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## UNIT 6: ARGONAUTS OF THE WESTERN PACIFIC-B. MALINOWSKI\*

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### Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 The Subject and Method of This Inquiry
- 6.3 The Country and Inhabitants of The Kula District
- 6.4 The Natives of the Trobriand Islands
- 6.5 The Magico-Religious Ideas of the Trobrianders
- 6.6 The Essentials of the Kula
- 6.7 Canoes and Sailing
- 6.8 The Ceremonial Building of a Waga
- 6.9 List of Gifts, Payments, and Commercial Transactions
  - 6.9.1 Pure Gifts.
  - 6.9.2 Customary payments, re-paid irregularly, and without strict equivalence
  - 6.9.3 Payment for services rendered.
  - 6.9.4 Gifts returned in economically equivalent form
- 6.10 The Meaning of the Kula
- 6.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.12 References
- 6.13 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 6.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you should be able to understand:

- a broad overview of the scope, focus and findings of ethnography on Trobriand Islanders;
- description of various methods used in the collecting of the ethnographic material;
- different spheres of Kula inhabitants;
- beliefs And Ideas among Trobrianders; and
- economic life of Trobriand tribal.

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### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit, we shall undertake a study on the Trobriand Islanders/ Trobrianders of now modern Papua New Guinea. This is the classic monograph authored by Bronislaw Malinowski entitled Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea, first published in 1922.

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‘Trobriand society is one of the ‘holy places’ in the anthropological cosmography’, with Malinowski first putting it on the anthropological map. The Trobriands comprise mainly four islands- Kiriwina, Kitava, Vakuta and Kaileuna, off the eastern coast of New Guinea, which was first colonised by Great Britain, then came under the subjugation of Australia and finally became part of the nation-state of Papua New Guinea in 1975.

Malinowski lived as a native among the natives for many months together, watching them daily at work and at play, conversing with them in their own tongue and deriving all his information from the surest sources- personal observation and statements made to him directly by natives in their own language without the intervention of an interpreter’. Malinowski’s work established participant observation as the most important method for anthropological fieldwork. Hence, for data collection researchers’ observation and long-term involvement with the community life and participation in the cultural events become important. In this unit, we will try to understand ethnographic methods and practices primarily through the work of Bronisław Malinowski.

The main focus of Malinowski’s book is the remarkable system of exchange, locally called Kula, among the Trobriand Islanders, which is economic or commercial only in part and which also examines the motives and feelings underlying this, with magic playing a very important role in it.

This unit explains the methods used in collecting the ethnographic material, the duties of an ethnographer, the mental charts that have to be calculated and formed to bring out the various realities of communities and inter-relationship, in particular in the trade practices, economic activities, political behaviour, and the importance of myths and legend which come out in various coastal population in south sea islands.

This unit also explains how an ethnographer has to do the profiling and depiction of the inhabitants according to the geographical location. In this context, profiling would include appearances and manners of the natives. Furthermore, the unit talks about different aspects of life, economic, social and political. The unit also talks about totems, myths and laws and the role of magic in regulating and controlling the tasks among the inhabitants. The clan system is also explained in detail. In this unit, ethnographic methods are explained in great detail through various practices in and around the kula system. For instance, different magico-religious ideas of the Trobrianders are explored.

In this unit, through an explanation of a particular cultural practice a clear distinction is made between the data which is collected through a direct involvement and participation and the ones collected through other means and sources. In this quest, underlies the assertion that researchers’ honest exposition is essential to capture these details in ethnographic studies.

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## **6.2 THE SUBJECT AND METHOD OF THIS INQUIRY**

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The coastal populations of the South Sea Islands, with very few exceptions, are, or were before their extinction, expert navigators and traders. Several

of them had evolved excellent types of large sea-going canoes, and used to embark in them on distant trade expeditions or raids of war and conquest. The Papuo-Melanesians, who inhabit the coast and the outlying islands of New Guinea, are no exception to this rule. In general, they are daring sailors, industrious manufacturers, and keen traders. The manufacturing centres of important articles, such as pottery, stone implements, canoes, fine baskets, valued ornaments, are localized in several places, according to the skill of the inhabitants, their inherited tribal tradition, and special facilities offered by the district; thence they are traded over wide areas, sometimes travelling more than hundreds of miles.

Definite forms of exchange along definite trade routes are to be found established between the various tribes. A most remarkable form of inter-tribal trade is that obtaining between the Motu of Port Moresby and the tribes of the Papuan Gulf. The Motu sail for hundreds of miles in heavy, unwieldy canoes, called *lakatoi*, which are provided with the characteristic crab-claw sails. They bring pottery and shell ornaments, in olden days, stone blades, to Gulf Papuans, from whom they obtain in exchange sago and the heavy dug-outs, which are used afterwards by the Motu for the construction of their *lakatoi* canoes.

Further East, on the South coast, there lives the industrious, sea-faring population of the Mailu, who link the East End of New Guinea with the central coast tribes by means of annual trading expeditions. Finally, the natives of the islands and archipelagoes, scattered around the East End, are in constant trading relations with one another.

