



## The Primitive Economics of the Trobriand Islanders

B. Malinowski

*The Economic Journal*, Volume 31, Issue 121 (Mar., 1921), 1-16.

---

Your use of the JSTOR database indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use. A copy of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use is available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>, by contacting JSTOR at [jstor-info@umich.edu](mailto:jstor-info@umich.edu), or by calling JSTOR at (888)388-3574, (734)998-9101 or (FAX) (734)998-9113. No part of a JSTOR transmission may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except: (1) one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or (2) with prior written permission of JSTOR and the publisher of the article or other text.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

*The Economic Journal* is published by Royal Economic Society. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/res.html>.

---

*The Economic Journal*  
©1921 Royal Economic Society

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact [jstor-info@umich.edu](mailto:jstor-info@umich.edu).

©2001 JSTOR

# THE ECONOMIC JOURNAL

MARCH, 1921

## THE PRIMITIVE ECONOMICS OF THE TROBRIAND ISLANDERS<sup>1</sup>

ONLY a very slight acquaintance with ethnological literature is needed to convince us that little attention has been paid so far to the problems of economics among primitive races. A certain amount of speculation has been devoted to origins of economic institutions—more especially to origins of property; to the stages of economic development, and to certain questions of exchange, “primitive money,” and rudimentary forms of division of labour. As a rule, however, small results have been achieved, because the amount of serious consideration given by theoretical writers to economic problems is in no way proportional to their complexity and importance, and the field observations extant are scanty. Again, the lack of inspiration from theoretical work has reacted detrimentally on ethnographic field work, and a careful survey of the best records of savage life reveals little or nothing that might be of value to the economist.

A student of economics, in possession of a systematic theory, might be naturally tempted to inquire how far, if at all, his conclusions can be applied to a type of society entirely different from our own. He would attempt in vain, however, to answer this question on the basis of the ethnological data extant, or, if he did, his results could not be correct. In fact, the question has been set forth and an attempt at its solution made by C. Buecher in his *Industrial Evolution*. His conclusions are, in my opinion, a failure, not owing to imperfect reasoning or method, but rather to the defective material on which they are formed. Buecher comes to the conclusion that the savages—he includes among them races as highly developed as the Polynesians—have no economic organisation, and that they are in

<sup>1</sup> *Résumé* of a course of lectures given at the London School of Economics in the Summer Term, 1920, embodying some results of the Robert Mond Ethnographic Expedition to British New Guinea.

a pre-economic stage—the lowest in that of the individual search for food, the higher ones in the stage of self-sufficient household economy.

In this article I shall try to present some data referring to the economic life of the Trobriand Islanders, a community living on a coral archipelago off the north-east coast of New Guinea. These natives, typical South Sea Islanders of the Melanesian stock, with a developed institution of chieftainship, great ability in various crafts and a fine decorative art, certainly are not at the lower end of savagery. In their general level of culture, however, they may be taken as representative of the majority of the savage races now in existence, and they are less developed culturally than the Polynesians, the bulk of North American Indians, of Africans, and of Indonesians. If we find, therefore, distinct forms of economic organisation among them, we are safe in assuming that even among the lowest savages we might expect to find more facts of economic interest than have been hitherto recorded.

I shall first give an outline of the natural resources of the Trobrianders and a broad survey of the manner in which these are utilised. The natives live on flat coral islands, covered with rich, heavy soil, very well suited for the cultivation of yams and taro, and they also enjoy a good regular rainfall. The coast is surrounded in parts with a fringing reef, in parts it encloses a big, shallow lagoon, teeming with fish. Having such excellent natural inducements, the natives are splendid tillers of the soil and first-rate fishermen, efficient and hard-working in both pursuits. These in turn reward them with a perennial abundance of food, sufficient to support a population very dense, as compared with other tribes of that part of the world. In gardening the natives obtain their fine results in spite of using only the most primitive implement—a pointed stick, made and discarded every time they go to work. In fishing they use big nets, also traps, fish-hooks and poison. As manufacturers they excel in wood-carving, basket-weaving, and the production of highly-valued shell ornaments. On the other hand, through lack of material, they have to rely on the importation from other tribes of stone implements and pottery, as, of course, neither hard stone nor clay are obtainable on a coral island. I have begun by giving this general outline of their resources, pursuits and crafts, in order to indicate the narrow frame within which the current accounts of economics are encompassed. The data would there, no doubt, be given with a much greater wealth of detail—especially in the

technological aspect—but it would be mainly the successive description of the various activities, connected with the quest for food and the manufacture of objects, without any attempt being made at a discussion of the more complex problems, referring to organisation of production, apportionment, and to the mechanism of tribal life in its economic aspect.

