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# ‘Like Playing a Game Where You Don’t Know the Rules’: Investing Meaning in Intercultural Cash Transactions Between Tourists and Trobriand Islanders

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**ABSTRACT** *When tourists visit cultural tourism destinations, the primary form of interaction between visitors and local residents is in the exchange of money for material objects and performances. While purchase of cultural commodities in tourism contexts may appear to be simple market transactions, they are often in fact morally fraught sites of ambiguous interaction, invested with disparate meanings by different participants. Drawing on Bloch and Parry’s (1989) analysis of the symbolism of money and its relationship to culturally constructed ideas about production, consumption, circulation, and exchange, this article examines the conflicting and contested views of cash transactions and other types of exchange in meetings between tourists and Trobriand Islanders in Papua New Guinea. I argue that intercultural exchange in tourism is not necessarily a straightforward commodity exchange, but evokes social relations that are often quite differently conceptualized by the producers and consumers of touristic products.*

**KEYWORDS** *Exchange, money, tourism, morality, authenticity, Trobriand Islands*

When I travel, I want to see daily life. When we went to [a certain Trobriand village] I didn’t like it so much, because I felt like a customer instead of a visitor. Everyone had something they wanted to sell. (Douglas,<sup>1</sup> a retiree from the USA in his 70s, travelling on a group tour)

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## Introduction

Cultural or ethno-tourism, or what we refer to in this volume as primitivist tourism, is a rapidly growing niche of the international tourism market. This is part of a larger global movement of increasing reification and branding of 'culture' as a thing to be consumed (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009), particularly in economically less developed destinations. Much research has focused on various types of inequality in the sphere of tourism as well as money's role in local economies (e.g. Apostolopoulos, Sönmez & Timothy 2001; Brennan 2004; Meiu 2009, 2014; Cole & Morgan 2010; Theodossopoulos 2010). As yet, though, little attention has been paid to the ways in which money may be seen as a specific medium of intercultural engagement, and how potential or actual cash transactions are sites of contested meanings and understandings. In the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), aspects of 'culture' which are offered for sale to tourists (such as wood carvings, objects of traditional wealth, dance performances, and village stays) may seem to be exchanged for cash as alienable commodities in uncomplicated monetary transactions. Yet these transactions are, in fact, moments of encounter that have significantly different meanings for each party. In this paper, I follow Bloch and Parry (1989) in examining the ways in which money is symbolically represented for both tourists and Trobrianders and in examining how moral evaluations of monetary transactions contrast with moral evaluations of exchanges of other kinds. As Bloch and Parry (1989: 23) suggest, the meanings with which money is invested are both situationally defined and constantly renegotiated. However, rather than looking at monetized exchanges as they are understood within a community, I look to tourism as a site of intercultural encounter and exchange, wherein monetary transactions can be (and often are) seen as a kind of 'game' with ambiguous rules. Neither the Trobriand social field nor the home societies of tourists are bounded or homogenous in any simple fashion, but for the purposes of this paper, the issue of disparities between tourists and Trobrianders who clearly expressed broadly similar discourses to other tourists and Trobrianders about what money means to them is even more significant. This article accordingly draws on the statements of a number of specific individuals in each population, to exemplify wider patterns of thought and experience I repeatedly encountered among members of their respective populations more widely in my fieldwork.<sup>2</sup>

While contributors to Parry and Bloch (1989) address issues of morality in monetary exchanges *within* a range of ethnographic examples, and Akin and Robbins' (1999) volume does so for exchanges within a number of Melanesian

societies, neither volume addresses how the meaning of money is complicated when used to transact *between* groups whose understandings of exchange are fundamentally different. It is this topic that I address here. Far from cash transactions being highly impersonal, anonymous, and disembedded, such transactions are, I argue, sites of intercultural and interpersonal relations fraught with moral ambiguity. Each party to such transactions is oriented by macro-tropes (Rumsey 2004; Merlan 2014) or metanarratives (Englund & Leach 2000; Bruner 2005) that ground both their own understandings of exchange, and their imagined reality of the others' understanding of the same exchange. As with any interpersonally constructed system, if the actors transacting do not share an understanding of how to represent and enact that system, there arises the potential for confusion, in much the same way as language differences impede communication (Zyphur, Islam & Franklin 2006). Such transactions, as my ethnographic examples will demonstrate, involve complex moral assessments and attempts to mediate differences not only in language and way of life, but also in entire cosmologies. The use of money as a means of interaction between radical cultural others may in some respects involve the bridging of cosmological gaps, but at the same time the interpretations and priorities of each party to the transaction differ dramatically.

