OWNERSHIP AND EXCHANGE AMONG THE KUIKURU INDIANS OF MATO GROSSO (*)

by

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The Kuikuru are one of a group of nine small tribes of Indians in the Upper Xingú region of Mato Grosso. Their subsistence techniques may be characterized as a relatively unevolved type of Tropical Forest horticulture. The staple food is manioc, which is supplemented with fish and fruits. The material culture of the Kuikuru consists primarily of items manufactured from wood, bark, and leaves. In this category are included houses; canoes; fish traps; most of the aboriginal weapons, tools, and utensils. Pottery is obtained from a neighboring tribe. Stones axes were formerly obtained from another neighboring group of Indians, but for the past few decades steel axes, knives, and scissors have been replacing the stone axes and fish-tooth knives. The Kuikuru wear no clothes. Cotton is cultivated and used in twining mats and hammocks.

In view of the simplicity of its technology, certain aspects of Kuikuru culture exhibit a surprising degree of elaboration. One such aspect is the economic. By the term economic I refer to ownership and exchange, and not primarily to the production, distribution, and consumption of subsistence items.

The Kuikuru are constantly preoccupied with the exchange of goods and services and with equalizing accounts. This theme permeates the whole culture. One of the expressions most frequently heard is, "Të ma fijë t'i", which means "What's the price", and which may be used in various contexts, being equivalent to "What will you give me in return", "What do you want in return", "What did you receive", or "What did you have to pay". Even youngsters have a remarkable degree of sophistication in the art of trading. A six-year-old girl may present a flower as a gesture of friendship. No sooner

(*) Based on a paper read at the 63rd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Detroit, Michigan, December 28, 1964. The field work from which the material for this paper is taken was financed by the Henry L. and Grace Doherty Charitable Foundation, Inc.
has the flower been accepted than the child asks, "What are you going to give me for it?" Or a man may give a handful of roasted corn to another. Instead of expressing gratitude, the receiver immediately asks, "What do you want for this?"

Transactions of this sort are clearly manifestations of what Marcel Mauss(1) has termed *le don*, an expression which has been translated as exchange-gift or prestation.

Between close relatives and friends, gifts are exchanged more frequently, and accounts are less carefully kept than between persons not closely related; but the theme of the exchange-gift is present here too. To give an example of its influence within the extended family, an old woman gave a few beads to her daughter's baby in order to acquire in return from the baby's father a can with a lid which she coveted.

The desire to acquire material goods appears to antedate the first recorded contact with Whites(2), but native acquisitiveness has also been fostered by contact with civilization. No less than two dozen times ethnographers, geographers, adventurers, journalists, and government agents have entered the Upper Xingú region. Each time material goods have been presented to the natives.

Virtually every gift or service requires a return. Sharing and pure gift-giving are almost non-existent among the Kuikuru. Communal sharing occurs only in conjunction with cooperative endeavors such as fishing and hunting of giant grasshoppers or of monkeys, which are considered to be rare delicacies and not staple foods. In all likelihood this is a survival of customs of sharing which accompanied communal enterprises in former times when subsistence was more precarious. Today, with a stable and abundant manioc subsistence base, the Kuikuru have no need for sharing food beyond the household unit. Even when fire destroys a house and with it the accumulated store of manioc, the owners do not rely on other members of the tribe for gifts of food. Instead they go to their gardens and dig a new supply of tubers. In Kuikuru culture gifts have come to perform other functions than providing survival insurance.

Injuries and damage to property may be compounded by payment in the form of a gift. Youths often pilfer food and trinkets from younger boys. Should this lead to complaints, the older boy may quiet the plaintiff with a promise to give him something in payment. Finally, this complex of gifts and counter-gifts is observable in the system of extra-marital sex relations. A man may make overtures

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(1) "Essai sur le don." L'Année Sociologique 1, n.s.: 30-186, 1983-84.
to a desired woman with trivial gifts; he pays for his relationship with her with an occasional gift of a bead necklace, and she may reciprocate with cotton thread for his ligatures. There is also some indication that a girl’s father may ask for material compensation from his daughter’s extra-marital sex partners.

