

Marcel

# Mauss

## The Gift

The form and reason for exchange  
in archaic societies

With a foreword by Mary Douglas



London and New York

(first published 1925)

*Essai sur le don* first published 1950 by Presses  
Universitaires de France in *Sociologie et*  
*Anthropologie*

English edition first published 1954  
by Cohen & West  
This translation first published 1990 by Routledge

First published in Routledge Classics 2002  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

Translation © 1990 W.D.Halls  
Foreword © 1990 Mary Douglas

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted  
or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic,  
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter  
invented, including photocopying and recording, or in  
any information storage or retrieval system, without  
permission in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-203-40744-X Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-71568-3 (Adobe eReader Format)

ISBN 0-415-26748-X (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-26749-8 (pbk)

is: 'Our festivals are the movement of the hook that serves to bind together the various sections of the straw roofing so as to make one single roof, ~~one single word.~~'<sup>14</sup> It is the same things that return, the same thread that passes through.<sup>15</sup> Other authors also point out these facts.<sup>16</sup>

### Trobriand Islands

At the other end of the Melanesian world a very well-developed system is equivalent to that of the New Caledonians. The inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands are among the most civilized of these races. Today they are wealthy pearl fishermen, and, before the arrival of the Europeans, they were rich pottery manufacturers and makers of shell money, stone axes, and precious goods. They have always been good traders and bold navigators. Malinowski gives them a name that fits them exactly when he compares them to Jason's fellow voyagers: 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific'. In one of the best volumes of descriptive sociology, focusing, so to speak, on the subject that concerns us, he has described the complete system of inter- and intratribal trade that goes under the name of *kula*.<sup>17</sup> We still await from him the description of all the institutions that are governed by the same principles of law and economics: marriage, the festival of the dead, initiation, etc. Consequently, the description that we shall give is still only provisional. But the facts are of capital importance, and are plain.<sup>18</sup>

The *kula* is a sort of grand potlatch. The vehicle for busy intertribal trade, it extends over the whole of the Trobriand Islands, a part of the Entrecasteaux Islands, and the Amphlett Islands. In all these territories it indirectly involves all the tribes and, directly, a few of the large tribes—the Dobu in the Amphletts, the Kiriwina, the Sinaketa, and Kitav in the Trobriands, and the Vakuta on Woodlark Island. Malinowski gives no translation of *kula*, which doubtless means 'circle'. Indeed it is as if all these tribes, these

expeditions across the sea, these precious things and objects for use, these types of food and festivals, these services rendered of all kinds, ritual and sexual, these men and women,—were caught up in a circle,<sup>19</sup> following around this circle a regular movement in time and space.

*Kula* trade is of a noble kind.<sup>20</sup> It seems to be reserved for the chiefs. The latter are at one and the same time the leaders of fleets of ships and boats. They are the traders, and also the recipients of gifts from their vassals, who are in fact also their children and brothers-in-law, their subjects, and at the same time the chiefs of various vassal villages. Trade is carried on in a noble fashion, apparently in a disinterested and modest way.<sup>21</sup> It is distinguished carefully from the mere economic exchange of useful goods, which is called *gimwali*.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the latter is carried on, as well as the *kula*, in the large primitive fairs that constitute the gatherings of the intertribal *kula*, or in the small markets of the intratribal *kula*. It is marked by very hard bargaining between the two parties, a practice unworthy of the *kula*. Of an individual who does not proceed in the *kula* with the necessary greatness of soul, it is said that he is 'conducting it like a *gimwali*.' In appearance, at the very least, the *kula*—as in the potlatch of the American Northwest—consists in giving by some, and receiving by others.<sup>23</sup> The recipients of one day become the givers on the next. In the most complete form, the most solemn, lofty, and competitive form of the *kula*,<sup>24</sup> that of the great sea expeditions, the *Uvalaku*, it is even the rule to leave without having anything to exchange, without even having anything to give, although it might be exchanged for food, which one refuses even to ask for. One pretends only to receive. It is when the visiting tribe plays host the following year to the fleet of the tribe that has been visited that the presents will be reciprocated with interest.

