

NEW LESSONS FROM OLD SHELLS: Changing Perspectives On The *Kula*

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Anthropology's project, in Western thought, has been to represent Otherness, as a counterpoint to and commentary on the civilization of its time.¹ "Primitive societies" were in the nineteenth century represented as evolutionarily prior, and inferior, to European society.² The rise of British functionalist social anthropology and American cultural anthropology led to rejection of the "conjectural history" and smug ethnocentrism of nineteenth-century evolutionism; yet it preserved the image of a world of "primitive societies." Anthropology's task remained squarely Orientalist, in Said's (1978, 1985) sense: to represent radical Alterity to, and provide philosophical commentary on, the West.

Anthropological discourse, typifying, essentializing, and exotifying the "primitive" world, has produced a series of quintessential images of Otherness. From Mead's adolescent Samoan girls to Chagnon's fierce Yanomamö, anthropology's key images of radical Alterity as commentaries on Ourselves and a Human Nature our discipline has simultaneously confirmed and denied have been instilled in students and consumed by an eager public. (In the past twenty years, Alterity has become even more radical, as chimpanzees and gorillas have become our Others and Ourselves, fur clad.)

One of anthropology's most compelling and influential and enduring images of Otherness, created both by Malinowski's rhetorical power and the sheer fascination they themselves

How to cite this book chapter:

Keesing, R.M. (2021). New Lessons from Old Shells: Changing Perspectives on the *Kula*. In J. Siikala (ed.), *Culture and History in the Pacific* (pp. 139–163). Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-12-10>

engender, has been the *kula* partners of the Melanesian Massim, passionately engaged in trading useless armshells for useless necklaces, and then passing them on to other partners. Malinowski saw in the *kula* lessons for the social science of his time, as well as popular stereotypes. He sent his Trobriand *kula* participants and magicians off to do battle with *Homo oeconomicus* and other imagined universal humans of his day. Malinowski saw profound importance in the sense, and non-sense, of the endless exchange of armshells for necklaces, in the meanings of the meaningless, the value of the worthless.

Through decades when anthropology's fashions have changed, and what there ever was of a "primitive" world has been overturned, engulfed, obliterated, the fascination of the *kula* has endured. Indeed, this fascination has been a lure helping to attract further generations of fieldworkers to Malinowski's Trobriands and other islands of the *kula* "ring." The new evidence, presented in international conferences on Massim exchange and a major volume (Leach and Leach 1983) and comprehensive bibliography (Macintyre 1983b), has greatly expanded and enriched ethnographic knowledge of the area. However, partly because the original image was so compelling, and partly because the new evidence has so far (for a number of reasons³) attained limited diffusion within the anthropological community and beyond, the changing picture of Massim exchange has not displaced the classic image.

Assessing the new evidence, I will suggest that the emerging picture has important implications not only for our understanding of the region and the phenomenon, but for the way we think about Alterity, about "primitive society" a world that never existed⁴ and about anthropology's Orientalist project of representing radical cultural difference to the West (Said 1978, 1985, 1987; Keesing n.d.).

Problems in the classic model

Some of the old questions that puzzled Malinowski and those who pored over *Argonauts* have been answered; but a host of new questions have risen in their place.

The *kula*, as Malinowski saw it from his vantage point in the Trobriands, was a system in which, around islands roughly arranged in a giant ring (whose inhabitants spoke different languages, had different cultural traditions), partners exchanged armshells for necklaces. You got necklaces from partners in

communities to your right, as you faced the middle of the giant ring of islands; and you gave them to partners on your left. In return, you eventually got pairs of armshells from partners on your left to whom you had given necklaces; and you gave them to partners on your right from whom you had received necklaces all subject to an elaborate etiquette and carried out on dramatic communal expeditions by fleets of canoes whose occupants, at once in competition and cooperation with one another, braved the dangers of flying witches and treacherous seas. The armshells and necklaces went around and around, the armshells counterclockwise, the necklaces clockwise. The most important valuables, with names and known histories, gained fame as they passed through the hands of important men. These men had many partners, in each direction; lesser men had few, or took no part in the *kula*. You tried to get the best, most important, armshells you could, using magic and where necessary trickery to attract them. But once you got them, they were of no use except as tokens of your renown, which you passed on to your partners. It was a game that had no beginning, no end; and seemingly no point, except insofar as all games have an artificially constructed point, at once meaningful in the terms of the game and meaningless outside them. Yet in this *kula* game reputations were made and lost; enormous efforts were expended, dire dangers faced, to play the game across hostile seas with partners in alien communities.

What, then, were the problems in “The *Kula*” as described by Malinowski? There were questions of how such a system could have ever been created, how such a game could have been invented, with rules spanning boundaries of language, culture, and political community: but Malinowski’s warning against speculative culture history pushed this question under a rug from which it has protruded tantalizingly through the decades. *Kula* exchange lived in the timeless, endlessly self-perpetuating realm of functionalist explanation. But what functions did it then serve? Was *kula* exchange a kind of regional peace pact, a substitute for war? Was the barter of pottery, greenstone, and other raw materials and craft goods in which various islands and communities specialized a barter fraught with undignified haggling that was kept strictly separate from the elaborate and dignified courtship of *kula* partners and their valuables the real rationale, the covert function, of the ceremonial transactions? Other commentators have seen Malinowski’s *kula* as exchange of intrinsically useless objects invested with purely symbolic value that dramatized social bonds indeed, that dramatized sociality itself, in its transcendence of the boundaries of kin groups, communities, even societies.⁵

There were also questions about how *kula* exchange actually worked, and how it served to build one's prestige. If one's partners were lifelong and fixed, how did one forge new partnerships, and through them, expand one's influence? What was the relationship, if any, between the *kula* valuables used in exchange with overseas partners and the valuables presented in mortuary ritual and other prestations *within* communities? What were the sanctions, in the end, if one didn't play the game properly if one took armshells and never gave back a necklace? The partner who got left high and dry was, after all, on a different island.