Classic theoretical accounts of money's distinctive features as an exchange valuable focus on its anonymity and impersonality, and its character as a readily convertible medium of exchange (Marx [1867] 1976; Simmel [1907] 1990). Economists recognize money's ability to quantify value as readily translatable and convertible in globalized markets. As a standard of value, money can be exchanged for virtually any good, and the value of a unit of currency can be held, transported, and recirculated in a future transaction. Even between people who have dramatically different understandings of value and the nature of exchange within their own societies, money allows a common 'language' of exchange. But this depiction of money's role in cross-cultural exchange does not tell the full story of the meanings and values associated with cash transactions between peoples with drastically differing worldviews. My fieldwork on cultural tourism in the Trobriand Islands suggested that there is a disconnect in the meaning of money from the perspectives of foreign tourists seeking an encounter with so-called primitive peoples who have, they suppose, largely escaped the reaches of consumerism and the global economy, and resident Trobrianders whose engagement with the market economy, while significant, is only a small part of the complex local exchange networks. Most Trobrianders'

access to cash is sporadic and unpredictable, largely limited to occasional remittances from relatives, and sporadic cash earned through tourism. While Trobrianders are highly mobile and many periodically go to urban centres to visit relatives, and some stay in the city to work, this paper considers the case of Trobrianders living in the Trobriands. Only a small handful of resident Trobriand Islanders work for a regular wage, while the vast majority live a predominantly subsistence lifestyle in the absence of electricity, running water, or regular access to media such as newspapers, television, or the Internet. In such an environment, the arrival of the small Dash-8 passenger plane several times per week from Port Moresby via Alotau is an event, with relatives and sometimes tourists coming and going and a lively (cash) market operating on the airstrip grounds.

Both Bloch and Parry (1989) and Akin and Robbins (1999) address the point that many 'traditional' societies had media of value – usually, but not always, shell money – that circulated as general purpose currencies well prior to the introduction of state-issued banknotes and coins. They note that in this sense the introduction of Western money was not necessarily conceived as a revolutionary or new technology (Robbins & Akin 1999: 3). While Bloch and Parry deal almost exclusively with state-issued currencies, Akin and Robbins take all forms of currency, both state-issued and indigenous, to share certain fundamental qualities, especially the fact that they are not consumed, but are valuable only as media of exchange for other things that *can* potentially be consumed. Although 'traditional' currencies<sup>3</sup> such as shells can provide a standard and store of value in much the same way as state-issued currencies, Robbins and Akin (1999: 12) argue that what sets money apart is the fact that it can move against anything, in any kind of exchange between people who stand in any kind of relationship to each other. The case of the Trobriand Islands – and, indeed, cases closer to home such as moral qualms instigated by commodification of human organs or children, for example – suggests that this argument is overstated. In economies where market exchange does not dominate, the relatively recent introduction of money provides fertile ground for considering the ways in which ideas about, and use of, money fits within or disrupts existing modalities of exchange and sociality.

### **Contemporary Tourism in the Trobriand Islands**

When Annette Weiner first arrived in the Trobriands in 1971, while PNG was still administered by a colonial Australian government, Kiriwina was experiencing a 'tourist boom' (1988: 20) in the form of weekly charter flights

from Port Moresby filled primarily with Australians on holiday from their government posts elsewhere in the country. After PNG achieved independence in 1975, tourist arrivals to the Trobriands dropped dramatically as expatriates left the country, infrastructure deteriorated, and international media reports focused on law and order problems. These issues endure, and tourism is further limited by the high costs of air travel, accommodation, and other tourist facilities. Still, a steady trickle of independent travellers, small tour groups, and cruise ship arrivals ensure that guest houses and other tourist services remain viable as a source of occasional income. A few resident Trobrianders hold government posts or work in one of several trade stores, or engage in other business endeavours, but most Trobrianders who live on Kiriwina and adjacent islands for the most part continue to make their livelihoods largely from subsistence gardening.<sup>4</sup> Access to tourist cash is generally restricted to the production of items for sale as souvenirs, not only the wood carvings for which Trobriand Islanders are well known, but also woven mats and bags, grass skirts, carved lime gourds, and even traditional forms of wealth such as shell valuables and axe blades. Some income can also be earned through dance or cricket performances for tourists, and by hosting visitors in a village on a day excursion (providing meals and entertainments) or overnight (providing village accommodation).

During my time in Kiriwina in 2009–2010, a total of 186 tourists visited the island, an average of about 10 visitors per month. Most visitors stayed for three or four nights, though some stayed for a week or more and, in rare cases, for several weeks. Some tourists came as independent travellers, while others arrived as members of organized groups. The longer the visitors stayed, the more likely they were to spend all or part of their visit in a village, either organized at their own initiative or with the assistance of the staff at one of the guest houses. Village stays were seen by most visitors as offering, as they often put it, a more ‘authentic’ experience and understanding of life in the islands ‘as it is really lived’. Such stays were also a cheaper alternative to extended residence in formal guesthouses. But regardless of the budget, length of stay, or differences in the travel organization, all tourists in one way or another gave money to Trobrianders in return for goods and services. In the case of organized tour groups, accommodation and dance performances were arranged by the tour company and paid for by the guide in advance of the group’s arrival. This limited the individual exchanges between tour group visitors and Trobrianders to, usually, the purchase of a souvenir. Lengthier

and independently organized visits, and especially those involving a village stay, offered greater opportunities for cultural and material exchange.

In my interviews with both tourists and Trobrianders about their experiences with tourism, the subject of money and its associated symbolic values inevitably arose. These conversations diversely addressed ideas about money's agency, its ability to create and transform, and, as tourists (but rarely Trobrianders) saw it, to corrupt and destroy. As noted earlier, while I cannot hope in the scope of this article to portray the full diversity of all Trobrianders' and tourists' experiences, the argument that follows reflects my extensive conversations and interviews *in situ* with tourists and resident Trobrianders, in the villages where these guests and hosts engaged with one another. With this as my basis, I attempt to untangle some of the conflicting understandings that emerged about what money is and does as it is transacted in the context of touristic exchange in a largely gift-based, non-market economy. The next sections broadly outline the main patterns that emerge in the way first Trobrianders, then tourists, think about and talk about money, in order to demonstrate the ways in which the 'game' of intercultural exchange is differently conceived, and what this means in practice.

