LARA

LEARNING AND RESIDENCE ABROAD

UNIT FIFTEEN

Local Level Politics

CONTENTS

SECTION ONE

1.   Introduction

> "I want to explain", said Miss Bartlett, "why it is I have taken the largest room. Naturally, of course, I should have given it to you; but I happen to know that it belongs to the young man, and I was sure your mother would not like it." Lucy was bewildered. "If you are to accept a favour, it is more suitable you should be under an obligation to his father than to him. I am a woman of the world, in my small way, and I know where these things lead to."
>
> (E.M. Forster *A Room with a View* (first published 1908)
> Penguin 1974:17)

In contrast to the more macro-approach towards politics and political institutions which is characteristic of Area Studies, this unit introduces anthropological perspectives to help students conceptualise politics as a part of everyday life and make sense of many of the interactions they will encounter during fieldwork. In particular it explores the idea that the role of gifts and exchanges in social interaction provides a useful entry point for understanding the cultural patterning of local level or 'micro' politics. As anthropologist F.G. Bailey points out in one of the student readings (see Section 3), exploring small activities 'can reveal patterns of social behaviour no less useful than the actions of statesmen.'

Exchange is presented here as a universal element of social and cultural activity which has important consequences for people over and above the idea of material gain. The session is intended to encourage students to analyse how patterns of favours and obligations constitute the 'social glue' which holds a community together and how, if we look beyond the purely functional, they are used to create and maintain social links and boundaries on a deeper structural level.

To explore the symbolic meanings embedded in exchanges, we examine practices of gift giving, related notions of reciprocity, role and reputation, and the idea of a moral community. In connection with these, students are introduced to the concept of social networks and to aspects of linguistic behaviour – in particular some of the sociolinguistic work on face, and the pragmatics of compliment giving and receiving.

The emphasis, as in other units, is not on covering all the theory, but on providing the conceptual foundations necessary for close observation and analysis of everyday interactions. Again, as with other units, teachers can select materials according to the time available and the required emphasis (it may be, for example, that the sociolinguistic dimension is stressed).

2.   Links with other units

This and the units on Belief and Action (Units 16 and 17) have been placed in the latter part of the course as they are perhaps more abstract and conceptually challenging than some of the earlier units.

The ideas introduced here can be used to reinforce areas covered earlier in the course. Links are particularly strong with Unit 5 (Families and Households) which examined hierarchy, roles, rights and obligations – in other words, the 'politics' and power relations within the family as well as the exchanges that help to maintain or break family equilibrium. Unit 6 which deals with the politics of gender relations is another obvious connection.

This unit also provides a further opportunity for students to 'make strange' and to relativise their own practices. Shifting the focus between the familiar and the unfamiliar allows them to draw connections between the apparently 'exotic' practices introduced here (the Moka or the Potlatch much studied by anthropologists) and what may at first appear more mundane customs such as buying a Christmas present, returning a dinner invitation or doing a favour for one's neighbour.

It should be pointed out to students that the micro examination of practically all the social interaction they have already undertaken in fieldwork assignments such as the pub or classroom observation tasks, would have been enriched by drawing on these overarching concepts. Examples of how former students have consistently drawn on them for project work in a wide variety of cultural scenes will underline their importance. Since there are many such examples, we have elected to focus on a number of them in greater detail than in many of the previous units, and there is a separate section describing them at the end of the Background Notes.

Finally, students should be made aware that the notions of exchange and reciprocity also apply to the fieldwork situation itself: what does the student ethnographer give in return for the way informants are prepared to teach her or him about their lives? This is a link to the important political and ethical dimensions of ethnographic research which are frequently stressed throughout these units (see in particular the units on methodology, Units 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 18).

3.   Background notes

Local level politics: exchange and social relations

The term 'local level politics' draws a distinction between the high-profile politics of statesmen, and politics on a micro-level, involving the small, taken-for-granted details of behaviour which form part of the fabric of our everyday lives and govern the way we manage our relationships and interactions with others. Politics, whether institutional or private and interpersonal, involve a variety of exchanges which are an integral part of all human interactions.

Speaking of micro-politics, Bailey suggests that exchange is 'the essence of social interactions' and that 'society exists in that men [sic] give each other deference, challenge, pieces of information, money, tribute, service.' Thus whilst the processes involved here do not necessarily map precisely onto those of politics with a capital 'P', we can nevertheless see many parallels between the small-scale politics of the quotidian and larger-scale, institutionalised politics. Features such as gift-giving or

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the granting and withholding of favours, with all their associated ramifications such as the negotiation of status, reputation, obligation and power, apply to politics with a capital 'P' as well as to family, office or sexual politics. In each case there are underlying issues of social hierarchies and identities as well as complex cultural norms which regulate actions and which judge them as egotistic or altruistic.

