

Apply Functionalism and Structuralism to the Trobriander Islanders' Economy

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Ethnographer: Bronislaw Malinowski 1914-1918,

Ethnographer: Anette B. Weiner 1980's

Location: Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea

The Trobriand Island inhabitants live in a society composed of four clans further divided into subclans or *dala*, in the local language. These dala follow a matrilineal descent system that define territory, kinship and marriage, and are the corporations of society via the yam exchanges of kin, but the higher structure, *clan*, have no corporate interest and have no chiefs, but only chiefly dala's have chiefs, commoner dalas have managers as leaders and they cannot marry polygamously. Although, the Trobrianders have a matrilineal descent system they have patrilocal residence structure.

Looking at the Trobrianders from a functionalist perspective that all aspects of that all aspects of society (ex institutions) have specific functions Malinowski said that functionalism is the theory that a society is a set of interconnected parts where the social institutions support the needs of the individual's society by contributing to the social structure. These needs are either social, biological or economical, e.g. biological needs involve aspects such as food and water necessary for survival. Malinowski argued against evolution saying that there is a certain order and organization to every cultural system. His main argument was that societies should be looked at in their own light, and not comparatively to other societies. We can then say that it is a particularist theory and also that Malinowski made a theoretical paradigm shift away from the evolutionistic perspective of universalism and ethnocentrism (with the help of Boas' ethical paradigm looking at a society *ethnocentrically and comparatively (method)* was racist), by rejecting the evolutionist perspective in all his research. And he also made a methodical paradigm shift introducing the concept of *participant observation*.

In his research, Malinowski strongly argue against an evolutionist theory of "survivals," which said that there were certain parts of society that are still in existence, but have lost their original function in society. Tylor, the evolutionist, used the example of dream charms in British society. Malinowski contradicted this explaining that every act or aspect of society has a function. He especially argued against that matrilineality was a survival in all societies. In his book the Argonauts of the Pacific (1922), Malinowski countered the concept with his data of the Trobrianders that clearly showed that matrilineality had functions

Matrilineality and the role of women had a significant role in the Trobrianders society (e.g. women can choose their husbands). It defines the corporate descent system of the dala's, so you inherit through your mother's side, not your father's. Matrilineality functions as the entitlement of the Trobrianders. This is a mythical charter that defines territory, inheritance, marriage rights (Trobrianders are exogamous apart from the chief) and above all your dala (kinship). Like functionalism states, the descent system is a contributor to the wider social structure.

A large part of the Trobrianders' society revolves around the exchange of yams. Yams function as the currency as well as defining your defining your *dala* and *affines*, meaning if you produce an exchange garden for your sister they are part of your dala and it shows the fulfilment of your obligation to your dala. Yams also define the social hierarchy, as they are usually given to those of higher authority, but even chief do not necessarily have authority over their affines. Even yams from scared gardens can be given reciprocally, ex. Wasi or in the case of giving to affines who are close to your status equal and from whom you receive axe blades. Although this is true, people of the highest authority (i.e. the chief) will receive the most yams because he is the only person who can be polygamous and will therefore receive yams from several matrilineages, which means that he is the most respected, influential and richest person in the dala.

The Harvest Presentation is the annual presentation of the yams grown in exchange gardens to another household between the husband's sister and the brother in-law that are stored in a building for display purposes, which shows they are special yams and a representation of a man's capital. Yams inside a yam house are a man's capital and rotting yams shows the fulfilment of exchange obligation, "*public statement of a man's control over his public, financial and ecological environment* (Weiner)." However, chiefs will always be the wealthiest due to their right to polygamy, and have more in-laws and affines as a result. This means that they will receive more yams at the Harvest

Presentation and are richer because of their large amount of yams; however, it doesn't necessarily mean that they have the highest authority in the society.

Even marriage supports the social structure. In the Trobriand society marriage is a political act. It establishes the formal bonds between contractual relationships and corporate relationships. The presentation of productivity from the brother to his sister boosts the dala's reputation and marriages into these dala's can mean more wealth and respect from the clans and subclans as well as the acquisition of yams (currency).

