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Ritual Energy and Social Life

The Importance of Mutuality

Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart



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To the Wind that clears the way/the path

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Series Editors' Preface

We are very pleased to see this book in the Ritual Studies Series with Carolina Academic Press. The numerous books in this Series have covered many different parts of the world, including the Pacific, Africa, South America, and Asia. The general overall approach in these works has been in line with the pursuit of detailed, theoretically significant ethnographic study in which room is made for description of local materials, as well as history and broader interpretive analysis leading to a rounded appreciation of the topic in hand. In numerous cases specific topics guide the progression of the analysis: for example, stories about the origins and management of fire, or stories of change in life-cycle rituals, or investigation of weaving practices, or secret societies and practices of violence, or the role of communal drinking institutions in creating solidarity among marginal groups.

The present book adds to this ensemble of studies in three ways. First, it is primarily based on first-hand field studies and also narratives of historical change, giving greater depth to the purview of materials. Second, the whole study bears directly on the issue of the place of violence, mediation, and peace-making in the Highlands societies of Papua New Guinea which has led to a proliferation of studies since outside influences were first brought to bear on these societies in the 1930s (see, e.g., Strathern and Stewart 2011). Third, this book pushes forward on these

themes by evaluating a current kind of approach to the creation and maintenance of social order or disorder that has been labeled as “costly signaling theory.” We seek to expand the scope of this theory by situating it in a wider view of relations of exchange culminating in the emergence of what are known as epideictic displays of status and achievement of groups and their leaders in contexts of competition for prestige and dominance. When these relations break down, violence re-emerges, as has been happening recently throughout parts of the Highlands, such as the Enga and Hela provinces of PNG.

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We want to thank all the people that we have worked with over the years for instructing us, sharing aspects of their lives with us, and accepting our presence in their world. Many thanks also to the numerous academic friends and colleagues in many parts of the world who have engaged with us in the spirit of collegiality for many decades, notably Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Papua New Guinea, Japan, Taiwan, Scotland, and Ireland. We also gratefully thank Carolina Academic Press for their unfailingly professional help in the production of this and many other works.

Front Cover of this book: Throughout the Pacific region cordyline plants are double markers of boundaries of customary claims to territory, as well as markers of healthy growth and resistance to decay. In Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea, a type of cordyline is also a sacred group emblem (mi) on which group members swear as evidence that they are telling the truth in a dispute. We have a cordyline in our front garden at our dwelling as a sign of vitality.

Introduction

This book examines the utility of a theoretical approach derived from biological studies of animal behavior in contexts of competition for resources, such as mating and reproduction. The approach is called costly signaling theory. The premise is that displays of strength and attractiveness to potential mates are ways of sending out costly signals enhancing the standing of the senders of such signals. A correlate is that these signals enhance trust between individuals because the signals are “hard to fake,” that is, they are costly.

Competitive displays of wealth and status are a prominent feature of many Papua New Guinea societies. Anthropologists have called such processes “epideictic displays” that exhibit the power of their performers. This book examines how costly signals theory can be combined with the idea of epideictic displays to produce a model of ritualized exchanges of wealth. Instead of isolating one particular action as constituting the costly signal, the model seeks to situate rosters of action in an overall picture of complexity that culminates in public epideictic displays, iconically shown in the sequences of events found in the moka exchange system in Mount Hagen within the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. We pursue this general argument by situating it in terms of histories of exchanges and their ecological underpinnings.

The investigation begins with a brief review of costly signaling as a concept (above). It continues with focused chapters on histories of exchange in the Orokaiva, Hagen, and Pangia areas and a further detailed history of one Hagen tribal group, the Kawelka, and their patterns of migration occasioned by vicissitudes of warfare with neighboring groups followed by deployment of costly symbols designed to stabilize their local political circumstances. The chapter on Pangia shows how exchange practices are shaped by cultural models of kinship. In Pangia such practices stay within the ambit of affinal-maternal relationships, whereas in Hagen the moka developed into more complex, open, and competitive networks, energized by alternating claims by leaders to prestige and influence.

Throughout, the emphasis is on showing how costly signals are integrated into total “prestations” constituting epideictic displays that assert status and ability to survive difficulties in the real world of politics. Costly symbols can also be analyzed as forms of ritualized action, so our study also fits into general discussions of the functions of ritual in social processes, with particular reference to the mediation of inter-group conflict and peace making. In the course of all this, mutuality emerges as a crucial factor in which the workings of costly signals are played out over time. A final, comparative chapter looks at extended examples of how elements of costly signaling are embedded within a range of exchange systems in Oceania and Asia, including minor informal contexts of behavior as well as formal major patterns. We also continue here with some further remarks on mutuality and ritualization.

Starting again, then, we note that social life is in general built from communications, indicating relationships of different orders. In a highly commoditized cultural world such communications become measurable in terms of money as a universal medium of exchange. Outside of such a nexus multiple values may be realized through unitary acts, so that signals can encompass various meanings, transmitted in encoded ways via symbols. Fundamental to

the workings of these symbols is their embeddedness in cosmologies expressing values inherent in social life itself, the bases of coexistence whether of enmity or amity. Within this framework particular acts of communication take their place. In turn, these acts are not only expressive of relationships but themselves create and transform social modalities between people.

Acts of exchange accomplish this creative process in ways that depend on a prior and ongoing mutuality between the parties involved. It is within a bedrock of mutuality that symbolic actions can flourish. Mutuality, in turn, depends on a flow of material exchanges that act as signals of commitment between people. The term “costly signals” has come to the fore in this context. This term arose as a means of conceptualizing such exchanges among animal populations outside of human social life, with reference to the fact that such signals entail a range of costs associated with them. (For a general exposition, including the relationship between communal religious signals and violence, see Alcorta and Sosis 2021.) Our major aim here is to situate these signals within the complex array of human practices that we can characterize as “mutuality.” The emphasis here is on the idea of reciprocity, sensibilities of exchange between people, rather than on unilateral payments, so that the costly signals that are generated are not understood as “purchases” but as vital parts of creating positive goodwill between the actors involved and as a resolution of conflicts and tensions stemming from violence in the historical past.

We will base our discussions on a range of ethnographic cases from Papua New Guinea, starting with the Orokaiva area and the work carried out there by Erik Schwimmer and others.