'Exchange' has been widely studied by sociologists and anthropologists and there are various theories relating to its role and function within different societies. Social Exchange Theory, for instance, is 'a theory of economic behaviour that assumes that power and prestige are non-material resources just as scarce as material wealth' (Cheater: 1986). This metaphor from the marketplace defines power as 'a negotiated relationship between people with different resources (land, money, position) in a community network'. It also examines how people exchange goods according to the standards of appropriateness determined by their cultural environment, and maintains therefore that economies are based on cultural practices as well as on market exchange.

The French anthropologist and social theorist, Bourdieu, also conceives of power within a culturally defined market. Power and prestige are symbolic capital and powerful language is a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991). So the exchange of symbolic 'goods' such as qualifications in return for hard work, honours in return for contributions to society (such as the Birthday Honours List) or even compliments are just as significant as the exchange of material goods.

Another anthropologist, John Davis, points out the numerous ramifications and layers of significance gift-giving assumes in any society: 'A simple gift has meanings which involve class, social mobility, matrimony, patronage, employment, manufacturing processes, issues of style and of changing rituals or conventions of gift-giving' (Davis: 1992. 6). He also looks beyond the surface giving and taking of such exchanges and, like Bailey, points out that they have 'political and emotional consequences which are important to people, quite apart from the material wealth which they gain or lose.'

Reciprocity: gifts and poison

Bailey notes that the German stem 'gif-' may translate into either gift or poison, and goes on to suggest that no gift is wholly uncontaminated. This 'poisoning of human relationships' is a factor every time we give or receive in as much as all gift giving encodes a complex system of obligations. People load their exchanges with meaning, and exchanges therefore become symbols with identifiable consequences, both political and moral. As Cheater points out: 'When we look at the apparently voluntary exchange of gifts between individuals we see [...] an underlying obligation' (Cheater: 1986. 124). In other words, even a 'free lunch' involves a tacitly understood I.O.U., and as the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss observed, failure to make a return gift leaves the recipient indebted to the donor. It is this burden of obligation which leads Bailey to speak of 'poison'.

Exchange, then, is always a message to be interpreted. For example, if a woman turns down a gift from a would-be suitor, she may be interpreting him as having a romantic interest in her and he may get the message that she is not interested. Similarly, if you help someone or ask a colleague to give a guest lecture, there are implications of reciprocity. Sometimes, as in the symbolic giving of Valentine's Day cards, for example, the messages exchanged are fairly clear within the particular cultural context. But receiving a gift can also be uncomfortably ambivalent; for example, when a gift is overgenerous and one is 'overwhelmed with gratitude', or when the message behind a gift is unclear or misinterpreted.

Obviously, ignorance of prevailing norms can be one reason the message carried by a particular exchange or gift-offering results in offence, ambiguity or 'poison'. It is common in language courses to find practical information in background or cultural notes reminding the learner that, for example, exchanges in Korea and Japan should be made with both hands, that gifts given in Thailand should not be wrapped in black, that when giving flowers to your German host you should always remove the wrapper first, that in France it is not customary for a dinner guest to bring wine, or that, as Joy Hendry points out, 'In some societies gifts are ignored by the recipient in front of the donor; in others they must be opened and admired, whether they actually give pleasure or not' (Hendry: 1999)

Anthropology studies all such modes of exchange in the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded and, most importantly, it does so in a way that goes beyond this simple noting of difference. Underlying practices such as those listed above may be many interwoven strands of understanding and expectations concerning appropriate degrees of reciprocity, class differences, notions of social roles, politeness and hospitality, as well as more tacit impression-management and boundary-negotiation. It is these deeper underlying principles that an ethnographic approach can help students to penetrate and understand.

In terms of reciprocity, Sahlins, amongst others, has shown that there are various types of reciprocity associated with exchanges. These carry varying social or moral implications, and Sahlins's typology outlines three reciprocities placed on a continuum: 'generalised reciprocity', 'balanced reciprocity', and 'negative reciprocity' (Sahlins: 1974). Generalised reciprocity implies exchange amongst people wishing to maintain close social relations, such as the family, where questions of obligations and returns often remain implicit and may be less crucial. Balanced reciprocity refers to the exchange of commodities of equal worth between parties with no delay between giving and receiving and no attendant moral implications. This kind of exchange is typified by an economic transaction. The third type, negative reciprocity, is involved in the most impersonal sort of exchange which entails 'the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity' and wherein 'participants confront each other as opposed interests, each looking to maximise utility at the others' expense' (148-9).

