BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Annette B. Weiner, ***Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving.*** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. Pp. ix, 232, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index, illustrations. US$35 cloth.

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Exchange, Gender, and Inalienable Possessions

DURING THE PRE-WORLD WAR II YEARS, it was fairly common, even with the emphasis on ethnographic particularism, for anthropologists to devote their intellectual energies to generating grand syntheses and overarching theories of social relations. Since then, despite the proliferation of anthropologists, there have been proportionally far fewer synthetic works. Most anthropologists, reacting to criticisms of earlier ethnologists, afraid that critical comment will damage their own careers, and mindful of the exigencies of satisfying grant and manuscript reviewers, dissertation supervisors, and tenure committees, have retreated to the safer havens of narrow topics, narrow areas, and ethnographic analyses of limited sectors of social life.

Annette Weiner's ambitious, challenging, impressively argued book returns to an earlier tradition of broad ethnological analysis and theory building. But this is theory envisioned through intimate knowledge of one place, the Trobriand Islands, over a twenty-year period--plus a shorter period of field research in Western Samoa--and closely grounded in the reinterpretation of cross-cultural ethnographic data.

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Weiner calls her book an anthropological experiment. She asks us to do no less than rethink the received wisdom of Malinowski and Mauss that the principle of reciprocity underlies exchange, and social life more generally. Instead, Weiner focuses on what she calls the paradox of keeping-while-giving and on the inalienable possessions that are hoarded, conserved, and inherited, to a greater or lesser degrees in all societies, while other objects, often symbolic replacements of these heirlooms and sacred relics, are offered in exchange.

Emphasizing the accumulation of wealth rather than its distribution, Weiner also stresses the building rather than the leveling of inequality through exchange. "The motivation for reciprocity is centered not in the gift per se," she argues, "but in the authority vested in keeping inalienable possessions. . . . [T]he authentication of difference rather than the balance of equivalence [is] the fundamental feature of exchange" (p. 40). Control of inalienable possessions generates and sustains rank and hierarchy. Individuals and groups exchange to try to snare what is hoarded and withheld, tokens of power and difference frequently imbued with what Weiner calls the "cosmological authentication" of gods or ancestors, and try to build or alter political hierarchy by capturing the "inalienable" possessions of others.

This is a stimulating and innovative position for rethinking exchange and inequality. It is worth bearing in mind during this rethinking, though, that the freshness of Malinowski's and Mauss's writings on exchange in the 1920s came from their contrast to European "commonsense" cultural assumptions that the accumulation of wealth--land, crown jewels, gold coins, shares of stock--and its conservation through inheritance, primogeniture, and entailment are the natural and logical avenues to power. Weiner's contribution, by emphasizing keeping, without omitting giving, is a valuable corrective for anthropologists who have allowed the brilliant theorizing on gift exchange and reciprocity of our forebears to obscure the need to think more creatively about the role of wealth conservation in the building of social relations and social difference.

As a teacher in an American university, I am reminded yearly of how counterintuitive the Maussian/Malinowskian views of exchange are to Westerners when I begin to explain to a new cohort of puzzled and objecting undergraduates what was explained to me by islanders in southeastern New Guinea: that publicly giving away shell necklaces, greenstone axeblades, and large pigs enriches the givers by putting others into their debt. The original paradox of giving that European observers such as Boas, Malinowski, and Mauss confronted was that you can get rich and powerful by giving things away.

Engendering Wealth and Exchange

Weiner argues that anthropologists should be careful about uncritically accepting theories based on flawed ethnography, particularly ethnographic reports that have ignored the activities of women as producers of wealth and reproducers both of persons and of social relations, as she says theories of exchange have generally done. Weiner especially emphasizes the production and the exchange and conservation--often but not always by women--of fibrous wealth, which she glosses as cloth: banana-leaf skirts and bundles, flax cloaks, barkcloth, feather cloaks and insignias, and so on. These are frequently imbued with sacred power and symbolize group identity and authority. She cautions further that there is a Western cultural bias in assuming that female roles as reproducers are negatively valued, domestic, or profane compared to male productions and forms of wealth.