**Purchase and currency**

Nearly every type of property in Kuikuru culture may be owned privately and exchanged in trade. The principal methods of trade are sale and barter. Informal trade most frequently takes the form of purchase, that is, desired commodities are exchanged for items which serve as currency but which have no other utilitarian value. Two types of currency are used in these transactions. The traditional medium of exchange among the Kuikuru consists of disk beads cut from the shell of a large land snail (*Strophocheilus* sp.). These disks are made in two sizes, constituting currency of two different denominations. The larger disks, which are about one centimeter in diameter, are considered to be twice as valuable as those of smaller size. Both types are perforated and worn as waistbands by men, or as necklaces by women. The customary unit of exchange is one waistband or necklace of these beads, consisting of from three to four hundred disks.

Another type of currency used aboriginally, which is more recent in Kuikuru culture history, is a necklace made of a few dozen sub-rectangular pieces cut from the shell of another type of land snail (*Oxystila pholgera* ?). The snail shells from which these beads are made are less common in the Kuikuru area, and a necklace made from them is therefore more highly prized. It is valued about twice as much as the more valuable strings of disk beads.

Partial standardization of values has taken place in Kuikuru culture. One string of disk beads is customarily given in exchange for one hard-wood bow, one large pot, one hammock, or one machete; and the items for which a string of beads is given may be exchanged against each other in barter. Items which are of less value because they are common and fairly easy to make or procure may be purchased for a fraction of a disk waistband or necklace. Since the advent of explorers and ethnographers to the area, native shell beads have been replaced to a certain extent by Czechoslovakian glass beads of a certain shade of blue. The preference for this particular color is remarkably strong and has the marks of a fad. All other colors are disdained at present by the natives of this area.

Not all items have been integrated into the system of standard values. The price paid for some items varies considerably, being affected by such unstable factors as hunger, fashion, and seasonal
availability. Value may be determined by the scarcity of an item or the difficulty of replacing it. We can see a survival of unstandardized values in some of the trades. For example, a steel axe was exchanged for four fish. In terms of availability to the society, axes constitute one of the most nearly irreplaceable items of present-day Kuikuru culture, since the natives cannot make them nor can they buy them at will from a supply house. Yet an axe may be purchased for the fruits of a few hours' labor. The ultimate irreplaceability of the axe is not a factor in domestic exchange, because axes are easily available to individuals within the bounds of the society. The society as a whole has a supply which is sufficient for their needs at present. A person who lets his axe go in trade knows that he will be able to buy it back or to buy or borrow another when he has need of it. Axes are relatively indestructible, and they are not often traded out of the village, so that there is no real danger that they will be lost to the society.

Trades such as this, in which the value of an article is relative to the desire of the moment and not to its ultimate replaceability, do not destroy the equilibrium of the economic system. Equilibrium is maintained through the constant circulation of property. Items may make the rounds of the village, being owned for a brief period by many individuals in sequence. Within the society what is sold cheap one day may be bought cheap at another time.

Exchange among the Kuikuru is characterized by the purchase of services as well as of goods. The most important are the services of the shamans, who are hired to divine the cause of misfortune, including illness, and to cure the latter. These services are expensive, each performance costing an entire string of beads, which may be the purchaser's entire stock.

**Barter by gift exchange**

Barter is important in informal trading. Typically, barter exchanges are conducted in the following manner:

Individual A informs individual B he wants a certain item in B's possession. Individual B tends to accede to any such request because of strong cultural pressure to trade. If B should demur, however, A may coax him to "say yes", and almost without fail B says "yes" with a promptness which is humorous to outsiders who have been accustomed to deliberate before parting with possessions. B then asks A what he will pay, and the bargain is struck. Alternately, A may present a gift to B, saying simply, "Here is a gift." Instead of thanking him, B asks what the price is. (The Kuikuru language appears to have no words to express "thank you" or "please"). Etiquette requires that A reply with an expression which might be translated, "Oh, I don't care; it's up to you". Thereupon B proffers
a number of items, and each may be declined until B finally brings forth the item on which A had his heart set from the beginning of the transaction.

In addition to informal trading, there is found throughout the Upper Xingú culture area a formalized method of trading, to which Buell Quain referred in his notes on the Trumai as a trading game. The name seems apt, since it is a means of effecting exchange and at the same time is a form of diversion.

