

## 21A.506 Module 2

### Summary of “The Natives of the Trobriand Islands” and “Essentials of Kula”

In “The Natives of the Trobriand Islands” and “Essentials of Kula,” Malinowski examines the social organization of tribal life in the Trobriand Islands, particularly rank and social differentiation, and describes the society’s economic functions. In the Trobriand Islands, the village is an “important unit.” Each village has a chief, who has authority of the village and to whom others must show deference. Although most chiefs only have influence over their village, the main chief of Kiriwana has considerable power, and his “sphere of influence” extends far beyond the village. Beyond the chief, among regular villagers, rank and social differentiation are often determined by appearance; the “finer looking” natives are treated with more deference.

The chief has many advantages compared to regular villagers. For example, the chief and other people of rank have “special, personal houses,” whereas other villagers have just one hut per family. A large fraction of the crops produced by any man go to the chief. Nevertheless, the chief has a price to pay for his distinction, and for services rendered to him, since generosity is a virtue in this society. The chief acquires his wealth by practicing polygamy; his multiple wives and their families each supply him with crops, and with these he is able to pay for services and provide food for the village during feasts.

Each village community acts as one group, with its own feasts and ceremonial arrangements, and is represented by a headman. Village communities have a great deal of independence. While the Trobriands are distinct politically, in that each obey their own chief and have their own interests, they form one “cultural unit,” because they all speak the same language and have the same institutions, beliefs and conventions, including religion, magic, and economics. Across “political and local divisions” there exist four totemic clans, and members of all of the clans live in each village community. Not only is there solidarity within each clan, but members of a clan have the same social duties, such as performance of certain ceremonies. Rank attaches itself to sub-clans (local divisions of clans); some sub-clans are more aristocratic than others.

The Trobriands live in a matrimonial society, which means that wealth and social position are inherited through the mother, from maternal uncle to nephew rather than from father to son. The mother’s brother is considered the real guardian of a boy, rather than the father. Nevertheless, the father does give to his children all he can, out of sentiment, whereas the uncle gives under the “compulsion of custom.” When a woman marries, she joins her husband in his house, and her family has to contribute and perform services for the husband.

One of the main economic activities of the Trobriand islanders is gardening: “Half of the natives’ working life is spent in the garden.” The natives work “hard” and “systematically,” and in their gardens they produce about twice as many crops as they can eat, partly for the purposes of ornamentation. In fact, there are many nonutilitarian aspects of this society, since the Trobriands are motivated by a “very complex set of traditional forces, duties and obligations, beliefs in magic, social ambitions and vanities.” Another significant economic activity is the Kula trade, which is guided by a specific set of rules and restrictions and which is surrounded by much ceremony and magic. Two items, long necklaces and bracelets, are traded along a circular route, and they are never kept in anyone’s possession for long, but are “merely possessed for the sake of possession itself.” A man takes pride in his articles, even though they are only temporarily owned. One aspect of the trade is the permanent relationships that form between two men in the trade, who are obliged to return an article of equal value within a proper passage of time. The Trobriands also take part in secondary trade; they go on expeditions in far-off countries in order to exchange articles and then return with many spoils.

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