### **Meanings of Money in the Pluralistic World of Trobriand Exchange**

The Massim region holds an abiding importance in the history of economic anthropology, primarily due to interest in the complex ceremonial inter-island exchange of decorated shells in *kula* (Malinowski 1920; 1922; see Macintyre 1983). The complex local economy of Trobrianders is well documented; less so its links to global economic and social forces. Here, I briefly describe the overall field of Trobriand exchange practices and their relation-making effects, as the background against which monetized transactions with tourists are understood from a Trobriand perspective.

Several non-monetary forms of wealth or 'valuables' well known from the ethnographic work of Malinowski and Weiner – such as *kula* shells, pigs, stone axe blades, pots, and banana leaf bundles and grass skirts – today remain essential items in famously complex webs of exchange interactions and obligations (Weiner 1976; 1988; 1992), and have also figured prominently in anthropological arguments about the nature of reciprocity (e.g. Weiner 1976; 1980; 1992; Mosko 2000) and (in particular) generalized exchange (Ekeh 1974; Damon 1980). Following Firth's (1939) analysis of exchange in Tikopia and Bohannan and Bohannan's (1968) classic discussion of Tiv exchange in Nigeria, Trobriand valuables and subsistence products have also been taken by Isaac (2005) to exemplify 'spheres of exchange', in which *kula* wealth

operates as a distinct and separate economic sphere. However, the Trobriand case seems to counter Bohannan and Bohannan's general assertion that 'each sphere is a different universe of objects [and] a different set of moral values and different behavior are to be found in each sphere' (1968: 228) such that the introduction of a universal equivalent in the form of money necessarily causes disruption and even collapse of 'traditional' exchange. Rather, as Bloch (1989: 167) argues, it is in the Western philosophical tradition that money has a strong moral charge hindering conversion from one sphere to another. In non-market-dominated settings, money is more neutral and facilitates all kinds of exchanges.

In fact, *kula*-type valuables that are situated outside active trade in the *kula* ring and are the private property of individuals, called *kitoum*, are sometimes sold to foreign visitors.<sup>5</sup> Other 'valuables' such as stone axe blades may also be sold under particular circumstances, as may be 'women's wealth' such as grass skirts, and yet these are both essential items in traditional exchanges, especially in the context of the competitive mortuary distributions known as *sagali*. This suggests that there is some degree of movement between spheres, and that non-commodities can, under certain circumstances, move into the commodity sphere, while the ideal of these spheres nonetheless remains intact. On the contrary, carved wooden objects are generally not ceremonially exchanged, but have been treated more or less as commodities since even prior to European contact, when carved utilitarian objects such as bowls, oars, and lime sticks were in demand throughout the Trobriands and neighbouring islands elsewhere in the Massim. Once colonial officials and missionaries established themselves on Kiriwina, production of wooden objects increased and new forms emerged to meet the growing European demand, but this merely encouraged fluorescence in innovation and borrowing of forms and designs, not the creation of an entirely new industry. In this sense, the arrival of tourists, who come specifically for leisure, was an extension of a well-entrenched commodity exchange system between Trobrianders and *dimdins* (white-skinned foreigners).<sup>6</sup> Although transactions with 'outsiders' have a long history in the region, the majority of day-to-day transactions in the Trobriand Islands, including those involving cash, take place between individuals or groups who have a personal relationship, and are part of an ongoing series of reciprocal obligations so that exchange is embedded in social relations (Polanyi 1944; Gudeman 1986, 2001).

The use of cash between Trobrianders is generally not a replacement for existing exchange obligations, but is supplemental and integrated within them. State-issued currency circulates alongside clay pots, yams, and other





**Figure 1.** Kina notes, banana leaf bundles (doba), and calico cloth prepared for distribution at a mortuary feast (sagali) in a kind of payment called *sepwana*. Source: Photo by author.

kinds of valuables in payments at marriages and deaths (see [Figure 1](#)). Cash may be invoked as an analogy for locally specific types of exchange media. For example, bundles of banana leaves called *nununiga* are often referred to by Trobriand women as ‘like your *dimdim* money’. These bundles are manufactured by women and exchanged for small goods such as betel nut, fish, tapioca cake, and even balloons or chewing gum, as well as being used as ‘payment’ in mortuary distributions (Weiner 1976). These patterns begin to illustrate not only that exchange is central to social life in this region (as many have argued, e.g. Gregory 1982; Strathern 1988; Mauss [1950] 1990), but also further that this exchange may take many forms, that the taxonomy of exchange genres is highly flexible, and that money can be accommodated within established strata of valuables that do various kinds of work in the Trobriand context.