The trading game is called uluki by the Kuikuru. It is conducted according to rules and is accompanied by a formal dialogue through which exchanges are proposed and accepted or rejected. A small number of men, especially the chief and other men who rank as political leaders, may direct the game. The director seats himself facing the front door of the house in which the game is being conducted. As host to the game, an adult male occupant of the house initiates transactions by tossing on the ground before the director an object which he wishes to exchange. The following conversation, or a variation of it, ensues:

Director: “Say what you want.”
Host: “I want such-and-such.”

If there is a taker, that is, if someone in the assembled group is satisfied with the trade proposed, he says, “I’ll give it to you”, and retrieves the item offered for trade. If the object promised as pay is not readily available, payment may be deferred for several weeks. Such a delay does not usually lead to difficulty through forgetting the obligation to pay, however, because the transaction is in the form of a contract which is not easily dissolved. It has been made before witnesses, which strengthens the bargain by increasing the number of individuals who would support the seller in exacting payment if the purchaser were delinquent in paying.

The great majority of exchanges proposed are not completed. In most instances no one picks up the object tossed to the floor for sale. Instead, many broad comments may be heard about the exorbitant price asked, or the low value of the item offered. These remarks are made in a joking manner, and contribute greatly to the enjoyment of the game. Nevertheless they undoubtedly have a serious function, namely, to prevent excessive demands and to maintain a system of equivalences. The game affords a sanctioned outlet for the expression of feelings and opinions regarding one another’s generosity, a personality trait which is considered to be of great importance in Kuikuru culture.
Owner-asiker complex of exchange

Ownership and exchange are not confined to material items. Songs, dances, and festivals are also treated as property which may be purchased, owned, and inherited. The Kuikuru have several songs and dances the origin of which they attribute to other Upper Xingú tribes, or the names of which resemble names of former Upper Xingú tribes. The words of the songs are often unintelligible to the singers themselves, indicating possible borrowing from speakers of foreign tongues. Apparently the repertory has been augmented in the past by adoption of songs from other tribes. It is still being augmented in the same way. The mechanism by which the Kuikuru incorporate a song into their culture will illustrate at the same time the method by which songs may be purchased.

Members of tribes in the territory surrounding the Upper Xingú basin occasionally visit and even marry into tribal villages within the basin area. The former are the so-called wild Indians of Brazil. Whenever representatives of one of these groups make a peaceful visit to a strange village they sing some of their native music. In this manner songs of the Gé-speaking Tchukahamay were recently brought to the area. First they were introduced at the Capitão Vasconcelos post of the Brazilian Indian Service. Subsequently some friendly Indians who had learned the songs at this post visited the Kuikuru village and sang them there. On hearing the foreign music, the Kuikuru liked and learned it. One man took a particularly strong fancy to the songs and decided to increase his prestige a degree by becoming the owner of the songs.

Songs and other types of non-material property may be purchased by means of food. The prospective owner of the Tchukahamay songs made known his intention to purchase the songs and prepared to assemble a quantity of manioc and fish for a party. The giving of food in this instance served both as a celebration and as the purchase price of the songs. A certain few adult males agreed to take it upon themselves to arrange for the songs to be performed from time to time. These individuals are known as askers, and it is to them that the food was given in payment for the songs. The purchase of the songs by throwing a party entitles the purchaser to be known as the owner of the songs, and it entitles his offspring to inherit them.

In the case of the Tchukahamay songs, all the men of the village learned them by repeated singing, but no one knew what the words of the songs meant. Without doubt these songs will eventually become the specialty of a few singers. When this occurs they will have been completely incorporated into the Kuikuru ceremonial pattern, which in brief operates as follows: One or more persons who
are askers for a particular ceremony feel the public pulse. From time to time they formally express the wishes of the society by addressing to the owner a request to have his ceremony performed. The owner usually consents and thereby assumes the responsibility of gathering an extra supply of manioc and fish with which to remunerate the individuals who perform his ceremony. The persons who perform it learn the ceremony as a specialty, thus adding to their own prestige. Owners, askers, and singers form a class of socio-ceremonial specialists. At each performance quantities of manioc gruel are served to the singers, who may share it with other males. This is undoubtedly a clue to the great fondness of the Kuikuru males for ceremonial performances. The Kuikuru have nearly two dozen different ceremonies which are conducted in this way. For each ceremony there is a set of owners, askers, and singers.