Between these three types of reciprocity are others, such as 'deferred reciprocity', which is nicely exemplified by Beattie's mention in the student reading of an Irishman who prefers to remain a little in debt to his local shopkeeper. Beattie analyses this as a tacit demonstration that he desires to sustain a relationship with his creditor

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rather than to complete the transaction which would cut off any need for further communication. Such patterns of behaviour where we urge a recipient to defer a return gift or favour are common and should easily be recognised by students.

John Davis has a repertoire of exchange relationships which can also usefully be exploited by students to examine types of reciprocity and which includes negative types such as 'gambling' or 'theft' where self-interest is the primary motivation. At the other end of the spectrum is altruism (e.g. giving to charity or making religious sacrifices) where self-interest is less relevant. Even here, however, the donor may expect to gain a personal sense of virtue, or a 'reward in heaven' – perhaps the most delayed form of reciprocity around!

An excellent example of gifts and poisons at work in a particular context can be observed in the documentary *Ongka's Big Moka* (see 'Description of a Session' for a detailed outline). Filmed in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, it follows the preparations for a 'Moka', a huge gift-giving ceremony orchestrated by Ongka, the most prominent 'big-man' of the Kalweka community. The whole purpose of this gift is to humiliate the recipient by its generosity and to assert the superiority of the donor. It will also leave the recipient very heavily in debt and obliged to reciprocate with favours until he can make a return gift some time later. The documentary shows how the entire social structure of the Highland people is dependent on the complex set of exchange relationships that go to make up the Moka.

Despite the very striking surface differences, a lot of what goes on between people in the Moka system is not really so different from our own cultural practices. As Cheater suggests, 'In an individualistic society like the UK, an "advanced capitalist economy", we might expect gifts to be peripheral in contrast with their importance in pre-capitalist societies such as the Trobriands, where after every harvest men customarily dispatched gifts of yams to their married sisters to reinforce the bonds of matrilineal descent.' However, she continues, 'Gifts are important in the UK not merely in social relationships, but also to the national economy. An industry [the gift industry] with a turnover of over one billion pounds annually is not an ephemeral speculation in a passing fashion. It is securely founded on structural relationships in society' (Cheater: 1989. 132).

Exchange, Power and Reputation

Many exchange relationships are clearly to do with power. This is particularly evident when they are unequal, and reinforce the status and power of either the donor or the recipient. The Moka ceremony referred to above is a good example, as are patron-client relationships (Delamont: 1995) whereby a person with greater influence in public life will give gifts or do favours for others in order to obtain their loyalty (in elections for example).

But power relations are always implicit in exchanges, and always running in tension with social cohesion.

In the student reading Bailey points out that the negotiation of roles and status through exchange is closely related to issues of reputation, power and the 'moral

communities' to which an individual belongs. He uses the term 'moral community' to refer to any group of people who are prepared to make moral judgements about each other on the basis of a shared set of codes, conventions and values. This could be a workplace community, a family, a village, etc. He describes status as a bundle of roles a person possesses, and the self as 'a set of reputations which spring from belonging to a community'. Our reputations arise from the interactions in which we engage and from the messages that these interactions signal about us.

Within any moral community, Bailey suggests, there are four kinds of political interaction, summarised in the terms 'friends, rivals, leaders and tyrants', but all these interactions are delicate: 'it is not that some exchanges are co-operative and others are competitive; all exchanges have the seeds of both these opposed things within them.' As in male/female relationships, compromise and constant adjustment are necessary to maintain the balance of social relations, and because we are dependent on others for our reputation, every exchange, however small, is important. In this sense, our partner in the exchange always has a certain power over us.

Take the example from the Bailey reading concerning the 'Housewives in Valloire'. This describes an important mechanism developed by the housewives to preserve their reputation when they are on their way to the shops. They are effectively caught between two stools in this situation: if they stop to chat with neighbours they may be branded as 'gossips'; if they pass by without chatting they may be branded as 'haughty'. The solution lies in going to the shops with their apron on, the apron becoming a powerful signifier or 'laconic sign' indicating that they are busy, politically off stage and not available for exchanges. This is a good example of how seemingly small actions can have important political consequences and lead to large judgements, and how our reputation is a gift from others.

