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How Kula Works Kula is a vast system of exchange where islanders exchange shell goods. It covers about twelve island groups, spanning about two hundred miles of ocean. Village chiefs organize Kula expeditions and men from several villages set off for other islands to receive shells so that upon returning home, they will have the shells that other partners will come to receive. The voyages consist of fleets of between sixty to a hundred canoes. Men who do Kula have partners on other islands whom they know since they sail to them to trade and consequently host sailors who arrive from these islands. More distant sailors are known only by name. The two types of shell exchanged are the mwali (white arm shells), which moves in a counterclockwise path through the villages, and bagi (red shell necklaces), which moves in a clockwise direction among partners. Shells' values are based on size, color, beauty of their polish and the history they bear. Kula path and partners are inherited by young ones, who are invited by their male kin on expeditions to observe the transactions, meet partners and learn the ways of the Kula ring. Good training is key since partners may reject an inexperienced protégé.

This tradition serves as a tool to bring the community together. The sailors' return is awaited with great anticipation and feast is organized which unites the villages with their partners. This is key in preventing unnecessary conflict. It also acts as a symbol for power and prestige for those involved. Owning a piece of Kula made one a hero and this was compounded by the unique history of a shell especially if it was previously owned by a renowned individual. In addition, the islanders preserved history through the shells, associated with exploits and talents of its previous owners, some who have

long since died. According to Holly, (2011) “ One was able to transcend the history of one’s ancestral lineage and become part of the Kula history”.

Finally, it serves as an opportunity to trade with other villages. The islanders would trade their own surplus goods for items they needed.

Reference

Holly, P. G. (2011). Culture Sketches: Case Studies in Anthropology (6th Ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.