

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 11
Economic exchange embedded in social relations

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- Since we have fallen behind, I am not going to cover some of the material on pastoralism and subsistence strategies in class
 - the material is straightforward, but some might be new to you
 - so I suggest that you look at the posted notes and slides
 - The broadest points
 - many aspects of life and social organization are shaped by subsistence strategies
 - as in “culture as adaptation” and cultural materialism
 - foragers tend to live in certain ways with certain social features, pastoralists tend to have other features, and farmers tend to have others yet
 - variables include the size of groups or settlements, residential mobility vs. sedentism, equality vs. inequality of wealth, equality vs. hierarchy of power, etc.
 - see the notes and slides for the features typical of each subsistence strategy
 - various detailed aspects show how subsistence is tied up with...
 - gender and status relations (the Kapauku)
 - world economic systems (the Ariaal)
 - kinship and social relations (the Ju/'hoansi and Herero), etc.
 - the long-term process has been to use increasing amounts of energy on limited amounts of land, in order to produce increasing amounts food for increasing populations
 - recently, substituting fossil fuels for human energy
 - getting ever *less* efficient in terms of energy use, not more.
 - This may not be sustainable.
- An interesting issue:
 - why do foraging societies consistently get displaced or replaced by pastoralists, and even more so by farmers?
 - it has to do with the social organizations of each
- In our culture, we assume that people are "**rational actors**" or "**rational maximizers**"
 - rational: behave in a logical sensible way
 - maximizer: intention is to maximize material gain
 - classical capitalist market theory assumes that
 - people have infinite wants and limited means
 - so they rationally allocate limited resources to alternative ends
 - in order to maximize the satisfaction of their needs
 - each actor intends to maximize his or her benefit in every exchange (or over a series of exchanges)
 - people are never satisfied, always striving for ever more gain
- Anthropologists say that this classical theory of exchange is not universal
 - this concept that people are "rational maximizers" is just an arbitrary social construct
 - even though it seems so normal and obvious to us
 - some people simply do not show unlimited wants

- they act satisfied with what they have, and don't bother to try for more
- like the Ju/'hoansi, or some people I met in Peru
- other models of behavior are just as possible
 - “Rational comparative maximizer”: do enough to have slightly more than others, then stop
 - “Rational goal seeker”: do enough to satisfy certain goals, then stop
 - “Rational work minimizer”: do as little work as possible
- Economists respond that classical market theory can handle all of these by saying that what people rationally maximize is not just material wealth, but “utility”
 - **utility** includes both material goods and non-material things that a person values
 - material goods, but also free time, sleep, liberty, friendship, sex, honor, etc.
 - if we include the right things in “utility”, then maybe everyone really *does* strive to be a rational maximizer of all those complex values
 - example: someone chooses to work a low-paying, half-time job
 - if this person values free time and lack of stress highly, and material goods relatively less, he or she may be rationally maximizing his or her overall utility
 - but in practice, economists almost always focus only on material gain
 - the rest is too difficult to measure, so they ignore it
 - another problem: people are not very good at actually maximizing utility, no matter how it is defined
 - people often make irrational decisions, swayed by emotion
 - make decisions based on insufficient information
 - overestimate immediate costs and benefits while underestimating future costs and benefits
 - are very poor at evaluating risk, etc.
- Anthropologists suggest that classical economics has its place
 - but often, exchange is not really about “the stuff”
 - instead, a lot of exchange is really about the social relationships in which it is embedded
 - as Cronk says, not only are “strings attached” to many exchanges, but the strings are often the main point
- Systems of exchange
 - **Market system**
 - impersonal exchanges, supposedly not embedded in social relations
 - value of goods set by supply and demand
 - exchanges usually mediated by money (**currency**)
 - *tokens* of wealth
 - all items can be valued in the currency
 - portable
 - easily divisible
 - easily exchanged
 - currency is usable for any transaction
 - difficult to falsify
 - money or currency is not the same as **wealth**
 - wealth may also consist of sacks of wheat, houses, shares of stock in a company, etc.