There exists, however, another, a very extensive and highly complex trading system, embracing with its ramifications, not only the islands near the East End, but also the Louisiades, Woodlark Island, the Trobriand Archipelago, and the d'Entrecasteaux group; it penetrates into the mainland of New Guinea, and exerts an indirect influence over several outlying districts, such as Rossel Island, and some parts of the Northern and Southern coast of New Guinea. This trading system, *the Kula*, is the subject Malinowski described in this work, and it will be seen that it is an economic phenomenon of considerable theoretical importance. It looms paramount in the tribal life of those natives who live within its circuit, and its importance is fully realized by the tribesmen themselves, whose ideas, ambitions, desires and vanities are very much bound up with the Kula.

The Method: Before proceeding to the account of the Kula, it will be well to give a description of the methods used in the collecting of the ethnographic material.

As Malinowski noted that the Ethnographer has in the field, the duty before him of drawing up all the rules and regularities of tribal life; all that is permanent and fixed; of giving an anatomy of their culture, of depicting the constitution of their society. But these things, though crystallized and set, are nowhere formulated. There is no written or explicitly expressed code of laws, and their whole tribal tradition, the whole structure of their society, are embodied in the most elusive of all materials; the human being. But not even in human mind or memory are these laws to be found definitely formulated. The natives obey the forces and commands of the tribal code,

but they do not comprehend them; exactly as they obey their instincts and their impulses, but could not lay down a single law of psychology. The regularities in native institutions are an automatic result of the interaction of the mental forces of tradition, and of the material conditions of environment. Exactly as a humble member of any modern institution, whether it be the state, or the church, or the army is of it and in it, but has no vision of the resulting integral action of the whole, still less could furnish any account of its organization, so it would be futile to attempt questioning a native in abstract, sociological terms. The difference is that, in our society, every institution has its intelligent members, its historians, and its archives and documents, whereas in a native society there are none of these. After this is realized an expedient has to be found to overcome this difficulty. This expedient for an Ethnographer consists in collecting concrete data of evidence, and drawing the general inferences for himself.

Though we cannot ask a native about abstract, general rules, we can always enquire how a given case would be treated. Thus for instance, in asking how they would treat crime, or punish it, it would be vain to put to a native a sweeping question such as, "How do you treat and punish a criminal?" for even words could not be found to express it in native. But an imaginary case, or still better, a real occurrence, will stimulate a native to express his opinion and to supply plentiful information. A real case indeed will start the natives on a wave of discussion, evoke expressions of indignation, show them taking sides—all of which talk will probably contain a wealth of definite views, of moral censures, as well as reveal the social mechanism set in motion by the crime committed. From there, it will be easy to lead them on to speak of other similar cases, to remember other actual occurrences or to discuss them in all their implications and aspects. From this material, which ought to cover the widest possible range of facts, the inference is obtained by simple induction. The scientific treatment differs from that of good common sense, first in that a student will extend the completeness and minuteness of survey much further and in a pedantically systematic and methodical manner; and secondly, in that the scientifically trained mind, will push the inquiry along really relevant lines, and towards aims possessing real importance. Indeed, the object of scientific training is to provide the empirical investigator with a mental chart, in accordance with which he can take his bearings and lay his course.

The collecting of concrete data over a wide range of facts is thus one of the main points of field method. The obligation is not to enumerate a few examples only, but to exhaust all the cases within reach; and, on this search for cases, the investigator will score most whose mental chart is clearest.

His mental chart ought to be transformed into a real one; it ought to materialise into a diagram, a plan, an exhaustive, synoptic table of cases.

The method of reducing information, if possible, into charts or synoptic tables ought to be extended to the study of practically all aspects of native life. All types of economic transactions may be studied by following up connected, actual cases, and putting them into a synoptic chart; again, a table ought to be drawn up of all the gifts and presents customary in a given society, a table including the sociological, ceremonial, and economic definition of

every item. Also, systems of magic, connected series of ceremonies, types of legal acts, all could be charted, allowing each entry to be synoptically defined under a number of headings. Besides this, of course, the genealogical census of every community, studied more in detail, extensive maps, plans and diagrams, illustrating ownership in garden land, hunting and fishing privileges, etc., serve as the more fundamental documents of ethnographic research. An Ethnographer, who wishes to be trusted, must show clearly and concisely, in a tabularized form, which are his own direct observations, and which the indirect information that form the bases of his account.

Living in the village with no other business but to follow native life, one sees the customs, ceremonies and transactions over and over again, one has examples of their beliefs as they are actually lived through, and the full body and blood of actual native life fills out soon the skeleton of abstract constructions. He is able in each case to state whether an act is public or private; how a public assembly behaves, and what it looks like; he can judge whether an event is ordinary or an exciting and singular one; whether natives bring to it a great deal of sincere and earnest spirit, or perform it in fun; whether they do it in a perfunctory manner, or with zeal and deliberation. In other words, there is a series of phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents, but have to be observed in their full actuality.