Malinowski, and Mauss commenting on *Argonauts*, wondered about the motives that led participants to give away valuables they had worked so hard, with magic and guile and verbal seduction, to secure. I have long been puzzled by the other side of the coin. Elsewhere in Melanesia, you gain prestige not by receiving the most valuable valuables, the biggest pigs or the best yams, but by giving them away, in public demonstrations of strength. In other contexts, Trobrianders, too, acquire prestige and assert dominance by giving. He who receives is challenged, tested, potentially shamed. I wondered why, in the *kula*, the prestige went to the man who got a famous valuable, rather than the man who gave it to him.

Against the spectrum of Melanesian exchange systems, I and others have been led to wonder as well what sustains the connection of mutual obligation between partners once an initial transaction has been reciprocated by the counter-prestition of armshells or necklace of equivalent value — once everything is squared, the obligation to reciprocate cancelled out.

What makes *Argonauts* stand out so brilliantly from the ethnographies of Malinowski's time is the view he evokes of a primitive world whose boundaries are open, not closed what we would nowadays call a regional system, through which ideas and material objects flowed, a world of trade and exchange and warfare and diplomacy across boundaries of language and culture. The primitive world evoked by other early ethnographers was a mosaic of separate cultures, each a distinctive shape and color: the one under study was presented to Western readers as a separate little piece of human possibility. Malinowski's Trobrianders as he polemically presented them to scholarly and lay audiences in *The Sexual Life of Savages, Crime and Custom*, and other works were squarely in this genre. But in *Argonauts* we view the Trobrianders of Kiriwina as connected not only to their cultural cousins on Vakuta and Kaileuna and Kitava, the lesser islands of the Trobriand archipelago, but as articulated with neighboring peoples to the southwest the Amphetlets, Sanaroa — and southeast Gawa,

Woodlark; peoples from whom came the pottery, axeblades, canoes on which the Trobrianders depended, peoples at once enemies and friends through the wondrous medium of *kula* exchange, flag of truce for trade. To the south were the Dobuans, to become famous from Fortune's classic *Sorcerers of Dobu*, people Malinowski knew only from a distance; and beyond them, the southerners of Tubetube and Koyagaugau, feared for their warlike and cannibalistic ways. We glimpsed here for the first time the tribal world as economically and politically connected regional system. Malinowski and Fortune knew in detail only two nodes in this system; for the rest we had to guess.

Revising the image

In the last twenty years a score of ethnographers have gone to the Massim. They have found *kula* exchange still flourishing despite capitalism and Christianity, outboard motors, cutter boats and airplanes. We now have detailed accounts of *kula* exchange from vantage points all around the "ring": from Kitava and Vakuta, from Gawa and Muyuw (Woodlark), from Normanby, from the once-feared southerners of Tubetube. We also have further accounts of Malinowski's Kiriwina by Powell and Jerry Leach and Weiner and Hutchins.

The character of *kula* exchange has changed since Malinowski's day. My colleague Michael Young was in Port Moresby entertaining a prominent Trobriand Islander when the latter noticed a local doctor backing his car out of his driveway: "He's Dobuan... He's got a famous necklace I want. I must ring him about it." Despite these changes, we now see the Massim as regional system, and *kula* exchanges within this system, more clearly than Malinowski could have, given his vantage point and the anthropological climate of the time. In assessing changing perspectives on *kula* exchange and their implications for anthropology, I will attempt to bring the rapidly changing picture up to date.

The new evidence on Massim exchange, and corrections to the picture drawn by Malinowski, range from very specific details misrendering of Kiriwina words, erroneous identifications of shell species to quite general points of system and interpretation. I will concentrate mainly on the latter, drawing an alternative picture of Massim exchange. Having done so, I will assess the newer picture in relation to the issues of contemporary anthropology, and more

general questions about anthropology's project of representing Otherness.

We have learned, first of all, that *kula* exchange operates in rather different ways, and is conceptualized in rather different ways, in different parts of the *kula*-ing network. In extrapolating from what he saw at the northern edge of the network, Malinowski created a "ring" that is in substantial measure a reification. So, indeed, is "The *Kula*" as a vast institution. Malinowski, seeing a small part of a regional exchange network and extrapolating to an inferred total "ring", depicted as a relatively simple and closed system governed by the "one-direction" principle always armshells in one direction, necklaces in the other connections that in reality are much more complex. Malinowski's inferences fit his northern corner of the *kula*-ing network much more clearly than they do elsewhere, especially in the south. (I say *kula*-ing because in most languages of the Massim, *kula* [*kune* in the southern Massim] is canonically a verb: one *kula*-s or *kune*-s. Indeed in the languages of the southern Bwanabwana area Tubetube, Koyagaugau *kune* is probably best translated simply as 'exchange'.)

