
hunger springs up when the gift is not being eaten. The brothers Grimm found a folk tale they called “The Ungrateful Son”:

Once a man and his wife were sitting outside the front door with a roast chicken before them which they were going to eat between them. Then the man saw his old father coming along and quickly took the chicken and hid it, for he begrudged him any of it. The old man came, had a drink, and went away.

Now the son was about to put the roast chicken back on the table, but when he reached for it, it had turned into a big toad that jumped in his face and stayed there and didn't go away again.

And if anybody tried to take it away, it would give them a poisonous look, as if about to jump in their faces, so that no one dared touch it. And the ungrateful son had to feed the toad every day, otherwise it would eat part of his face. And thus he went ceaselessly hither and yon about in the world.

This toad is the hunger that appears when the gift stops moving, whenever one man's gift becomes another man's capital. To the degree that we desire the fruits of the gift, teeth appear when it is hidden away. When property is hoarded, thieves and beggars begin to be born to rich men's wives. A story like this says that there is a force seeking to keep the gift in motion. Some property must perish—its preservation is beyond us. We have no choice. Or rather, our choice is whether to keep the gift moving or to be eaten with it. We choose between the toad's dumb-lust and that other, more graceful perishing in which our hunger disappears as our gifts are consumed.

II • The Circle

The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him—it cannot fail...

A bit of a mystery remains in the Scottish tale “The Girl and the Dead Man”: Where does the vessel of cordial come from? My guess is that it comes from the mother or, at least, from her spirit. The gift not only moves, it moves in a circle. The mother gives the bread and the girl gives it in turn to the birds whom I place in the realm of the mother, not only because it is a mother bird who addresses her, but also because of a verbal link (the mother has a “leash of daughters,” the mother bird has her “puppies”). The vessel of cordial is in the realm of the mother as well, for, remember, the phrase in Gaelic means “teat of ichor” or “teat of health.” The level changes, to be sure—it is a different sort of mother whose breasts hold the blood of the gods—but it is still in the maternal sphere. Structurally, then, the gift moves from mother to daughter to mother to daughter. In circling twice in this way the gift itself increases from bread to the water of life, from carnal food to spiritual food. At which point the circle expands as the girl gives the gift to her sisters to bring them back to life.

The figure of the circle in which the gift moves can be seen more clearly in an example from ethnography. Gift institutions are universal among tribal peoples; the few we know the most about are those which Western ethnographers studied around the turn of the century. One of these is the Kula, the ceremonial exchange of the Massim peoples who occupy the South Sea islands near the eastern tip of New Guinea. Bronislaw Malinowski spent several years living on these islands during the First World War, staying primarily in the Trobriands, the northwesternmost group. In his subsequent book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski describes how, after he had returned to England, a visit to Edinburgh Castle to see the Scottish crown jewels reminded him of the Kula:

The keeper told many stories of how [the jewels] were worn by this or that king or queen on such and such an occasion, of how some of them had been taken over to London. to the great and iust indignation of the

whole Scottish nation, how they were restored, and how now everyone can be pleased, since they are safe under lock and key, and no one can touch them. As I was looking at them and thinking how ugly, useless, ungainly, even tawdry they were, I had the feeling that something similar had been told to me of late, and that I had seen many other objects of this sort, which made a similar impression on me.

And then there arose before me the vision of a native village on coral soil, and a small, rickety platform temporarily erected under a pandanus thatch, surrounded by a number of brown, naked men, and one of them showing me long, thin red strings, and big, white, worn-out objects, clumsy to sight and greasy to touch. With reverence he also would name them, and tell their history, and by whom and when they were worn, and how they changed hands, and how their temporary possession was a great sign of the importance and glory of the village.