In the same way, in studying the conspicuous acts of tribal life, such as ceremonies, rites, festivities, etc., the details and tone of behaviour ought to be given, besides the bare outline of events. In observing ceremonies or other tribal events, such, it is necessary, not only to note down those occurrences and details which are prescribed by tradition and custom to be the essential course of the act, but also the Ethnographer ought to record carefully and precisely, one after the other, the actions of the actors and of the spectators. Forgetting for a moment that he knows and understands the structure of this ceremony, the main dogmatic ideas underlying it, he might try to find himself only in the midst of an assembly of human-beings, who behave seriously or jocularly, with earnest concentration or with bored frivolity, who are either in the same mood as he finds them every day, or else are screwed up to a high pitch of excitement, and so on and so on. With his attention constantly directed to this aspect of tribal life, with the constant endeavor to fix it, to express it in terms of actual fact, a good deal of reliable and expressive material finds its way into his notes. He will be able to "set" the act into its proper place in tribal life, that is to show whether it is exceptional or commonplace, one in which the natives behave ordinarily, or one in which their whole behaviour is transformed. And he will also be able to bring all this home to his readers in a clear, convincing manner. It is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on. He can take part in the natives' games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in their conversations.

Finally, let us pass to the third and last aim of scientific field-work, to the last type of phenomenon which ought to be recorded in order to give a full and adequate picture of native culture. Besides the firm outline of tribal constitution and crystallized cultural items which form the skeleton, besides

the data of daily life and ordinary behaviour, which are, so to speak, its flesh and blood, there is still to be recorded the spirit—the natives' views and opinions and utterances. For, in every act of tribal life, there is, first, the routine prescribed by custom and tradition, then there is the manner in which it is carried out, and lastly there is the commentary to it, contained in the natives' mind. A man who submits to various customary obligations, who follows a traditional course of action, does it impelled by certain motives, to the accompaniment of certain feelings, guided by certain ideas. These ideas, feelings, and impulses are molded and conditioned by the culture in which we find them, and are therefore an ethnic peculiarity of the given society. An attempt must be made therefore, to study and record them.

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### 6.3 THE COUNTRY AND INHABITANTS OF THE KULA DISTRICT

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The tribes who live within the sphere of the Kula system of trading belong, one and all—with the exception perhaps, of the Rossel Island natives, to the same racial group. These tribes inhabit the eastern most end of the mainland of New Guinea and those islands, scattered in the form of the long-drawn archipelago, which continue in the same south-easterly trend as the mainland, as if to bridge over the gap between New Guinea and the Solomons.

New Guinea is a mountainous island-continent, very difficult of access in its interior, and also at certain portions of the coast, where barrier reefs, swamps and rocks practically prevent landing or even approach for native craft. The easily accessible portions of the coast and the outlying islands would certainly offer a hospitable reception to immigrants of a higher stock; but, on the other hand, the high hills, the impregnable fastness in swampy flats and shores where landing was difficult and dangerous, would give easy protection to the aborigines, and discourage the influx of migrators.

The actual distribution of races in New Guinea shows the Eastern part of the main island and archipelagoes of New Guinea and the racial distribution of the natives. The interior of the continent, the low sago swamps and deltas of the Gulf of Papua—probably the greater part of the North Coast and of the South-West Coast of New Guinea, are inhabited by a “relatively tall, dark-skinned, frizzly-haired” race.

The Eastern Papuans, that is, the generally smaller, lighter coloured, frizzly-haired races of the eastern peninsula of New Guinea and its archipelagoes now require a name, and since the true Melanesian element is dominant in them, they may be called Papuo-Melanesians.

The Papuo-Melanesians again can be divided into two groups, a Western and an Eastern one, which, following Dr. Seligman's terminology, we shall call the Western Papuo-Melanesians and the Massim respectively.

The Kula district lies at the easternmost end of the main island and the archipelagoes lying to its East and North-East. As Professor C.G. Seligman says: “This area can be divided into two parts, a small northern portion comprising the Trobriands, the Marshall Bennets, the Woodlarks (Murua), as well as a number of smaller islands such as the Laughlans (Nada), and

a far larger southern portion comprising the remainder of the Massim domain”.

It is necessary to sub-divide this Northern Massim further into three groups, first, that of the Trobriand Islanders, or the Boyowans (the Western Branch); secondly that of the natives of Woodlark Island and the Marshall Bennets (the Eastern Branch); and, thirdly, the small group of the Amphlett natives. pg. 23-24

The other big sub-division of the Kula tribes is composed of the Southern Massim, of which, as just said, the western branch mainly concerns us. These last natives are smaller in stature, and with, broadly speaking, a much less attractive appearance than those of the North. They live in widely scattered communities, each house or group of houses standing in its own little grove of palm and fruit trees, apart from the others. Formerly they were cannibals and head-hunters, and used to make unexpected raids on their adversaries. There is no chieftainship, authority being exercised by the elders in each community. They build very elaborately constructed and beautifully decorated houses on piles. Such are the general characteristics of the Northern and Southern Massim respectively, given in a few words.