Malinowski apparently missed two key concepts in Trobriand *kula*-ing which are turning out to be important in communities all around the exchange network. These concepts may have become more elaborated and more central since Malinowski's day: but their pervasiveness through the whole area, in varying linguistic forms, attests to their being old concepts, not new ones. The most important is the concept of *kitoma* (*kitoum*, *kitomwa*). Whereas Malinowski argued that *kula* valuables belong to no one, circulating endlessly, the new studies reveal that as a valuable circulates it passes from states of being encumbered by debt-obligation to being free from such obligation. When it is not encumbered, it becomes the *kitoma* of the person who holds it: he or she can use it for a further *kula* transaction, but need not do so. The person who has unencumbered title to the valuable can use it to buy a pig or a canoe, present it to an affine, use it in a mortuary rite or (contra Malinowski) simply keep it. When one manufactures a new necklace it is one's *kitoma*. But whereas C. A. Gregory (1982, 1983) has argued that objects given, in exchange systems such as those of the Massim, are inalienable and ultimately remain attached to the giver, in Massim logic the new necklace once given and reciprocated becomes the *kitoma* of the recipient. The concept is more subtle and complex in practice than my account suggests: the same valuable may be talked about in different contexts as at the same time being the *kitoma* of several people. Nor is its absence in Malinowski's and Fortune's accounts a simple matter.

It has been suggested that the *kitoma* concept may have become more pervasive and important since the period of early ethnography because of the democratization of an exchange economy once dominated by powerful leaders (see Macintyre 1983a). But the concept of valuables as *kitoma* seems to be an old one not simply because of its variant forms in the different languages but because it provides the missing connections, as we will see, between *kula* exchange, the domestic prestige economy, and more utilitarian trade.

A second important concept one less disruptive of the Malinowskian model, but important nonetheless is that of “roads” or “paths” (Kiriwian *keda*, Tubetube *kamwasa*) along which *kula* valuables flow. This notion of roads or paths is a dominant metaphor of *kula*-ing. Malinowski had depicted one’s *kula* partnerships as fixed, permanent, lifelong. Recent accounts, notably by Campbell, Weiner, Munn, Damon and Macintyre, have shown that partnerships are much less stable than this, with links to immediate partners, and beyond to their partners, forming, going through cycles as valuables pass back and forth along the links, then ending when the cycle is complete. New paths are created, replacing old ones: some paths are relatively enduring, others transitory; some are “big”, involving prominent transactors and stable political alliances, and others are “small” as well as temporary. Campbell shows particularly clearly how opening new paths places men in competition not with overseas partners but with their own fellow villagers:

kula is... a highly competitive exchange. But the real competition... is at the intra-community level with Vakutan men setting up *keda* [path] relationships outside their own communities. The *keda* can be viewed as an alliance between men from different social environments who work together to accomplish power and influence for each... Men break up partnerships, set up new *keda*, or reinstate old relationships in response to opportunities for enhancing personal power and influence within their own community (Campbell 1983: 203).

Another major respect in which the Malinowskian model of *kula*-ing requires revision is, as I have hinted, his insistence that the exchange of armshells for necklaces was entirely symbolic and ceremonial, that the valuables were not “convertible wealth”. Another quote from Campbell will serve to introduce this theme:

Contrary to Malinowski’s impression that shell valuables [are] regarded [as]... “supremely good in themselves, and not

as convertible wealth, or as potential ornaments or even as instruments of power” (Malinowski 1922: 512), the armshells and necklaces are indeed “convertible wealth” and used as “instruments of power”. From the vantage point of Vakuta, it is quite clear that shell valuables can be fed into the internal exchange system as wealth items, thereby securing other wealth in the form of yams, magic, land and women. The degree to which a man can manipulate his *kula keda* [paths], and consequently the internal exchange networks through his wealth in the form of shell valuables, determines his status in the power play of local politics. (Campbell 1983: 204.)

Macintyre and Young, taking the same quote from Malinowski about “convertible wealth” and “instruments of power” as text, argue that his claim

is contradicted by all the evidence, including that available to Malinowski himself. If one has a *Kula* valuable, one can use it in a wide range of internal exchanges: to marry, acquire pigs, canoes or land; to pay mortuary debts and compensation for injury; to purchase magic or the services of a curer or sorcerer (1982: 213).

Kula valuables, when they are one’s *kitomwa*, can be diverted into the internal prestige economy within the community:

It is as *kitomwa* that... valuables function as a flexible currency in internal exchanges for marriage, land transactions and mortuary payments (Macintyre and Young 1982: 214).

The purpose of *Kula* is to forge alliances through a sequence of indebtedness and to accumulate valuables which can be used for internal exchange (Macintyre and Young 1982: 214).

The connections between *kula* paths and affinal alliances, especially in the southern islands, emerge clearly in Macintyre’s research on Tubetube and Koyagaugau (1983a). Use of *kula* valuables in marriage prestations and mortuary prestations represent not so much diversion from *kula* paths as the multiple strands of connection that run along these paths.

Through much of the *kula*-ing network though not in the Trobriands *kula* valuables are diverted to buy canoes and pigs (these transactions, too, are called *kune*-ing, from the standpoint of those who produce the pigs and canoes and those who invest shell valuables to get them).

Particularly in these southern islands, *kula*-ing incorporates much wider range of valuables than armshells and necklaces, although in

Malinowski's day some of them had already dropped out. Wooden platters, lime spatulae and other items entered into *kula*-ing. In fact it seems only in the northernmost sector of the *kula*-ing network that the exchange of armshells and necklaces was clearly separated from exchanges of other wealth items. Through most of the circuit it was neither armshells nor necklaces that had the most general convertibility and most pervasive value as convertible wealth: in various contexts and places these honors would go either to pigs or to greenstone axe blades both items of practical as well as symbolic value, both items for which armshells and necklaces were exchanged. For Tubetube, Macintyre (1983a: 239) writes that:

Pigs were the most flexible media of exchange for they could be converted into *kitomwa* on any path. Like all *kune* valuables they could be used to acquire other valuables; they could be given in marriage, mortuary and land transactions, or to pay compensation.