Bailey's thesis is particularly useful in its stress not just on reputation but on the finely tuned, dynamic work of reputation maintenance. In other words, reputation is not given once and for all, and people 'run hard to stand still', since it requires much skill and energy simply to maintain the status quo, to preserve the balance of reputations and to keep people in the places they have always occupied.

In an examination of all female and male/female interactions by Deborah Tannen (1992), 'symmetrical' and 'asymmetrical' connections are highlighted as factors instrumental in achieving and maintaining a kind of equilibrium between participants. Here women she had observed on a videotape discussing their college grades are said to be involved in a kind of 'one-downmanship', the goal of which is to 'reinforce symmetry', 'to keep the scales even by lowering one's own side.' Another game of one-downmanship (this time said to be reinforcing asymmetry) has been observed in studying patterns of interaction in Iran (Beeman, 1986). This game is described as 'intensely hierarchical in nature. By portraying himself as lower in status, an Iranian puts himself at the mercy of someone more powerful, who is thereby obligated to do things for him: it invokes a protector schema.' Tannen suggests that women may also adopt such a position 'so that men will take care of them.'

In cases where reciprocity is unbalanced because of differences in capacity to grant goods and services, friendships may give way to 'lop-sided friendships' or patron-client relationships where the element of power becomes more explicit. That is, relationships where one person, the patron, is more powerful and gives favours to a partner or client, who has the obligation to return through, for instance, casting votes for the patron or providing services.

Finally, the idea of what constitutes a good reputation should be relativised. The wealth of anthropological literature on honour and shame in the Mediterranean shows how the reputation of men may depend much less on factors such as material wealth than on their ability to act in defence of their families and maintain the chastity of their daughters and the faithfulness of their wife (Delamont: 1995). Le Wita's study of French bourgeois culture (see Unit 5) is another example of how class reputations are maintained in a particular cultural context.

Community

The similarities across cultures in the symbolic dimension of exchange may be highlighted by examining a variety of exchange relationships at work in different types of community. Much of the anthropological work on exchange has concentrated on small rural communities, and on what Mauss and other anthropologists refer to as 'gift societies', but the concepts at work here can also be applied to more complex urban environments or 'commodity societies'. In commodity societies, transactions become depersonalised, social relationships are converted into economic ones and bureaucratisation impinges upon social structures. As individuals become less involved with others in face-to-face relations of mutual interest and interdependency, their relationships with institutions play an increasingly vital role in the organisation of their lives.

Anthropologists have examined how, in patron-client systems in rural areas of southern Europe, clients typically bypass direct dealings with state bureaucracy by inviting patrons or 'fixers' to intercede on their behalf (e.g. Delamont, 1995). In return, as has been suggested, they will reward the patron with gifts, favours and support at elections (which will also have the effect of reinforcing their respective statuses and the prevalent power relations).

It could be said that patron-client relationships are also present in less explicit forms in the bureaucratic encounters of complex urban environments where there is an overlap between different systems of exchange and varieties of reciprocity. For example, just as patrons and clients may call themselves 'friends', the hospitality motif also functions within the state bureaucracy. This is most obvious in the German representation of migrant workers as '**guest**workers'. So although clear-cut distinctions have been made between exchange systems in traditional and modern urban societies such distinctions may not always be so obvious.

One can certainly say, however, that reputations tend to be managed differently in rural and urban communities. If, in a rural community, status dictates how people behave when they meet each other, in an urban community status is likely to dictate whether they meet at all. 'Life in the small-scale community' suggests Glickman, 'is

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governed by links between individuals which cut across one another. As the individual grows into adulthood, in rural society, he takes more part in social life so that his ties to those around him are multiplied. In the non-rural societies additional roles bring interaction with more people, each role carrying a simplex tie.'

In the anthropological literature, the terms 'simplex' and 'complex' (or 'uniplex' and 'multiplex') are used to signify these two types of role relationships. The work on social networks within a sociolinguistic tradition (Milroy: 1980) also demonstrates how low-density and high-density network types affect interpersonal contacts. In other words, while, in a small community, the man who plays the church organ may also be one's next door neighbour and the school teacher of one's children, in an urban context people usually know each other in single roles. In the city, the person who delivers the post may never see you, and is unlikely to know that you are an adulterer. In rural communities (as in the Valloire example) systems of exchange reflect the greater degree of connectedness among people.

Different types of reciprocity also depend on degrees of social distance within a community. For example, to diddle the tax-man would be a quite different order of exchange from diddling your granny or your neighbour: 'Civic sense', as Bailey points out, 'stops at village boundaries.' Logically therefore, a set of reputations is at the same time more crucial and more difficult to maintain in complex or multiplex relationships. In Section 3 there is a diagram illustrating social network types which can be used to discuss these differences with students.