In the Trobriand vernacular, there are a number of key terms relevant to understanding how Trobriand Islanders view and practice exchange, including cash transactions. As Weiner (1980: 74) has noted, the Kiriwina term *mapula* has played a significant role in the development of exchange theory. Malinowski glossed the term as ‘repayment, equivalent’, defining it as ‘the general term for return gifts, and retributions, economic as well as otherwise’ (1922: 178). I most frequently heard the term *mapula* glossed by Trobrianders in English as ‘payment’ or ‘answer’; like many Kiriwina words, it can function grammatically as either a noun or a verb. Tourist transactions and the payment tourists make for goods or services are generally referred to as *mapula*, as are a variety of payments made in cash or in kind between Trobriand Islanders. Both with respect to transactions between Trobrianders and that between Trobrianders

and non-Trobrianders, payment or return is also referred to using the verb 'to help' (*-pilasɪ*), such as when tourists would look at artefacts offered for sale, and the carvers would implore me to tell my 'friends' to 'help' them by buying their wares.

A related concept is *gimwali*. Malinowski glossed this as 'barter', and though the term may once have been used to refer to exchanges of goods for other goods, in contemporary speech it refers exclusively and specifically to transactions involving cash. Money presented in traditional exchanges such as bride payments<sup>7</sup> or mortuary distributions is not *gimwali*, but any direct purchase of a good or service is. This is contrasted with *bobwelila*, a noun glossed as 'gift'. A *bobwelila* may or may not require immediate return, but it is always recognized as part of longer term reciprocal obligations. Gifts are sometimes given by Trobrianders to *dimdims* in an attempt to create an obligation to reciprocate, that is, to make them feel compelled to give or spend their money. Charm and magic, even trickery and manipulation may also be used to try to 'sweeten' or 'turn' the mind of a prospective customer. In essence, then, the techniques used to foster exchange with foreign tourists bear a striking resemblance to those used in *kula* transactions (Malinowski 1920; 1922; Leach & Leach 1983). *Kula* transactions are described by Trobriand Islanders as a sort of game, and the participants as 'players' (Linus digim'Rina, personal communication), in which the outcome is unpredictable, especially since transactions often take place with visitors from afar, usually other islands across the Massim region, who are not kin (Malinowski 1922; Damon 2002). There are clear parallels with touristic exchanges. A primary difference between *kula* and tourist transactions is that *kula* exchanges are ongoing, while exchanges with a *particular* tourist are usually finite. I contend, however, that the category of *dimdim* is seen by Trobriand Islanders less as a series of distinct individuals than as a single typified figure. It was clear to me by the constant stream of questions as to how I would 'call' each newly arrived visitor, whether Australian, American, or Swedish – that is, how was I related to them – and by the consistent generalizations I heard about how *dimdims* act, think, and live – that tourists are considered a distinct but homogenous group, composite beings representing one another in a general sense (Stasch 2014; see also Bashkow 2006).

Robbins and Akin refer to the 'anxieties' regarding money in non-market societies, suggesting that

Beneath the surface of any well-ordered Melanesian economy there always lurks the possibility that objects will begin to consort promiscuously, erasing in the shuffle the

many boundaries between kinds of persons and kinds of relationships that people have worked hard to create through their exchange... it is not surprising that despite their quick adoption of money [Melanesians] continue to worry about its power to breach the transactional boundaries they have erected. (1999: 7)

On the contrary, at least in the Trobriand instance, money does not demonstrate particularly potent power in this regard, and its presence (or absence) is no more potentially destabilizing than manoeuvres made with 'traditional' forms of wealth (though see Schram 2010 for a different interpretation in nearby Normanby Island). Exchange relationships are always tenuous, and the way people choose to deploy objects of wealth always has the potential to either solidify or subvert relationships. If a *kula* valuable is not passed on the proper path, or a long yam is not presented to the appropriate chief but is diverted for other purposes, boundaries are breached and social relationships are shifted. Money is but one of any number of transactional media that may affect the relationships between people, and between people and things.

The role of money in Trobrianders' lives is something that Trobrianders themselves emphasize strongly in some expressive contexts and downplay in others. Trobriand Islanders pride themselves on producing locally much of what they need to live. I was often told, both in English and in Kilivila,<sup>8</sup> 'We don't live on money here. We have our gardens.' Nonetheless, people desire access to money both for the commodities that can be purchased with it, and for its role in meeting kinship obligations in traditional exchange. One need not necessarily work directly for money; periodically sending garden produce or other gifts to wage-earning relatives living off island entitles one to a share of that relative's earnings. This should be given freely, but if needs are unmet, it is acceptable to 'beg' (*-niḡada*) for it.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of begging for food, there is no shame in such a request. Conversely, if someone has an abundance of anything, it is that person's 'shame' (*kalamwasila*) not to share freely with all who may ask. Generosity is a virtue, while to be called selfish or mean is a great insult. Part of the risk in dealing with foreigners is that they are often 'selfish people' (*minapiki*) and do not understand the right way to engage in exchange. Money should be shared by those who have it with those who do not; it 'helps' people to find the things they need that cannot be locally procured; and the only danger associated with it is its potential to foster selfishness, jealousy, or laziness. This is not seen as an agentive quality of money itself. Rather, people may choose to behave in social or anti-social

ways with money in much the same way as they might when confronted with other valuables, such as *kula* shells or long yams. No amount of money, however, can compensate for a poor yam garden, and to buy garden food at the market is to invite gossip about one's slothfulness and incompetence. In this sense, money is subject to its own set of constraints. Its use may invoke judgement on the moral virtues of both the Trobrianders and *dimdims* who transact with it.