This key aspect of Weiner's work is part of a larger scholarly trend in the anthropology of gender of the last decade and a half to question received categories, such as nature/culture, sacred/profane, public/domestic, and their associations with male and female. Contemporary anthropological gender studies reanalyze the actions of both women and men. They focus on the ideologies in which those actions are embedded and which they actualize or subvert, stressing their multiple and often contradictory aspects, as Weiner does here.

Weiner's book is likely to introduce, or to emphasize, the gender dimensions to some scholars of economic relations and exchange who may have either ignored or paid minimal attention to women's productive or reproductive activities and their consequences. Weiner's own ethnographic reanalyses of Trobriand Island exchange, which document women's exchanges of skirts and banana-leaf bundles, ritually essential counterpoints to men's famous interisland exchanges of stone and shell valuables, or ***kula***, are well known, particularly through her first book (1976). Still, a great deal of the anthropological writing on gender and on women, both ethnographic and theoretical, which has burgeoned in the last twenty years, is read with great interest, but mostly within a restricted subset of anthropologists and social theorists, largely female, who already identify themselves as gender scholars. I have heard male colleagues say, "I'm not interested in gender," using a tone and language they would probably not employ publicly to proclaim a lack of interest in, say, political anthropology. By not using the words gender or women in her title, and by writing an important theoretical work addressing core issues in economic anthropology--production, accumulation, exchange--and political anthropology--rank, chiefdoms, the creation

and maintenance of social inequality--Weiner will compel many of her colleagues, whether they ultimately agree with her or not, to consider and take seriously the gendered dimensions of women's and men's actions as they generate and reshape wealth and power.

Like Marilyn Strathern's ***The Gender of the Gift*** (1988), Weiner's ***Inalienable Possessions*** integrates gender into a reexamination of exchange--in Weiner's case with an emphasis on what is not exchanged--and uses a close reading of these aspects of social life--across Oceania for Weiner and in Melanesia for Strathern--as a lens for rethinking social relations more generally in all parts of the world. Weiner argues that anthropologists have paid insufficient attention to the cross-sex sibling bond, or what she calls sibling intimacy; to the productive, exchange, and ritual roles of women as sisters rather than as wives; and to women as actors in social dramas rather than as mere objects-- valuable ones to be sure--exchanged between men. The focus on the marital pair and the nuclear family, she reminds us, is part of a European cultural legacy. European anthropologists and those who read their theoretical works, whatever their cultural backgrounds, have uncritically allowed these cultural assumptions to pass unanalyzed, she says, and to be projected onto non-Western societies. "Giving a sibling to a spouse is like giving an inalienable possession to an outsider" (p. 73), Weiner states. Note the gender-neutral language: she sees this as a fundamental principle applying to husbands and wives, sisters and brothers.

Wealth Held and Lost

Weiner uses ethnographic examples from societies in Australia, Melanesia, and Polynesia with varying types of social hierarchy and with matrilineal, patrilineal, and cognatic descent to support her theses: that conserved wealth, imbued with ***mana*** or ancestral power, is key to understanding the meanings of what is exchanged and to the construction of hierarchy and difference; that women's production and exchange are central to social and political formations even in societies usually described by anthropologists as male dominant and excluding women from the prestige economy and ritual; and that a close, continuing bond between adult sister and brother, often extending to their children, is substantiated in exchange and religious practice, authenticating rank or natal lineage identity. She makes briefer comparative excursions into the ethnographic and historical literature on ancient Greece, medieval Europe, and the Pacific Northwest coast in the nineteenth century, among other times and places. ***Inalienable Possessions*** draws together and significantly expands on ideas from a number of Weiner's previously published essays on exchange, cultural reproduction, and women's

wealth, and the book is valuable as a more fully developed and comprehensive treatment of her theoretical positions.