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## 6.4 THE NATIVES OF THE TROBRIAND ISLANDS

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The Trobriand Archipelago, also called Boyowa or Kiriwina. The appearance of the natives, their manners, their types of behaviour, may augur well or ill for the possibilities of rapid and easy research. The great variety in their physical appearance is what strikes one first in Boyowa. There are men and women of tall stature, fine bearing, and delicate features, with clear-cut aquiline profile and high foreheads, well-formed nose and chin, and an open, intelligent expression and besides these, there are others with prognatic, negroid faces, broad, thick-lipped mouths, narrow foreheads, and a coarse expression. The better featured have also a markedly lighter skin. Even their hair differs, varying from quite straight locks to the frizzly mop of the typical Melanesian. They wear the same classes of ornaments as the other Massim, consisting mainly of fibre armlets and belts, earrings of turtle shell and spondylus discs, and they are very fond of using, for personal decoration, flowers and aromatic herbs. In manner they are much freer, more familiar and confident, than any of the natives we have so far met. As soon as an interesting stranger arrives, half the village assembles around him, talking loudly and making remarks about him, frequently uncomplimentary, and altogether assuming a tone of jocular familiarity. One of the main sociological features at once strikes an observant newcomer—the existence of rank and social differentiation. Some of the natives—very frequently those of the finer looking type—are treated with most marked deference by others, and in return, these chiefs and persons of rank behave in quite a different way towards the strangers.

When a chief is present, no commoner dares to remain in a physically higher position; he has to bend his body or squat. Similarly, when the chief sits down, no one would dare to stand. The institution of definite chieftainship, to which are shown such extreme marks of deference, with a

sort of rudimentary Court ceremonial, with insignia of rank and authority, is so entirely foreign to the whole spirit of Melanesian tribal life, that at first sight it transports the Ethnographer into a different world.

The next interesting thing to do, after we have sufficiently taken in the appearance and manners of the natives, is to walk round the village. In the coastal villages, placed on marshy ground and coral outcrop, the irregularity of the soil and cramped space have obliterated the design, and they present quite a chaotic appearance. The big villages of the central districts, on the other hands, are built one and all with an almost geometrical regularity. In the middle, a big circular space is surrounded by a ring of yam houses. These latter are built on piles, and present a fine, decorative front, with walls of big, round logs, laid cross-wise on one another, so as to leave wide interstices through which the stored yams can be seen. Some of the store-houses strike us at once as being better built, larger, and higher than the rest, and these have also big, ornamented boards, running round the gable and across it. These are the yam houses of the chief or of persons of rank. Each yam house also has, as a rule, a small platform in front of it, on which groups of men will sit and chat in the evening, and where visitors can rest. Concentrically with the circular row of yam houses, there runs a ring of dwelling huts, and thus a street going all round the village is formed between the two rows. The dwellings are lower than the yam houses, and instead of being on piles, are built directly on the ground. The interior is dark and very stuffy, and the only opening into it is through the door, and that is usually closed. Each hut is occupied by one family, that is, husband, wife and small children, while adolescent and grown-up boys and girls live in separate small bachelor's houses, harbouring some two to six inmates. Chiefs and people of rank have their special, personal houses, besides those of their wives. The Chief's house often stands in the central ring of the store-houses facing the main place.

In the circular street between the stores and living houses, everyday life goes on, that is, the preparation of food, the eating of meals, and the usual exchange of gossip and ordinary social amenities. The interior of the houses is only used at night, or on wet days, and is more a sleeping than a living room. The backs of the houses and the contiguous groves are the scene of the children's play and the women's occupations. Further away, remote parts of the grove are reserved for sanitary purposes, each sex having its own retreat. The baku (central place) is the most picturesque part, and there the somewhat monotonous colour scheme of the brown and grey is broken by the overhanging foliage of the grove, seen above the neat fronts and gaudy ornamentation of the yam-houses and by the decorations worn by the crowd when a dance or ceremony is taking place.

Half of the natives' working life is spent in the garden, and around it centres perhaps more than half of his interests and ambitions. The native can and, under circumstances, does work hard, and work systematically, with endurance and purpose, nor does he wait till he is pressed to work by his immediate needs. They produce this surplus in a manner which entails much more work than is strictly necessary for obtaining the crops.

Among the forces and beliefs which bear upon and regulate garden work, perhaps magic is the most important. It is a department of its own, and the



garden magician, next to the chief and the sorcerer, is the most important personage of the village. The position is hereditary, and, in each village, a special system of magic is handed on in the female line from one generation to another.

The garden magician, according to native ideas, thus controls both the work of man and the forces of Nature. He also acts directly as supervisor of gardening, sees to it that people do not skimp their work, or lag behind with it. Thus magic is a systematising, regulating, and controlling influence in garden work. The magician, in carrying out the rites, sets the pace, compels people to apply themselves to certain tasks, and to accomplish them properly and in time.

