What can the exchange of gifts tell us about society?

The exchange of gifts is highly useful for anthologists in understanding the principles of a particular society. This is because gift exchange is not merely the movement of objects from one person to another, but it is an integral constituent of a society and plays an important role in creating and maintaining social hierarchy. Furthermore, understanding symbolism behind gift exchange gives us a valuable insight to the workings and motivations of the society as a whole. It is important to recognise that exchange of gifts is a universal occurrence; no known human population consumes the entirety of their output with no form of exchanges. This universality of exchange means that all systems of gift exchange are a principle aspect of life and indeed society, and can thus be compared across differing societies and cultures. In this essay I shall discuss various examples of 'primitive', or rather traditional, societies which are underpinned by particular gift exchange systems, such as the Trobriand Islanders in New Guinea, how these systems of gift exchange fundamentally affect and in many cases control such societies, and whether these anthropological studies have an explanatory value. In addition I will examine Mauss' description of the process of exchange and suggest that the 'rules of reciprocity', underlined by Mauss, apply to our modern society to the same extent that they do for traditional societies.

Firstly I shall explore the work of Malinowski and his studies into the exchange systems in the Trobriand Islands. The Trobriand Islands are made up of a flat coral island which is about 30 miles long surrounded by numerous smaller islands. The villages are scattered along the western coast and in the centre. It is important to note that no village has access to all the necessities of its population and nowhere in these islands can one obtain essential materials such as bamboo or greenstone which is used in the blades of axes. Additionally, many of the villages are highly specialised, with the northern villages specialising in agriculture and the western coast villages specialising in fishing. For this reason, exchange systems are an important aspect of the Trobriand society. This system of exchange fundamentally affects their society; it leads to the organisation of agricultural work whereby members of several households will pool their labour collectively. This form of communal labour is based on reciprocity; the household whose tasks are being completed collectively will provide food for the workers as repayment. Another example of this communal labour based on reciprocity is where a person commands kin members to work for them, and in return he disseminates food. This is known as kabutu labour. Kabutu is also used by leaders to command a sizable work force in order to undertake large scale projects from which he derives prestige. This highlights that the Trobriand society is underpinned by systems of exchange, which are in many cases based on food.

However, Malinowksi highlights that this form of exchange is merely a secondary exchange system to that of Kula which effectively influences every aspect of Trobriand life. He describes the Kula as 'a form of exchange, of extensive, inter-tribal character; carried on by communities inhabiting a wide range of islands, forming a closed circuit.' The exchange of items forms what is known as the Kula ring which spans 18 island communities of the Massim archipelago (including the Trobriand Islands), involving thousands of people. The

Trobriander society is based upon this system of exchange, Kula, and have eighty different forms of exchange centred on the Kula. Two articles- long necklaces of red shell called s*oulava* and bracelets of white shell called *mwali*- are moved around this ring or circuit and are constantly being exchanged for one another; every man in the Kula will receive some *mwali* or *soulava* and then will pass it onto a partner from whom he will receive the opposite in exchange. The *soulava* are traded to the north and thus circle the ring in a clockwise direction, while the *mwali* are traded to the south in an anti-clockwise direction. The exchange of these articles takes place between established male partners on and inter-tribal basis. This partnership establishes a life-long relationship based on mutual duties and obligations between the two men, which varies 'with the distance between their villages and their reciprocal status'. This ultimately creates 'a vast intertribal net of relationships consisting of thousands of men bound together by mutual passion for Kula exchange and secondarily by minor ties and interests.' In this example it is clear that this gift exchange system has a tremendous influence on the components of society in terms of relationships and hierarchies.

Importantly Kula governs all other allied activities in areas in which it is practiced, such as canoe building and the subsidiary trade which occurs alongside the sea voyages to different islands. To the natives, Kula is the most vital interest in life and is surrounded by ceremony and magical belief. Magic rites must be performed over the sea-going canoe when it is first built in order to ensure it is 'swift and safe', but also lucky to ensure it averts dangers. Furthermore, the mwasila (the Kula magic proper) is a form of magic which is believed to directly act upon the partners mind (the nonola) to make him 'eager to give gifts'. This common belief binds the community of a number of villages who all perform Kula, magic, have common leaders, and the same outer and inner social sphere, within which they exchange their *vaygu'a* (valuables). This highlights the shear impact of Kula on the lives of the natives and the society as a whole working organism. Whilst Malinowski doesn't suggest a theoretical assessment of the meaning of Kula, he did suggest in 1935 that if he were to analyse the function (as such) of the Kula, he would suggest that for the Trobriand Islands the Kula as a cultural activity 'is to a large extent a surrogate and substitute for head-hunting and war.' Whether or not this is the case, Malinowski's descriptions tell us a huge amount about the societies based on the Kula.