Weiner first traces the concept of reciprocity in European economic history, as in the "reciprocal give and take of the marketplace" (p. 28). She notes that Marx, Morgan, Maine, and other nineteenth-century social theorists, writing in a milieu of industrial capitalism run rampant, envisioned "primitive societies" as characterized by reciprocity and communalism without social inequality This nineteenth-century intellectual legacy, she believes, has been largely unnoticed and unchallenged in anthropology, received as it is through the modernist and ethnographically buttressed exchange theories of Malinowski and Mauss. Weiner uses a brief survey of medieval European legal and philosophical treatments of wealth, especially land, to develop her concept of inalienable possessions as "symbolic repositories of genealogies and historical events" identified with "a particular series of owners through time" (p. 33).

This discussion raises a fundamental question, which can also be asked about the Pacific societies she later analyzes. As Weiner often but briefly notes, the categories of things she calls inalienable possessions do in fact become alienated: by conquest, by lack of issue, by the sale of landed estates, by gift. I will use one of the best-known European examples: the crown of England. Along with the "cosmological authentication" of the divine right of kings, it has passed from Plantagenets to Tudors and Stuarts to Hanoverians and the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, also known as the House of Windsor, along with assorted duchies, castles, and crown jewels. David Cannadine (1990:103) quotes Lord Ailesbury, writing in 1911: **"A** man does not like to go down to posterity as the alienator of old family possessions." But, Cannadine continues, "that was exactly what he and many others of his class were doing." The British royal family and the wealthiest dukes still own significant chunks of the British Isles, as Weiner points out in a footnote. On the other hand, recent historical research shows that one-quarter of all the land in England, about one-third of both Wales and Scotland, and an even-higher fraction of Ireland were sold by the nobility and landed gentry in the years just before and after the First World War, reversing five hundred years' worth of accumulation of land, the premier European inalienable possession, by a tiny handful of privileged families (Cannadine 1990:111).

What does it mean when the "inalienable" is alienated? **It** may be viewed as catastrophic or tragic by certain participants or onlookers and as a great victory against tyranny by others, but disruption of the orderly succession to and inheritance of ***dala*** lands or duchies occurs somewhere in the socially known world in every generation. In my view these disruptions do not

negate Weiner's core concept of "inalienable" possessions, which she carefully explains can be appropriated by outsiders, along with their "cosmological authentication." But pursuing further the political and ritual meanings of these periodic appropriations, which are both material and symbolic, at greater length might lead to fresh perspectives on social change and continuity, equality and hierarchy, just as Weiner's focus on what is kept illuminates what is given and why.

As Weiner points out (p. 23), we anthropologists and our perspectives are shaped by "our" field sites. We forever afterward see the world, at home and elsewhere, not just through the eyes of our natal cultures but through our own bemused version of the worldviews of the people with whom we have lived. It is logical that Weiner looks at the gendered nature of social relations and the accumulation and distribution of wealth cross-culturally through Trobriand as well as Western and anthropological eyes. This has led her to examine the ethnographic accounts of others in search of a female domain of exchange focusing on fibrous wealth and, after living off and on for years with the matrilineal Trobrianders, for evidence of close economic and ritual ties between sisters and brothers. The most striking thing about her reanalyses of the ethnographic literature--and to the rethinking of the ethnographic corpus that her book provokes in the reader--is not that some societies seem to give lesser or little weight to the accumulation of forms of wealth imbued with sacred power, that is, to a separate but ritually essential female domain in which "cloth" is exchanged, or to close sibling relations. It is that so many societies do emphasize these things to some degree, whatever their types of political stratification or descent rules.

