Kula Ring Exchange

Bronislaw Malinowski

1922. Argonauts of the Western Pacific
Papua New Guinea
Kula Ring Canoes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_qxDIBJTik
Argonauts of the Western Pacific (Agonautas do Pacifico Ocidental)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCASVaoG1s
Kula: How it Works

- Centerpiece is the ritualized exchange of two different types of shells:
  - **White Arm shells**
    - Called *Mwali*
    - These move in a counterclockwise fashion between villages and islands
  - **Red Shell Necklaces**
    - Called *Soulava*
    - These move in a clockwise fashion between villages and islands and take the exact same route as the Mwali, only in reverse
Soulava and Mwali

- *Soulava and Mwali* carry history
- Rarely worn...
- Prestigious to hold in possession
- Named
Kula: How it Works

• Functional trade occurs regularly between all of the islands occupied by the Trobriand Islanders
• Kula Exchange initiated by the village chief
• Group sails to the closest neighboring island to continue the exchange (to receive)
• Permanent and lifelong affair with trading partners
• “once in the kula, always in the kula”
Kula: How it Works

• Not setting off to *gift* a Kula shell, but to *receive* one from the other village
• Other Kula partners will come to receive the shells from them (once they return home)
• Can be as much as six months in between Kula expeditions
  – Left hand *soulava*, right hand *mwali*
Kula: How it Works (cont.)

• Different *Mwali* and *Soulava* shells
  – Each one valued for history and beauty
  – One gains prestige for having held a particularly awesome Kula shell
• Young men gain prestige by invitation
  – Tutored/trained in the Kula protocol
    • routes etc.
    • magic
• Economic function-balanced reciprocity
• Educational *Mwasila*-teaching of proper respect and behavior.
Kula (Masawa) Canoes, c. 1993
The Kula and Magic

Five phases and accompanying magical rites.

1. **Canoe building and preparation** (6 months): remove wood spirits, launching.
2. ‘**Softening’** the partners, making them generous (rites before the major expedition)
3. **Prevent shipwreck.**
4. **In the event of a shipwreck.**
5. **Rites to impress the trading partners.**
Why do it?

More Reasons
• Extend your world
• Rite of passage
• Sorcery
• Reputation/prestige
• Competition
• Generosity
• Relationships with others
• The Journey, not the destination

1. Establish friendly relations
2. Provide the occasion for the inter-island exchange of utilitarian items
3. Reinforce status and authority distinctions
4. Gain prestige for group
Analogy in classroom exchange

- In the classroom-exchange of knowledge
- Knowledge=prestige
- Gift more than you receive
- Oral tradition passed on (see protocol)
- Only one person may speak at a time
Questions

1. What is the Kula ring and where is it held?
2. What are the soulava and in what direction do they move?
3. What are the Mwali and in what direction do they move?
4. Name and describe the first two situations in which magic rites are conducted.
5. Name and describe the last three situations in which magic rites are conducted.
6. What are the hypotheses for why Kula occurs? (Purpose served)