A final point from Bailey: if we are to belong to a community, a reputation is essential in order to fit in to the existing system of social relations, even if the reputation is a negative one. For example, in Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* the two old ladies who live near his family are linked together by mutual hatred. 'Er up a top' is always criticising 'Er down under' and yet they are necessary to each other and when one dies, the other follows soon after.

Face, Politeness and Compliments

Reciprocity is essential to the ways in which we manage social relations and our reputation, as we have said. This, in turn, depends upon how we present ourselves to others. The work of Goffman, already referred to in Unit 3, focuses on the presentation of self in everyday life and how we manage issues of face. Goffman uses the term 'face' in the same way as we talk about losing face. In other words, 'face' is concerned with how we are judged by others and in particular, how our actions and words can avoid or create embarrassment and a gain or loss in our reputation. Our concern with face is communicated through the metamessages of our utterances (see Unit 3). When we request something, thank somebody or compliment them, we not only transmit a message but also a message about that message in which we take account of their face needs and wants. In effect, we display our social relationship with them as more or less formal, familiar, polite and so on.

In what is generally seen as a classic study, Brown and Levinson (1987) drew on Goffman's notion of face to develop a theory of politeness to account for the ways in

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which, cross-culturally, people used broadly similar linguistic strategies to manage politeness in social interaction. Despite some criticisms that their notion of politeness strategies is not as universal as they assert, their framework remains persuasive. They argue that, to maintain social relations, people use two types of strategies. One is a solidarity strategy in which people claim closeness and put on a positive face. So, for example, with those we know well or consider inferior to us, we are likely to use a style that is direct and unmitigated, e.g. 'Pass the salt' or 'I love your new coat!' With those we are unfamiliar with or who are our superiors, we are likely to use more mitigating terms and be more indirect, e.g. 'I wonder if you wouldn't mind passing me the salt'. As with other examples of exchange, these strategies serve to maintain a balance between personal reputation and social attentiveness.

Of course, politeness is one of the areas where most intercultural misunderstanding can happen. Normal politeness from one linguistic group is seen as direct and confrontational to another. The point is here that even though these basic types of politeness and face-saving may have universal status, they are realised linguistically in different ways. If students are doing their ethnographic study in a school or in a family or are making a study of a friendship group, one of the aspects which is unavoidable is how face and politeness are treated in the maintenance of social relationships.

One of the most obvious forms of oral exchange in which face and politeness play a central role is that of the giving and receiving of compliments. The reading for students by Manes is one of a number of studies that look at compliments cross-culturally. The problem with such studies is that the compliments can be divorced from the context in which they arise and from a more general understanding of their role in maintaining social relations. If students choose to do a more sociolinguistic study based on compliment-giving, then it is important that they also undertake the necessary ethnographic field work to set compliment-giving and taking within the wider system of exchange within the group studied.

Student projects

The work covered in this session was followed up systematically in many of the student ethnography projects. These ranged from more linguistically focused pragmatic work on compliments to studies that were more anthropologically orientated. Several examples are outlined below to indicate the often innovative ways in which students were able to marry the concepts encountered in the class to their own naturally occurring data collected in the field.

One home ethnography explored the ways in which employees of a major high-street store accomplished the complex range of exchanges taking place at the customer service desk of a local branch. These ranged from purely economic exchanges (purchases, refunds and exchanges of goods of the same value) to the more interpersonal dimension; the carefully balanced verbal exchanges with the customer at this sensitive part of the store where factors such as trust, politeness and face became important. Here issues of staff hierarchy, control, customer relations and the store's reputation were seen to underpin interactions in specific ways. The

student (an employee of the store) and her colleagues found themselves operating in situations where they were caught between personal decisions and judgements, and statutory company policy. The public's perception of this well known store and the employees' duty as ambassadors for the store provided a very specific set of tensions between commodity exchange and social exchange, and an interesting frame for a localised study of exchange at work.

Another 'shop-based' ethnography examined exchanges taking place in a corner shop, where purely economic transactions were accompanied by a variety of other exchanges seen as a product of the shop's social role within a small community. At the opposite pole from the impersonality of supermarket transactions, these involved credit arrangements, the exchange of greetings, information, views on local events, gossip and favours of various sorts. The shopkeeper sold food cooked in her own kitchen, on which she was complimented. There was even a large jigsaw puzzle on one corner of the counter for shoppers to help with.

