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Q4(c)

Critically examine various anthropological interpretations about the Kula Ring

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Religion

5. Religion: Anthropological approaches to the study of religion (evolutionary, psychological and functional); monotheism and polytheism; sacred and profane; myths and rituals; forms of religion in tribal and peasant Societies (animism, animatism, fetishism, naturism and totemism); religion, magic and science distinguished; magico-religious functionaries (priest, shaman, medicine man, sorcerer and witch).

Core demand of the question

- Critically examine various anthropological interpretations about the Kula Ring
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Malinowski made kula a total social fact of the Massim.

Mauss generalised the gift from kula and potlatch.

Weiner restored women's wealth and rank.

Munn and others added fame and political economy.

The ring is historical, not a frozen primitive market.

Introduction

The kula is the ceremonial exchange of armshells and necklaces among Massim islands. Interpretations have moved from function to meaning, history, and power.

Body

Classic readings

- **Malinowski** in *Argonauts* treated kula as a total social fact: partnership, magic, canoe, and rank, not barter. Reciprocity explained the circling of mwali and soulava.
- **Marcel Mauss** used kula, with Northwest Coast potlatch, to theorise the gift as obligation to give, receive, and return.
- **Reo Fortune** and later **Annette Weiner** stressed women's wealth and the reproduction of rank, which **Malinowski** had underplayed.

Later critique

- **Nancy Munn** read Gawa kula as fame and spatiotemporal value. **Fred Damon** and **Jerry Leach** mapped regional political economy.
- Formalists tried to see delayed profit. Substantivists kept Polanyi's reciprocity. Both miss that kula names are political.
- Colonial and mission history changed routes. A timeless ring is an ethnographic postcard.

Balance

- Kula is still the best teaching case that exchange can be the constitution of society. It is not a fossil of primitive trade, and it is not only a poem of solidarity.

Flow diagram

Kula -> Malinowski total fact
Kula -> Mauss gift
Kula -> Weiner women wealth
Kula -> History power

Conclusion

Kula has been read as function, gift, female wealth, fame, and regional politics. **Malinowski** opened the file. Critique added gender, history, and power without deleting the ring.

Facts & figures

Mwali and soulava

Armshells and necklaces that travel opposite ways around the kula ring.

Malinowski

Showed that kula partners, magic, and canoes are one institution, not hidden barter.

Mauss

The Gift used kula to argue that presents create persons and obligations.

Weiner

Women of Value, Men of Renown recast Trobriand exchange through female production and rank.

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