Of the stone axe blades, Weiner writes for the Trobriands that

Stone ax blades can be converted through exchanges into a wide variety of objects and services (1976: 180).

Of all objects of exchange... within the internal exchange system of Kiriwina ax blades (*beku*) are the most valued. A man is called wealthy... if he owns such ax blades (1976: 179).

In the Trobriands the *beku* axe blades are classed with armshells and necklaces as *vaiguwa*⁶; but they are distinguished from *kula* valuables proper, and at least in this century have not been used in overseas *kula* exchanges in the Trobriands and immediately adjacent islands.⁷

In other parts of the network, again most strikingly in the southern islands, axe blades, canoes and even pigs are classed as *kula* valuables when they circulate on *kula* paths and are exchanged for armshells and necklaces. As Macintyre (1983a: 359) observes for the southern islands,

If we focus on the exchange of these items then *kune* can no longer be seen as the ceremonial exchange of useless objects. Rather it becomes the exchange of scarcest and most useful commodities. Viewed from this perspective, the prestige derived from *kune* no longer resides in the temporary possession of ornamental objects, but in the control over access to scarce essential commodities...

Another crucial connection between *kula* exchange and other intercommunity transactions which emerged in Macintyre's research on the southern islands is the link between *kula* valuables and homicide payments. Indeed the relationship between *kula* exchange and the endemic intercommunity warfare of the Massim is crucial in placing *kula*-ing in historical perspective, a point to which I shall shortly return. Macintyre notes (1983a: 143–49) that:

... if *kula* valuables defined and symbolized peaceful relations they also figured prominently in the transactions entailed in war and vengeance... On Tubetube, the modern use of valuables in all transactions associated with death is often explained with by their former function in exchanges for human lives, particularly in the context of war. ... It is likely that the number of valuables exchanged in the context of war exceeded the numbers normally involved in *kune* transactions... Each *susu* [matrilineage] needed *kitomwa* in order to wage war, redeem captives, pay compensation and appease enemies.

But homicide transactions and *kune* transactions were intimately connected. Macintyre (1983a: 162) notes that:

The *kitomwa* given to the warrior became his own possessions, he could use them in *kune* or other exchanges... The accumulation of *kitomwa* as homicide payments... was one means whereby men could become big *kune* traders.

Malinowski and Fortune had noted the relationship between *kula* and warfare. But Malinowski's observations about *kula* exchange being a substitute for warfare and head-hunting were set in an ahistorical frame of reference (in keeping with his rejection of speculative culture history); he apparently meant this as functionalist interpretation: the *kula* served functions which otherwise, and less positively, would have been served by intercommunity violence. Fortune noted the way *kula* exchange, conducted under a kind of flag of truce, constituted a sort of regional peace pact. While intercommunity raiding was more pervasive and more institutionalized among the cannibal traders of the south than Malinowski's prosperous gardeners of Kiriwina, the pervasiveness of warfare throughout the whole area in the precolonial era is largely missing from the early ethnographies.

The symbolism of *kula*-ing

The new generation of ethnographers has not only clarified how *kula*-ing “works”; it has also clarified what and how it *means*. With anthropology’s deepening concerns with cultural symbolism and interpretation has come closer attention to the rich imagery of metaphor, the coherent structures of cosmology, the premises about maleness, femaleness and power that render *kula*-ing rituals, magic, and myth and *kula*-ing procedures and strategies meaningful.

In comparison with most of the ethnography of his time, Malinowski’s account provides considerable evidence on the symbolic structures that motivate Trobriand ritual and magic. The newer studies go beyond Malinowski’s account in showing global symbolic structures of which the original ethnography revealed fragments and partial patterns. (It is a tribute to Malinowski’s ethnography that we can retrospectively go further interpretively with his own material.)

The newer interpretations make clear how pervasively *gendered* are the symbolic universes of the Massim. For the Trobriands, we have not only Weiner’s (1977, 1978, 1979) accounts of the “reproductive model” of the Kiriwinan cosmos, but a less well known and widely available account by Shirley Campbell (1984) of the gender symbolism of *kula*-ing on Vakuta.

The entire process of preparing oneself, charming solicitory gifts, going to the villages where partners wait, and then, in the verbal discourse peculiar to *Kula*, seducing one’s partners into giving up their possessions parallels men’s behaviour in wooing and the seduction of women. In *Kula*, however, the actors are all male. Their roles alternate according to which group of men, at any given time, are in possession of the shell valuables and which group sets sail for the purpose of attracting and seducing partners (230–31).

When the seduction of a man has been accomplished and the two men enter into an exchange relationship through which shell valuables are passed, Vakutans say that a ‘marriage’ has been contracted. ... *Kula* facilitates the detachment of men from... relationships that bind men to women. ... The aim of [such a] ‘marriage’ is not only to initiate relationships between men in which women have no part, but also to reproduce male wealth... the means by which men achieve immortality for their names (233–34).

While women actually regenerate society, men act out their own regeneration by invoking their powers of attraction and seduction in the pursuit of *Kula* and the renown it affords (242).

In Nancy Munn's accounts (1983, 1986) of Gawan metaphors, magic, and the "spacetime" of *kula*-ing, we find further rich structures and webs of symbolism. Her account of the symbolic identification between shells and the men who exchange them is compelling:

It is as if both shells and men are seen as starting their "careers" without renown or memorability; as the transactions in which they participate multiply, they become increasingly famous and "beautiful", concentrating into themselves the continuous reproduction of their circulation and exchange (the shells) or the circulation of shells through their hands (the men) (1983: 304).