This will be done here, beginning with production, and taking agriculture as an example.

The questions before us are, first, the important problem of land tenure; next, the less obvious problems of the organisation of production. Is the work in the gardens carried out by each family, or each person individually and independently? Or is there any general co-ordination of this work, any social organisation of their efforts, and, if so, how is it done, and by whom? Are the successive stages of the work integrated into any organic whole, by any supervision, by any personal guidance, or any social or psychological force?

Land tenure among the Trobriand natives is rather complex, and it shows well the difficulties of solving ethnographic field problems of this type and the dangers of being misled into some inadequate approximation. When I began to inquire into this subject, I first received from my native informant a series of general statements, such as that the chief is the owner of all land, or that each garden plot has its owner, or that all the men of a village community own the land jointly. Then I tried to answer the question by the method of concrete investigation: taking a definite plot, I inquired successively, from several independent informants, who was the owner of it. In some cases I had mentioned to me successively as many as five different "owners" to one plot—each answer, as I found out later on, containing part of the truth, but none being correct by itself. It was only after I had drawn up complete plans of the garden land of several village communities, and inquired successively into the details, not only of each separate garden unit, but also into the details of each of the alleged forms of "ownership," that I was able to reach a satisfactory conclusion. The main difficulty in this, as in ever so many similar questions, lies in our giving our own meaning of "ownership" to the corresponding native word. In doing this we overlook the fact that to the natives the word "ownership" not only has a different significance, but that they use one word to denote several legal and economic relationships, between which it is absolutely necessary for us to distinguish.

The chief (*Guya'u*) has in the Trobriands a definite over-right over all the garden land within the district. This consists in the title of "master" or "owner" (*Toli*), and in the exercise of certain ceremonial rights and privileges, such as the decision on which lands the gardens are to be made, arbitration in garden disputes, and several minor privileges. The garden magician (*Towosi*) also calls himself the "master of the garden" and is considered as such, in virtue of his complex magical and other functions, fulfilled in the course of gardening. Again, in certain cases, and over certain portions of the land, the same title is given to notables or sub-chiefs, who carry out certain minor offices in connection with it. Finally, each garden plot belongs to some individual or other in the village community, and, when the gardens are made on this particular land, this owner either uses his plot himself or leases it to someone else under a rather complicated system of payment. The chief, the magician and the notables also own individually a number of garden plots each, independently of their general over-rights.

Now the reason why an economist cannot ignore such over-rights and complications is that the natives value them extremely, and, what is more important, that such over-rights carry with them definite functions and wield definite influences of economic importance.

Thus the complex conditions of land tenure, the not infrequent quarrels about gardening, and the need for summoning and maintaining communal labour require a social authority, and this is supplied by the chief with the assistance of the notables. On the other hand, the *Towosi*, the hereditary garden magician of each village community, has to a great extent the control over the initiative in the more detailed proceedings of the work. Each stage of gardening is inaugurated by a magical rite performed by him. He also orders the work to be done, looks after the way in which it is carried out, and imposes the periods of taboo, which punctuate it.

The proceedings of gardening are opened by a conference, summoned by the chief and held in front of the magician's house, at which all arrangements and the allotment of garden plots are decided upon. Immediately after that, the members of the village community bring a gift of selected food to the garden magician, who at night sacrificially offers a portion of it to the ancestral spirits, with an invocation, and at the same time utters a lengthy spell over some special leaves. Next morning, the magician repairs to the garden, accompanied by the men of the

