



**51. Kula; the Circulating Exchange of Valuables in the Archipelagoes of Eastern New Guinea.**

B. Malinowski

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## ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

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**Kula; the Circulating Exchange of Valuables in the Archipelagoes of Eastern New Guinea.\*** By B. Malinowski.

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In this article is described a special system of trade, obtaining over a widespread area, and possessing several features remarkable in their bearing upon questions of primitive economics, as well as throwing some new light on native mentality.

The distant and perilous trading expeditions of the South Sea islanders are a well-known feature of their tribal life. We possess especially good descriptions of such voyages in Dr. Seligman's *Melanesians*. In that book, the *Hiri*, the seasonal voyage of the Motu to the Gulf of Papua, is treated in a brilliant monograph by Captain Barton, and Dr. Seligman himself gives an excellent analysis of the trading routes between the various islands of the East End of New Guinea.†

All these trading systems are based upon the exchange of indispensable or highly useful utilities, such as pottery, sago, canoes, dried fish and yams, the food being sometimes imported into islands or districts which are too small or too infertile to be self-supporting. The trading system, however, which will be described in this paper, differs in this and many other respects from the usual Oceanic forms of exchange. It is based primarily upon the circulation of two articles of high value, but of no real use,—these are armshells made of the *Conus millepunctatus*, and necklets of red shell-discs, both intended for ornaments, but hardly ever used, even for this purpose. These two articles travel, in a manner to be described later in detail, on a circular route which covers many miles and extends over many islands. On this circuit, the necklaces travel in the direction of the clock hands and the armshells in the opposite direction. Both articles never stop for any length of time in the hands of any owner; they constantly move, constantly meeting and being exchanged.

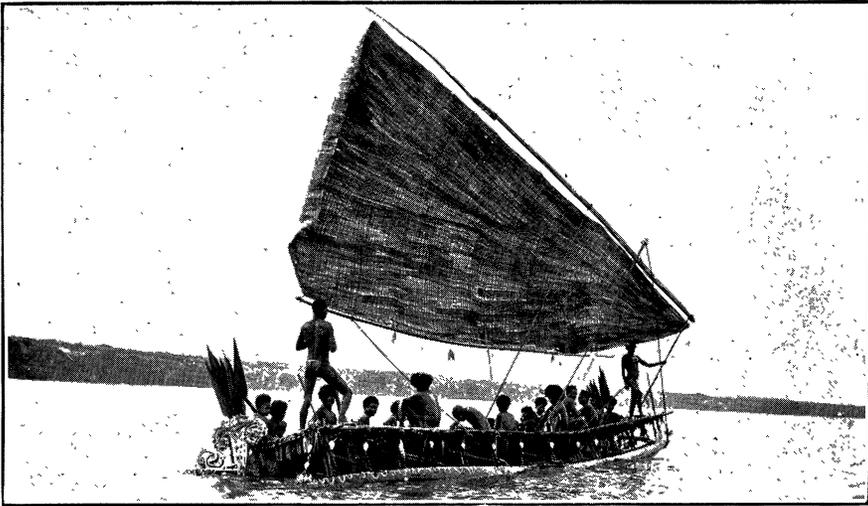
This trading system, the *Kula*, embraces, with its ramifications, not only the islands off the East End of New Guinea, but also the Lousiades, Woodlark Island, the Loughlans, the Trobriand Archipelago and the d'Entrecasteaux Group. It touches the continent of New Guinea and extends its indirect influence over several outlying districts, such as Sud-Est Island, Rossell Island, and stretches of the northern and southern coast of the mainland.

A glance at the map will show the enormous geographical extent of the trading system, and the statement may here be anticipated that the *Kula* looms paramount in the tribal life of all the peoples, who participate in it. These peoples belong to that branch of the Papuo-Melanesians whom Dr. Seligman calls the Massim, and whom he has characterised in the above-mentioned work.‡ Some of them, living on big islands, have a very highly-developed agriculture, and they harvest each year a crop amply sufficient for their needs and with a good deal to spare. Such are the natives of Woodlark Islands, of the Trobriands, of the d'Entrecasteaux Group. Others, again, who live on very small islands, like the volcanic Amphlett Rocks, Wari (Teste Island), Tubetube (Engineer Group), and some of the Marshall Bennett Islands, are not self-supporting as far as food goes. They are, on the other hand, specialised in certain industries, notably pottery and canoe-building, and they are monopolists in intermediary trade. Thus it is evident that exchange of goods

\* Some results of the Robert Mond Ethnological Research work in British New Guinea.