In one of her most intriguing chapters, Weiner turns to Polynesia, particularly to the Maori, Samoans, and Hawaiians, for examples of the interrelations of "cloth" wealth, heirlooms and insignias of divine authority, giving and keeping, gender relations and the cross-sex sibling tie, female ***mana,*** and chiefly powers. She relates these to means that vary in each culture and over time for creating and maintaining rank and hierarchy. Chiefs, usually male but occasionally female, give away while preserving their most precious heirlooms, often created by women of an earlier generation. Their gifts are replacements that call attention to what they keep, such as particular, famous cloaks of feathers or flax, or the oldest and finest mats or tapa cloth. These are permeated with ancestral power, may even become divine themselves, and bear political legitimacy to their owners and conservators. Chiefs and rivals build political hierarchy, Weiner argues, by capturing the inalienable possessions of others. As recent ethnographic research in Samoa by Weiner and others shows, the ritual/political use of fibrous wealth and of women's production continues to this day in the independent island nations

of Polynesia. Reading this chapter vividly reminded me of visiting Nuku-'alofa, the capital of Tonga, in 1977 and seeing fifty women sitting cross-legged in the square in the middle of town, opposite the bank and the Morris Hedstrom store, producing piles of tapa cloth for an upcoming wedding in the Tongan royal family.

Weiner's view of Polynesian chiefly keeping (the oldest and rarest wealth objects, imbued with ***mana)*** while giving (valuable goods, paradoxically drawing attention to objects withheld that validate the owner's authority) as the mechanism for creating and maintaining hierarchy differs from, but is still compatible with, earlier, more materialist analyses that emphasize chiefs' responsibilities to give. To avoid being killed and having all their possessions plundered in a mass revolt, chiefs in times of drought or famine were under intense pressure to "give" the surplus food they had previously collected in tribute from others. This noblesse oblige, to use an equivalent European term, simultaneously preserved their authority, displayed their divine power, and safeguarded their most precious possessions, as Weiner would likely observe.

Kula **and Inalienable Possessions**

Weiner compliments the skills of an array of Oceanic ethnographers by using their rich and detailed accounts to substantiate her own theoretical projects, even when she reaches conclusions those who collected the data may not share. But the chapter of ***Inalienable Possessions*** that will probably be most closely read is the one on ***kula,*** largely based on her own ethnographic research though interwoven with the observations of others, including contemporaries and our distinguished predecessor, Bronislaw Malinowski. Weiner rereads ***kula*** giving as loss and getting (keeping) as fame. She also points out something that is rarely emphasized: in ***kula,*** there are many losers, individuals (almost all ***kula*** players are men) who give shells hoping to open or strengthen particular ***kula*** paths but who get back much less than they hoped, and without gaining fame from their giving. This is the only way a successful few can accumulate large numbers of important armshells and necklaces and then judiciously distribute a few of them to favored partners, hoarding the rest for years or even a generation. ***Kula,*** then, does create difference, as objects of value do in Polynesia. But--with the partial exception of the Kiriwina chiefs, especially in the precolonial era--this difference is individual and comparatively ephemeral, creating personal fame and temporary influence only 'within ***kula,***" Weiner writes (p. 133), rather than hereditary rank and authority for a group of people and their descendants. ***Kula,*** she argues, is an arena outside of kinship and locality that may lead to spe-

cific kinds of authority and fame. Prized shells are trophies that may be kept. Like Polynesian heirlooms, they attract other valuables to their (temporary) owners, who substitute gifts of lesser valuables of the same type as that which is hoarded, gifts that paradoxically remind the recipients and spectators of the valuable withheld and thus the power of their owner.

Kula armshells and necklaces are not inalienable possessions, then, in **Weiner's** terms. They "lack sacred powers" (p. 133). ***Kula*** does not generate rank "because kula shells lack cosmological authentication and women's participation is minor. " Weiner instead sees chiefly shell decorations, insignia of rank worn ceremonially, as inalienable possessions--along with ***dala,*** or matrilineage, land. Women's "cloth wealth" objects, banana-leaf skirts and bundles, signify, despite their brief existence, the cosmological authentication of matrilineal ancestors that ***kula*** shells lack (p. 147).