- that is, things which are not normally exchanged directly for other things
- in a market system, wealth has to be converted to currency first
 - by selling the goods for currency
 - or at least theoretically converted
 - by valuing the goods exactly in currency
- **Redistribution**
 - some portion of production is turned over to a central person or institution
 - a “big man” that people want to ally with
 - traditionally expected gifts to a chief
 - tithes to a church
 - taxes to a government
 - that person or institution accumulates a considerable quantity of goods
 - and doles them out again to others
 - may serve as a safety net for farmers in bad years
 - may support specialists like shamans, people who make fancy goods for the chief so he will look the part, etc.
 - this allows the chief, church, etc. to wield a certain degree of real power
 - because the central institution determines who gets what and how much
 - also because the chief, church, etc. can use some portion for their own ends
 - Harris notes that in its simpler forms, the central person gains only prestige and power, without getting any of the goods
 - as the central person or institution becomes more powerful, he can begin to skim off some of the goods for his own benefit
 - or to hire agents to persuade or coerce others
- **Reciprocity**: gift exchange; tit-for-tat exchange
 - **generalized**
 - no expectation of exact or prompt repayment
 - although anyone who takes too much and gives too little will eventually face social sanctions
 - exchange is just a small part of the social relationship
 - as between parents and their children
 - or between members of a foraging band, like those of the !Kung
 - where even thanking someone for something is considered rude
 - because it would imply that the transaction was unusual, or anything other than expected
 - **balanced**
 - the giver expects something more or less equivalent in return
 - the repayment is often delayed, establishing a relationship between the giver and the receiver
 - this is the most typical form of reciprocity that people usually think of
 - **negative**
 - each expects to get greater value than they give
 - that is, each seeks to profit from the transaction

- often, payment has to be immediate
 - because the parties do not really trust each other
 - each is trying to get the better of the other
- the extreme case is theft
 - the thief intends to get something while giving nothing, or even while causing harm
 - this is still reciprocity: still an exchange
 - it still creates obligations and a social relationship
 - you steal from me, I return with my friends to beat you up, and so on.
- These systems of exchange are not mutually exclusive
 - our society has all three
 - market exchange: our obvious money economy
 - redistribution: taxation and spending by the government, collection and use of donations by churches, etc.
 - reciprocity:
 - holiday and birthday gift exchanges between kin and between friends
 - exchanges within families such as parents supporting their children, and children taking care of elderly parents
 - exchanges of favors, social invitations, etc. among friends and acquaintances
 - which should be roughly balanced
- Key idea: Economic exchanges are embedded in social relations
 - originally proposed by Marcel Mauss in "The Gift"
 - discussed by Cronk in "Strings Attached"
 - economic exchanges establish and maintain social relationships
 - often, the relationship is the main point, rather than the goods
 - as in exchanging birthday gifts with someone, year after year
 - another aspect of this idea: some economic relations may make sense only in terms of the social relations in which they are embedded
 - gift exchange and other economic behavior is very different between friends, between parents and children, and between workers and their bosses
 - you can't understand this economic exchange without understanding the social relations that surround it
 - "it's not about the stuff"
- Classic examples of economic activities that make sense only in terms of the social relations in which they are embedded
 - **Kula ring** exchange among the Trobriand Islanders
 - Described in the Robbins extract for today and the optional reading by Malinowski (who did this classic research)
 - arm bands (also called arm shells) are given as gifts in one direction around the ring
 - necklaces are given as counter-gifts in the other direction
 - with moderately long gaps in between
 - the items have no practical value, but are very showy

- they are individual, unique, named, with known histories of ownership by illustrious kula traders
- they cannot normally be bought or sold for money or traded for other goods; they are only suitable for giving as gifts to be recompensed with the corresponding other kind of item
- giving them confers prestige by demonstrating generosity
- holding them confers prestige by showing what good connections you have built up through social skills
- but holding them too long makes you look stingy
- there is little or no practical reason for this economic exchange practice
- but it is crucial for men's (and a few women's) pursuit of social status
- **Moka**
 - Described in Robbins reading for today
 - Melpa of central highland Papua New Guinea
 - this group is related to the Kapauku Papuan agriculturalists in the reading by Pospisil, who have a similar pig feast system
 - men aspire to be "Big Men"
 - to be a Big Man, you have to prove yourself in warfare and in competitive gift-giving ceremonies called moka
 - goal is to give more than you got, ideally to give more than the recipient can repay
 - the exchanges go back and forth, escalating each time
 - there is an editing error in the reading (Robbins, p 230)
 - the amount given and owed should ratchet up each time, not level off
 - since mobilizing enough goods (especially pigs) requires contributions from many people, each moka exercises a large number of social relationships
 - maintaining not only the Big Man's status, but also the whole network of kinship and alliances through many complex reciprocity relations
 - this is clear at the moka itself, which is not a single big gift at all, but a collection of many gift exchanges
 - every contributor is named and his contribution counted out and displayed
 - many people besides the main recipient also get some of the goods, in highly formal, pre-arranged exchanges with much elaborate oratory to bring them to everyone's attention
- **Potlatch**
 - description - see Harris reading
 - this article also covers other important concepts in economic anthropology; it is worth a careful, if skeptical, reading
 - Northwest coast of north America
 - Kwakiutl, now more correctly called Kwakwaka'wakw
 - competitive feasting
 - chiefs sought to prove that they are the most worthy to hold their positions
 - gave away or even destroyed: blankets, boxes of fish oil, copper ornaments, etc.
 - changed over time, with greater access to industrial trade goods... eventually tinware, enamelware, even a pool table