Mobilizing labor

Ramifications of the ceremonial complex reach into the political structure of the society. The Kuikuru are very loosely organized. The hereditary chief does virtually nothing in the way of maintaining order or directing activities. Competition in trying to achieve leadership status is not marked. The norm is rather to be generous, cooperative, and above all genial.

The Kuikuru are frequently faced with the necessity of performing tasks which require a greater degree of cooperation than can be mustered through their lax political organization. Individuals occasionally need the cooperation of several other persons in carrying out a large enterprise, such as house building. There is no political mechanism through which to order or direct such cooperative effort. Nor are there any unilineal descent groups whose members might be commanded by a strong leader. Obligations of mutual aid because of kinship bonds extend only to the closest consanguineal relatives, so that the number of helpers who could be rallied through this mechanism usually is too small to satisfy the need. As a solution to these problems the Kuikuru extend their owner-asker-performer complex to serve as a mechanism to mobilize labor.

In the mobilization of labor, the owner and the asker are the same person. If he wishes help in erecting a new house, for example, he gathers an extra supply of food, usually manioc and fish. He makes this fact known and offers to share the food publicly with those persons who will help him in the enterprise. Those who agree to help regard the occasion as an opportunity for comradeship, recreation, and a free meal. They paint themselves with urucú (Bixa orellana), pítí (Caryocar butyrosum) oil, and soot to enhance the festive atmosphere.
During the course of the work, the man who initiates the procedure cuts and distributes small uniform sticks of wood, one for each member of the work party. When each person has received a stick, the excess is discarded, and the distributed sticks are gathered in again. This bundle of sticks is a counting device which does not involve numbers. The counters are kept until the food is prepared, at which time a portion of fish paste and manioc cake, let us say, is matched with each counter to make certain that everyone in the work party receives a share. Thus it happens that the number of the counters is never really known.

Enterprises which require the cooperation of several persons are undertaken only when the initiator has a large enough supply of food with which to reward the workers. Such enterprises are clearing or planting manioc plots; harvesting corn; transporting a newly cut canoe to the water; building fish wiers and traps; and spinning cotton. In this same category also might be included a very unusual subsistence activity, namely, a communal grasshopper hunt. The four-inch grasshoppers (Schistocerca paranaensis), which abound in Mato Grosso only once in five to seven years, are considered a rare delicacy. By the same technique of promising food, a man may organize virtually all the adult and adolescent males in the village for an expedition to shoot grasshoppers with tiny bows and arrows. On such an expedition, which occupies the whole day, great seven-foot flutes are carried; some of the young fellows play these flutes and dance while others work at chopping down a tree in which the giant grasshoppers breed. The undertaking, while it does involve some strenuous labor, is also a source of enjoyment.

Summary

A few characteristics of ownership and exchange which appear to be exceedingly primitive have persisted in Kuikuru culture while other more advanced traits have been developed. The more primitive traits are the constant circulation of goods in the form of gifts and counter gifts and the compulsion to grant requests for gifts. These gifts are the prestation or exchange-gifts about which Marcel Mauss has written with so much insight(3). They are clear examples of what B. Malinowski has termed reciprocity, a principle from which he derives all law(4) and indeed the social relations between all kin groups(6).

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(3) "Essai sur le don."
The Kuikuru take advantage of the capacity of a gift to yield a return. They make use of exchange not only as an instrument of social integration but for individual economic and social gain, the latter in the form of prestige. As a step in the direction of commercial enterprise, this culture has evolved mechanisms by which to specify what is required in return for gifts. Socio-economic customs based on the return gift accomplish in this society what political organization does not, namely, the mobilization of a labor force. Further, the Kuikuru have customs of formal trading with currency and standardized equivalents which resemble marketing.

Resumo

A autora estuda o comércio entre os Kuikuru visitados por ela em 1953 observando que estes índios do alto Xingu "estão constantemente preocupados com a permuta de bens e serviços e em saldar as suas contas".