalienable right over a thing when it is circulated as a gift (1982: 197). The reality is that many, especially inexperienced, Kula participants lose their *kitoums*. This happens because shells are diverted off established paths by men who become attracted, through soliciting, by other partners or by the lure of tempting high rank valuables (see e.g. Campbell 1983: 211). Damon (1983: 322) explains how, in Muyuw, Kula valuables may be acquired as *kitoums* through gifts of large pigs to possessors of shells, if the possessor is not able to replace the pig. This applies even if these valuables are not the possessor's *kitoums*. This evidence shows that the concept of *kitoum* indicates a claim to possession of a Kula valuable, rather than an inalienable right. The notion implies contradiction. It could with as much right be seen as expressing alienability: the exclusive claim to individual property which one is free to dispose of at will. In my opinion *kitoum* is a concomitant phenomenon of the risk and speculation in Kula exchange. An increasing stress on *kitoum* claims by Kula participants — such as may probably have developed during this century — reveals increased competition about advanced position in the Kula, more attempts to enter the Kula by conversion of cash or pigs etc. into *kitoums* and more attempts to divert shells from existing paths.

Thus, we find in the Kula the same double-standards as on Rossel; also in the Kula there are contradictory models of reality. On the one hand, a model of restricted exchange: the give-and-take of equivalent values. On the other, a model of generalized exchange implying expansion and hierarchy, as men 'climb' to higher renown and shells accumulate history and worth (see Damon 1980 and Munn 1983). In both systems we find the insistence on equivalent replacement, or even the generous incremental return from the "good man" (Munn *ibid.*), but all authors, since Fortune, also stress the amount of manoeuvring, deception and default going on in the

Kula. As Damon's informants said: "The only way to get ahead in the Kula is to lie!" (1980: 278).

A critique of the concepts of reciprocity and inalienability

The preceding analyses have, I hope, revealed the naivety and simplicity of the concept of reciprocity as Malinowski formulated it: "...a chain of reciprocal gifts and counter-gifts, which in the long run balance, benefiting both sides equally" (1926: 40). Moreover we can discern a curious paradox in Malinowski's analytical construction of the Kula.

In "*Argonauts of the Western Pacific*" (1922) Malinowski set out to disprove what he regarded as current fallacious theories of primitive man. He attacked notions of 'primitive economic man' (*ibid.* 60, 96, 166) of 'primitive communism' (*ibid.* 97, 167) and of the 'materialistic conception of history' (*ibid.* 516). But in his continuum of forms of exchange (*ibid.* 177–91) we find the Kula classified under "Ceremonial barter with deferred payment," next to "Trade, pure and simple". And, as referred to above, to him the Kula was "a simple affair" — a deferred exchange of gifts of equivalent value. So, in spite of the romantic version of an economically irrational savage in this early work, is this model of the Kula not similar to the model of commodity exchange of bourgeois society: the exchange of value equivalents?⁸ In this respect it's "... all same bloody market", as Malinowski's trader-friend said about another Trobriand institution (1967: 147).

Thus, notions derived from the researcher's own background of a commodity economy have repeatedly intruded themselves into theories of gift exchange, even though the researcher had the best intention of demonstrating the 'otherness' of the object. There is an instructive example of this problem in Gregory's recent book "*Gifts and Commodities*" (1982). Gregory's method is an abstract logical derivation of the character of the gift in contrast to that of the commodity. As commodity exchange is the exchange of alienable property between independent individuals, gift exchange is by assumption, the exchange of inalienable property between persons in a relationship of interdependence. Therefore the exchangers of gifts retain a lien on their possession. Reception of a gift involves the recipient in a debt which must sooner or later be discharged. Gregory, therefore, regards all forms of gift exchange as 'forms of equality' (1982: 64–66). There is no alienation of value in gift

economies and no possibility of accumulation and capital formation (1980: 641, 1982: 61).⁹