Face and name are the two centers of an actor's personal identity. ... When a man is widely known there are places where the people may have "never seen his face," but they "know his name"... because of his *kula* transactions, and the travels of named and especially well-known shells he has obtained and passed on. It is said that one's name travels with the shells (1986: 106).

The shell model of the process of becoming famous or climbing is... an icon of the same process for men (1986: 108-09).

Conjectural history and documented history

Before going on to try to set *kula* exchange in historical perspective, in the light of recent research, let me pause to say something more positive about Malinowski as ethnographer. I have enormous admiration for the quality and character of his *kula* analysis an admiration I share with those who have done recent research in *kula*-ing communities. Malinowski's limited vision and skewed interpretations of the theoretical significance of *kula* exchange may have become clear after nearly seventy years of subsequent Melanesian ethnography and growing sophistication regarding exchange systems; but confronted as he was by a strange customary practice to which his hosts were passionately committed, and given the state of theory that prevailed at the time, his inferences were not unreasonable and his data regarding actual *kula* practice are remarkable and of enduring value. What he got wrong he got wrong partly, as I have argued, in extrapolating from the rather special forms of exchange in a particular corner of the *kula*-ing network to a picture of an entire "ring" governed by the same principles.

Malinowski also got some important aspects of *kula*-ing, viewed as a regional exchange system, wrong because of his overreaction against the speculative culture history of his time (exemplified by Rivers' reconstruction of the history Melanesian society and by the German *Kulturkreise* scholars.) There was no real evidence on the precolonial past, at least the ancient past, such as that unearthed by modern prehistorians such as Irwin, Allen, Specht, Lauer and Egloff; and Malinowski did not make the use he could have of oral-historical evidence or the documentary evidence of early European contact. Malinowski's *kula* is carried on timelessly in the eternal vacuum of functional explanation. Placing *kula*-ing in real time is the major challenge in reinterpreting Massim exchange.

First, there is the evidence of archaeology that *kula* exchange is a relatively recent development out of early trade systems. Irwin (1983: 70–71) observes that:

... even though armshells and necklace units are known to have an antiquity of nearly 2,000 years in the region, the *kula* as such probably developed only in the last 500 years.

Elsewhere Irwin comments (n.d.: 23) that:

Archaeology does not offer any assurance of time depth for Malinowski's *kula*... We can see it as... no more than selecting a random moment of time to freeze a fluid system.

The relationship between a relatively recent specialization in production of pottery for export in such nodes as Mailu and the Amphletts, trade in raw materials, and *kula* exchange is so far worked out only in the most tentative terms. We may expect a clearer picture of Massim prehistory to emerge in the next few years, and with it the means to situate *kula* exchange as a development from earlier systems of local exchange and trade between proximate communities. We cannot expect the prehistorians to give us clear answers to questions of a sociopolitical nature and the emergence of area-wide rules to the serious and economically and politically motivated game of *kula*-ing, and of something like a closed "ring", must have entailed complex, cumulative diplomacy. But these processes can, we may hope, be placed in a framework of time, space, and economic transformation and articulation of Massim communities.

Placing *kula*-ing as Malinowski saw it early in this century in a context of real time and process is most importantly a task of anthropological history or historical anthropology. This enterprise,

which Malinowski regarded as superfluous and eschewed in favor of functional explanation, has been pursued with particular skill and insight in Martha Macintyre's doctoral thesis on the southern Massim (1983a). Macintyre's work brings out strikingly the extent to which *kula* exchange as Malinowski saw it was a product of European penetration and colonial pacification. Macintyre introduces her historical argument in these terms:

Malinowski's... "closed circuit" model of *kula*... requires that the circulation be constant, that it have an historical depth of several generations and that none of the parties leave the network. In short, it requires that these islands maintain peaceful relations for generations. Throughout his analysis of *kula* Malinowski assumes an historical depth for the institution. The inheritance of *kula* valuables, the value of wealth items being viewed as cumulative over time, and the permanence of the circulation along time-honoured paths are essential features of Malinowski's *kula*. It is my contention that such incessant circulation could only occur after pacification. The *kula* as closed circuit is a modern institution (1983a: 132).

Macintyre, after a meticulous reconstruction of patterns of precolonial warfare in the southern Massim, sums the implications for Malinowskian model of "The *Kula*" as follows:

When Malinowski described the institution of *kula* alliances as "a relation not spasmodic or accidental but regulated and permanent" (1922: 515) he was generalizing from a specific point in time and from the Trobriand Islands. ... From a southern Massim perspective... the "Ring", as a series of alliances between people on different islands, [is] nothing more than a descriptive model based on actual relations... in the second decade of this century...

The pre-eminence of the *kula/kune* exchange as a political form of alliance has emerged only since pacification. Prior to that... in the south the patterns of alliance were [apparently] cyclical, with *kune* partnerships severed by war, reconstituted by appeasement and then liable to disruption...

Colonial intruders abolished war and... altered the social and political context of *kune* so that it became the focus for peaceful interaction over a wide area. *Kune* paths were stabilized... *Pax britannica* created a new political environment in which *kune* flourished... (Macintyre 1983a: 165-67).