village, each of whom carries an axe with the charmed leaves wrapped around its blade. While the villagers stand around, the *Towosi* (magician) strikes the ground with a ceremonial staff, uttering a formula. This he does on each garden plot successively, and on each the men cut a few saplings with their axes. After that, for a month or so, the scrub is cut in the prospective gardens by men only, and communal labour is often resorted to. The *Towosi* has to decide when the next stage, the burning of scrub and the clearing of soil, has to begin. When he thinks that the cut scrub is sufficiently dry, he imposes a taboo on garden work, so that any belated cutting has to be suspended. In a series of rites, lasting, as a rule, for about three days, he inaugurates the work of clearing the garden plot; this afterwards is carried on by men and women jointly, working in families, each on its own plot, without the help of communal labour. The planting of yams is inaugurated by a very elaborate ceremony, also extending over a few days, during which no further garden work is done at all. A magical rite of its own inaugurates each further stage, the erection of supports for the yam vine; the weeding of the gardens, done by female communal labour; the cleaning of the yam roots and tubers; the preliminary harvest of early yams; and finally the main harvest of late yams.

When the plants begin to grow a series of magical rites, parallel with the inaugural ones, is performed, in which the magician is supposed to give an impulse to the growth and development of the plant at each of its successive stages. Thus, one rite is performed to make the seed tuber sprout; another drives up the sprouting shoot; another lifts it out of the ground; yet another makes it twine round the support; then, with yet other rites, the leaves are made to bud, to open, to expand, respectively.

The *Towosi* (garden magician) always performs a rite first on one of the four garden plots selected for the purpose each season, and called *Leywota*. In certain ceremonies he afterwards carries the magic on into each garden plot, in others the magic is performed on the selected plots only. The *Leywota* are important from the economic point of view, because the owner of such a plot is bound to keep pace with the progress of magic, that is, he may not lag behind with his work. Also, the *Leywota* plots are always worked with a special care, and they are kept up to a very high standard of gardening. Thus, both in the regularity and in the quality of the work done, these plots set a definite pattern to all the others.

Besides the indirect influence which the *Towosi* exercises on garden work by giving the initiative and inaugurating the successive stages, by imposing taboos, and by setting the standard by means of the *Leywota* plots, he also directly supervises certain activities of general importance to all the gardens. Thus, for example, he keeps his eye on the work done in fencing round the garden. All the plots are placed within a common enclosing fence, of which everyone has to make his share, corresponding to his plot or plots. Thus, the neglect of one careless individual might result in a damage to all, for bush pigs or wallabies might find their way in and destroy the new crops. If this happens, the garden magician gets up in front of his house in the evening and harangues the village, often mentioning the culprit by name and heaping blame on him—a proceeding which seldom fails to take effect.

It is easy to see that the magician performs manifold and complex functions, and that his claim to be the "master of the garden" is not an empty one! What is now the economic importance of his functions? The natives believe deeply that through his magic the *Towosi* controls the forces of Nature, and they also believe that he ought to control the work of man. To start a new stage of gardening without a magical inauguration is, for them, unthinkable. Thus, his magical power, exercised side by side with their work, his magical co-operation, so to speak, inspires them with confidence in success and gives them a powerful impulse to work. Their implicit belief in magic also supplies them with a leader, whose initiative and command they are ready to accept in all matters, where it is needed. It is obvious that the series of magical rites—punctuating the progress of activities at regular intervals, imposing a series of rest periods, and, in the institution of standard plots (*Leywota*), establishing a model to the whole community—is of extreme importance. It acts as a psychological force, making for a more highly organised system of work, than it would be possible to achieve at this stage of culture by an appeal to force or to reason.

Thus, we can answer the questions, referring to the organisation of production, by summing up our results, and saying that the authority of the chief, the belief in magic, and the prestige of the magician are the social and psychological forces which regulate and organise production; that this latter, far from being just the sum of uncorrelated individual efforts, is a complex and organically united tribal enterprise.

Finally, a few words must be said about the character of

native labour in the Trobriands. We would see their economic activities in an entirely wrong perspective, if we were to imagine that these natives are temperamentally lazy and can work only under some outside pressure. They have a keen interest in their gardens, work with spirit, and can do sustained and efficient work, both when they do it individually and communally. There are different systems of communal work on various scales; sometimes the several village communities join together, sometimes the whole community, sometimes a few households. Distinctive native names are given to the various kinds of communal work, and payment in food also differs. In the more extensive kinds of work, it is the chief's duty to feed the workers.

