

Ethnography and islands assignment



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With reference to the Transponders' Kulak, gift exchanges during Christmas, and the flea markets in Singapore society, this essay discusses the importance of reciprocity and the circulation of gifts for the establishment and maintenance of social relations. The Trinidad Islands – Importance of yam and kinship From adolescence, adulthood and finally death, reciprocal gift giving is prevalent in the Trinidad Islands. This is exemplified in the way men give gifts of yams while the women give banana leaf bundles and red fiber skirts. According to Sullivan et, al. 008), yams are “ the most esteemed and perhaps the oldest of the staple foods in the Pacific,” (as cited in McCarthy, 2012). A representation of wealth and an indication of how much respect a man is able to command, yam can also be used to exchange for more valuable items like armless and stone axe-blades. The act of giving in the Trinidad Islands is seen as being caring and generous and communicates a person's intentions entirely based on hope. In kinship, it is customary that the oldest brother will make a garden for his oldest sister, the next oldest for the next sister and so on.

Therefore, as a form of reciprocation, many of these women generously give betel nuts and tobacco to brothers as a yam garden will eventually be built for her. A villager who brings yam in an attempt to curry favor with someone, cannot ask for something in return but has to wait in hope that he will eventually receive more than he gave (Winner, 1988). Actions speak louder than words and if a small and soft yam were to be given, it would be perceived as a “ reluctant” gift. However, if much effort is given to clean the yam and arrange it according to size, it will be deemed as impressive (Winner, 1988).

The Trinidad Islands – Effects of marriage In courting women, young men must make the extra effort in giving betel nuts and tobacco as a sign of their ability to provide as long as the relationship lasts. The generosity seen here is key in “enticing” a woman and sealing the marriage (Winner, 1988). Men work tirelessly to grow yams not for themselves but for others. As seen in the case when a woman gets married, her father or brother is expected to plant a yam garden for her. This ultimately signifies a women’s wealth and is seen as a sign of respect for the couple due to the effort in tending to the crop.

Yam houses draw comparisons to that of a bank account, a signal of wealth and power when full. (Winner, 1988). Many exchanges occur during a marriage. Yams are presented to the groom who in turn reciprocates with highly valuable items such as stone axe-blades or the occasional kulak shell. Not produced in the Trinidad Islands, these valuables are inherited and of paramount importance during marriages as they honor the marriage, and create an obligation by the bride’s kinsmen to take care of her husband.

Once the yams cultivated by the bride’s father and her matrilineal kin are reverted, a portion of these would be given to men who initially contributed a valuable during the earlier marriage exchanges as a way to reciprocate his loss” (Winner, 1988). In addition, how a woman accumulates wealth is largely dependent on yam production, as her husband must exchange his personal valuables should his wife need bundles in large amounts. The Trinidad Islands – Effects of death The practice of giving gifts is further illustrated when a person dies.

Out of respect, the village goes into mourning and the traditional yam competitions are replaced by competitions of women's wealth. Each woman who is a member of the dead person's matrilineal arduously works to accumulate huge amounts of skirts and bundles and is supported by her husband financially if the need arises. This reflects a woman's claim of the strength of her matrilineal. The skirts and bundles are then given as gifts at the final distribution as a form of reciprocation to people who participate in the mourning.

The Trinidad Islands – Torridness's Kulak The Kulak, an intertribal exchange between the Melanesia Islands can be described as the exchange of two items of great value but of no real use such as an armless for classes (Mammalians, 1961). According to Winner (1988), the main essence of the kulak is the notion of equality – to match the size and value of one shell exactly for another. Ranked according to their size, color, and fineness of the shell's polishing, armless are categorized into named rankings.

In a circular motion, these armless are being circulated miles away, to many communities of islands in the vicinity. These valuables never stop moving and are “ constantly meeting and being exchanged. ” (Mammalians, 1961). The kulak has a huge influence on social relations as it is through kulak that there is competition amongst kulak men to acquire “ friends ” on other islands who exchange serially with each other (Winner, 1988). The frequent travels to the various islands create the inevitable partnership that bonds these men even though they are from different tribes.

As Moonwalks observed, the “ kulak partnership is one the special bonds which unites two men into one of the standing relations of mutual exchange of gifts and services so characteristics of these natives. ” (Mammalians, 1961). The kulak exchange is indeed intricate – one that requires lot of work and cultivation in many social aspects like maintaining friendships and to constantly keep each other in ones’ good books. Money, although important in present day society, has not replaced these objects as it lacks the historical richness of these valuables (Winner, 1988).

The establishment and maintenance of social relations can be seen in yams, banana leaf bundles, skirts, stone axe-blades, and shell valuables. These items are all connected in this complex web of gift exchange and reciprocity as they each have a significant role in a Torridness’s access to each there and to the projection of their group identity and individual fame. Gift giving in modern societies Gift giving in modern societies bears little resemblance to that of rural ones.

Christmas is to remind us of God’s gift of Jesus to the world and the presents given to Jesus by the wise men (Matthew 2: 1 1, New International Version). In present society, the exchanging of gifts during Christmas is very popular. This follows a generalized medium of exchange – money, which can be used to purchase commodities as gifts. The heightening sociality of Christmas highlights the importance of gift reciprocity ND is reflected in the behavior displayed by people during their shopping escapades.

According to Capital (1984), gift exchanges occur within families in an unequal quantity and value, as parents are the main caregivers for their

children. He also noted that there is little reciprocity of gifts between non-kin providing minor services as seen in employers to employees, and students to teachers. However, it is the process of transforming commodities into gifts that really maintains the basis of social life. The time spent together in acquiring these gifts builds social platforms ND allows personal and social interactions.

Celebrating Christmas and the exchanging of gifts closely knits a family with tender memories and relations. This inevitably strengthens family bonding and the maintenance of social relations (Carrier, 1993). Similar to gift exchanges during Christmas and garage sales in the American society, flea markets are a common sight in Singapore. Flea markets are one of the best places for hawking wares, clearing old stuff or getting a great bargain where money is the generalized mode of exchange.

The goods sold at flea markets are often than not, resemble gifts as most of these items have been imbued with identities of former owners. Low in price but rich in sentimental value, these items consists of items that sellers might have overgrew, such as their favorite clothing. As such, most sellers see the transference of belongings at a minimal fee as adoption by a suitable owner through flea markets (Herrmann, 1997). In addition, flea markets allow the general public to know each other better due to the attraction of the informal open invitation to the public to stop by and look over the goods sold (Herrmann, 1997).

This creates more opportunities for the public to interact and socialize in a society predominantly influenced by social media. Conclusion As seen in the

Trinidad Islands, at Christmas exchanges and at flea markets, gift exchanges and reciprocity varies to a great extent in rural and modern society.

However, there is no denying the respect formed between the giver and the receiver. In modern society, this respect is further amplified when a gift reflecting the personality of the recipient is given as it reflects great effort on the part of the giver in knowing and understanding the recipient.