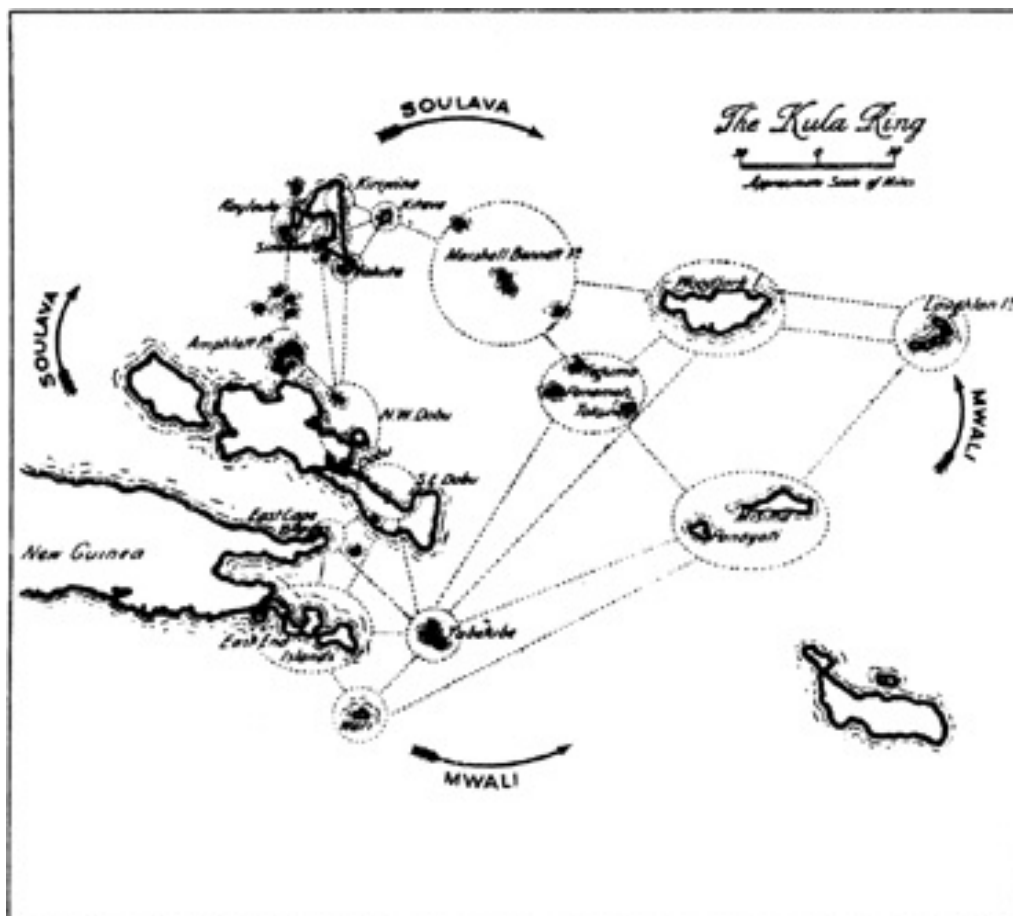
Two ceremonial gifts lie at the heart of the Kula exchange: armshells and necklaces. "Armshells are obtained by breaking off the top and the narrow end of a big, cone-shaped shell, and then polishing up the remaining ring," writes Malinowski. Necklaces are made with small flat disks of a red shell strung into long chains. Both armshells and necklaces circulate throughout the islands, passing from household to household. The presence of one of these gifts in a man's house enables him "to draw a great deal of renown, to exhibit the article, to tell how he obtained it, and to plan to whom he is going to give it. And all this forms one of the favorite subjects of tribal conversation and gossip ..."

Malinowski calls the Kula articles "ceremonial gifts" because their social use far exceeds their practical use. A friend of mine tells me that his group of friends in college continually passed around a deflated basketball. The joke was to get it mysteriously deposited in

someone else's room. The clear uselessness of such objects seems to make it easier for them to become vehicles for the spirit of a group. Another man tells me that when he was young his parents and their best friends passed back and forth, again as a joke, a huge open-ended wrench that had apparently been custom-cast to repair a steam shovel. The two families had found it one day on a picnic, and for years thereafter it showed up first in one house, then in the other, under the Christmas tree or in the umbrella stand. If you have not yourself been a part of such an exchange, you will easily turn up a story like these by asking around, for such spontaneous exchanges of "useless" gifts are fairly common, though hardly ever developed to the depth and elegance that Malinowski found among the Massim.