A rather different focus was provided by a student who undertook his home ethnography in Spain, examining the rituals and discourses surrounding a major gift-giving ceremony, Twelfth Night (Reyes). The term 'home ethnography' was taken to its literal conclusion as the student concentrated predominantly on roles and relationships within his own (Spanish) family. Drawing on concepts from the session on exchange and from an earlier unit on families and households, the student was able to 'make strange' and gain new insights into this familiar aspect of his life. Far from Twelfth Night being a simple exchange of gifts, his research led him to the persuasive conclusion that it was one of the very powerful ritual ways in which his family re-confirmed its identity as family and, through notions of duty, expectations, and degrees of reciprocity, re-confirmed hierarchical relationships within it.

A third home ethnography, 'The Other Side of the Stream', explored the minutiae of everyday exchanges (greetings, gossip, hospitality, favours and 'neighbourliness') in an isolated rural setting. The student discovered that the hamlet in which her auntie lived was divided into two 'factions': her informants who lived on one side of the stream, and 'them up there' who lived on the other. Through her observations and ethnographic conversations, she was able to develop a sensitive account of small-community relations. She drew predominantly on concepts of boundaries and charted the many exchanges which not only served to ensure the cohesion of these distinct groups, but which occasionally resulted in symbolic boundaries between them being negotiated and crossed.

A student on a six-month placement in Cadiz chose to focus on an aspect of exchange which was treated only fleetingly in the session, prostitution. His fieldwork was carried out amongst transsexual prostitutes in the city bars. He found that exchange was an important element in the conversations he had with his informants, and a crucial part of their value system. The prostitutes defined themselves as different from mainstream culture largely owing to their more honest and up-front management of sexual exchange and through the way they transferred the values of the market place to transform sex into an economic activity in a very explicit way. Putting a price on their services and making themselves into commodities was seen by them as being less hypocritical about social exchange.

Finally, a project researched in Las Palmas took a more sociolinguistic direction. The focus on this occasion was on compliments and arose out of a series of cultural misunderstandings in which the student was involved shortly after she arrived in Spain. In Spanish there are two terms for compliments, with different functions and notions of appropriacy: the first, 'piropo', is almost exclusively sexual and non-reciprocal – the kind which is regularly 'offered' to women by complete strangers in the street. The second, 'cumplido', is a broader category of compliment and almost always requires a response. The fact that many of her informants saw the term cumplido as essentially insincere or 'hypocritical' captured her ethnographic imagination and she embarked on the process of categorising the different types of compliment and the way these were carefully managed in terms of appropriateness. Analysing a large amount of verbatim data allowed her to isolate, for example, gender differences in the use of compliments; compliments within relations of unequal power; compliments used to confirm belonging to a group; compliments as highly valued courtship or 'hunting' skills, etc.

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SECTION TWO

1. Outline of a session

1. Introduction: Exchange and social relations.

2. Assignment feedback.

3. Short lecture and class discussion: Gifts and poisons, reputations, communities and social networks.

4. Video excerpts: *Ongka's big Moka*.

5. Linguistic aspects of exchange: Face, politeness and compliments.

6. How concepts of exchange and local level politics have been used in ethnographic projects.

2. Description of a session

2.1 Introduction: Exchange and social relations

Two quotations can be presented to students as the guiding concepts for this session: Bailey's claim that 'Gifts are the channels along which social relations run', and the well known saying that 'there's no such thing as a free lunch.' Explain what is meant by local level politics (e.g. not politics with a capital 'P', and not what happens at town council, so much as office politics, sexual politics, or micro-politics at work in any everyday human interaction). Point out that what we are looking at is political processes, and that there is a continuity between the micro and macro levels in terms of these processes. Introduce the idea of exchange as a framework for understanding the patterning of local level politics. Use the first part of the background notes for this.

This introductory session should concentrate on discussion of the Beattie article and gift exchange at first, since this provides an accessible way in to the subject. Questions on students' understanding of the article should attempt to draw out their ideas on the complexity of gift giving within any culture (including their own), and on the symbolic meanings behind gifts. In terms of their own cultural norms, students can be encouraged to make strange by thinking about rules surrounding some of the following questions:

- When do we give gifts? (Institutionalised occasions? Other times?)

- What is okay as a gift (Flowers? Chocolates? A pack of bin liners and a J-Cloth? Why? Why not? How are these gifts framed and interpreted?)

- Are there special rituals surrounding gift giving? What are they and why do we have them?

- Is it okay to give money? (Why?/why not?)