Money, like all valuables, is seen as circulating continuously, and a given transaction is rarely finite. Cash received is most frequently put to use either for payment of children's school fees or for use in *sagali*, large distributions of both 'traditional' wealth objects such as yams, clay pots, stone axe blades, and banana leaf skirts and bundles, and modern commodities such as rice, housewares, clothing, and cash notes and coins. School fee payment is explicitly described by Trobrianders as an investment that may yield future returns. So too *sagali* exchanges are an ongoing process, and investment in *sagali* for one's relatives is essential to exchange networks on an extensive spatiotemporal plane. If neither of these most common needs is pressing, money might be used to make bride payments, to buy rice to feed those who have offered some service such as assisting in house building or weeding in the garden, or even to give away to someone in greater need with the expectation that later, a return gift will be made. Even money expended for basic household needs is conceived as feeding and forming the family, which creates obligations for children to later 'take care of' their parents (Mosko 1995). Thus while Trobrianders engage in cash transactions, and some may be seen as 'selfish', 'greedy', or 'money-faced' (a common Trobriand epithet), this does not mean they are adopting a wholesale capitalist framework. Rather, capitalism articulates locally with a diverse socially embedded world of circulation and exchange.

### Meanings of Money in Tourists' Perceptions

The moral implications of money are conceived of rather differently by tourists visiting Kiriwina, who idealize the Trobrianders and other places that maintain a 'traditional' way of life and an economy that is not based strictly on market exchange. As Sillitoe (2006) observes, 'cash may mean something else to people on the periphery of the market economy than to those deeply in it'. Tourists who transact in cash often assume that it will be disruptive to the social fabric of the village. While anthropologists have long since repudiated references to 'the primitive' and an essentialized view of culture as static and homogeneous, these frameworks are very much alive in the orientations of

many tourists who visit the island. Idealizations of a 'primitive economy', where most things are given freely rather than bought and sold and where people produce most of what they need locally, are central to the romanticization and allure of tourist destinations such as the Trobriands (Selwyn 1996; Bruner 2005; see also Stasch 2014). In the Western philosophical tradition, money has a long history of associations with evil, corruption, and vice. Moral qualms about the dangers of profit-oriented exchange date back to Aristotle and resurface with Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century (Bloch & Parry 1989: 2). In my interviews with the cultural tourists who choose to visit less economically developed places such as the Trobriand Islands, it became clear that most visitors idealize people whom they imagine to live outside of monetary economies as more harmonious, cooperative, and contented than the profit- and accumulation-driven West, and desire that they should remain 'untainted' by capitalist greed. They feel these desires both at a level of personal contentment in the knowledge that such places still exist, and at a level of paternalistic concern to protect those who are not fully engaged in a monetary economy from the pitfalls of capitalism. Krista, a German multicultural skills coach for business-people in her 50s who travelled to the Trobriands on a small group tour, made an observation echoed in many other conversations I had with tourists:

Well, I learned that they [Trobriand Islanders] may be poorer with regard to material things – we are richer in this type of thing. But I would say we are poorer in many other things they've got – close ties to family members, helping one another, sharing, mutual obligations. And this is what, in my mind, has been lost in Western cultures.

Visitors frequently articulated their concern that money has a destabilizing and potentially disastrous effect on the moral fabric of a perceived 'pure' society, and many were fearful that the perceived negative effects of a market economy were already being felt in the islands. 'I wanted to come and see it before it gets corrupted,' and 'I worry about this place being spoiled by tourists' were typical comments. Some were suspicious about whether the hospitality and entertainment they enjoyed were 'authentic' and untainted by money. Sally, a retired bankruptcy lawyer from the West Coast of the USA who visited a village with her tour group, noted, 'We know [the tour guide] is paying each village we visit. I'm not sure if people would be as accepting and welcoming if they were not being paid.' Similarly, an affluent British couple who had visited several of the smaller outlying islands by private charter boat before arriving in Kiriwina noted that the residents of the outer islands were 'less concerned with money'

than Kiriwinans, citing significant fees charged for accommodations, food, and dinghy hire in contrast to the generosity they received elsewhere. On the tiny atoll of Gawa, they told me, people came to them bearing gifts of small woodcarvings and shellfish, expecting (as they interpreted it) nothing in return. They saw the relatively overt focus on cash payments for goods and services in Kiriwina as representing, in their words, 'a little crack in paradise'.

It is paradoxical that these foreign visitors who, by definition, have a level of affluence that permits them to travel to such a relatively expensive destination as PNG bring to their encounters with Trobrianders preconceived ideas about the potential negative effects of money. These ideas contrast sharply with Trobriand Islanders' views of payment as the appropriate return 'gift' for goods or services provided to visitors. This mismatch of viewpoints is illustrated by the experience of John, a visitor who called in to the Trobriands while attempting a round-the-world yacht voyage, who complained bitterly to me about how he 'felt ripped off, tricked' when invited to see a local dance displaying villagers in traditional dress in the village of Koma, on Kaileuna Island. The nature of the invitation meant that he and his companions 'thought we were guests', and took 'gifts' such as sugar and rice, which they thought would be appropriate thanks to give in return. However, the group felt 'a bit put out' when cash was demanded as payment for seeing the dance performance, which was surely organized for their benefit as a way to bring some income to the community. This request for payment was interpreted by the visitors as demonstrating a regrettable 'cash mentality'. The request for cash shattered the myth the group had constructed that here they had an opportunity to join in with 'the locals', and participate in a village activity in the way they imagined it would take place if not for their presence; this was not the 'pure gift' the visitors had imagined (Carrier 1995).