An interesting institution of ceremonial enterprise deserves special attention. This is known as the *Kayasa*, and might be described as a period when all activities, whether gardening, fishing, industrial or even merely tribal sports and merrymaking, are carried out with special intensity. When the season is good, and the time is felt by the whole community to be propitious, the chief announces the *Kayasa*, and inaugurates it by giving a big feast. The whole period of the *Kayasa* is punctuated by other feasts, also provided for by the chief, and everyone who takes part is under an implicit obligation to do his best, and work his hardest, so that the *Kayasa* may be a success.

We have discussed their production on the example of gardening. The same conclusions, however, could have been drawn from a discussion of fishing, building of houses or canoes, or from a description of their big trading expeditions. All these activities are dependent upon the social power of the chief and the influence of the respective magicians. In all of them the quantity of the produce, the nature of the work and the manner in which it is carried out—all of which are essentially economic features—are highly modified by the social organisation of the tribe and by their magical belief. Customary and legal norms, magical and mythological ideas, introduce system into their economic efforts and organise them on a social basis. On the other hand, it is clear that if an ethnologist proposes to describe any aspect of tribal life, without approaching it also from the economic point of view, his account would be bound to be a failure.

This will be still more evident after a description of the manner in which they apportion the produce and utilise it in what could be called the financing of tribal enterprise. Here, again, I shall speak, for simplicity's sake, mainly of the garden



produce. As each man has allotted to him for each season one or several garden plots, we might expect that, following the principle of "closed household economy," each family would by themselves consume the results of their labour. As a matter of fact, the apportionment or distribution, far from following such a simple scheme, is again full of intricacies and presents many economically interesting features. Of these the two most important are: the obligations, imposed by rules of kinship and relationship-in-law, and the dues and tributes paid to the chief.

The first-named obligations involve a very complex redistribution of garden produce, resulting in a state of things in which everybody is working for somebody else. The main rule is that a man is obliged to distribute almost all his garden produce among his sisters; in fact, to maintain his sisters and their families. I must pass over all the complications and consequences implied by this system, and only notice that it means an enormous amount of additional labour in handling and transporting the produce, and that it enmeshes the whole community into a network of reciprocal obligations and dues, one constant flow of gift and counter-gift.

This constant economic undertow to all public and private activities—this materialistic streak which runs through all their doings—gives a special and unexpected colour to the existence of the natives, and shows the immense importance to them of the economic aspect of everything. Economic considerations pervade their social life, economic difficulties constantly face them. Whenever the native moves—to a feast, to an expedition, or in warfare—he will have to deal with the problems of giving and counter-giving. The detailed analysis of this state of affairs would lead us to interesting results, but it would be a side issue from our main theme—the public economy of the tribe.

To return to this, we must first consider, what part of the whole tribal income is apportioned to the chief. By various channels, by dues and tributes, and especially through the effect of polygamy, with its resulting obligations of his relatives-in-law, about 30 per cent. of the whole food production of his district finds its way into the large, finely-decorated yam houses of the chief. Now to the natives the possession and display of food are of immense value and importance in themselves. Pride in possessing abundant food is one of their leading characteristics. One of the greatest insults that can be uttered is to call someone "Man with no food," and it would be bitterly resented, and probably a quarrel would ensue. To be able to boast of

having food, is one of their chief glories and ambitions. Their whole conduct, in the matter of eating in public, is guided by the rule that no suspicion of scarcity of food can possibly be attached to the eater. For example, to eat publicly in a strange village would be considered humiliating, and is never done.

Their ambitions in this direction are also shown by the keen interest taken in the display of food. On all possible occasions—at harvest time, when there is an interchange of gifts, or when the enormous food distributions (*Sagali*) take place—the display of the food is one of the main features of interest. And there are even special food exhibitions, in which two villages compete against each other, and which in the old days used to be taken so seriously that often war was the result.

The chief is the only person who owns a big yam house, which is made with open interstices between the beams so that all may look through and admire the yams, of which the finest are always placed to the front. The chief is, as a matter of fact, also the only person who can accumulate, and, as a matter of privilege, the only one who is allowed to own and display large quantities. This gives him a definite status, is a sign of high rank, and satisfies his ambition. Finally, it enhances his power, broadly speaking, in the same manner as possession of wealth does with us.

Another important privilege of the chief, is his power to transform food into objects of permanent wealth. Here again, he is the only man rich enough to do it, but he also jealously guards his right, and would punish anyone who might attempt to emulate him, even on a small scale.

