

Kula Expert to Study Museum Collection

Social anthropologist Dr. Susanne Kuehling visited the Otago Museum recently to study some Kula valuables in the collection. Kuehling's PhD saw her undertake fieldwork on Dobu Island, Papua New Guinea, focusing on the moral dimension of gift exchange.

Kula exchange is well known in social sciences as the archetypical example of gift exchange with delayed reciprocity. On a group of islands lying off the southeastern tip of Papua New Guinea, specific valued objects – red shell necklaces (*bagi* or *soulava*) and white shell armbands (*mwali*) – are exchanged in opposite directions around a chain of partners. This means that a gift-giver will not immediately be given a reciprocal gift, as is common in many gifting situations. The exchanges provide links between communities in the area. There is a significant competitive element between the participants, as prestige is attached to possession of the most valuable objects, and social standing is enhanced when partners give generously. The objects are also used for internal exchanges, such as bride wealth, mortuary feasting, compensation, pigs and land use.

As the global economy and the principles of patriarchy are reaching these remote islands with force, the young generation is less inclined to spend energy and time on Kula exchange. The rules of gift exchange are in stark contrast to capitalist principles of accumulation. The current generation of Kula masters believes that this exchange system is at great risk and they may well be the last who take it seriously.

Dr. Kuehling's project, funded by the Canadian Social Science Council (SSHRC), aims to answer these concerns. Together with the Dobu islanders, she is developing methods to research the value and movements of individual *bagi* and *mwali*, drafting a 'constitution' for the correct way of gifting *bagi* and *mwali*, and discussing ways to increase its attractiveness to the younger generation.

Dr. Kuehling is fluent in Dobuan, the lingua franca of the Kula region, and her long-standing relationships are the basis of this project. So far, about 300 bagi and mwali have been documented, but there may well be thousands of them waiting for assessment. This is the first time Kula is being studied as a multi-sited institution.

Many bagi and mwali have left the Kula region and became decorations of private houses, as well as museum treasures. Dr. Kuehling is currently visiting museum collections, searching for bagi and mwali in order to provide the islanders with information about these objects and – in good Kula exchange style – returning the experts' knowledge to the curators.

Dr. Kuehling was at the Otago Museum on 6 October and will be in Dunedin for the remainder of the week. She has already identified a number of mwali and some Kula necklaces in the Museum's collection.

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