The model from our own commodity economy here distorts the analysis in two ways. Firstly, it enters into the construction of the gift as an antithesis to the commodity. By the construction of the properties of the concept 'gift' as mere inversions of the properties of the concept 'commodity', the object of investigation remains analytically bound to the conception of the researcher's own categories. The gift economy just becomes the commodity economy stood on its head. Secondly, although Gregory perceives that gift exchange "...establishes an unequal relationship of *domination* between the transactors" (1982: 41) he does not develop the consequences of this insight. Instead, the commodity model sneaks back into his view of gift exchange as establishing 'forms of equality'. Here Gregory's view comes near to Malinowski's simple model of reciprocity. Indeed, Mauss' discussion of the gift takes account of much more complexity. As "a kind of hybrid" (1954: 70) he placed *gift exchange* developmentally between an almost hypothetical category of collective *simple total* prestations and the market of individual contract (*ibid.* 4-5, 33-34, 45, 73). He compared the Trobriand or Tsimshian chief to a capitalist (*ibid.* 72) and noted the ambiguous mixture of interest and disinterestedness in gift exchange (*ibid.* 70ff.). What is needed now is a grasp of gift exchange, neither as a primitive version of commodity exchange, nor as its antithetical opposition, and neither also as some kind of 'hybrid' in between, but in a 'third position', which acknowledges its complex character and takes account of it as a process unfolding through time.

Some years ago Bourdieu criticized the 'objective' structural model of reciprocity (1977). He stressed the temporal structure of gift exchange and argued that "... cycles of reciprocity are not the irresistible gearing of obligatory practices..." (*ibid.* 9). Attention to the time factor, he suggested, introduces *strategy* and *calculation* as distinct from *rule* and reveals the contradiction, the "two opposing truths" inherent in the gift (*ibid.* 5).¹⁰

Another important critique of the notion of reciprocity has been advanced by Weiner (1980). She argues that the complexities of exchange as an ongoing process are distorted by collapsing it into a timeless 'norm of reciprocity' involving equivalent gifts and counter-gifts. She suggests an approach where gift acts are seen as moments in a long-term process of reproduction during which a *negotiation* of the social relationships of the parties involved takes place.

In a recent paper Weiner has again questioned the 'received'

interpretation of reciprocity as an alliance maintaining 'norm' with the function of promoting social solidarity (Weiner 1985).¹¹ Weiner points out that it is important to 'keep while giving'. As mentioned above in connection with the *hau* she is especially concerned with the kind of immoveable property which embodies the history, rank and identity of the owner(s). To give away such valuables is to part with oneself. Gift exchange is thus not unproblematic but carries serious risks for the *persona* of the giver — thus the many limitations to the circulation of wealth objects with a historical connotation — inalienable wealth — in gift societies. Weiner has proposed a concept of replacement instead of reciprocity. This indicates the long-term investment and eventual reclamation of important wealth (1980). Yet, I find that the notion of replacement does not entirely save us from the idea of equality or equilibrium inherent in the concept of reciprocity. However, most recently Weiner has acknowledged the risk of loss in the practice of exchange (1988, ch.9, this vol.).

Conclusion: the negotiation of identity

Through this reconnaissance into some concrete systems of gift exchange and theoretical discussions of the field I have attempted to show the inadequacy of simple models of gift exchange. I have pointed out their affiliation with a commodity model of social exchange as transactions of equivalents by parties who remain equal. Instead, I have demonstrated the complexity of gift exchange and sketched a model of ranked exchange involving long-term debt relations which are continuously bargained about and renegotiated.

I have also tried to bring out the symbolic significance of valuables and the personal and life-like qualities attributed to them. We can discern how they intermingle with the identity of their possessors and are involved in their personal destinies. This explains the many restrictions to their exchange and their increasing inalienability, the higher their rank. The forces producing inalienability are however complex (in the Rossel case we saw how the higher ranking *ndap* were immobilized as a result of the historical process of colonialism). If objects of wealth are entirely withdrawn from circulation they may tend to lose their significance. I would therefore argue that in most cases wealth, to maintain its relevance, must be made *social* through entering, however guardedly, in *some* circulation (cf. Weiner 1987).