Here I should explain that my own view of ***kula*** and cognate forms of ceremonial exchange is from the vantage point of Vanatinai (Sudest Island), in the Southern Massim, the largest island in the Louisiade Archipelago. Vanatinai is not part of the ***kula*** ring but connected to it through other exchange links; armshells are not used in exchange, but large numbers of ceremonial shell-disc necklaces are made, and the finest, named ***kula*** necklaces also circulate in the region today (including some mentioned by Malinowski), along with several thousand greenstone axeblades and other ceremonial valuables, Parenthetically, women as well as men ritually exchange these forms of "hard" wealth (to use Weiner's term), associated with men in the Trobriands, in inter-island exchange journeys and at mortuary ritual feasts. At the same feasts, women also participate in limited but ritually essential exchanges of coconut-leaf skirts among the matrilineages of the deceased, widowed spouse, and deceased's father (Lepowsky 1993).

From the perspective of field research in the Southern Massim, I suggest another possible relationship between ***kula*** armshells and necklaces and Weiner's category of inalienable possessions. Following an analysis of Fitz Poole's beautifully detailed studies of the Bimin-Kuskusmin of interior New Guinea, whom Weiner sees as transforming human bones into inalienable possessions embodying ancestors, Weiner writes that bones are a limited medium of exchange. Unlike "cloth," they cannot easily be produced or replicated to provide replacement objects for exchange, while ancestral relics are conserved and venerated (p. 117). But I would argue that ***kula*** armshells and necklaces are just that: symbolic replacements of human bones. I was explicitly told by elders on Vanatinai that shell-disc necklaces, the kind that circulate in ***kula*** as well as in the Louisiade Archipelago, were originally decorated human skulls. The white plate of helmet shell that forms the main part of what is still called the head of the necklace has been substituted for

the skull, and the decorations of reddish shell discs, wild banana seed, pearl shell, and so on have become more elaborate and various (and some ***kula*** necklaces lack this type of pendant altogether).

Decorated ***Conus*** armshells (and the ***Trochus*** shell bracelets worn by a few big-men at Vanatinai feasts), I further suggest, are metaphorical substitutes for human jawbone bracelets. These used to be worn on Vanatinai, according to the diary of a twenty-four-year-old assistant ship's surgeon and assistant naturalist named Thomas Henry Huxley, who arrived in Sudest Lagoon in 1849 on HMS ***Rattlesnake.*** Huxley tried but failed to barter with its owner for one such bracelet, which had only one tooth (the jaw seemed to be lashed to an animal bone), but "the old fellow would not part from it for love or money. Hatchets, looking-glasses, handkerchiefs, all were spumed and he seemed to think our attempts to get it rather absurd, turning to his fellows and jabbering, whereupon they all set up a great clamour, and laughed. Another jaw was seen in one of the canoes, so that it is possibly the custom there to ornament themselves with the memorials of friends or trophies of vanquished foes." The man returned the next day with another "jaw bracelet . . . in fine preservation and [which] evidently belonged to a young person . . . with every tooth being entire" (Huxley 1935:191-192). I presume that the first bracelet was an ancestral relic and the second the relic of a recently slain enemy.

Jawbone bracelets were also observed around 1900 near Milne Bay and Samarai (Monckton 1922). Given the sketchy nature of our information on the precolonial Massim, it is highly possible that jawbone bracelets were customary relics of ancestors or trophies of war on many islands, especially since secondary burial was the norm. Both Vanatinai and Misima Island people tell me that inter-island skull exchange was practiced throughout the Louisiade Archipelago, on Vanatinai until as recently as about 1910 (see Macintyre 1983 for skull exchange on Tubetube Island). The relatives of a slain warrior sometimes demanded the skull of an enemy victim as compensation. The skull of an important defeated enemy might be decorated with face paint, scented resins, flowers, and leaves, and the victorious warrior would present it to his grateful allies in exchange for shell-disc necklaces and greenstone axeblades.