† C. G. Seligman, *The Melanesians of British New Guinea*, Chaps. VIII. and XL. For the trading system of the Mailu, a tribe living midway between Port Moresby and the East End of New Guinea, see B. Malinowski, "Mailu," in Proc. R. Soc. of S. Austr., 1915.

‡ *Op. cit.*, Introduction and Chapters XXXIII-LV.



A SEA-GOING *KULA* CANOE UNDER SAIL.



AN EPISODE IN THE INLAND *KULA*: OFFERING A NECKLACE (*SOULAVA*) TO A CHIEF.

**KULA; THE CIRCULATING EXCHANGE OF VALUABLES IN THE ARCHIPELAGOES OF EASTERN NEW GUINEA.**

had to obtain between them. The important point about it, however, is that with them, and notably according to their own ideas, the exchange of utilities is a subsidiary trade, carried on as an incident in the *Kula*.

The *Kula* has been called above "a form of trade." The usual a priori notion of savage trade would be that of an exchange of indispensable, or, at least, useful



ARMSHELLS CEREMONIALLY BROUGHT INTO OMARAKANA VILLAGE FROM A SMALL EXPEDITION TO KITAVA.

things, done under pressure of need by direct barter, or casual give and take of presents, without much ceremony and regulation. Such a conception would almost reverse all the essential features of the *Kula*. Thus, first, the objects of exchange—the armshells and strings of shell-discs—are not "utilities" in any sense of the word; as said above, they are hardly ever used as ornaments, for which purpose they could serve. Nevertheless, they are extremely highly valued; nowadays a native will give up to £20 for a good article, and in olden days their value was an equivalent of this sum, if we take as a common measure such utilities as basketfuls of yams, pigs and other such commodities. Secondly, the exchange, far from being casual or surreptitious, is carried on according to very definite and very complex rules. Thus it cannot be performed between members of these tribes taken at random. A firm and lifelong relationship is always established between any participant in the *Kula*, and a number of other men, some of whom belong to his own community, and others to oversea communities. Such men call one another *karayta'u* ("partner," as we shall designate them), and they are under mutual obligations to trade with each other, to offer protection, hospitality and assistance whenever needed.\*

Let us imagine that we look at the whole system from one definite point, choosing the large village of Sinaketa in the Trobriand Islands. An old chief in that village would have, say, some hundred partners southwards, and about as many again to the north and east, while a young commoner would have only a few on both sides. It must be remembered that not all men in a village take part in the *Kula*, and some villages are out of it altogether.

Now another definite rule is that the armshells must always be traded to the

\* *Karayta'u* is the word for "partner" in the language of Kiriwina, in the Trobriand Islands. All the terminology in this paper will be given in the language of the Trobriands, from which district the *Kula* has been studied.

south, and the necklets of shell-beads to the north. The word "traded" is, of course, only a rough approximation. Let us suppose that I, a Sinaketa man, am in possession of a pair of big armshells. An oversea expedition from Dobu in the d'Entrecasteaux Archipelago, arrives at my village. Blowing a conch shell, I take my armshell pair and I offer it to my overseas partner, with some such words, "This is a *vaga* (initial gift)—in due time, thou returnest to me a big *soulava* (necklace) for it!" Next year, when I visit my partner's village, he either is in possession of an *equivalent* necklace, and this he gives to me as *yotile* (restoration gift), or he has not a necklace good enough to repay my last gift. In this case he will give me a smaller necklace—avowedly not equivalent to my gift—and will give it to me as *basi* (intermediary gift). This means that the main gift has to be repaid on a future occasion and the *basi* is given in token of good faith—but it, in turn, must be repaid by me in the meantime by a gift of small armshells. The final gift, which will be given to me to clinch the whole transaction, would be then called *kudu* (equivalent gift) in contrast to *basi*.