Macintyre (1983a) and other ethnographers of the southern Massim, notably Stuart Berde (1974, 1983), have also documented the major economic changes in the Massim that followed the introduction of steel axes and other Western goods, and the penetration of the area by pearlers, traders, labor recruiters and missionaries. Inflationary processes, introduced technology and the decline of local craft industries, as a result of European penetration (and in some instances deliberate economic manipulation) had led to the disappearance of many wealth items from *kula* and related exchange: greenstone axe blades, lime spatulae, platters, belts and lime gourds had dropped out or become restricted in their circulation. European penetration and colonial control had also radically reduced the power of the *guyau*, the powerful leaders who had dominated exchange, trade and warfare in and between Massim communities. A process of change that had been going on for several decades when Malinowski arrived in the Massim has continued into the era of diesel-powered cutters and air travel. "The *Kula*" Malinowski saw was a temporary phase in the process of political and economic change since European penetration of the Massim; and *kula*-ing as it was practiced on the eve of the first European contact was itself a moment in a process of economic and political change.

The evidence I have cited fits well with new data from other parts of the Massim, both *kula*-ing areas such as Gawa, studied by Nancy Munn, and areas such as Sudest (studied by Maria Lepowsky), Panaeati (studied by Stuart Berde) and Sabarl (studied by Debbora Battaglia) that exchange *kula* valuables and trade with *kula*-ing communities but do not *kula* themselves.

Reflections on *kula* and anthropology

Let me come back, then, to my promise at the outset to try to do what Malinowski did: to relate *kula* exchange to issues of contemporary social science. I shall be less bold than he in my claims: I shall not suggest that the *kula* reveals the crucial flaw in supply-side economics. What I do hope to show is that the new perspectives on Massim exchange exemplify directions in which contemporary anthropology has been moving, and provide some useful insights about where and how it needs now to move.

A first point is that the emerging picture of *kula* exchange exemplifies the need to view the tribal world as comprising regional systems, in a sense more profound than that prefigured so

brilliantly by Malinowski in *Argonauts*. Many parts of the precolonial tribal world comprised systems whose component “societies” had open, not closed, borders; systems characterized by centers and peripheries, specializations and interdependencies, warfare and diplomacy, trade and exchange, the flow of ideas as well as objects: and by change, often rapid change. Interpreting the dynamics of these regional systems is a challenge to both prehistorian and social anthropologist, and to their collaboration. Anthropologist-historian Martha Macintyre has recently collaborated with prehistorians Jim Allen and Geoffrey Irwin in separate projects that brought together with telling results the systems- and time-perspectives and formal modelling of one subdiscipline and the ethnographic and ethnohistorical sophistication and symbolic insights of the other.

A second point is that the bad, imaginary history Malinowski sought to expunge from anthropology is being reintroduced as careful and theoretically sophisticated historiography: informed by a knowledge of cultural process and structure (Sahlins 1981) and of the political economy of colonialism and the world system (see Wolf 1982). We now know that we ethnographers must be historians as best we can, whatever else we do.

The *kula* evidence presents a strong theoretical message to the cultural-symbolic anthropologist who would view cultures as relatively autonomous from their material conditions of existence. The success of formal models central place theory and related connectivity and graph-theoretical analyses (Irwin 1983; Brookfield and Hart 1971; Hage 1977) and Allen’s model of specialized sociopolitical orientation of particular islands in the Massim on the bases of their location and resources should give sobering pause to the culturologists among us.

But there is another side to this coin. *Kula*-ing, not only in its ceremonial and symbolic aspects but in the diplomacy and intercommunity negotiation that must have gone into its creation and preservation, ultimately defies reduction to materialist explanation. In the Massim, there may be need to trade and to make and keep the peace where possible: but there is certainly no need to *kula*. We need a more subtle and dialectical mode of theoretical interpretation, in which environmental constraints and material factors, political processes and powers, and the production and reproduction of cultural symbols are intricately interwoven: what the material world is, and what power and its tokens are, are culturally constructed, yet cultural construction itself is an ongoing process shaped by material exigencies and political⁸ interests. Prehistorians too, inevitably starting on the material side, are

beginning to move in this direction: they too need a theory of sociopolitical process, ideology and cultural meaning more powerful than the techno-ecological determinisms of older models (see e.g. Spriggs 1984). *Kula-ing* shows us why.

For the social anthropologist the message, I think, needs further articulation. The new work on *kula-ing* shows that all social anthropology must now be symbolic anthropology. Nancy Munn's brilliant accounts (1983, 1986) of how the *keda*, the paths of *kula-ing*, symbolize the circulation of a man's name and fame, how the shells represent their transactors, her characterization of "the densely objectified spacetime formed in the islanders' experience through *kula*" (1983: 290) serve to illustrate the growing sophistication of symbolic anthropology.

We see in recent studies the complex symbolism of paths; we find *kula* valuables "marrying" one another, partners 'seducing' one another, transactors attracting valuables by magnetic powers; we find *kula* valuables not only identified with famous men and their deeds but conceived as instruments of their immortality, icons of past lives. These and other elaborations, skillfully interpreted by a new generation of ethnographers, show how and why we must see cultures as systems of socially constructed meanings, why all social anthropology must be symbolic anthropology.