The famous sociologist, Marcel Mauss famously questioned 'What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?' He argued that no gift is free but instead gift giving is a form of reciprocal exchange. He studied the North American potlach, which is essentially a gift exchange festival or ceremony practiced by the aborigines of the Northwest coast of North America, such as the Haïda and the Kwakwaka'waka cultures. Mauss states that events such as the potlach are religious, juridical and moral, relating to 'both politics and the family' and are economic events concerned with 'production and consumption'. Mauss suggests that this embodies a total system of giving which is universally echoed in human systems of exchange. Within this system a gift may be reciprocated with an item of equal value, and thus statuses within a society will remain stable. Mauss argues that the given gift is a vehicle for the spiritual, religious or magical

force of the giver, and because the gift wishes to return to the giver, if its power is not returned in the form of another gift the original gift will haunt the receiver. He points to the example of Maori gift exchange whereby if person A were to give a gift to B, who then passes this gift onto C, and C then returns a gift to B, B must give that gift onto A. This is because the gift continues to carry the force or spirit of person A, and any benefit B gains from this gift must thus be given to A.

Mauss does, however, suggest that the North American potlach is different from other gift exchange events in that it is underpinned by rivalry based on honour. Mauss states that 'In certain kinds of potlatch one must expend all that one has, keeping nothing back. It is a competition to see who is the richest and also the most madly extravagant. Everything is based upon the principles of antagonism and rivalry' . Malinowski also suggests this element of competition in the Kula gift exchange whereby if a man were to receive a less valuable good than that which he gave, he would brag about it to his friends to highlight his own generosity. In this society generosity is a synonym of power and rank. The social code of *Noblesse oblige* overrides any natural tendency based upon 'to love to have, to loathe to lose' and indeed a man who owns something is expected to share it, and the higher his rank, the greater his obligation. Thus gift exchange determines social position and rank. Furthermore, as suggested by Mauss, gift exchange is a triple obligation; for certain people and under certain circumstances there is an obligation to give, there is also an obligation to receive (to refuse a gift is to reject the social bond), and finally reciprocation which demonstrates honour and wealth (in Polynesia, failure to reciprocate means to lose *mana*, one's spiritual source of authority and wealth). Mauss emphasises that this principle of reciprocity and obligation ensures that the exchange of gifts forms part of a 'system of total services' and is part of a deep seated tradition of social contract building. Fundamentally, the ways in which societies give gifts are essential to our understanding of that society as gift exchange is the basis for social relations, social hierarchy and indeed economic exchange.

I would now like to focus on the concept of ownership. For those involved in the Kula, the *vaygu'a* are not owned in order to be used (the aim of possession is not to decorate oneself), and in fact 90% of the arm-shells are too small to be worn and some are so big and valuable to be used at all. For this reason, in Kula society, ownership is a strange concept. No article would be kept for more than a year or so, but instead each member of Kula enjoys temporary possession of a large number of items passing through his hands. This temporary ownership allows the partner to gain a large amount of renown through the exhibition of the article and the discussion of where it was from and to whom he will give it. This shapes a large proportion of the 'gossip' and conversation within the village, and emphasises the extent to which Kula dominates life. Malinowski highlights that this mental attitude toward ownership of *vaygu'a* is similar to our European concept of heirlooms and trophies, from which we gain pride in merit. However, in European society it is the norm that objects are sold, and with this the ownership rights are transferred to the new owner, and thus the object has become 'alienated'. However in a gift economy the objects given are inalienated from the giver and are almost loaned rather than sold. It is because these gifts are inalienated that the gesture must be reciprocated as the giving of an inalienated object

creates a 'gift-debt', and consequently exchange of gifts creates a mutual interdependence between giver and receiver. Indeed, Mauss emphasises that the 'free' gift that is not returned is a contradiction due to the fact that it is thus unable to create social ties, and he argues that solidarity (the concept on which Durkheim bases his quest for understanding social cohesion) is achieved through the social bonds created by exchange of gifts. Ultimately by examining how societies view the concept of ownership an anthropologist has a great insight into the mechanisms of society.

Finally, I would like to explore the notion that these rules of reciprocity also apply to our society in 21st century Europe. The UK economy consists of the market sub-economy, the redistributive economy, the domestic economy and the gift economy which is, as with traditional societies, ruled by reciprocity. This can be highlighted by the well known embarrassment of receiving a gift at Christmas from someone who you have not got one in return. The extent of spending of the population at Christmas time is an indicator of the existence of a gift economy, as undoubtedly people would not buy many goods if it weren't for reciprocity.

To conclude, it is clear that by examining gift exchange, not just as an action but as a symbolic act, anthropologists can gauge the causes and motivations behind different facets of society such as hierarchy, rank, trade and inter-tribal relations. Malinowski said of the members of Kula that none had knowledge of the total outline of their social structure, but merely know their 'motives, the purpose of individual actions and the rules that apply to them. Beyond this is out of their mental range.' This is in fact the task of the anthropologist; to take fundamental aspects of society such as gift exchange and examine how that influences the lives of the people and indeed the structure and functioning of society.

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