

Summary: *Argonauts of The Western Pacific*

Malinowski opens the scene with his arrival to the Lagoon of the Trobriands. He arrives at the main island and visits a village in Boyowa, also known as Kiriwina. He takes note of the varying physical appearances of the Trobriand natives; some are tall with “delicate features” and others are shorter and with a broader nose. It is immediately clear to Malinowski that there is a division of social rank among the natives which he correlates with appearance.

Malinowski begins to explain the position of Trobriand women. Women can express their sexuality freely. Marriage is not accompanied by any sort of ceremony, but instead is a natural progression of a relationship between a woman and man. Interestingly, once a couple is married, the wife’s family must provide for her and her husband. A wife retains her independence while married and is free to leave her husband and remarry if she chooses. Women are considered more powerful than men of lower rank and can keep their status even if they marry someone lower in caste.

Trobriand society is matrilineal and rank is passed through the maternal line. Technically, no familial ties exist between a father and his children. The relationship between father and child is sentimental, whereas the relationship between maternal uncle and child is by law; the uncle must give the child inheritance, and the father does so out of love and under his own volition.

The village is the fundamental unit of Trobriand societal structure. Malinowski explores the village, and from this he notes that yam houses surround a central circular area. The yam houses of high ranking people are larger and more decorated than the houses of those with lower rank. Around the yam houses, there are huts occupied either by one family or a group of unmarried adolescents. The chiefs and those of rank have their own homes. Malinowski concludes that decoration of the yam house and dwelling reveals rank.

Gardening has incredible importance in Boyowa. The natives produce a surplus from gardening, and spend much of their labor cultivating the gardens purely for aesthetic purposes. Magic regulates garden work and although time consuming, sorcery serves an economic purpose. The sorcerer is hereditary from the female line and oversees gardening ceremonies, and in turn ensures that Trobrianders complete their duties properly.

Almost all of the produce generated from gardening goes to the man’s in-laws and the chief. Therefore, gardening is not necessarily done for the purpose of generating sustenance, but rather for the work itself. That is, men receive social status by gardening well, which they can demonstrate during competitive ceremonies.

In Trobriand society, chiefs have village authority and also are members of totemic clans which define one’s caste. A headman of low rank does not wield much power and is not much more than the head of tribal ceremonies. However, a headman of high rank, which Malinowski defines as a chief, has tributary villages that he can call upon for aid in times of war or for workers. However, the chief always needs to pay for the benefits received, which makes wealth a key feature of power. The chief has the privilege of polygamy, which provides him with wealth from his wives’ families that he can use to exercise power. The most powerful chief is of Omarakana of Kiriwana, who is well-known in the region for his power. Although the Trobriands have the same culture, they are distinct politically, each with their own chief.

Magic pervades Trobriandan society and acts as the cause of almost all disease and death. The only deaths not attributed to magic are those from suicide and battle. Magic is expressed through black magic, flying-witches, and tauva’u, which are beings that cause epidemics.

In the following chapter, Malinowski describes Kula, an inter-tribal circular exchange governed by customs and tradition. Soulava, which are shells, are always traded for mwali, which are bracelets. Both of these objects have no inherent value, however to the Trobriand they are seen as trophies with sentimental value.

Partners who trade in the Kula are bonded for life and share certain roles and privileges. A chief has the most number of partners, whereas a person with lower status may have fewer trading partners. Trade is not spontaneous but happens in a controlled and planned manner, with a specified time and place. There are specified directions of trade, to enforce that the mwali flow in the opposite direction of the soulava. The traded goods are only temporarily owned, and by custom are held for at most one or two years before they are traded.

In the Kula, a gift is exchanged for another gift that should be of equal value. Kula is distinct from barter, as there cannot be any coercion between the two parties. A Trobriandian has no way to enforce that he or she receives a good of

equivalent value. There can be no haggling, cancelling of the transaction, or force. However, customs regulate behavior of the trade, and encourages Kula participants to be generous. Generosity is seen as the most moral and good quality, so competition about who is the most generous gift giver may sometimes arise. There is therefore little incentive for a Kula trader to give a gift of lesser value.

There are many activities associated with the Kula. Culture spreads along the Kula route, in the form of songs and customs. Accompanying the Kula, there is a secondary trade that may be carried out in villages far away using goods of more value. Therefore, the Kula consists of both small transactions within and among neighboring communities, and also expeditions to villages far away and separated by seas. The large expeditions have ceremonies attached to them and also require activities such as canoe building.

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