The *Vaygua*—objects or tokens of wealth—consist of several classes of highly-valued articles, mainly big ceremonial axe-blades, necklaces of red shell discs, and armshells of the *conus mille-punctatus* shell. These objects are hardly ever put to any real use, but they are extremely highly valued in themselves by the natives. The material of which they are made is rare and difficult to obtain, and much time and labour must be spent in working it. Once made, however, the objects are very durable, almost indestructible. Their main economic function is to be owned as signs of wealth, and consequently of power, and from time to time to change hands as ceremonial gifts. As such, they are the foundation of certain kinds of native trade, and they constitute an indispensable element of the social organisation of the natives. For, as mentioned above, all their social life is accompanied by gift and counter-gift. These are, as a rule,

arranged so that one party has to give a substantial present of food, when the other offers one of the tokens of wealth.

The chief, as said, has the means and the customary privilege of producing these objects. He also, in definite circumstances, frequently acquires them in exchange for food. In any case, about 80 per cent. of these objects remain in his possession (or at least this was the proportion before the chief's power and all their tribal law had been undermined by white man's influence). This acquisition of valuables, side by side with possession of food, is the basis of his power and a mark of his dignity and rank.

The chief finally is (or, more correctly, in olden days was) the owner of about three-quarters of all the pigs, coconuts and betel nuts in the district. By a system of *métayage*, there are in the various villages certain people, who look after his right over these three classes of things; they also receive their share, but have to bring him the bulk of the produce.

Thus, the possession of the beautiful yam houses, always ready to receive the crops, and often filled with them; the acquisition of a large amount of *Vaygua* (tokens of wealth), and of the greater part of the pigs, coconuts and betel nuts, give the chief a static basis of power, prestige and rank. But also the control over all these classes of wealth allows him to exercise his power dynamically.

For in a society where everything has to be accompanied by gift and payment, even the chief, the highest and most powerful individual in the community, though, according to customary rule, he can command the services of all, still must pay for them. He enjoys many personal services, such as being carried about on his journeys, sending people on errands, having all forms of magic performed for him. For such services, rendered by retainers and picked specialists, a chief must pay immediately, sometimes in *Vaygua*, sometimes in food, more especially in pigs, coconuts and betel nuts.

The essential of power is, of course, the possibility of enforcing orders and commanding obedience by means of punishment. The chief has special henchmen to carry out his verdicts directly by inflicting capital punishment, and they must be paid by *Vaygua*. More often, however, the punishment is meted out by means of evil magic. How often the sorcerers in the Trobriands use poison, it would be difficult to say. But the enormous dread of them, and the deep belief in their power, renders their magic efficient enough. And if the chief were known to have given

a *Vaygua* to a powerful sorcerer in order to kill a man, I should say that man was doomed.

Even more important than the exercise of personal power, is the command, already mentioned once or twice, which wealth gives the chief over the organisation of tribal enterprises. The chief has the power of initiative, the customary right to organise all big tribal affairs, and conduct them in the character of master of ceremonies. But there are two conditions incidental to the rôle he has to play. The leading men, such as the headmen of dependent villages, the main performers, the always indispensable magicians, the technical specialists, have all to be paid, and are, as usual, paid in objects of wealth, and the bulk of the participants have to be fed.

Both these conditions can be fulfilled by the chief in virtue of his control over a considerable portion of the consumable and condensed wealth of the tribe.

As a concrete example of big tribal affairs, organised and financed by the chief, we can quote first of all the above-mentioned *Kayasa*, a term embracing several kinds of ceremonial enterprises. In these, as we saw, the chief, by means of gifts, imposes a binding obligation on the participants to carry out the undertaking, and by means of periodical distributions he keeps everyone going during the time of dancing, merry-making or communal working. In former times during war, when the inhabitants of two hostile districts used to forgather in their respective chiefs' villages, the chief had to summon his vassal headmen by gifts of *Vaygua*.<sup>1</sup> Then at an initial ceremonial gathering, there would be a distribution of food, in particular the specially coveted pig's flesh, coconuts and betel nuts. And, later on, when during the progress of hostilities large numbers had to camp in or near the chief's village, his yam houses would be severely taxed in order to keep the warriors provided with food. Again, there is an important feature of their tribal life—the *Sagali*, or ceremonial distributions of food from one clan to another, associated with their mortuary ritual. In these the chief's wealth often had to be called upon to a considerable extent if the nominal giver of the feast had any claim on him as his kinsman, clansman, or relative-in-law.