- Any experiences of culturally variable expectations? (e.g. taking patisserie to a friend's house if invited for Sunday lunch in France)

Then move away from listing rules to thinking about issues around reciprocity:

- What happens if a gift is too large/too small?
- When do you first start gift giving to somebody who is not family?
- Have you ever returned a gift?
- Are there special issues to consider when giving/receiving gifts from the opposite sex?

Clearly, the important thing at this stage is to raise the above as interesting questions about exchange. They cannot all be debated at length, but should simply serve to provoke students into making strange and should help establish a number of essential points, namely:

- that the rules surrounding gift-giving are extremely complex;
- that the meaning of a gift may be hard to deduce even for a member of the cultural group concerned;
- that the issue of reciprocity is always in play (gifts are not innocent);
- that there are degrees and culturally variable norms of reciprocity.

Remind students that this is not just about cultural norms of gift giving, but that approaches to data analysis and ideas encountered here will help them make sense, more generally, of cultural interactions during the period of residence abroad.

Extend the notion of the gift from something material to other commodities we routinely exchange such as time, politeness, good manners, etc. – in other words to symbolic exchange, both interpersonally and as part of the symbolic economy (Bourdieu). This is developed more in the Bailey reading so students should already have some ideas on it. Finally, the important outcome of this introductory session is the conclusion that gifts are a way of establishing or re-affirming relationships between individuals, and that all these shared practices of gift-giving show our belonging to a community (if you don't exchange, you don't belong). They are the 'social glue' which holds the community together. Tell students that this idea of community will be developed further later in the session and move on to the assignment feedback.

2.2   Assignment feedback

Students should work in small groups to compare data they have collected. Each group selects two examples and writes them on an OHT to present to the whole class. It is important here to encourage them to go beyond the anecdotal, to 'make strange' and to 'unpack' their examples by focusing on the symbolic patterning of gift-giving and relating examples of their own practice to concepts of exchange explored in the session. The way that peoples' roles are defined, in part, by exchange practices can be linked back to the idea of how people are slotted into certain roles in the family group (see Unit 5).

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The handout from Barley (see Section 3) on the English habit of separating gifts from the monetary sphere can be distributed as supplementary information if desired. This need not take very long. A question about when it is appropriate to give money as a gift, and the habit of disguising this by giving tokens should be enough to elicit students' ideas on the issue. Five minutes can also usefully be spent exploring the repertoire of exchanges in the handout from Davis. This can help to draw out views on less obvious forms of exchange and reciprocity. Students may, for example, be asked about altruism (e.g. is blood donorship purely altruistic or does the donor get some kind of reward? If not a financial reward as in the US then what?) Davis also extends the repertoire into the realm of exchanges with negative connotations such as prostitution, bribery or robbery (which is negative because unreciprocated and undesired). This idea of shared moral values surrounding the exchanges we make leads into the following discussion of what is meant by a 'moral community'.

2.3 Short lecture and class discussion: Gifts and poisons, reputations, communities and social networks

This should be used to develop the concepts found in the Bailey reading on reputations and roles within different types of community, and on the idea of a 'moral community' consisting of people with shared criteria about exchange who are prepared to make moral judgements about each other. Some of the questions may be based on the sheet distributed with the Bailey reading, but this is largely useful in guiding students' appreciation of the text as they read it before the session; it is not essential that they go through it point by point.

Milroy's ideas of networks should be introduced briefly by showing the OHT. Explain the terms low / high density communities, and uniplex/multiplex ties (see background notes). Students should be encouraged to see the correspondence between these categories and rural versus urban communities. Elicit further examples from them.

Refer also to the kind of signalling system used in Bailey's example of the Housewives in Valloire. Relate this back to the idea of frame and metacommunication introduced at various points throughout the course (particularly Unit 3 which is taken up when discussing face and politeness). This example can usefully lead into a brief discussion of the difficulties an outsider (e.g. an ethnographer) may experience in trying to make sense of such a tacitly understood code. A further useful example may be mentioned to illustrate the point: that of the lengthy process of favour negotiation in a Breton peasant community as described by Pierre-Jakez Hélias. Here the 'supplicant' must engage in a protracted ritual of civilities, including conversation and the partaking of food and drink, and must avoid making direct reference to the purpose of his visit until the host raises the matter. Helias points out that during the war, outsiders who were unaware of the rules and who came to farmsteads asking for butter and eggs were turned away empty-handed, not through lack of generosity but because the cultural norms had not been observed; the supplicant had 'lost face' and had not asked with honour. The important notions of honour and shame which underpin much anthropological research in the rural communities of Western Europe can also be mentioned here (e.g. Delamont: 1995).