But *kula-ing* teaches us, I think, that symbolist interpretations must be articulated with the perspectives of what I can perhaps best characterize as political economy. Cultural symbols do not emerge full blown, do not exist in a vacuum where only meanings matter. They are created, manipulated, used; they serve political ends, mystify and disguise. Cultures as symbolic systems are economically as well as politically grounded, serving to extract labor and its products, as well as to sustain power, through their hegemonic force. The "sharedness" of cultural meanings is always deeply problematic. Anthropological theories of culture have characteristically utilized a kind of sleight of hand whereby we have gone from the idea that cultural meanings are shared to the conclusions that seemingly follow: that they are collectively created (so that, as I have put it elsewhere, a culture grows by countless tiny accretions, like a coral reef) and collectively held, in the sense that all participants have essentially the same perspectives, a kind of consensus, vis-à-vis what is "shared." I have commented recently on this illusion (1987: 165) using sexually polarized New Guinea Highlands to illustrate:

Even in their domestic lives, such as they were with the [New Guinean] men in their men's houses plotting wars and

planning exchanges, the women and pigs and children in their separate little huts sexual and social relations were... fraught with anxiety and danger of pollution and betrayal. I have no doubt that husbands and wives constructed meanings together, even shared them; but there is surely more to that than collectively reading cultural texts.

Anthropological theory, like feminist theory, needs seriously to engage the hegemonic force (in Gramsci's sense) of cultures as symbolic systems; but this hegemonic and ideological aspect, an inescapable challenge and central problem for feminism, has remained submerged in most anthropological discourse. Perhaps the greatest theoretical challenge to social anthropology in the 1980s is to develop a framework that brings together the insights from Marxism and related theoretical approaches, and feminism, regarding the political situatedness and hegemonic ideological force of "culture" with the powerful insights of symbolic anthropology.

The *guyau* leaders of the precolonial Massim monopolizing exchange, controlling trade, forging military and political alliances, securing tribute will serve to illustrate the need for a politically critical perspective on culture-as-ideology. These leaders had interests and strategies not only very different from but directly in conflict with the interests of ordinary men not to mention women. In some areas, notably northern Kiriwina in the Trobriands, the domination of "chiefs" was dramatized in everyday rituals of ascendancy and deference: the "chief" sat on his platform, while commoners had to crawl in his presence. The "rules" of *kula*-ing, in the northern zone in particular, were constructed in such a way that they gave strong advantages to the *guyau*, in terms of the monopolization of culturally valued exchange and access to the most important objects. We can and should, I think, ask where cultural symbols come from (even if our answers must be speculative) and whose interests they serve, as well as what they mean. In this sense, "a culture" is not a seamless web; its elements are not all of a piece. We can guess that the Trobriand "custom" that commoners must crawl prostrate in the presence of a high ranking leader had a very different kind of history than a prow-board art motif or a noun-classifier in the Kiriwina language.

We can go on from this to make a further point. To understand the political dynamics and ideological nature of cultural forms may entail our looking across as well as within the "borders" of the societies connected in a regional system. The alliances between *guyau* in interisland *kula* will serve to illustrate. Those who create, define and change cultural forms are those with the political power

to do so. The evidence from the Massim suggests that *guyau* in different communities, linked together in alliances, had common interests in defining the rules of the game of exchange and manipulating the flow of valuables, so as to keep others out of the game and maintain their own power and prestige as a kind of regional political-economic elite; and they had common interests in what shells and paths signify and symbolize. In short, they had common interests in one another's "cultures". The rules and even the symbolism of exchange we find in particular communities may represent expressions of these quasi-class interests (recall shells as embodiments of human reputations, and icons of immortality) rather than the *consciences collectives* of the communities where we find them. A theoretical orientation that takes "cultures" to be shared, collectively held and valued, and discrete begins to fray noticeably at the edges where such class or quasi-class interests cut across societal borders (c.f. Asad 1979: 422–23; Keesing 1981: 188–89): focusing on cultural symbols may give us a view too narrow in space as well as too shallow and politically uncritical.

***Kula*-ing and anthropology's Orientalist project**

This leads to some final reflections on anthropology's project of representing Otherness.

A central theme in anthropology's creation of the "primitive" world has been the representation of ethnographic areas in terms of prototypical institutions: the Potlatch of the Northwest Coast, the cattle-complex and age-sets of east Africa, the sexual polarization and male aggression of Amazonia. In anthropology's representation of Melanesia, Malinowski's Trobrianders, and their *kula*, loom large.⁹

Melanesia has been typified and essentialized in anthropology largely in terms of exchange (and, of course, Big Men, contrasted with the Chiefs of Polynesia). Although we now have mountains of ethnographic documentation of exchange systems among Papuan- and Oceanic-speaking peoples of the southwestern Pacific, the Trobrianders and their armshells and necklaces continue to hold a central place.

We can well reflect on this typification process. First, it reflects a selective interpretive focus. Recent controversies about representations of the Yamomamö (Ramos 1987) underline the degree to which ideology and selective vision, as well as the observer's vantage point, shape this interpretive process.

The typification process is situated in time and space, as well as in ideology and the nature of ethnographic encounters. The new evidence of prehistory and ethnohistory suggests that had anthropologists seen various regions of “Melanesia,” including the “Massim,” a century earlier, they might have typified them in terms of warfare or trade systems rather than exchange or, in many areas, of chiefly political systems rather than Big Men. The Melanesia stereotypically represented by anthropology is a world created by pacification and colonial invasion just as the classic Potlatch was a short-lived efflorescence partly catalyzed by European presence.

A final meta-reflection on the representation of Melanesia through the Trobrianders and their shells incorporates my own project in this paper within the brackets of scrutiny. Since Malinowski’s *Argonauts* first brought the *kula* to the intellectual world, the Trobrianders have served as foils for Western social science. They have served to inform Us that cultures are tightly integrated as functional systems, that rationality and value are culturally constructed.