If valuable objects are so significant to the image and integrity of their possessors, it is not surprising that the natives themselves invoke notions of inalienability (such as are involved in the concepts of *ngmaa* and *kitoum*) and express rules of just return or replacement. There is a model of equal exchange upheld, not only by anthropologists but by the participants themselves. On the other hand, we have seen the amount of manipulations, diversions and deceptions which is part of exchange practices. It is not only us who are mystified. As Bourdieu says: "... the economy... is forced to devote as much time to concealing the reality of economic acts as it expends in carrying them out..." (*op.cit.* 172). I shall therefore advocate that we devote more attention to the aspects of contradiction in our informants' statements, as well as in the process of exchange itself.¹²

Instead of constituting 'forms of equality' gift exchange systems involve subtle processes of *unequalizing*. As M. Strathern notes: "... people affect, influence, and create one another through exchanging material items" (1984: 44). Through the ongoing process of exchange the 'name', substance and status of some men (and to a varying extent women) 'grow' as they come to control more and higher-ranking valuables and establish and expand their networks of reliable exchange friends. But other men find themselves losing shells, connections and esteem. In the 'tournaments of value' (Appadurai 1986: 21) 'big men' as well as 'rubbish men' are created. And, moreover, as the images of persons wax and wane, the value of things is influenced as well. As Munn notes: "Shells and men 'valorize each other'" (1983: 284). This means also that the value of a debt is influenced by the relative and changing statuses of creditor and debtor. The obligation to return gifts is therefore not a fundamental law, although we and our informants subscribe to it. In the real world it is situationally determined. Your decision concerning when to return a gift, how generous the return should be, or, whether or not the debt should be met at all, depends on whether your creditor has become a greater or lesser man in the meantime. And the result of your decision will further reflect on your identity as well as his. Thus Firth's old dictum: "From each according to his status obligations in the social system, to each according to his rights in that system" (1963: 142) still holds — but with the proviso that rights and obligations are not expressions of fixed statuses but the outcome of negotiation in an unstable status field.

Notes

1. In working out these glosses I have made use of an unpublished word list compiled by Jim and Anne Henderson of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The Hendersons have worked since 1971 on Rossel Island. I did not acquire fluency in the difficult Rossel language myself. My field work was carried out from 1971 to 1973 and in 1980. It was generously supported by the Danish Social Science Research Council, the Australian National University and the University of Copenhagen. I thank Michael Whyte for correction of my English.
2. Keesing (1984) has performed a similar 'demetaphorization' of the concept of *mana* which he shows generally referred to a condition of 'efficacy' or 'potency' but was substantivized by early researchers as a thinglike 'spiritual energy'.
3. I have described the changes in the exchange system caused by colonialism in Liep 1983a.
4. I have published such a list in Liep 1983b.
5. These are specific terms for customary steps in the chain. Generally, each step is also the *ngmaa* of the next higher. In an earlier publication I erroneously glossed *kaa-pee* = 'hold-half' (Liep 1983b: 521).
6. I was told that a man would only ask for the return of a 'loan' when he, himself, needed the shell for some definite purpose. My informants said that this way of publicly remonstrating with a debtor was an "old custom". However, I only saw it this one time.
7. I leave aside in this connection the stated preference for patrilateral (classificatory FZ or FZD) marriage as this, in effect, does not lead to any simple reciprocation of prestations. The matter is too complex to take up here.
8. I owe this insight to Michael Harbsmeier, now at the Center for Humanistic Research, University of Copenhagen, who pointed it out at a seminar on an earlier paper of mine.
9. Gregory makes an exception in the case of the destruction of wealth in 'gifts to gods' (1980, 1982: 61).
10. The elements of calculation and interest in gift exchange have also been underlined in a recent essay by Appadurai although he goes too far by regarding gift exchange as "a particular form of the circulation of commodities" (1986: 12).
11. Sahlins (1972, ch. 4, 5), and to some extent Lévi-Strauss (1969), are the most prominent representatives of this 'received' view.
12. Compare LiPuma's stimulating discussion of contradictory Maring marriage rules which he sees as ideological statements or rationalizations after the fact produced by decontextualized ethnographic interviewing (1983).

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