Nineteenth-century European visitors to the Louisiade Archipelago confirm the practice of skull exchange. The skull of bêche-de-mer fisherman Frank Gerret, murdered on Panapompom Island, was exchanged for twenty-five greenstone axeblades in 1885. The skull of the unfortunate John McOrt, murdered at Brooker (Utian) Island, was still circulating seven years after his death in 1878. A man from Motorina Island obtained it in exchange "for several pigs, canoes, white arm-shells, and hatchet-heads" and hung it in his

house rafters (Bevan 1890; see Lepowsky 1993). Note the exchange of one of the primary types of ***kula*** valuables, "white arm-shells," for a skull.

Even in this late precolonial form of skull exchange, ancestral relics do not circulate but are conserved, and retrieved from enemies, as inalienable possessions, to use Weiner's term. Relics today are imbued with ancestral power, as they surely were in the past. Small pieces of a mother's skull, a father's tooth, or a lock of a deceased sisters hair are secreted by many people in their personal baskets as talismans and are used in magic and sorcery. These relics embody both ancestral and personal power and to some extent the power of the deceased's matrilineage. But in the militantly egalitarian society of Vanatinai they do not create or authenticate rank or lineage authority.

Vanatinai elders told me that the exchange of shell-disc necklaces and other valuables began in ancient times as a peacemaking ceremony. Reo Fortune, based on field research on Dobu Island in the 1920s wrote that ***kula*** is "like an annually repeated peacemaking ceremony" ([1932] 1963: 209; see also Young 1971 for similar explanations from Goodenough Island and Macintyre 1983 for Tubetube Island). In the late precolonial period, the two forms, skull exchange and ***kula*** and its cognates, coexisted, just as off-islanders traded in some years and places and raided in others. The actual and metaphorical substitution of decorated shells for the decorated skulls of war victims--formerly ransomed from enemies with shell valuables and greenstone axeblades and reclaimed as ancestors--is entirely logical in an ongoing, increasingly effective and elaborated international peace treaty. If ***kula*** and cognate inter-island exchanges began as peacemaking, the giving and getting of valuables are not intended to validate interlineage difference, authority, or rank. They are instead a ritualized and aggressive form of competition among individuals from different islands that substitutes for warfare and for the wealth and renown that a champion warrior (an exclusively male role) and his home island, district, or hamlet would gain. And this is why, in the Massim as a whole, though not in the southeastern islands, ***kula*** is, as Malinowski put it, "essentially a man's type of activity" (1922:280).

Ancestral relics continue to be guarded in secrecy by individuals and used to make the matrilineal children and gardens of these ancestors fruitful. They are also used in the powerful magic of exchange--in a metaphorical form of sympathetic magic, or like to like--to attract other valuables and to seduce exchange partners, making them dizzy with desire and eager to give away their carefully conserved articles of wealth. Making peace and exchanging symbolic decorated relics in ***kula*** protects the ownership of "inalienable possessions": ancestral matrilineal lands and relics that might otherwise be conquered and plundered.

Keeping While Giving

Annette Weiner's "anthropological experiment" in ***Inalienable Possessions*** successfully challenges the rest of us to rethink our assumptions about exchange, reciprocity, and authority. Not all her readers will agree with her about the universality of her theses, or her conclusions about the local complexities of action and belief in a particular milieu, but they will have to consider them carefully and articulate their own analyses in response. Weiner's call to look afresh at some of our most basic anthropological tenets of social relations is a welcome one. In issuing it she joins an all-too-small group of contemporary anthropological theorists who provoke us to think in new ways about the underlying themes and permutations of human social life instead of sheltering ourselves in received wisdom and our prior assumptions about the meanings of ethnographic data, our own and that of others. Admirably original in concept, this book extends Weiner's views of inalienable possessions, female wealth, siblingship, and the creation of social difference, generated in the ethnographic matrix of the Trobriand Islands, into a variety of social arenas. Although Weiner limits herself primarily to Pacific societies, as she says, variations on the theme of "keeping-while-giving" are found in all societies. No anthropologist will be able to ignore this important book.

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