Trobriand Islanders have (with very limited exceptions)¹⁰ never been in a position either to represent themselves or to critique what has been written about them. They certainly have never been in a position to reverse the asymmetries in power of the colonial situation. Like other tribal peoples the Trobrianders (and the Dobuans and the rest) have been anthropology’s subjects and objects. They have served as our inkblots as well, confirming the theories economic, ecological, semiotic, feminist, Freudian, sociobiological in terms of which we have invoked them.

My own project here partakes of the same asymmetries and presumptions: What have the Trobrianders now got to “tell” us, that corrects and extends what they “told” us before? That orientation was partly a response to the occasion for which the first version of my paper was written: as the first lecture in a University of California series observing the centenary of Malinowski’s birth. The final line of my original lecture expresses the orientation: “There are, I submit, lessons to be learned still from the old shells of Massim exchange.” Are there further lessons to be learned if we take another step backward to include Us in the picture?

The peoples of Milne Bay Province have in various ways been telling Western anthropologists to stop objectifying their cultures and using them to advance our arcane academic theories and our careers. The political injunctions, local, provincial and national, have been partial, selective, and sporadic. Those Western scholars who are perceived as genuinely serving the interests of Papua New Guinean communities seeking to develop and change as well as to

preserve what is most valued of the past have still been welcomed.

Although the indigenous critique of anthropological praxis in Milne Bay Province and other parts of the contemporary Pacific is often hollowly rhetorical and often wide of the mark,¹¹ some further elements of this critique bear pondering. One is a challenge to the way anthropologists filter out of their accounts what is not “traditional” — Christianity, cash crops, schools, tradestores, contemporary state politics, an absent elite and labor force — and concentrate on rituals, exchanges, and kinship, that may be of diminishing concern to local populations. Indeed, our own commitment to find what is “traditional” in the 1970s or 1980s has often led us to take too static a view of the past: to imagine an “ethnographic present” we can still reconstruct and reconstitute. The evidence of prehistory and ethnohistory I have touched not only suggests that what we want to cast as “traditional” may have developed or have been substantially changed during early decades of European penetration, but that even what existed on the eve of invasion was a passing moment in a process of change.

Another element in the indigenous critique is the way we characterize indigenous cultures and worldviews through a kind of lens of exoticism (see Keesing 1989a). Our vested interests and theories push us to characterize alterity in terms of radical Difference, of mystical world views and exotic logics. These interpretations often violate both the intuitions and the contemporary ideologies of those we study.¹² We may often be right: but their challenges can well catalyze our own self-reflexivity and skepticism. Some of the lessons we may finally learn from anthropology’s engagement with *kula* exchange may be lessons *about* us, not simply *for* us.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented as a Malinowski Memorial Lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, on 19 November 1984, as part of a program in conjunction with “The Kula: A Bronislaw Malinowski Centennial Exhibition”. I am grateful to Professor William Shack and his colleagues for their hospitality, and to Dr. Maria Lepowsky for special assistance and helpful comments. For valuable suggestions toward revision of the original lecture, I am indebted to Debora Battaglia, Geoffrey Irwin, Martha Macintyre, and Michel Panoff. Helpful comments during the Helsinki conference, particularly assessments by John Liep and Annette Weiner, recent

researchers in the Massim, and subsequent suggestions by Jukka Siikala assisted me in further revision. An early version of the paper was published in the UNESCO journal *Human Rights Teaching* (Vol. VI, 1987).

2. On the use of evolutionary conceptions, and the invention of the “primitive” world in nineteenth century social thought, see Kuper (1988) and Fabian (1983).
3. These include an increasing specialization of the anthropological community, in terms of regional and topical interests, a vast outpouring of publications no one can now keep up with, and the high price of the main Cambridge University Press volume (Leach and Leach 1983). Even that has been partly superseded by subsequent evidence and debate.
4. See Kuper (1988) and Wolf (1982).
5. As Michel Panoff has pointed out to me, although Mauss’ work has often been cited in portrayals of “the *kula*” as a purely symbolic game involving the exchange of intrinsically useless valuables for purely semiotic ends, Mauss himself took a more critical perspective on *kula* exchange than most subsequent scholars, and perceived some of the gaps and problems in Malinowski’s account that have been explored and clarified in later work. See Panoff 1970.
6. The term Malinowski gives as referring generically to Trobriand exchange valuables, in the revised modern orthography.
7. Geoffrey Irwin tells me that his findings suggest that the beautiful polished axe blades so important in the northern Massim are themselves probably relatively recent — though presumably pre-European — introductions into the system of interisland trade and exchange, with an antiquity of at most several centuries: further evidence that we are dealing with a rapidly-changing system, not an ancient and stable one.
8. In a very broad sense.
9. In many ways, as Thomas (1989) has recently argued for Polynesia and Melanesia, the ethnographic- or culture-areas are themselves in many ways anthropology’s invention. In the case of “Melanesia,” I think it is no accident that it is dark skin color that continues implicitly to define the unity of a region transected by the gulf between Oceanic Austronesian and Papuan languages; I have noted the submerged racism that has run through a century of anthropological discourse on the Pacific (Keesing n.d.).
10. As in some of the writings of John Kasaipwalova and such young Trobriand scholars as Linus Digim’rina.
11. On the way indigenous challenges to anthropology characteristically incorporate Western categories and are derivative of Western ideologies, and often suffer from anthropology’s own conceptual “diseases” of essentialism and reification, see Keesing 1989b, 1992, and 1994.
12. Although sometimes they are congruent with such ideologies, which — derivative of Western critiques of Western culture — may seek to

portray indigenous ways of life in terms of mystical wisdom, holistic healing, etc..
See Keesing 1989b.

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