- Marvin Harris's explanation
 - Harris suggests that potlatching balances out variation in production by redistributing surplus
 - it gets everyone to work harder and produce more, creating a safety margin
 - as you know, Harris is an extreme cultural materialist
 - many anthropologists reject his explanation here as being excessively materialist
 - he argues that the desire for prestige (the *emic* explanation that the Kwakiutl would use to explain why they practice potlatch) is actually a result of economic circumstances (an *etic* explanation proposed by Harris)
 - this is Harris's cultural materialist viewpoint: that infrastructure (the economic realities of life) determines superstructure (in this case the ritualized, social, political practice of potlatch)
 - Harris also suggests that this kind of practice was the origin of complex, socially stratified societies
 - over time, there would be a progression from hard-working big men, to managerial (exploiting) chiefs who skim enough to be wealthy and not work so hard... eventually leading to kings and states
 - this may seem plausible, but remember that it is mostly hypothetical.
 - even when he talks as if he had been there to see it
 - many anthropologists would say that this is a gross oversimplification, or even flat-out wrong
 - but even if so, the ideas he is playing with are worth understanding, if only to recombine them in different ways, in other contexts
- **Clientage**
 - another kind of social relation created by economic exchange
 - a wealthy or powerful **patron** gives ongoing gifts, support, food, use of land, etc. to a less-wealthy **client**
 - the **client** is never expected to be able to pay back the gifts of the **patron** in kind
 - so the client has to be subservient, paying back with loyalty or service
 - this is prone to lead to loss of dignity by the client, if not actual abuse
 - the social relations involved in this form of exchange have a profound impact on the lives of clients, and possibly of patrons
- Carrier's analysis of gift exchange as creating and recreating social relationships
 - is laid out in Robbins reading for today
 - some ideas of gift exchange, illustrated by American Christmas gift practices
 - a gift is only a gift if it is meaningful
 - that is, a gift only has meaning, or works to establish or maintain a social relationship, if it is *connected* to the giver
 - a gift has to represent a personal sacrifice by the giver, giving up something connected to him or her, or it is meaningless
 - and a meaningless exchange does not establish or maintain a social relationship
 - in Carrier's terms, an object that is connected to someone is a **possession**
 - a possession is **inalienable**

- it has a permanent connection to its owner
- like something the owner made himself or herself
- someone else can hold the object, but it is still connected to its owner
- like your inalienable rights
 - you cannot sign them away or sell them
 - they are inherently yours by virtue of your being human in our culture
 - (despite recent laws to the contrary)
- a **commodity** is an **alienated** object
 - one that has no connection to its maker, owner, or anyone else
 - it can be bought and sold simply, with no social relations involved
- Carrier argues that commodities have no meaning as gifts
 - they are ineffective at creating and maintaining social relations
- they have to be converted into possessions to work as gifts
- this process of converting a commodity into a possession is called **appropriation**
 - appropriation undoes alienation
 - it connects a commodity to a person, changing it into a possession
 - ways that Americans appropriate commodities in order to give them as gifts
 - monogramming
 - wrapping
 - developing a history for the object (perhaps through catalog advertising copy), etc.
 - by selecting an object that embodies the giver's personal knowledge of the recipient's needs, tastes, personality, etc.
 - or perhaps by the arduous act of shopping for the perfect item
- why do many people go to all the trouble and expense of shopping and gift giving at Christmas?
 - in order to create and recreate relationships
 - through appropriation and gift exchange, money is converted into family ties