The Kula gifts, the armshells and necklaces, move continually around a wide ring of islands in the Massim archipelago. Each travels in a circle; the red shell necklaces (considered to be "male" and worn by women) move clockwise and the armshells ("female" and worn by men) move counterclockwise. A person who participates in the Kula has gift partners in neighboring tribes. If we imagine him facing the center of the circle with partners on his left and right, he will always be receiving armshells from his partner to the left and giving them to the man on his right. The necklaces flow the other way. Of course, these objects are not actually passed hand to hand; they are carried by canoe from island to island in journeys that require great preparation and cover hundreds of miles.

The two Kula gifts are exchanged for each other. If a man brings me a necklace, I will give him in return some armshells of equivalent value. I may do this right away, or I may wait as long as a year (though if I wait that long I will give him a few smaller gifts in the interim to show my good faith). As a rule it takes between two and ten years for each article in the Kula to make a full round of the islands.



THE KULA RING

“Soulava” are necklaces and
 “Mwali” are armshells.

Because these gifts are exchanged for each other, the Kula seems to break the rule against equilibrium that I set out in the first section. But let us look more closely. We should first note that the Kula articles are kept in motion. Each gift stays with a man for a while, but if he keeps it too long he will begin to have a reputation for being “slow” and “hard” in the Kula. The gifts “never stop,” writes Malinowski. “It seems almost incredible at first ..., but it is the fact, nevertheless, that no one ever keeps any of the Kula valuables for any length of time ... ‘Ownership,’ therefore, in Kula, is quite a special economic relation. A man who is in the Kula never keeps any article for longer than, say, a year or two.” When Malinowski expands on

this point, he finds he must abandon his analogy to the crown jewels. The Trobriand Islanders know what it is to own property, but their sense of possession is wholly different from that of Europeans. The “social code ... lays down that to possess is to be great, and that wealth is the indispensable appanage of social rank and attribute of personal virtue. But the important point is that with them to possess is to give—and here the natives differ from us notably. A man who owns a thing is naturally expected to share it, to distribute it, to be its trustee and dispenser.”

The motion of the Kula gifts does not in itself ensure that there will be no equilibrium, for, as we have seen, they move but they are also exchanged. Two ethics, however, govern this exchange and both of them ensure that, while there may be a macroscopic equilibrium, at the level of each man there will be the sense of imbalance, of shifting weight, that always marks a gift exchange. The first of these ethics prohibits discussion: “the Kula,” writes Malinowski, “consists in the bestowing of a ceremonial gift, which has to be repaid by an equivalent counter-gift after a lapse of time ... But [and this is the point] it can never be exchanged from hand to hand, with the equivalence between the two objects discussed, bargained about and computed.” A man may wonder what will come in return for his gift, but he is not supposed to bring it up. Gift exchange is not a form of barter. “The decorum of the Kula transaction is strictly kept, and highly valued. The natives distinguish it from barter, which they practice extensively [and] of which they have a clear idea ... Often, when criticising an incorrect, too hasty, or indecorous procedure of Kula, they will say: ‘He conducts his Kula as if it were [barter].’” Partners in barter talk and talk until they strike a balance, but the gift is given in silence.

A second important ethic, Malinowski tells us, “is that the equivalence of the counter-gift is left to the giver, and it cannot be enforced by any kind of coercion.” If a man gives a second-rate necklace in return for a fine set of armshells, people may talk, but there is nothing anyone can do about it. When we barter we make deals. and if someone defaults we go after him. but the gift must be a

gift. It is as if you give a part of your substance to your gift partner and then wait in silence until he gives you a part of his. You put yourself in his hands. These rules—and they are typical of gift institutions—preserve the sense of motion despite the exchange involved. There is trade, but the objects traded are not commodities.

We commonly think of gifts as being exchanged between two people and of gratitude as being directed back to the actual donor. “Reciprocity,” the standard social science term for returning a gift, has this sense of going to and fro between people (the roots are *re* and *pro*, back and forth, like a reciprocating engine). The gift in the Scottish tale is given reciprocally, going back and forth between the mother and her daughter (until the very end).

Reciprocal giving is a form of gift exchange, but it is the simplest. The gift moves in a circle, and two people do not make much of a circle. Two points establish a line, but a circle lies in a plane and needs at least three points. This is why, as we shall see, most of the stories of gift exchange have a minimum of three people. I have introduced the Kula circuit here because it is such a fine example. For the Kula gifts to move, each man must have at least two gift partners. In this case the circle is larger than that, of course, but three is its lower limit.