Through the application of an idealist perspective, *structuralism*, the Trobrianders economy brings about a great deal of other interesting revelations. Structuralism is a Universalist perspective, arguing that there is a mental structure behind gestures/acts, meaning that there is a cognitive meaning behind human actions; however, to say that there is cognitive meaning behind every action would be an overstatement. The theory, developed by Claude Levi-Strauss who had analysed the social activity with the use of language and drew his methodological model from structural linguistics, says that like we are unaware of our grammar when we speak we are unaware of the components that make up the social structure; even if we subconsciously are unaware of it, there is cognitive meaning behind human actions. A focus was put on the cognitive processes of humans, and concluded that all humans have a mental demand for mental classification, called *commonality*. Levi-Strauss' idea was that people have an innate urge to order and classify. This is done in terms of *binary oppositions*, such as black and white, high and low, life and death. He also said that people understood cultures in terms of these opposites.

In the Trobriand Islanders society, marriages and dala's functions in terms of binary oppositions because for dala's, they are simply separated into commoner dala's and chiefly dala's, the separation is that the chief of a chiefly dala has the right to polygamy. In terms of marriages, the wife givers are symbolically higher than the wife takers, which means that the wife givers have a higher status in society. As a form of dala obligation yams are presented to your affines annually at the Harvest Presentation. This presentation defines both hierarchy but also implies male dominance since the more yams you possess the persons will also become, although not automatically, more respected and influential, and known as the wealthiest, so in fact it is a political act similarly to marriage. In addition, the Harvest Presentation also is the show of obligation to their dala as only men can grow and receive yams. Women also grow yams; it is the project of the couple with help from other dala members and even affines, male and female.

According to Levi-Strauss's theory of classification, the Trobrianders give mental classification in the form of binary oppositions, sacred and profane (using Durkheim's concepts). For yams, everyday eating yams from the subsistence garden can be conceptualized as the profane, whereas exchange garden yams to affines belong to the sacred can be conceptualized as and are even presented ceremoniously and stored in yam houses for display purposes; however, chief exchange gardens are far more sacred than the affine yams. Also, uncooked yams are sacred and cooked yams are profane, and as a result have very different properties and uses. Uncooked yams can be invested; where as cooked yams can only be eaten and may almost never be used for exchange.

In the *Kula Ring Exchange*, prestigious goods are exchanged called *vaguy'a* (a kind of currency), these are either *soulava*, long necklaces in shell discs associated with women and exchanged in a clockwise ring and *mwali*, white arm shells associated with men and exchanged in a counter-clockwise ring. This is another example of binary oppositions. It is important to note that only males can participate in Kula exchange and that only Chiefs have enough wealth to take part, in return this shows political power and status, but affines can accompany them if allowed. For every exchange there is a giver and a receiver, and at first both appear disinterested in exchanging. The object is then thrown on the ground at the receiver's feet where the receiver then accepts the gift, but he must not seem eager. The whole exchange is very ceremonious.

In the other exchanges, you can also see binary oppositions. The entire exchange systems are ceremonious acts (*wasi*, *sagali*, *pokala*) apart from *gimwali*, which is the only Trobriander exchange that is not ceremonial. It occurs during the *Kula Ring Exchange*, where both partners bargain separate from the Kula Exchange for far less valuable goods. Fish is exchanged for vegetables or newly manufactured items of various sorts. On the Kula Ring expeditions, one brings items to *gimwali*, but is kept separate from the Kula/*vaguy'a* exchange (binary oppositions.) Another example of an exchange in Trobriand society is *wasi*. It occurs between a partner in a coastal village and a partner in an inland village, where fish is exchanged for yam, in an annual affirmation of partner villages. This is ceremonious, as it happens once a year and the inland villager must seek out the coastal villager before he can go to give his fish to receive yams.

By looking at the Trobrianders through the glasses of the particularist functionalists and universal structuralist it is clear that every part of their society functions to support the social structure, but at the same time has cognitive meaning to its inhabitants.

*****Remember to discuss the Kula Ring*****
Kabuto Labour