Chieftainship in the Trobriands is the combination of two institutions: first, that of headmanship, or village authority; secondly, that of totemic clanship, that is the division of the community into classes or castes, each with a certain more or less definite rank. In every community in the Trobriands, there is one man who wields the greatest authority, though often this does not amount to very much. This village headman is, as a rule, therefore, not much more than a master of tribal ceremonies, and the main speaker within and without the tribe, whenever one is needed. In the Trobriands there exist four totemic clans, and each of these is divided into a number of smaller sub-clan. From each subject village, he takes a wife, whose family, according to the Trobriand law, has to supply him with large amounts of crops. This wife is always the sister or some relation of the headman of the subject village, and thus practically the whole community has to work for him. The chief has the best sorcerers of the district always at his beck and call. Of course he also has to reward them when they do him a service.

Right across the political and local divisions cut the totemic clans, each having a series of linked totems, with a bird as principal one. The members of these four clans are scattered over the whole tribe of Boyowa, and in each village community, members of all four are to be found, and even in every house, there are at least two classes represented, since a husband must be of a different clan from his wife and children. There is a certain amount of solidarity within the clan, based on the very vague feeling of communal affinity to the totem birds and animals, but much more on the many social duties, such as the performance of certain ceremonies, especially the mortuary ones, which band the members of a clan together. But real solidarity obtains only between members of a sub-clan.

As regards kinship, the main thing to be remembered is that the natives are matrilineal, and that the succession of rank, membership in all the social groups, and the inheritance of possessions descend in the maternal line.

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## **6.5 THE MAGICO-RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF THE TROBRIANDERS**

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In connection with their belief in the spirits of the dead, was that they are almost completely devoid of any fear of ghosts, of any of these uncanny feelings with which we face the idea of a possible return of the dead. All the fears and dreads of the natives are reserved for black magic, flying witches, malevolent disease-bringing beings, but above all for sorcerers and witches.

The spirits migrate immediately after death to the island of Tuma, lying in the North-West of Boyowa, and there they exist for another span of time, underground, say some, on the surface of the earth, though invisible, say others. They return to visit their own villages once a year, and take part in the big annual feast, milamala, where they receive offerings.

Disease, health, or death are also the result of magic or counter-magic. The Trobrianders have a very complex and very definite set of theoretical views on these matters. Good health is primarily of course the natural, normal state. Minor ills may be contracted by exposure, over-eating, over-strain, bad food, or other ordinary causes. Such ailments never last, and have never any really bad effects, nor are they of immediate danger. But, if a man sickens for any length of time, and his strength seems to be really sapped, then the evil forces are at work. By far the most prevalent form of black magic, is that of the bwaga'u, that is the black sorcerer, of whom there are a number in each district.

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## 6.6 THE ESSENTIALS OF THE KULA

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Having thus described the scene, and the actors, let us now proceed to the performance. The Kula is a form of exchange, of extensive, inter-tribal character; it is carried on by communities inhabiting a wide ring of islands, which form a closed circuit.

It is represented by the lines joining a number of islands to the North and East of the East end of New Guinea. Along this route, articles of two kinds, and these two kinds only, are constantly travelling in opposite directions. In the direction of the hands of a clock, moves constantly one of these kinds—long necklaces of red shell, called soulava.

In the opposite direction moves the other kind—bracelets of white shell called mwali. Each of these articles, as it travels in its own direction on the closed circuit, meets on its way articles of the other class, and is constantly being exchanged for them. Every movement of the Kula articles, every detail of the transactions is fixed and regulated by a set of traditional rules and conventions, and some acts of the Kula are accompanied by an elaborate magical ritual and public ceremonies.

On every island and in every village, a more or less limited number of men take part in the Kula—that is to say, receive the goods, hold them for a short time, and then pass them on. Therefore every man who is in the Kula, periodically though not regularly, receives one or several mwali (arm-shells), or a soulava (necklace of red shell discs), and then has to hand it on to one of his partners, from whom he receives the opposite commodity in exchange. Thus no man ever keeps any of the articles for any length of time in his possession.

The Kula is not a surreptitious and precarious form of exchange. It is, quite on the contrary, rooted in myth, backed by traditional law, and surrounded with magical rites. All its main transactions are public and ceremonial, and carried out according to definite rules. It is not done on the spur of the moment, but happens periodically, at dates settled in advance, and it is carried on along definite trade routes, which must lead to fixed trysting places. This partnership is a lifelong relationship, it implies various mutual

duties and privileges, and constitutes a type of inter-tribal relationship on an enormous scale. As to the economic mechanism of the transactions, this is based on a specific form of credit, which implies a high degree of mutual trust and commercial honour—and this refers also to the subsidiary, minor trade, which accompanies the Kula proper. Finally, the Kula is not done under stress of any need, since its main aim is to exchange articles which are of no practical use. The objects are cherished because of the historical sentiment which surrounds them

The exchange of these two classes of *vaygu'a*, of the arm-shells and the necklaces, constitutes the main act of the Kula. This exchange is not done freely, right and left, as opportunity offers, and where the whim leads. It is subject indeed to strict limitations and regulations. Two continuous streams will constantly flow on, the one of necklaces following the hands of a clock, and the other, composed of the arm-shells; in the opposite direction.