This does not exhaust the subtleties and distinctions of *Kula* gifts. If I, an inhabitant of Sinaketa, happen to be in possession of a pair of armshells more than usually good, the fame of it spreads. It must be noted that each one of the first-class armshells and necklaces has a personal name and a history of its own, and as they all circulate around the big ring of the *Kula*, they are all well known, and their appearance in a given district always creates a sensation. Now all my partners—whether from overseas or from within the district—compete for the favour of receiving this particular article of mine, and those who are specially keen try to obtain it by giving me *pokala* (offerings) and *kaributu* (solicitory gifts). The former (*pokala*) consists, as a rule, of pigs—especially fine bananas and yams or taro; the latter (*kaributu*) are of greater value: the valuable "ceremonial" axe blades (called *beku*) or lime-spoons of whale's bone are given. There are further



LOADING LARGE CLAYPOTS IN THE AMPHLETT ISLANDS, IN CONNECTION WITH  
THE *KULA*.

complications as to the repayment of these solictory gifts, into which we cannot enter here, and the *termini technici* of the transactions are by no means exhausted by the words so far given.

But this is sufficient to make clear that the *Kula* involves a complicated system

of gifts and counter-gifts, in which the social side (partnership), as well as the rules of give and take, are definitely established and regulated by custom. It must also be emphasized that all these natives, and more especially the Trobrianders, have both a word for, and a clear idea of, barter (*gimwali*), and that they are fully aware of the difference between the transactions at the *Kula* and common barter. The *Kula* involves the elements of trust and of a sort of commercial honour, as the equivalence between gift and counter-gift cannot be strictly enforced. As in many other native transactions, the main corrective force is supplied by the deeply engrained idea that liberality is the most important and the most honourable virtue, whereas meanness brings shame and opprobrium upon the miser. This, of course, does not completely exclude many squabbles, deep resentments and even feuds over real or imaginary grievances in the *Kula* exchange.

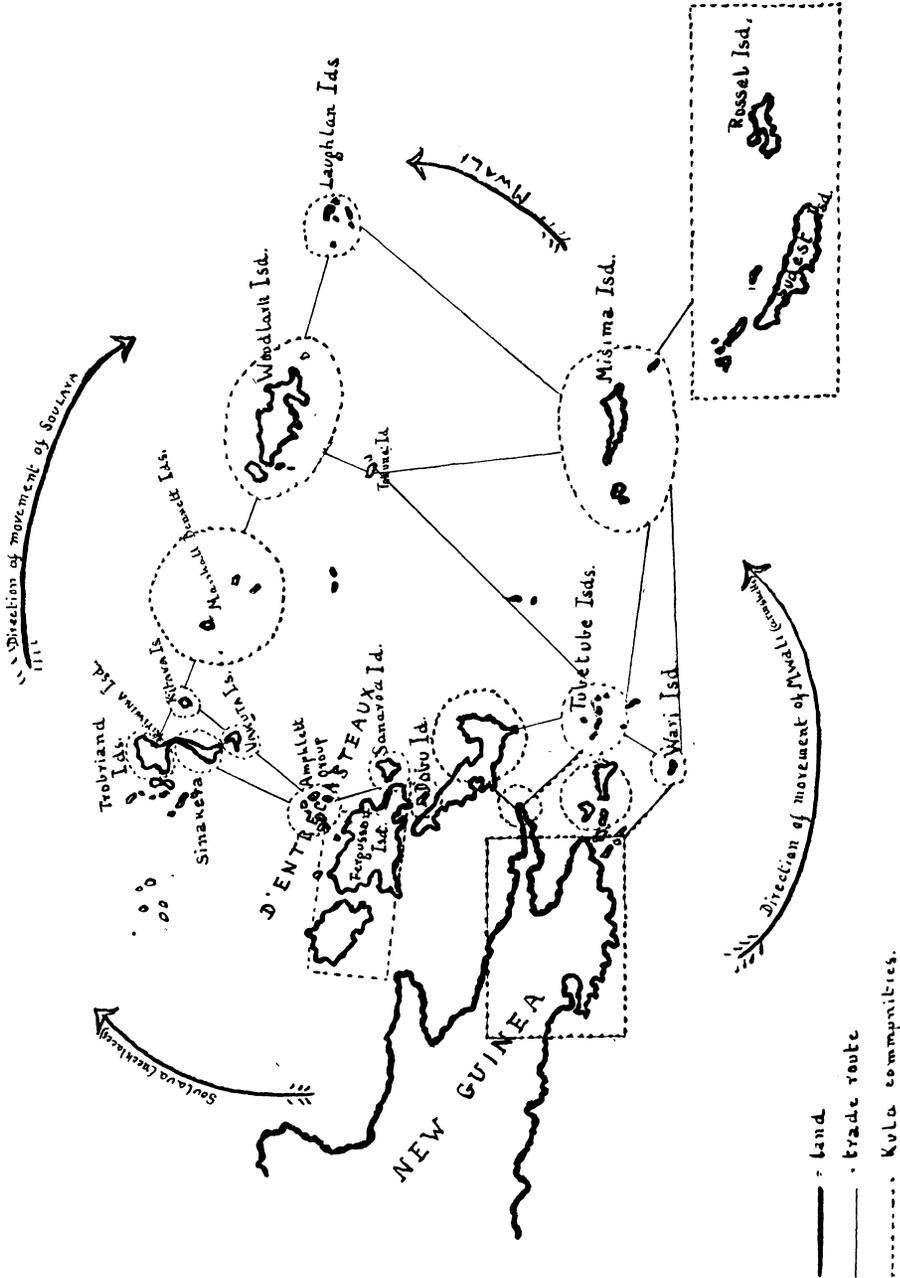
As said already, the armshells and shell-strings always travel in their own respective directions on the ring, and they are never, under any circumstances, traded back in the wrong direction. Also they never stop. It seems almost incredible at first, but it is the fact, nevertheless, that no one ever keeps any of the *Kula* valuables for any length of time. Indeed, in the whole of the Trobriands there are perhaps only one or two specially fine armshells and shell necklaces permanently owned as heirlooms, and these are set apart as a special class, and are once and for all out of the *Kula*. "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. Even this exposes him to the reproach of being niggardly, and certain districts have the bad reputation of being "slow" and "hard" in the *Kula*. On the other hand, each man has an enormous number of articles passing through his hands during his lifetime, of which he enjoys a temporary possession, and which he keeps in trust for a time. This possession hardly ever makes him use the articles, and he remains under the obligation soon again to hand them on to one of his partners. But the temporary ownership allows him to draw a great deal of renown, to exhibit his 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 favourite subjects of tribal conversation and gossip, in which the feats and the glory in *Kula* of chiefs or commoners are constantly discussed and rediscussed.

