

The Soulava Necklace and the Kula Exchange

A soulava necklace (figs 1 to 3) is a type of necklace made by a Trobriand islander in the Western Pacific. It is a symbol of culture and heritage which has the capacity to tell us a lot about history. Context of the object, such as when and why it was made, and who possessed such an item, will be analyzed to discern what it can tell us about life and culture in the Trobriand Islands. Further to this, the item has adopted a second history since its acquisition by anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski in 1922, and has since additionally become a symbol of colonialism. This highlights the extensive history that the necklace possesses, and both aspects of its history will be explored to determine what the item can tell us about history.

The soulava necklace is made from materials such as drilled shell discs, banana seeds, cowrie shell, glass beads, and pandanus leaf (The British Museum, no date a). It was acquired by Malinowski in 1922 when conducting field research in the Trobriand Islands. Although it was acquired in 1922, it is unknown exactly when it was made, as it had likely been in circulation within the Kula for quite some time before Malinowski's acquisition. Kula refers to a system of exchange practiced in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea, in which trinkets, specifically necklaces and bracelets, are continuously exchanged (Malinowski, 1922). The Kula exchange spans a closed circuit of eighteen island communities, with the soulava necklaces being exchanged by those traveling in a clockwise direction, and the bracelets, known as mwali, are exchanged by those traveling in an anti-clockwise direction (Malinowski, 1922). Consequently, a mwali

bracelet is always exchanged for a soulava necklace and vice versa. This condition of direction means that the Kula operates as a circle. Those who come into possession of the item only hold onto it for a period of time before exchanging it again for the alternate item. This period of time can range from minutes to years, but it is never kept in the hands of one person. Therefore, one could regard the items as being more so property of the Kula system itself rather than of any particular individual.

It is interesting to note that these items are of no practical use. Though ornamental in nature, it is not their purpose to adorn those in possession of them (Malinowski, 1922). It is specifically in the act of exchanging these items that their value lies, for it forms a life-long partnership between the islanders. The items themselves are a symbol, representative of the relationship between those of different tribes and, as a result, those involved in the Kula have attached high value to objects which would otherwise be of little worth. The value in these items does not exist in having them, but rather in giving them. It is important to note that the items are not given arbitrarily. An individual's status is also of relevance to Kula. An average islander may only establish a few partnerships, whilst a chief may be bound to hundreds. Thus, the social hierarchy of those inhabiting the islands is interwoven into how the Kula system operates.

The relationships that are established through Kula produce benefits beyond the recurring exchange of bracelets and necklaces. They also facilitate the trading and bartering of utilitarian items, such as food that would otherwise be unavailable on one's own island. Such bartering is referred to as gimwali. They also engage in activities such

as the building of canoes. Mauss (1967) makes the distinction between gift and commodity exchange, the latter of which serves economic purposes. The island natives also enforce this clear distinction. Kula is a well respected system, to which certain rules, values, and decorum are applied. The islanders even have a saying, if Kula is conducted with a lack of decorum, “He conducts his Kula as if it were *gimwali*” (Malinowski, 1922). This saying demonstrates a difference in attitude between Kula and *gimwali*, between gift and commodity exchange. Kula is regarded with more respect and integrity. It is something to be valued and honored.

Although the soulava necklace was not made for the purpose of adornment, it possesses an attractive aesthetic. It appears that effort and craftsmanship went into fabricating the necklace, which demonstrates the value that the islanders hold for the Kula ritual of exchange. Despite being made presumably over a hundred years ago, and having been handled by presumably many individuals, the necklace remains in a good condition, which shows that it was made with durable materials and suggests it was typically handled with care.

Malinowski sold 672 artifacts collected from the Trobriand Islands to the British Museum in 1922. He was asked to take them away in 1936, reason unknown, and they have since ended up in the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley, USA (The British Museum, no date b). It seems unscrupulous that a collection of items intended to remain in circulation between the islands in the Western Pacific have since become property of museums. This raises an important ethical debate pertaining to the

items' history post Malinowski's acquisition in 1922. The British Museum hosts a myriad of objects that have been acquired either directly or indirectly through colonialism (Frost, 2019). As a result, museums displaying such artifacts have come into question in recent years, with public perception acknowledging the artifacts' colonial history. The British Museum has received backlash on social media with visitors to the museum expressing their conflict in observing items that have been "stolen from other countries" (Frost, 2019). Incidentally, this highlights how such objects displayed in museums can act as agents for eliciting discussion and subsequently raising awareness of colonialism, which one could argue is a positive thing.

The soulava necklace represents the rich culture of the Trobriand Islands as well as the complex and intricate Kula system which facilitates lifelong bonds between Islanders. It has value in anthropology to teach us about the nature of gift giving, as well as value in history to teach us about life and culture among the islands and the problematic history of colonialism. It also has contemporary value in sparking debate surrounding the displaying of such artifacts. The necklace possesses an extensive history and items such as these paint a picture and bring mere words to life when exploring its history.

References

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Images

Figure 01

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc-M-332

[Accessed 13/12/2022]



Figure 02

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc-M-332

[Accessed 13/12/2022]



Figure 03

Aria Anderson

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc-M-332

[Accessed 13/12/2022]