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## 6.7 CANOES AND SAILING

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A CANOE is an item of material culture, and as such it can be described, photographed and even bodily transported into a museum.

The canoe is made for a certain use, and with a definite purpose; it is a means to an end. Referring to its ownership, accounts of who sails in it, and how it is done; information regarding the ceremonies and customs of its construction, a sort of typical life history of a native craft—all that brings us nearer still to the understanding of what his canoe truly means to the native.

To the native, a craft is surrounded by an atmosphere of romance, built up of tradition and of personal experience. It is an object of cult and admiration, a living thing, possessing its own individuality. To the native his cumbersome, sprawling canoe is a marvellous, almost miraculous achievement, and a thing of beauty. He has spun a tradition around it, and he adorns it with his best carvings, he colours and decorates it. It is to him a powerful contrivance for the mastery of Nature, which allows him to cross perilous seas to distant places.

It is associated with journeys by sail, full of threatening dangers, of living hopes and desires to which he gives expression in song and story. In short, in the tradition of the natives, in their customs, in their behaviour, and in their direct statements, there can be found the deep love, the admiration, the specific attachment as to something alive and personal, so characteristic of the sailors' attitude towards his craft.

The canoe is constructed by a group of people, it is owned, used and enjoyed communally, and this is done according to definite rules. There is therefore a social organisation underlying the building, the owning, and the sailing of a canoe.

The natives firmly believe in the value of magic. In the case of canoes, the Trobrianders would be so firmly persuaded that a canoe built without magic would be unseaworthy, slow in sailing, and unlucky in the Kula, that no one would dream of omitting the magic rites

## 6.8 THE CEREMONIAL BUILDING OF A WAGA

The building of the sea-going canoe (masawa) is inextricably bound up with the general proceedings of the Kula. As we have said before, in all villages where Kula is practiced, the masawa canoes are built and repaired only in direct connection with it. That is, as soon as a Kula expedition is decided upon, and its date fixed, all the canoes of the village must be overhauled, and those too old for repair must be replaced by new ones.

To the native, the construction of the canoe is the first link in the chain of the Kula performances. From the moment that the tree is felled till the return of the oversea party, there is one continuous flow of events, following in regular succession. The technicalities of construction are interrupted and punctuated by magical rites. Some of these refer to the canoe, others belong to the Kula.

As to the magical ideas which govern the various rites. Here it must suffice to say that they belong to several different systems of ideas. The one based on the myth of the flying canoe refers directly to the canoe; it aims at imparting a general excellence, and more especially the quality of speed to the canoe. The rites of the other type are really exorcisms directed against evil bewitchment (bulubwalata) of which the natives are much afraid. The third system of magic (performed during canoe construction) is the Kula magic, based on its own mythological cycle, and although performed on the canoe, yet aiming at the imparting of success to the toliwaga in his Kula transactions. Finally, at the beginnings of the proceedings there is some magic addressed to the tokway, the malignant wood sprite.

The construction of the canoe is done in two main stages, differing from one another in the character of the work, in the accompanying magic, and in the general sociological setting. In the first stage, the component parts of the canoe are prepared. A big tree is cut, trimmed into a log, then hollowed out and made into the basic dug-out; the planks, boards, poles, and sticks are prepared. This is achieved by slow, leisurely work, and it is done by the canoe-builder with the assistance of a few helpers, usually his relatives or friends or else those of the toliwaga. This stage generally takes a long time, some two to six months, and is done in fits and starts, as other occupations allow, or the mood comes. The spells and rites which accompany it belong to the tokway magic, and to that of the flying canoe cycle. To this first stage also belongs the carving of the decorative prow-boards. This is done sometimes by the builder, sometimes by another expert, if the builder cannot carve.

The second stage is done by means of intense communal labour. As a rule this stage is spread over a short time, only perhaps a week or two—including the pauses between work. The actual labour, in which the whole community is energetically engaged, takes up only some three to five days. The work consists of the piecing together of the planks and prow-boards, and, in case these do not fit well, of trimming them appropriately, and then of the lashing them together. Next comes the piecing and lashing of the outrigger, caulking and painting of the canoe. Sail-making is also done at this time, and belongs to this stage. As a rule, the main body of the canoe is constructed at one

sitting, lasting about a day; that is, the prow-boards are put in, the ribs and planks fitted together, trimmed and lashed. Another day is devoted to the attaching of the float and binding of the outrigger frame and the platform. Caulking and painting are done at another sitting, or perhaps at two more, while the sail is made on yet another day. These times are only approximate, since the size of the canoe, as well as the number of people participating in communal labour, greatly varies. The second stage of canoe-building is accompanied by Kula magic, and by a series of exorcisms on the canoe, and the magic is performed by the owner of the canoe, and not by the builder or expert. This latter, however, directs the technicalities of the proceedings, in which he is assisted and advised by builders from other villages; by sailing experts, and by the toliwaga and other notables. The lashing of the canoe with a specially strong creeper, called wayugo, is accompanied by perhaps the most important of the rites and spells belonging to the flying canoe magic.