But the tradition of the *Kula* is not limited to the recounting of recent or historical exploits. There is a rich mythology of the *Kula*, in which stories are told about far-off times when mythical ancestors sailed on distant and daring expeditions. Owing to their magical knowledge—how they came to it no one knows distinctly—they were able to escape dangers, to conquer their enemies, to surmount obstacles, and by their feats they established many a precedent which is now closely followed by tribal custom. But their importance for their descendants lies mainly in the fact that they handed on their magic, and this made the *Kula* possible for the following generation.

The belief in the efficiency of magic dominates the *Kula*, as it does ever so many other tribal activities of the natives. Magical rites must be performed over the sea-going canoe, when it is built, in order to make it swift, steady and safe; also magic is done over a canoe to make it lucky in the *Kula*. Another system of magical rites is done in order to avert the dangers of sailing. The third system of magic connected with overseas expeditions is the *mwasila* or the *Kula* magic proper. This system consists in numerous rites and spells, all of which act directly on the mind (*nanola*) of one's partner and make him soft, somewhat unsteady in mind, and eager to give *Kula* gifts.

In order to form a better idea of how the magic is woven into the many practical activities incidental to the *Kula*, it will be necessary to give a concrete

outline of a trading expedition, and thus to supplement the set of rules and features enumerated above somewhat *in abstracto*. It will be best again to adopt a definite starting-point in our geographical orientation and to imagine ourselves again in Sinaketa, one of the main industrial and trading centres of the Trobriands.



SKETCH MAP OF KULA showing the area, trade routes and communities of the circular exchange. The dotted circles represent the Kula communities, the dotted squares represent the districts indirectly affected by the Kula.