In the absence of an organized handicraft market, carvings are usually purchased directly from the carver or his proxy, usually a relative (see Figure 2). Interacting with the carver, asking questions about the 'meaning' of the object, and knowing the money was going directly to the producer were frequently cited by tourists as significant and positive aspects of the exchange. On the other hand, being asked to pay to take a photo or visit a beach was usually interpreted by tourists as confirmation of the very moral degradation they anticipated. Haggling over artefacts for sale caused great angst. Most visitors wanted to pay a fair price that did not exploit the carver, but they also feared that, as Val, a physiotherapist in her 60s, put it, 'We might spoil [Trobriand culture] if we pay too much.' Many opted to buy carved items expressly



**Figure 2.** Visitors shop for Trobriand-made objects as souvenirs. Source: Photo by author.

made for tourists, but were uncomfortable with purchasing items made for local use, such as stone axe blades. When offered one of these, an Australian travelling with his family by catamaran responded: 'I told the guy, you keep them, it's your culture. It's sad seeing people sell their culture – that stuff should never leave. I don't mind buying carvings, because they're made for tourists.' Others, however, felt that objects made for tourist sale lacked meaning and were mere trinkets. Sally, introduced earlier, stated: 'I don't buy what they make for tourists – if it has meaning for people who use it, it has more meaning for me.' Often, I found myself positioned as intermediary between a Trobriander hoping to make a sale, and his or her prospective customer. Trobriand sellers often implored me to help them to receive a generous price, assuming that the

visitor had ample money at his or her disposal. Tourists, likewise, expected me to offer advice on both the cultural and monetary value of the object. In some respects, my reluctant mediation served to neutralize the ambiguity and difficulty of negotiating a transaction between cultural others, as I was viewed as familiar to both sides and *au fait* with both Trobriand and *dimdim* ways of transacting (see also Causey 2003).

Despite qualms about tourism's potential disruptive and pernicious qualities, many visitors felt a sense of moral superiority over their counterparts who stuck to developed resorts or cruises. Here again is Sally, the retired bankruptcy lawyer: 'It makes me feel good that we are providing money to the village – not to change culture, but to help them survive.' In a similar vein, Diana, a well-travelled and vibrant 69-year-old American group tourist, informed me, 'I'm not big on souvenirs, but I would like to get one ebony carving, because it contributes to the local economy.' A group of elderly tourists from North America visited both the local hospital and Kiriwina High School on the last day of their tour, collecting donations among themselves to make a small monetary contribution to both. Several group members later sent medications and supplies to the hospital by post. Most visitors self-identified as travellers, rather than tourists, and critically positioned themselves as culturally sensitive as against the stereotypical figure of the ugly tourist, a widespread and well-documented feature of cultural tourism (e.g. Crick 1989; Errington & Gewertz 1989; Bruner 2005; Gillespie 2006). The ambivalence in tourists' views is again highly explicit; money can bring destruction, but if managed correctly, it might also improve the quality of life in a place that lacks many basic services. As Herb, a retired professor of biochemistry visiting on a group tour, said:

I don't know what fifty kina [PNG currency] represents to a family – it's important to buy staples that they can't grow, but I don't know how much people really need . . .

As tourists, we change the natural economy. It's hard to tell if for better or worse. I see poverty, but I'm applying my standard to them.

An example of a particular transaction may illuminate some of the ways in which the nature and meanings of an intercultural exchange are played out in reality. While I was visiting the outlying island of Kuyawa, a local man approached the house where I was staying with two other *dimdims*. The man had brought a stone axe blade he wished to sell. The seller was expecting guests as part of a prayer exchange with a parish on another island and needed to buy rice. One of my companions, a German journalist in his 30s,



expressed interest in purchasing this item, especially when he learned something of its role in Trobriand exchange networks (Malinowski 1922; Weiner 1976; Battaglia 1994). The seller claimed that this item had been passed through his family since 'ancient times' (*tukanibogwa*), thereby imbuing the object with an aura of authenticity, based on age and cultural significance. Paradoxically, for Alard, the prospective buyer, this made the object in a sense *too* valuable – priceless – in his eyes. The Trobriand owner, on the other hand, saw the object as valuable, but not the right kind of valuable for his immediate needs. By turning the axe blade to cash through its sale, he could then turn the cash to rice through a purchase at the trade store, which would be consumed by guests to create an obligation to reciprocate with food, objects, or cash. For the seller, the relationships he needed to foster, and the future returns it would engender, were more important than the object. Alard vacillated about whether to purchase the axe blade for the stated price of K100 (about USD35). He worried that if he purchased the object and took it back to Europe, he would be disrupting an otherwise unadulterated exchange system. When a companion pointed out that this man needed cash, and might end up selling it for even less to someone else, Alard decided to purchase the item, which he deemed 'real – it has a story'. He contemplated offering the seller *more* money than the asking price to assuage his guilt at purchasing an heirloom item, and to mediate his moral ambivalence about whether he was helping or exploiting the seller. For the buyer, the 'story' of the object and its role in non-monetary exchange would enhance his narrative and further authenticate his Trobriand experience, even if the act of transaction (in which the item was removed from its 'traditional' exchange context) was fraught with moral uncertainty.