However, in *kula* not given on such a grand scale, advantage is taken of the sea journey to exchange cargoes. The nobles themselves carry on trade. About this there is much native theory.

Numerous objects are solicited,<sup>25</sup> asked for, and exchanged, and every kind of relationship is established outside the *kula*, which, however, always remains the purpose, and the decisive moment in these relationships.

The act of giving itself assumes very solemn forms: the thing received is disclaimed and mistrusted; it is only taken up for a moment, after it has been cast at one's feet. The giver affects an exaggerated modesty:<sup>26</sup> having solemnly brought on his present, to the sound of a seashell, he excuses himself for giving only the last of what remains to him, and throws down the object to be given at the feet of his rival and partner.<sup>27</sup> However, the seashell and the herald proclaim to everybody the solemn nature of this act of transfer. The aim of all this is to display generosity, freedom, and autonomous action, as well as greatness.<sup>28</sup> Yet, all in all, it is mechanisms of obligation, and even of obligation through things, that are called into play.

The essential objects in these exchange-gifts are the *vaygu'a*, a kind of money.<sup>29</sup> It is of two kinds: the *mwali*, which are beautiful bracelets, carved, polished, and placed in a shell, and worn on great occasions by their owners or relatives; and the *soulava*, necklaces fashioned by the skilful craftsmen of Sinaketa in a pretty mother-of-pearl made from red spondylus. They are solemnly worn by the women,<sup>30</sup> and, in cases of great anguish, exceptionally by the men.<sup>31</sup> Normally, however, both kinds are hoarded and treasured. They are kept for the sheer pleasure of possessing them. The making of the bracelets, fishing for and making the necklaces into jewellery, the trade in these two objects of exchange and prestige, together with other forms of trade that are more profane and vulgar, constitute the source of the Trobriand people's fortune.

According to Malinowski, these *vaygu'a* follow a kind of circular movement: the *mwali*, the bracelets, are passed on regularly from west to east, whereas the *soulava* always travel from east to west.<sup>32</sup> These two movements in opposite directions occur in all the

islands—Trobriand, Entrecasteaux, Amphlett, the remote islands—Woodlark, Marshall Bennett, Tubetube—and finally the extreme southeast coast of New Guinea, from which come the unworked bracelets. There this trade meets the great expeditions of the same kind that come from New Guinea (South Massim),<sup>33</sup> which Seligmann has described.

In principle the circulation of these signs of wealth is continuous and unerring. They must not be kept too long a time, nor must one be slow or difficult in passing them on.<sup>34</sup> One should not present them to anyone other than certain partners, nor save in a certain direction—the ‘bracelet’ or the ‘necklace’ direction.<sup>35</sup> One can and should keep them from one *kula* to the next, and the whole community is proud of the *vaygu’a* that one of its chiefs has obtained. There are even occasions, such as in the preparation of funeral ceremonies, of great *s’oi*, when it is permitted always to receive and to give nothing in return.<sup>36</sup> Yet this is in order to give back everything and to spend everything, when the festival has begun. Thus it is indeed ownership that one obtains with the gift that one receives. But it is ownership of a certain kind. One could say that it partakes of all kinds of legal principles that we, more modern, have carefully isolated from one another. It is ownership and possession, a pledge and something hired out, a thing sold and bought, and at the same time deposited, mandated, and bequeathed in order to be passed on to another. For it is only given you on condition that you make use of it for another or pass it on to a third person, the ‘distant partner’, the *murimuri*.<sup>37</sup> Such is the nature of this economic, legal, and moral entity, which is truly typical, as Malinowski was able to discover, find again, observe, and describe.

This institution has also its mythical, religious, and magical aspect. The *vaygu’a* are not unimportant things, mere pieces of money. Each one, at least the rarest and the most sought after—and other objects enjoy the same prestige<sup>38</sup>—each one has its name,<sup>39</sup> a personality, a history, and even a tale attached to it. So