

SOCI 421: Social Anthropology

Session 9 – Economic Anthropology: Exchange of Goods

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Session Overview

Economic organization has been introduced from level 100 where the topic has been treated as adaptive strategies. Foraging, horticulture, agriculture and industrialization have been discussed. Since production ends only when the goods and services reach the final consumer, distribution has also been treated as part of production. In this session, distribution and exchange in selected simple societies will be discussed.

Session Outline

The following topics will be discussed in this session:

- Topic One: Exchange of Goods
- Topic Two: Exchange – Kula
- Topic Three: Exchange - Potlatch

Objectives

By the end of this session students should be able to

- explain the essence of exchange of gifts
- describe the 'kula'
- articulate the 'potlatch'

Reading List

- Kottak, P. K., (2000) *Cultural Anthropology*, Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Crapo, R. H., (2002) *Cultural Anthropology: Understanding Ourselves & Others*, Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Rosman, A., Rubel, P. G. and Weisgrau, M., (2009) *The Tapestry of Culture: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, Lanham: Altamira Press.
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Topic One: Exchange of Goods in Simple Societies

- People with no monetary system cannot make profit and loss calculations
- They exchange goods of which each party has surplus
- It is this kind of exchange that captures the attention of the social anthropologist
- The anthropologist wants to study that kind of exchange in which the giver gains nothing

Topic One: Exchange of Goods in Simple Societies

- Is this a rational way of disposing one's property?
- The answer lies in the analysis of gift exchange
- The theory of gift giving is first advanced by Marcel Mauss
- Marcel Mauss used the *kula* sailing expedition and *potlatch* competitive distribution of property for analysis of gift giving
- Anthropologists have developed understanding of the social significance of gifts for which no direct return is made

Topic One: Exchange of Goods in Simple Societies

- The parties to the exchange made long sea voyages to exchange gifts and they also engaged in some barter deals although the latter is not the main theme of the transactions
- In simple societies it is believed that relations cannot engage in trade else they quarrel
- For some, friends cannot trade because business can bring about cheating and this can destroy relationships such as kinship and friendship

Topic One: Exchange of Goods in Simple Societies

- In modern societies gifts are given to relations at birthdays, weddings, Christmas without calculations of having return
- But some think there should be some kind of roughly equal balance between gift giver and receiver
- Gift giving follows adopted principle such as no haggling; gift accepted ceremoniously polite; gnash teeth in secrecy if gift is not as expected; relative values are placed on different objects; people are aware what the objects given as gifts mean to them

Topic One: Exchange of Goods in Simple Societies

- Gift giving in modern and simple societies achieve the same purpose i.e. maintenance of social relationships
- Objects given as gifts are virtually considered as appropriate in all societies – both small and western
- Gifts are highly prized in small scale societies and associated with both social and economic considerations
- However, the social relationships created in gift giving is very important

Topic Two: The Kula

- This is one most important gift-exchange institutions studied and described by Bronislaw Malinowski
- This is a Trobriand exchange linking the Trobriand Islands with other islands which are culturally and linguistically different in a circular structure
- The other islands were considered dangerous because of their endemic warfare and cannibalism
- Red shell necklaces *soulava* and white armshells *mwali* which moved in clockwise and counterclockwise respectively were the goods exchanged

Topic Two: The Kula

- The Trobrianders sailed in small native crafts clockwise to Kitava Islands to receive armshells and counterclockwise to the south to receive red shell necklaces from the Dobu Islands in the *kula* expedition
- They exchange red shell necklaces for white armshells and not red shells for red shells and armshells for armshells
- The *kula* exchange is similar to generalized exchange

Topic Two: The Kula

- The exchange of shell valuables in the kula created alliances between individuals living in potentially hostile areas
- Kula visitors and their hosts (not kula partners) also carry out direct barter of food, pottery and other manufactured utilitarian objects
- Items they exchange were either scarce or absent in one place but not another
- The kula delayed but barter did not; there was no bargain for kula but there was bargain for barter

Topic Two: The Kula

- The exchange system has been modified and continues to operate among the Trobrianders today
- The kula has been accompanied by elaborate ceremony
- The Trobrianders today are citizens of Papua New Guinea

Topic Three: The Potlatch

- Just as the Trobriand kula exchange is associated with a very wide area, the potlatch is a festive event of a regional exchange system among different ethnic groups of North Pacific Coast of North America
- The people involved are Salish and Kwakiutl of Washington and British Columbia as well as the Tsimshian of Alaska
- Potlatch means give and the principles that a gift deserves a counter gift as in *kula*
- At each potlatch event sponsors and their assistants gave away food, blankets, pieces of copper, or other items
- In return, the sponsors got prestige

Topic Three: The Potlatch

- The Kwakiutl has an elaborate ranking system in which men are placed in order of closeness in descent to the remotest remembered ancestor
- The line of eldest sons was the most senior and provided the chief who ruled
- Through the sponsor of potlatch and distribution to his guests in strict order of rank, a man of this descent claimed the chiefship by recalling the famous potlatches and other deeds of his ancestors

Topic Three: The Potlatch

- Giving potlatch means enhancement of one's reputation
- The level of prestige is determined by the lavishness of the potlatch which in itself is dependent on the value of the goods given
- Scholars indicate that potlatch defies profit motive and viewed as economically wasteful behaviour
- It is economically irrational drive for prestige at the expense of material well being; but this interpretation is challenged by ecological anthropologists

Topic Three: The Potlatch

- Suttles (1960) and Vayda (1961/1968) see potlatch as a long-term cultural adaptive mechanism
- To them potlatch helps in culturally adapting to alternating periods of local abundance and shortage among the Kwakiutl and Salish villages
- In a good year, a village may have surplus of subsistence which it could trade for more durables wealth items like blankets, canoes, or pieces of copper which may be distributed at a potlatch for prestige

Topic Three: The Potlatch

- Members of villages were invited to a potlatch and had to take away resources given out
- This way, potlatch linked villages together in a regional economy; a system of exchange of food and wealth from wealthy to needy communities
- Potlatch sponsors and their villages achieved prestige
- Needy villages could also become wealthy villages and vice versa

Topic Three: The Potlatch

- Through potlatch, local groups along the North Pacific Coast were linked into regional alliance and exchange network
- The rivalry in potlatch that anthropologists stated was only a motivation only served as catalyst to economic and ecological systems

Conclusion

In this session, we have examined:

- The essence of exchange of goods in both the modern and simple societies
- Non-economic motivations of exchange has been examined under kula among the Trobriand Islanders to diffuse hostile tension among the islanders
- The potlatch which is also a gift giving, apart from its long-term of regional economic alliance, it also ensured movement of goods from the wealthy to the needy.