We see, therefore, that in following up the various channels through which produce flows, and in studying the transformations it undergoes, we find a new and extremely interesting field for ethnological and economic interest. The chief's economic rôle

<sup>1</sup> For a general description of the Kiriwinian war customs, which are a thing of the past, see the article by the writer in *Man*, January, 1920.

in public life can be pointedly described as that of "tribal banker," without, of course, giving this term its literal meaning. His position, his privileges, allow him to collect a considerable portion of tribal yield and to store it, also to transform part of it into permanent condensed wealth, by the accumulation of which he gives himself a still bigger fund of power. Thus, on the one hand, the chief's economic function is to create objects of wealth, and to accumulate provisions for tribal use, thus making big tribal enterprises possible. On the other hand, in doing so, he enhances his prestige and influence, which he also exercises through economic means.

It would be idle to generalise from one example, or to draw strained parallels—to speak of the chief as "capitalist" or to use the expression "tribal banker" in any but the most unpretentious way. If we had more accounts of native economics similar to this—that is, going more into detail and giving an economic synthesis of facts—we might be able to arrive, by comparative treatment, at some interesting results. We might be able to grasp the nature of the economic mechanism of savage life, and incidentally we might be able to answer many questions referring to the origins and development of economic institutions. Again, nothing stimulates and broadens our views so much as wide comparison and sharp contrast, and the study of extremely primitive economic institutions would no doubt prove very refreshing and fertilising to theory.

It is necessary to point out that, in such a short article, where the broad outline of the institutions and customs has to be given with a few strokes, I have had to summarise certain things. Thus I speak of "the chief," whereas in a more detailed account I would have shown that there are several chieftainships in the tribe with a varying range and amount of power. In each case the economic, as well as the other social conditions, are slightly different, and to these differences I have not been able to do justice in this article. I have tried to present the general features which, in a manner, are common to all the districts of Kiriwina. A greater wealth of detail, though it might blur certain outlines and certainly would make things look less simple, would have allowed us to draw our conclusions even more forcibly and convincingly.

To sum up the results so far obtained, we may say that both the production and its apportionment in the native communities are by no means as simple as is usually assumed. They are both based on a special form of organisation, both are intertwined

with other tribal aspects, depending and reacting on other social and psychological forces.

Through the institution of chieftainship and the belief in magic, their production is integrated into a systematic effort of the whole community. By this a considerable amount of consumable wealth is produced, a great part of which is controlled by the chief, who transforms some of it into permanent wealth and keeps the rest in store. This, again, coupled with the natives' regard for wealth, and the importance of material give-and-take in their social institutions, allows the chief to wield his power to organise and finance tribal life.

We have not spoken of exchange yet, and, indeed, it is such a vast subject in the Trobriands—that is, if treated in the light of a more precise analysis—that in this paper I shall not attempt to deal with it exhaustively. There is, however, one point to which I want to draw attention. The tokens of wealth have often been called “money.” It is at first sight evident that “money” in our sense cannot exist among the Trobrianders. The word “currency”—differentiated from “money” in that it is an object of use as well as a means of exchange—does not help us much here, as the articles in question are not utilities. Any article which can be classed as “money” or “currency” must fulfil certain essential conditions; it must function as a medium of exchange and as a common measure of value, and it must be the instrument of condensing wealth, the means by which value can be accumulated. Money also, as a rule, serves as the standard of deferred payments. It is obvious at once that in economic conditions such as obtain among the Trobrianders, there can be no question of a standard of deferred payments, as payments are never deferred. It is equally clear that the *Vaygua* do serve as a means of condensing wealth—in fact, that this is their essential rôle.

The questions of a common measure of value and a measure of exchange require, however, some consideration. Exchange of useful articles against one another does exist in Kiriwina, both in internal and external trade. Indeed, barter among the natives is very well developed. Their exchange sometimes takes the form of free gift and following counter-gift—always repaid according to definite rules of equivalence. Sometimes it is real barter (for which they have a term—*Gimwali*), where one article is traded against another, with direct assessment of equivalence and even with haggling.