Glancing at the map we see a number of circles, each of which represents a certain sociological unit which we shall call a *Kula* community. A *Kula* community consists of a village or a number of villages, who go out together on big overseas expeditions and who act as a body in the *Kula* transactions—perform their magic in common,

have common leaders, and have the same outer and inner social sphere, within which they exchange their valuables. The *Kula* consists, therefore, first of the small, inner trade within a *Kula* community or contiguous communities, and secondly of the big overseas expeditions in which the annual exchange of articles takes place between two communities, divided by sea. In the first, there is a chronic, permanent trickling of articles from one village to another, and even within the village. In the second a whole lot of valuables, amounting to over a thousand, articles at a time, are exchanged in one enormous transaction, or, more correctly in ever so many transactions taking place simultaneously.

I will describe the normal and typical course of such a big overseas expedition as it takes place between the *Kula* community of Sinaketa with its surrounding villages and the Amphlett Group and Dobu districts to the south. Such an expedition would take place about once a year, but only every second or third year would it be carried out on a really big scale. On such occasions big preparations take place. First of all the large seagoing canoes must be made ready. As a rule a few new ones have to be built to replace those worn out and unseaworthy, and then those in good order have to be overhauled and redecored. The building of a canoe, which cannot be described in this place in detail, is a big tribal affair. A series of magical rites have to be performed by a specialist or specialists, who are versed in the art of constructing and carving—the magic being considered indispensable to both arts. The magical rites aim successively at the expulsion of a wood spirit (*tokway*) from the tree to be felled; at the imparting of stability, swiftness and good luck to the canoe, and at the counteracting of evil influences cast on the canoe by direct sorcery or by the unwitting breaking of taboos. The rites—some performed in a simple manner by a magician alone, some ceremonially with the attendance of the whole community—are carried out in a series, associated with the various activities, inaugurating some, accompanying others. The magic is always interwoven with the technical operations and is to the native mind absolutely indispensable to the successful accomplishment of the task. Another important feature of canoe-building is the communal labour, which is always used at certain stages and for certain tasks, as for sail-making, the piecing together and lashing, caulking and painting of the canoe. The owner of the canoe has to pay for the work by gifts of *vaygu'a* (valuables) and distribution of food, and the expert magician-constructor directs the work.

The building and overhauling of canoes lasts for about six months, for it is done slowly, in the intervals of other work. As the expeditions take place usually in February–April, the canoe work begins some time in August or September. When all the canoes are ready, there is a big gathering from the whole district, and the canoes are launched ceremonially, and races and general festivities take place. Some days later all the canoes start on a preliminary trip to the neighbouring districts, that is, in the case of Sinaketa, to the northern half of the island, to Kiriwina proper. There is a custom, called *kabigidoya*, of ceremonially presenting a canoe, and the owner receives gifts, which form part of the subsidiary trade, to be used on the big expedition. More subsidiary trade is obtained by barter (*gimwali*), especially from the manufacturing districts on the north shore of the lagoon. Wooden combs, fibre armlets, baskets, mussel shells and other articles, abundant here and rare in the Amphletts and in Dobu, are thus acquired in great quantities. On this preliminary trip the Sinaketans also obtain a number of armshells from Kiriwina by inland *Kula*, and with their wealth thus replenished return to Sinaketa.

A period of taboos and initial magic now obtains as the immediate preliminary to main departure. The owner of each canoe is subject to the most stringent

restrictions—mainly referring to sexual relations—and he also performs all the magic. On an evening he goes into a garden and uttering a spell he plucks a spray of aromatic mint, which he brings home. Then he prepares some coconut oil, anoints the mint with it, and, putting some oil and the mint into a vessel, he medicates it all with another spell. The vessel—in olden days a contrivance of roasted and thus toughened banana leaves, now a small glass bottle—is then attached to the prow of the canoe. This magic aims at the softening of the Dobuan's mind, so that he may be unable to resist any appeal made to his generosity. This aim is explicitly stated by all natives, and an analysis of the magical spells reveals it also as their leading idea. But the magic is full of mythological allusions, of side ideas and of references to animals and birds, and it contains interesting metaphorical circumlocutions of the aims to be attained.

Other spells, all expressing more or less the same ideas, are used in the magical rite performed over a special bundle of valuables and goods, called *lilava*, which is placed in the centre of the canoe and must not be opened before the arrival in Dobu; also in the rite over the coconut leaves lining the canoe. Again, in the rite over the provisions of food taken on the journey, the main aim is to make it last long.