Circular giving differs from reciprocal giving in several ways. First, when the gift moves in a circle no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to. I continually give armshells to my partner to the west, but unlike a two-person give-and-take, he never gives me armshells in return. The whole mood is different. The circle is the structural equivalent of the prohibition on discussion. When I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere), it is as if the gift goes around a corner before it comes back. I have to give blindly. And I will feel a sort of blind gratitude as well. The smaller the circle is—and particularly if it involves just two people—the more a man can keep his eye on things and the more likely it is that he will start to think like a salesman. But so long as the gift passes out of sight it cannot be manipulated by one man or one pair of gift partners. When the gift moves in a circle its motion is

beyond the control of the personal ego, and so each bearer must be a part of the group and each donation is an act of social faith.

What size is the circle? In addressing this question, I have come to think of the circle, the container in which the gift moves, as its “body” or “ego.” Psychologists sometimes speak of the ego as a complex like any other: the Mother, the Father, the Me—all of these are important places in the field of the psyche where images and energy cluster as we grow, like stars in a constellation. The ego complex takes on shape and size as the Me—that part of the psyche which takes everything personally—retains our private history, that is, how others have treated us, how we look and feel, and so on.

I find it useful to think of the ego complex as a thing that keeps expanding, not as something to be overcome or done away with. An ego has formed and hardened by the time most of us reach adolescence, but it is small, an ego-of-one. Then, if we fall in love, for example, the constellation of identity expands and the ego-of-one becomes an ego-of-two. The young lover, often to his own amazement, finds himself saying “we” instead of “me.” Each of us identifies with a wider and wider community as we mature, coming eventually to think and act with a group-ego (or, in most of these gift stories, a tribal ego), which speaks with the “we” of kings and wise old people. Of course the larger it becomes, the less it feels like what we usually mean by ego. Not entirely, though: whether an adolescent is thinking of himself or a nation of itself, it still feels like egotism to anyone who is not included. There is still a boundary.

If the ego widens still further, however, it really does change its nature and become something we would no longer call ego. There is a consciousness in which we act as part of things larger even than the race. When I picture this, I always think of the end of “Song of Myself” where Whitman dissolves into the air:

I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your boot-

soles.

Now the part that says “me” is scattered. There is no boundary to be outside of, unless the universe itself is bounded.

In all of this we could substitute “body” for “ego.” Aborigines commonly refer to their own clan as “my body,” just as our marriage ceremony speaks of becoming “one flesh.” Again, the body can be enlarged beyond the private skin, and in its final expansion there is no body at all. When we are in the spirit of the gift we love to feel the body open outward. The ego’s firmness has its virtues, but at some point we seek the slow dilation, to use another term of Whitman’s, in which the ego enjoys a widening give-and-take with the world and is finally abandoned in ripeness.

The gift can circulate at every level of the ego. In the ego-of-one we speak of self-gratification, and whether it’s forced or chosen, a virtue or a vice, the mark of self-gratification is its isolation. Reciprocal giving, the ego-of-two, is a little more social. We think mostly of lovers. Each of these circles is exhilarating as it expands, and the little gifts that pass between lovers touch us because each is stepping into a larger circuit. But again, if the exchange goes on and on to the exclusion of others, it soon goes stale. D. H. Lawrence spoke of the *égoïsme à deux* of so many married couples, people who get just so far in the expansion of the self and then close down for a lifetime, opening up for neither children, nor the group, nor the gods. A folk tale from Kashmir tells of two Brahmin women who tried to dispense with their almsgiving duties by simply giving alms back and forth to each other. They didn’t quite have the spirit of the thing. When they died, they returned to earth as two wells so poisoned that no one could take water from them. No one else can drink from the ego-of-two. It has its moment in our maturation, but it is an infant form of the gift circle.

In the Kula we have already seen a fine example of the larger circle. The Maori, the native tribes of New Zealand, provide another, which is similar in some ways to the Kula but offers new detail and a hint of how gift exchange will feel if the circle expands beyond the