## Conclusions

What do these conflicting discourses tell us about the nature and meaning of money and its moral implications, as perceived in the interaction between two groups who think differently about what money is and does? And how does this bear on theoretical concerns about the nature of commodity transactions, and the way money works as a medium of exchange?

Trobrianders and tourists in many ways hold incommensurate understandings of the nature of exchange, and this often makes their actual interactions perilous and morally uncertain. Each of the parties operates within its own frame of reference, and brings to the transaction an (often imperfect or incomplete) understanding of differences in the others' economic world. Both

Westerners and Trobrianders depend on money as the primary means of exchange for goods and services provided to tourists, and both recognize different co-existing modalities of exchange, such as sharing, buying, and delayed-return exchanges. If exchanges between members of a given group, who share understandings of the meaning and nature of money, may at times be differently interpreted and lead to conflict or bad feelings, intercultural exchange is doubly perilous. Robbins and Akin note that

'For an exchange to be a morally neutral conveyance, not only must people in the right kind of relationship (or potentially in such a relationship) be transacting with the right kind of objects, they must also be doing so in the right way'. (1999: 9)

Doing things 'right' becomes particularly difficult – and therefore morally ambiguous – when parties to the transaction are operating with discordant rules and philosophies about money, and are further hindered by carrying out transactions across gaps of linguistic comprehension. Lucy, an expatriate Australian in her 30s working in Port Moresby who spent a week staying in a Trobriand village with several friends, summed up the difficulties inherent in understanding transactions between visitors and their hosts:

It's like playing a game where you don't know the rules. And someone gives you something, and you know that they want something back, but you don't know [what]. I think part of the complicating factor is it's not upfront like a monetary transaction [back home] but we're still Australians, and so, there's always that kind of – with friendship, you know, we're paying for services, kind of thing – there's just a bit of lack of clarity in it.

Tourists value the opportunity to have a 'friendship' – however fleeting – with the people they travel to see, to ask questions about the meaning of an object or performance, or even to stay in a village, which provides for the visitor a heightened sense of authenticity. A souvenir, experience, or even a photograph in this sense is not entirely alienable. It carries with it, if not a part of the individual producer or seller, at least an invocation of the place, a sense of memory and bodily experience that can traverse time and space. The money transacted is significant to both parties, but in different ways. To the (relatively) affluent tourist, money is easily replaced, but the moral dilemma of 'disrupting' a 'primitive' economy is the cause of significant angst, and there is concern about transacting 'properly' – with the right person, in the right amount, and with the right social behaviour. The cash received by a Trobriand Islander in return for a carving, dance

performance, or other good or service might be used to buy comestibles such as rice or fish, or may be recirculated to meet or create ongoing reciprocal obligations: as payments in cash or in kind, to contribute to a mortuary feast, or to pay for a child's school fees as an investment in creating future obligations from child to parent. There is a moral obligation on the part of the Trobriander who holds money to share it and spend it carefully, with an eye to past debts and future relationships. For both parties, the role of money in their own lives is complicated and poorly understood by the other; cross-cultural monetary exchange is, indeed, as Lucy put it, 'a game where you don't know the rules'. Trobrianders assume that tourists have limitless supplies of cash, and use it for everything, selfishly, without obligations or commitments, as a contrast to their own more limited access to cash, and the complexity of their social obligations. Western tourists assume that Trobrianders do not really 'need' money and that it can only disrupt the harmonious dynamics of the local economy they imagine, again in contrast to what such tourists see in their own consumerist, competitive, cash-driven society. These misunderstandings complicate what might, on the surface, look like a straightforward commodity transaction, creating ethical conundrums for the traveller seeking not to 'corrupt' or 'spoil' Trobriand economic life, and judgements by Trobrianders about the moral qualities of the 'selfish' visitors who do not spend freely.

Drawing on Marx' and Simmel's contributions to discussions on the nature and transformative capacities of money, Bloch and Parry suggest that the impersonality and anonymity of money mean its introduction can only be destructive to community and depersonalizing of social relations:

In light of such arguments it is tempting to conclude that money acts as a kind of acid which inexorably dissolves cherished cultural discriminations, eats away at qualitative differences and reduces personal relationships to impersonality. It is only to be expected, then, that those 'traditional' cultures which must for the first time come to terms with it will represent money as a dark satanic force tearing at the very fabric of society. (1989: 6)

In the present case, it is not *Trobrianders* who see money thus, but only the Western visitors who see their own social fabric as long since torn asunder due to the corrupting influence of the market, and who strongly extend that anxiety towards Trobrianders in interpreting the material aspect of tourism encounters.

Perhaps not surprisingly, both Trobriand Islanders and Western tourists conceive of the role and effect of money in the context of their respective underlying philosophies on the meaning of wealth and its role in exchange.

For Trobrianders, money is another form of 'valuable', intermediate between the consumable items of exchange such as pigs, yams, betel nut, and even rice, on the one hand, and enduring, non-consumable items of value such as shell necklaces, clay pots, stone axe blades, and even banana leaf bundles and skirts (*doba*), on the other hand. Each of the many valuable objects used in Trobriand exchanges has particular characteristics and contexts in which it may be more or less important than other items. Money is neither inherently good nor bad, although greed, jealousy, and selfishness are moral pitfalls one must avoid with any form of wealth. Money may have the *potential* to be a store of value, but this potentiality is rarely realized in a temporal sense by an individual. That is to say, money is rarely held or saved, but is quickly recirculated. Like any other valuable – yams, a *kula* shell, or a pig – one must calculate in any given circumstance the best way to transact – when, with whom, and for what purpose or end. In other words, money is 'cultural' and very much a part of social (inter)-action.