But in all cases trade follows customary rules, which deter-

mine what and how much shall be exchanged for any given article. Thus the villagers of Bwoitalu are the professional carvers in hard wood and produce excellent carved dishes. They are, on the other hand, in need of coconuts and yam food, and they like to acquire certain ornaments. Whenever one of them has a few dishes of certain dimensions on hand, he knows that in the village of Oburaku he can get about forty coconuts for one grade, twenty for another, ten for another, and so on; in the central villages of Kiriwina, he can obtain a definite number of yam baskets; in some other villages, he can get a few red shell-discs or turtle-shell ear-rings. Again, some coastal villages need a special kind of strong creeper for lashing their canoes. This they know can be obtained from villages near swamps for a definite payment—that is, one coil of creeper for one coconut or betel nut, or ten coils for a small basketful of yams.

All the trade is carried on in exactly the same way—given the article, and the communities between which it is traded, anyone would know its equivalent, rigidly prescribed by custom. In fact, the narrow range of exchangeable articles and the inertia of custom leave no room for any free exchange, in which there would be a need for comparing a number of articles by means of a common measure. Still less is there a need for a medium of exchange, since, whenever something changes hands, it does so always because the barterers directly require the other article.

This leads us first of all to the conclusion that we cannot think of *Vaygua* in terms of “money.” Moreover, what is more important still, we see that in Kiriwina the character of the exchange does not admit of any article becoming money. Certain things, no doubt, more especially basketsful of yams, bundles of taro and coconuts are very frequently exchanged, and against a wide range of other articles, and in economic considerations they may serve us as measures of value; but they are not regarded or purposely used as such by the natives.

When reading ethnological accounts about native “money”—such, for example, as those about the *diwarra* shells in New Britain or about the big stones in the Carolines—the statements appear to me singularly unconvincing. Unless it is shown that the mechanism of exchange among the natives there requires or even allows of the existence of an article, used as a common measure of value or medium of exchange, all the data given about an article, however much they might lend it a superficial resemblance to money, must be considered worthless. Of course, when a savage community comes into commercial relations with a

higher culture—as in Africa, where trading between Arabs and Europeans has long taken place—then money can and even must exist. Some forms of the so-called South Sea “money” may have acquired this character recently under European influence, and the *diwarra* may possibly be a case in point.

The discussion of the problem of money among primitive peoples shows very clearly how necessary it is in ethnology to analyse the economic background of the conditions indispensable to the existence of certain complex phenomena. The existence of “money” or “currency” so easily assumed, so glibly introduced by the use of these terms, proves with close analysis to be an hypothesis extremely bold and probably equally misleading.

One further function of the tokens of value should be mentioned here, that is, their exchange in the form of circular trading, called by the natives *Kula*, which takes place over a wide area amongst the islands and coasts of this part of British New Guinea. This peculiar form of circular trade presents many interesting economic features, but as it has been described elsewhere I shall not enter into the subject now.<sup>1</sup>

All the facts adduced in this article lead us to the conclusion that primitive economics are not by any means the simple matter we are generally led to suppose. In savage societies national economy certainly does not exist, if we mean by the term a system of free competitive exchange of goods and services, with the interplay of supply and demand determining value and regulating all economic life. But there is a long step between this and Buecher's assumption that the only alternative is a pre-economic stage, where an individual person or a single household satisfy their primary wants as best they can, without any more elaborate mechanism than division of labour according to sex, and an occasional spasmodic bit of barter. Instead, we find a state of affairs where production, exchange and consumption are socially organised and regulated by custom, and where a special system of traditional economic values governs their activities and spurs them on to efforts. This state of affairs might be called—as a new conception requires a new term—Tribal Economy.

The analysis of the natives' own economic conceptions of value, ownership, equivalence, commercial honour and morals opens a new vista of economic research, indispensable for any deeper understanding of a native community. Economic elements enter into tribal life in all its aspects—social, customary, legal and magico-religious—and are in turn controlled by these.

<sup>1</sup> See article by the writer, “*Kula*: Circulating Exchange of Valuables in the Archipelagoes of Eastern New Guinea,” *Man*, July, 1920.



It is not for the observer in the field to answer or to contemplate the metaphysical question as to what is the cause and effect—the economic or the other aspects. To study their interplay and correlation is, however, his duty. For to overlook the relation between two or several aspects of native life is as much an error of omission as to overlook any one aspect.

B. MALINOWSKI