After the decision to build a waga has been taken, a tree suitable for the main log has to be chosen. Once the tree is chosen, the toliwaga, the builder and a few helpers repair to the spot, and a preliminary rite must be performed, before they begin to cut it down. A small incision is made into the trunk, so that a particle of food, or a bit of areca-nut can be put into it. Giving this as an offering to the tokay (wood sprite), the magician utters an incantation:

After the rite has been performed, the tree is felled. After the tree is on the ground, the preliminary trimming is done on the spot. The branches are lopped off, and the log of appropriate length is made out of the tree. This log is cut into the rough shape of a canoe, so as to make it as light as possible, for now it has to be pulled to the village or to the beach. The transporting of the log is not an easy task, as it has to be taken out of the uneven, rocky raywag, and then pulled along very bad roads. Pieces of wood are put on the ground every few metres, to serve as slips on which the log can more easily glide than on the rocks and uneven soil. 98. In spite of that, and in spite of the fact that many men are summoned to assist, the work of pulling the log is very heavy. The men receive food in payment for it. Pig flesh is cooked and distributed with baked yams; at intervals during the work they refresh themselves with green coco-nut drinks and with sucking sugar cane.

After the log has been finally brought into the village, and left on the baku, the main central place, the creeper by means of which it has been pulled and which is called in this connection duku, (the duku (the creeper used for the pulling of the canoes.) is not cut away at once. This is done ceremonially on the morning of the following day, sometimes after even two or three days have passed. The men of the community assemble, and the one who will scoop out the canoe, the builder (tota'ilawaga, "the cutter of the canoe") performs a magical rite.

After the recital of this long spell over the herbs and blade of his adze, the magician wraps up the dry banana leaf, thus imprisoning the magical virtue of the spell round the blade, and with this, he strikes and cuts through the duku (the creeper used for the pulling of the canoes. when the canoe is put on transversal logs (nigakulu), another rite has to be carried out. Some herbs are placed on the transversals between them and the body of the big canoe log. Over these herbs, again, another spell has to be uttered.

After that, for some days, the outside of the canoe body is worked. Its two ends must be cut into tapering shape, and the bottom evened and smoothed. After that is done, the canoe has to be turned over, this time into its natural position, bottom down, and what is to be the opening, upwards.

Before the scooping out begins, another formula has to be recited over the kavalali, a special ligogu (adze), used for scooping out, which is inserted into a handle with a moveable part, which then allows the cutting to be done at varying angles to the plane of striking. The rite stands in close connection to the myth of the flying canoe, localised in Kudayuri, a place in the Island of Kitava, and many allusions are made to this myth. After a short exordium, containing untranslatable magical words, and geographical references, the spell runs.

The canoe is now ready for the sea, except for the painting, which is only for ornamentation. Three more magical rites have to be performed, however, before it is painted and then launched. All three refer directly to the canoe, and aim at giving it speed. At the same time all three are exorcisms against evil influences, resulting from various defilements or broken taboos, which possibly might have desecrated the waga. The whole outside of the canoe is painted in three colours. Over each of them a special spell is chanted again, the most important one over the black colour. The canoe is now quite ready to be launched.

In the first stage of canoe-building, the rites are performed by the magician himself, with only a few helpers in attendance.

The rites of the second stage are attended by all those who help in piecing together and lashing. As to the attention and behaviour during the performance of the magic, much depends of course on whether the magician officiating is a chief of great importance or someone of low rank. A certain decorum and even silence would be observed in any case.

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## **6.9 LIST OF GIFTS, PAYMENTS, AND COMMERCIAL TRANSACTIONS.**

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### **6.9.1 Pure Gifts**

By this, as just mentioned, we understand an act, in which an individual gives an object or renders a service without expecting or getting any return. This is not a type of transaction very frequently met in Trobriand tribal life. It must be remembered that accidental or spontaneous gifts, such as alms or charities, do not exist, since everybody in need would be maintained by his or her family. Again, there are so many well-defined economic obligations, connected with kinship and relationship-in-law, that anyone wanting a thing or a service would know where to go and ask for it. And then, of course, it would not be a free gift, but one imposed by some social obligation. Moreover, since gifts in the Trobriands are conceived as definite acts with a social meaning, rather than transmissions of objects, it results that where social duties do not directly impose them, gifts are very rare. The most important type of free gift are the presents characteristic of relations between husband and wife, and parents and children. Among the Trobrianders, husband and wife own their things separately. There are man's and woman's possessions,

and each of the two partners has a special part of the household goods under control. When one of them dies, his or her relations inherit the things. But though the possessions are not joint, they very often give presents to one another, more especially a husband to his wife. As to the parents' gifts to the children, it is clear that in a matrilineal society, where the mother is the nearest of kin to her children in a sense quite different to that in our society, they share in and inherit from her all her possessions.

