

beyond a fitful flicker ever since. But however that may be, from Louvain has now come this bright beam, illuminating, as it were, the clouds of to-day, and scanning them as with a searchlight.

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EXCHANGE AND CEREMONY AMONG AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land

By Dr. Donald F. Thomson. Pp. vi+106+11 plates. (Melbourne and London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1949.) 12s. 6d. net.

IT has been known for a long time that the social life of the Australian aborigines is not as simple as their primitive technology might suggest. But it is only gradually that even anthropologists have realized how complex and how important to them are their ceremonial exchange cycles. Articles in great variety, such as spears, boomerangs and shields, red ochre and other pigments, pearl-shell ornaments, pounding and grinding stones, beeswax, even narcotics from species of *Duboisia* and *Nicotiana*, are passed from hand to hand and travel immense distances, sometimes hundreds of miles from the place where they were produced. This exchange fulfils very important economic functions. But it has wider interest, too. The process is rarely one of barter; it is one of gift and counter-gift, with elaborate ceremonial. Repayment is often not immediate, but delayed, in a credit system which has ritual as well as economic sanctions. There is obligation not merely to repay, but also to give, to maintain the social ties and to keep up the status of the giver. The exchange is not random, with anyone who is willing, but takes place as a rule between regular partners in different groups, who may keep this relationship for life. Such long-period linkage is helped by the fact that kinship provides a common basis for partnership. The exchange therefore expresses and reinforces kinship ties and is part of a general social fabric.

Dr. D. F. Thomson has made here a valuable contribution to this whole study. He knows Arnhem Land very well, from several expeditions, and has given an authoritative account of the way in which the aborigines there use their resources with care and skill, and augment them by ceremonial exchange of an intricate kind. In some craft usages, such as a specialized type of fish trapping, the people follow patterns believed to have been laid down by the totemic ancestors of a group, and restrict the distribution of the process or the article from a pious belief in the importance of group solidarity. Yet many other kinds of goods are in constant circulation, such as flint spear-heads, human-hair belts, opossum-fur aprons, fighting clubs, and calico and various kinds of iron goods. Many of these types of specialized artefacts must have been used for centuries in a traditional exchange system. But it is part of Dr. Thomson's thesis that a new impetus was given to the exchange cycle by contact of the Arnhem Land aborigines with visitors from Macassar and neighbouring Indonesian areas, who brought cloth, iron

tools, tobacco, bottle glass and other foreign articles during a period of about two hundred years. The whole exchange takes place along fairly definite trade routes. From the point of view of any one participant, each type of object must be handed on in the direction opposite to the one from which it was acquired. Each person acts as a clearing house for a short time, then passes the goods on to his partners in the appropriate direction. The result is a complex system of movement and counter-movement of objects, making an enormous network of relationships between people. The canalization of the exchange flow has its own terminology, reference being made to direction somewhat after the style of 'quarters' of the compass. The result is fascinating reading, with the various ceremonial threads skilfully disentangled.

Good as much of the analysis is, it omits discussion of important problems. No information is given about exchange-rates, yet this might have helped to elucidate the rather nebulous account of the relation between economic and ceremonial factors. A canoe-maker is paid in bundles of spears, baskets and tomahawks, by gift, and liberally. But we are not given any idea of the value of these things relative to other objects in the system. There are no data about velocity of circulation—it would have been relevant to understanding the relative demand situation to know how long it takes representative objects of different types to travel across the region. To estimate the volume of exchange would not have been easy. But some data could doubtless have been given about the kinds and amounts of goods passing, say, between two partners in the course of a year, or inwards to and outwards from a camp. It is mentioned that one man who was a consistent informant of Dr. Thomson's was a very active participant in exchange. This suggests that there were others less active. Since the obligation to exchange is represented as being so strongly sanctioned, an analysis of the reasons for more or less participation would have been useful. The prestige gained from acting as a middleman, especially in handling goods of the type obtained from the Indonesians, is noted. But no consideration is given to the question of any middleman's profit. This would strike any economist as a most likely incentive to exchange, especially since Stanner¹ has pointed out, for another region to the south-west, that there is a practice of 'milking' some objects, such as lumps of red ochre or beeswax, when they pass through one's hands. As a final point, while it is true, as stated in the book, that no definitive account has yet been published of the economic exchange of the Australian aborigines, mention might have been made of McCarthy's useful synopsis².

The book is thus not as helpful as it might have been on the quantitative side, and to this extent has its limitations for the theory of primitive exchange. But it gives a vivid picture, in a not too technical form, of the workaday life of these aborigines, and the way in which this is integrated with their kinship system and their ritual system. Good photographs illustrate major crafts, and two maps show the workings of the ceremonial exchange system.

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¹ Stanner, W. E. H., "Ceremonial Economics of the Mulluk Mulluk and Madngella Tribes of the Daly River, North Australia. A Preliminary Paper", *Oceania*, 4, 156 and 458 (1933-34).

² McCarthy, F. D., "Trade in Aboriginal Australia, and Trade Relationships with Torres Strait, New Guinea and Malaya", *Oceania*, 9, 405 (1938-39); 10, 80 and 171 (1939-40).