After the rites are finished and the expedition is ready, many people from the neighbouring villages assemble, the departing chiefs enjoin chastity to their wives and warn all the neighbouring male villagers to keep off Sinaketa, and prognosticate a speedy arrival with much *vaygu'a* (valuables). They are assured that they can depart in safety as no one will visit their village surreptitiously. Indeed, during their absence, the village should be kept tabooed, and if a man is found loitering about the place, especially at night, he is likely to be punished (by sorcery, as a rule) on the chief's return.

The fleet now sails south; but the first stage of the journey is short, as the natives halt on a sandbank some ten miles off Sinaketa, where they have a ceremonial distribution of food, which imposes an obligation on the *usagelu* (members of the crews) towards the *toliwaga* (owners of canoes) to carry out the expedition even in the face of contrary winds and bad weather. Next morning several rites are performed over the canoes to undo all evil magic and to make them swift and steady.

The open sea now lies before the fleet with the high, distant peaks of the d'Entrecasteaux mountains floating above the haze. In very clear weather the nearer Amphletts can be seen—small steep rocks, scattered over the horizon, misty, but more material against the faint blue of the distant land. These far-off views must have inspired generation after generation of Kiriwinian sailors with zest for adventure, wonder and desire to see the much-praised marvels of foreign lands, with awe and with superstitious fear. Mixed with it all—associated in the native mind with the allurements of the distant *koya* (mountains)—there was the ambition to return with plenty of *vaygu'a*. In myths, in traditional legends, in real stories and in songs, *Kula* expeditions were and are described and praised and there is a definite complex of *Kula* tradition and mythology, governed perhaps by two dominating emotions: the desire to obtain the *vaygu'a* and the dread of the dangers to be encountered.

These latter are real enough, as the wind in the N.W. season, when the expeditions take place, is changeable, and violent squalls obtain, and the sea is full of reefs and sandbanks. But the natives have added to that from their store of myth-making imagination, and have surrounded the real dangers with a fabric of imaginary perils and modes of escape. There exist for them big, live stones, lying in wait for a canoe—they jump up when they see one, and smash it to pieces and destroy the

sailors. There is a giant octopus, which will take hold of a canoe and never let it go, unless a sacrifice is made of a small boy, adorned and anointed, who is thrown overboard to the *kwita* (octopus). There may come a big rain, which smashes and submerges the canoe. But the greatest danger comes from flying witches, who, whenever they hear that a canoe is drowning—and they possess the capacity of hearing it at enormous distances—assemble and wait till the men are in the water, and then fall on them. There is a deep belief that shipwreck in itself would not be fatal—the men would float ashore, carried by the *débris* of the canoe—unless the flying witches were to attack them. A whole cycle of beliefs centres round this main idea, and there is a system of rites which are always practised in shipwreck, and which, if carried out properly, would ensure safety to those shipwrecked.

One part of this magic is directed towards the flying witches; it blinds and bewilders them and they cannot attack the men in the waves. Another part is chanted by the *toliwaga* (master of the canoe) whilst he and his companions are drifting, suspended on the float of the outrigger, and it attracts a giant fish (*iraveaka*). This beneficent animal arrives and pulls the float and the men ashore. This is not the end; the shipwrecked party have to go through a series of ceremonies intended to make them immune from the flying witches, and only after that may they return to their village. This interesting account of a potential shipwreck and the magical rites referring to it I have obtained from several sets of independent informants. There are also a few definite traditions about actual salvage from death by drowning, through the carrying out of the magic.

The normal expedition, however, sails in one day with good following wind, or in several days if the wind is weak or shifting, and arrives at its first stage, in the Amphletts. Some exchange is done here, as well as on the further two intermediate halts in Tewara and Sanaroa and the concomitant magic has to be performed here. There are also several mythologically famed spots in these islands: some rocks from which magic originated—how, the myths do not relate distinctly—and other rocks, formerly human beings, who travelled to their present sites from very far, and to whom the natives offer *pokala* (offerings in order to have a propitious *Kula*). The island of Gumasila in the Amphletts, that of Tewara, and places on Fergusson Island, are important mythological centres.