### **6.9.2 Customary payments, re-paid irregularly and without strict equivalence**

The most important of these are the annual payments received at harvest time by a man from his wife's brothers. These regular and unfailing gifts are so substantial, that they form the bulk of a man's income in food. Sociologically, they are perhaps the strongest strand in the fabric of the Trobriands tribal constitution. They entail a life-long obligation of every man to work for his kinswomen and their families. When a boy begins to garden, he does it for his mother. When his sisters grow up and marry, he works for them. If he has neither mother nor sisters, his nearest female blood relation will claim the proceeds of his labour. The reciprocity in these gifts never amounts to their full value, but the recipient is supposed to give a valuable (*vaygu'a*) or a pig to his wife's brother from time to time.

### **6.9.3 Payment for services rendered**

It has to be given each time the service is performed, but we cannot speak here of direct economic equivalence, since one of the terms of the equation consists of a service, the value of which cannot be assessed, except by conventional estimates. All services done by specialists for individuals or for the community, belong here. The most important of these are undoubtedly the services of the magician. The garden magician, for instance, receives definite gifts from the community and from certain individuals. The sorcerer is paid by the man who asks him to kill or who desires to be healed. The presents given for magic of rain and fair weather are very considerable.

### **6.9.4 Gifts returned in economically equivalent form**

In this fourth class have been put such gifts as must be re-paid with almost strict equivalence. But it must be stressed that strict equivalence of two gifts does not assimilate them to trade altogether. There can be no more perfect equivalence between gift and counter-gift.

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## **6.10 THE MEANING OF THE KULA**

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As said the Kula seems to be, to a certain extent, a novel type of ethnological fact. Its novelty lies partly in the size of its sociological and geographical extent. A big, inter-tribal relationship, uniting with definite social bonds a vast area and great numbers of people, binding them with definite ties of reciprocal obligations, making them follow minute rules and observations in a concerted manner—the Kula is a sociological mechanism of surpassing size and complexity, considering the level of culture on which we find it. Nor can this wide network of social co-relations and cultural influences be considered for a moment as ephemeral, new or precarious. For its highly

developed mythology and its magical ritual show how deeply it has taken root in the tradition of these natives and of what ancient growth it must be.

Another unusual feature is the character of the transaction itself, which is the proper substance of the Kula. A half commercial, half ceremonial exchange, it is carried out for its own sake, in fulfilment of a deep desire to possess. But here again, it is not ordinary possession, but a special type, in which a man owns for a short time, and in an alternating manner, individual specimens of two classes of objects. Though the ownership is incomplete in point of permanency, it is in turn enhanced in point of numbers successively possessed, and may be called a cumulative possession.

Perhaps the greatest importance and which perhaps reveals best the unusual character of the Kula is the natives' mental attitude towards the tokens of wealth. These latter are neither used nor regarded as money or currency, and they resemble these economic instruments very little, if indeed there is any resemblance at all, except that both money and *vaygu'a* represent condensed wealth. *Vaygu'a* is never used as medium of exchange or as measure of value, which are the two most important functions of currency or money. Each piece of *vaygu'a* of the Kula type has one main object throughout its existence—to be possessed and exchanged; has one main function and serves one main purpose—to circulate round the Kula ring, to be owned and displayed in a certain manner.

The acts of exchange of the valuables have to conform to a definite code. The main tenet of this declares that the transaction is not a bargain. The equivalence of the values exchanged is essential, but it must be the result of the repayer's own sense of what is due to custom and to his own dignity. The ceremonial attached to the act of giving, the manner of carrying and handling the *vaygu'a* shows distinctly that this is regarded as something else than mere merchandise. Indeed it is to the native something that confers dignity, that exalts him, and which he therefore treats with veneration and affection.

### Check Your Progress

1. Malinowski's work established .....as the most important method for anthropological fieldwork.
2. The Trobriand Archipelago, also called ..... or .....

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## 6.11 LET US SUM UP

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This unit develops your skill further as a keen researcher and observer. It takes you through the processes involved in ethnographic research and also explains how to make mind maps and tables to process the labyrinthine data that one comes across during the field study. It makes you aware of the need to meticulously feed data and conceptualise it under different relevant categories to make it more comprehensive. The need for ethnographic research to highlight various social, religious, political and economic patterns and their interconnectedness is brought out in the unit. This unit also appeals to the researchers and learners to be sensitive to the sense of dignity of the natives and inhabitants of a region and cultural groups. In the field, the duty of the ethnographer is to clearly sketch all the rules and regularities



## Ethnographic Cases

of tribal or cultural life as also explained by Malinowski and bring out the anatomy of their culture, depicting the constitution of their society. The unit explains the methods of observation and participation in detail in order to make sense of the reality in its actual context by giving importance to the inhabitants own meanings and interpretation of existence including their social, political, economic, religious and mythical accounts. The centrality of an ethnographer with rigorous efforts and duty as a researcher is emphasised in ethnographic researches like the ones mentioned in this unit.

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### 6.12 REFERENCES

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### 6.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Participant observation.
2. Boyowa or Kiriwina