Western tourists, on the contrary, see the agency money wields as explicitly morally ambivalent. Most carry with them a metanarrative that money (more accurately, love of money) is, as *The Bible* proclaims, 'the root of all evil' (1 Timothy 6:10). A so-called primitive economy that has long relied on things other than money to meet social obligations, and in which much of what one consumes can be produced locally, is idealized as morally good, pure, and unadulterated. The introduction of cash can only, in this romanticized view, lead to a casting out from Eden. For the avowed capitalist, money is anonymous, impersonal, and implies that everything has its price; in a market economy, gifting is relegated to the margins, everyone is selfish and maximizing, and greed soon replaces cooperation. For cultural tourists, the social action is in experiencing alterity, and having to pay for it is an uncomfortable but necessary detraction from seeing and knowing 'life as it is really lived'. Paradoxically, the moment of financial transaction is as 'real' an intercultural encounter as many tourists are likely to achieve. It may be the only direct transaction they will have in a village, since the majority of their interactions with Trobrianders are mediated by tour leaders or guest house staff.

The discourses of both tourists and Trobrianders about money suggest that both see money as an active agent, capable of instigating transformations, but with differing implications. Trobrianders – who have a long and complex history of engagement with Christianity, colonialism, and capitalism – are far less anxious about the moral perils of money than are those visitors whose economies are dominated by it. Trobrianders are renowned for

reconfiguring foreign introductions in ways that reflect the distinctive Trobriand ethos. As Weiner (1988: 167) eloquently states, 'With masterful zeal, Trobrianders make manifest who they are through what they exchange.' Negotiating exchanges, whether in *kula* or in tourist transactions, is a game in which many Trobrianders excel, and, if played well, can reap great rewards. For many Trobrianders, tourists are one of few potential sources for obtaining the cash they need and desire as one of many important exchange items, but they make for unpredictable trading partners. For tourists, desire to experience something outside their own hyper-commoditized society is part of the incentive to travel to a place known for its traditional exchange practices. The rules for, and meanings ascribed to, such intercultural interactions are unfixed and potentially incommensurately understood, but as the primary means by which tourists can buy objects and experiences in the tourism milieu, each side must find a way to engage despite their imperfect understandings of the others' economic world and the moral ambiguities such transactions may elicit.

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### **Notes**

1. All participants were explicitly asked whether they preferred I use their own name or a pseudonym. I have reflected their choices here, but do not indicate each case where names have been changed.
2. In general terms (though of course there are exceptions), travellers who reach the Trobriands are usually affluent professionals, mobile, well educated, widely travelled, adventurous, and curious enough to opt to travel to PNG. Many are retired. Among tourists, my inquiries turned up few systematic differences of viewpoint along lines of gender, whereas age and previous travel experience often were axes of significant differentiation (see MacCarthy 2012). For Trobrianders resident in their home

- islands, the other group of people with whom I worked extensively, the patterns of opinion that I report across this article did not vary systematically along lines of gender, chiefly versus non-chiefly lineage, or other obvious areas of local social differentiation.
3. In this paper, I use the term 'traditional' to describe exchanges that make use of items of wealth produced locally (yams and pigs), exchanged intra-regionally (stone axe blades and shell valuables), *and* state-issued notes and coins which are used to meet ongoing social obligations and to maintain and solidify both kin and non-kin relationships. I do not intend for expressions like 'traditional' currency or 'traditional' exchange to imply any assumptions of a frozen-in-time continuity from a distant past uncoupled from modern life and economic exchange.
  4. Accurate statistical data for PNG are difficult to obtain. While a census was carried out in 2011, only preliminary data are available and due to high mobility, communication difficulties, and flexible kin arrangements, even such data as are available have limited accuracy. According to my own observations, perhaps 90% of resident Trobriand Islanders do not have a regular source of cash income, though some of these persons may engage in the market economy in an informal and generally low-return manner, such as selling produce or value-added products like cakes or scones.
  5. Malinowski did not make reference to *kitoum*, but they have been discussed by a number of more recent scholars such as Damon (1980; 2002), Munn (1986), and Weiner (1976; 1988; 1992). May (1982: 297) briefly discusses efforts made as part of micronationalist movements in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s to prevent *kula* valuables being sold outside the traditional exchange networks.
  6. The term *dimdim* refers to both skin colour (white) and point of origin (non-Trobriand). It is not a term particular to the Kilivila language, but is used throughout Milne Bay Province.
  7. There are exchanges that take place to formalize and publically recognize matrimony, and today money is virtually always integral to these transactions. However, it should be noted that these exchanges, called *kaikaboma* and *katwivila* in the Trobriand vernacular, are not on the scale of 'bride price' as represented in the literature from many other parts of PNG and Melanesia more broadly.
  8. The vernacular language of the Trobriand Islands is usually referred to as Kilivila, but is also often called both in the literature and by Trobriand Islanders by the name of the largest island, Kiriwina. I use these terms interchangeably here.
  9. While Trobriand Islanders most often glossed the verb *-nigada* as 'beg' in English, it may also be glossed as 'request' or 'demand'; see also Hammons (2014).

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