But the main aim of the expedition is the district of Dobu, more especially the north-east corner of Fergusson Island, where on the flat and fertile foreshore, among groves of cocoanut, betel-palms, mangoes and bread-fruit trees, there stretch for miles the populous settlements of Tautauna, Bwayowa, Deidei and Begasi.

Before approaching them, the whole fleet stops on a beach called *Sarubwoyna*, not far away from the two rocks, *Atu'a'ine* and *Aturamo'u*, which are the most important, perhaps, of the rocks to whom *pokala* offering is given. Here the final magic is performed. All the *usagelu* (members of the crew) go ashore and collect leaves for magic. Spells are pronounced over them by the members of each canoe and everyone washes with sea-water and dries his skin with the medicated leaves. Then spells are uttered over cocoanut oil, red paint and aromatic herbs—and the natives anoint and adorn themselves, the magic making them beautiful and irresistible. A spell is uttered into the mouth of a conchshell and the canoes get under way. The last distance, a few miles only, is traversed by paddling; and powerful spells are uttered by several men in each canoe, who recite them simultaneously, and the medicated conchshell is blown. These spells have to “shake the mountain”—that is, to produce a deep agitation in the minds of the Dobuans, and impress them with the arrival of the newcomers. One more important rite is uttered to prevent the Dobuans from becoming fierce and angry and to suppress any attempt at attacking the visitors.

Finally the party arrive, and it is the custom for the Dobuans to meet them with *soulava* (shell-disc necklaces) in their hands. The conchshells are blown and the necklaces are ceremonially offered by the Dobuans to the newcomers. Then the party go ashore, every man going to the house of his main partner. There the visitors receive gifts of food, and they again give some of their minor trade as *pari* (visitors' gifts) to the Dobuans. Then, during a several days' stay, many more *soulava* are given to the visitors. Often it is necessary for a Kiriwinian to woo his partner by gifts, solicitations and magical rites, transparently performed, if the latter possesses a specially good and desirable article. All the transactions are carried out according to the rules set forth above.

Side by side with the *Kula*, the subsidiary trade goes on, the visitors acquiring a great number of articles of minor value, but of great utility, some of them unprocurable in Kiriwina, as, for instance, rattan, fibre belts, cassowary feathers, certain kinds of spear wood, obsidian, red ochre and many other articles. This subsidiary trade is carried on by means of gifts and counter-gifts with one's own partners; by means of barter (*gimwali*) with other people; whereas certain articles are procured directly. Among the latter, the most important is the Spondylus shell, fished by Sinaketans in the lagoon of Sanarua, again under the observance of many taboos, and with the aid of magic, private and collective, simple and ceremonial. The shell called *kaloma* is, on their return home, worked out into the red shell-discs, which serve for making the *Soulava* necklaces.

All the transactions in Dobu concluded, the party receive their parting gifts (*talo'i*) and sail back, doing the spondylus fishing just mentioned in Sanarua, trading for pots with the Amphletts, and receiving additional *Kula* gifts and *talo'i* (parting gifts) in all the places, where they go ashore on their return journey.

In due time, after a year or so, the Dobuans will make their return expedition to Sinaketa, with exactly the same ceremonial, magic and sociology. On this expedition they will receive some armshells in exchange for the necklets previously given, and others, as advance gifts towards the next *Kula* transaction.

The *Kula* trade consists of a series of such periodical overseas expeditions, which link together the various island groups, and annually bring over big quantities of *vaygu'a* and of subsidiary trade from one district to another. The trade is used and used up, but the *vaygu'a*—the armshells and necklets—go round and round the ring.

We have here a very interesting form of tribal enterprises. In a sense they are *economic*, for the natives carry out their organised purposeful work under the stimulus of a desire for wealth, for ownership. The conception of value and the form of ownership revealed through the *Kula*, are different from those current among us, and this shows how necessary it is to apply a more detailed analysis to their economic ideas.

Again, the *Kula* presents a type of intertribal relationship of unprecedented magnitude, the standing partnership linking together thousands of people scattered over an immense area.

In this short preliminary account I have been able barely to touch upon the essentials of the *Kula*, and to give a summary account of one of its typical concrete manifestations—the expeditions from Sinaketa to Dobu. A more detailed and thorough description, which I trust will soon be forthcoming, will allow me to show many more of its important features.

B. MALINOWSKI.