Students can relate these ideas to their own lives by drawing on their experiences of gossip, information-sharing, and the differences between how they know people in e.g. a university environment, a big city or a small village.

2.4   Video excerpts: *Ongka's big Moka*

As it may be difficult to obtain this documentary, a comprehensive summary of its important features is included here as well as notes on how to use video excerpts, so that an oral account may at least be given.   Although it is more stimulating and analytically challenging for students to draw conclusions from the visual material, an alternative would be to link Beattie's mention of the Potlach with a description of the Moka and a brief reading about the potlach (e.g. Leinhardt. See bibliography). The idea is to demonstrate the universality of exchange across very different cultures, and to explore an example from a 'gift society' (Mauss) which demonstrates very clearly the role of exchange in maintaining the social fabric.

2.5   Background notes to the video

This documentary was made in 1974 for Granada Television's Disappearing World series. It is a record of preparations for an elaborate exchange event set up by a small community of about 1,000 people and it demonstrates the importance of this event in maintaining the social fabric of the community. The community concerned is the Kawelka people in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, and the film was made by an anthropologist who specialised in the study of gift-giving. He was concerned that the practices the team was filming might not survive.

Point out to students that, however exotic and far-removed from their own practices the exchange rituals in the film may appear, they still exemplify the common themes we are examining in this unit: themes of reciprocity, obligation, hierarchy, power and status maintenance.   Point out also that the system of gift exchange here is obligatory, and that it has replaced warfare as a means of asserting power and influence over rival groups.

Set the scene by explaining the mysterious terms in the film's title: Ongka is the most prominent leader or 'big-man' of the Kalweka people, whilst the Moka is the huge gift-giving ceremony, highly ritualised and orchestrated by Ongka. The Moka arrangement forms part of the complex system of reciprocity which governs social relations between communities, and Ongka is arranging this one in response to a similar ceremony given to his own people some years earlier. The film is about why Ongka wanted to give the Moka and his efforts to get it off the ground.

Also explain that this is a non-capitalist economy. Status is not gained here by flaunting the trappings of wealth as we might understand them, but by having lots of pigs. Pigs are the essential currency for distribution at Mokas and for buying wives, and many of them will exchange hands in the Moka: 'If you don't have pigs', declares Ongka, 'you are rubbish'.   The Moka can in fact be described as a system of investment of pigs. Pigs will be given to one community, but they have to be paid back later with interest (the term 'Moka' refers not only to the ceremony and the gift,

but also to the accumulated interest). Finally, stress that the whole system of investing, collecting, giving and receiving pigs is the most important thing in the lives of the Highland people, and that for Ongka, assembling and giving the Moka is more important than anything else in his life. It has taken him five years of manipulation, persuasion, fixing and scheming to accumulate this gift.

But who is the recipient of the gift and what benefit does the Moka bring to Ongka and his people? The recipient of the gift is the big-man of a neighbouring community who is also a local government official. He suspects the Moka is coming, but he does not know when, nor does he know how big it will be, and this is worrying him.

In fact, Ongka is planning a sort of ritual humiliation wherein he will be giving much more than the technical interest owed. His Moka will include six hundred pigs (two hundred more than the neighbouring community gave to him in the previous ceremony), a number of rare birds, some tubes of body paint, a truck, a motorbike and one or two other valuable assets. Although Ongka is giving all this away, he expects to get a great deal for himself and his people in return. His idea is to provide such an enormous Moka that the recipients will be 'overwhelmed with gratitude' and, in accepting the gift, will admit their lower status. Their big-man will also be under obligation to pay Ongka back and do him favours. It will take him years to reciprocate by making his own Moka, and meanwhile he will remain in debt to Ongka. This is a good example of what Bailey means when he sums-up the ambivalent nature of gifts by suggesting that they are also 'poisons' and can be used to challenge, humiliate or assert one's superiority.

By giving, then, Ongka and his people are winning a victory over a rival community and gaining status. A successful Moka will also ensure that Ongka holds on to his honorific big-man status. The documentary points out that the Kalweka have no appointed leaders and that big-men are therefore vulnerable. Their status relies on their personal qualities (such as being persuasive talkers and energetic organisers) and, more concretely, on their ability to muster huge numbers of pigs.

It is also useful to point out the important function of ritual (ceremonial dress, dance and speech making). This underlines the very public nature of the gift and makes issues of status and reputation particularly prominent. Finally it should be stressed that although this circular system of giving and receiving involves a lot of effort just to stand still and maintain the status quo, the whole system of social relations depends on the Moka. As with the Indian Potlach practice in British Columbia described in the proposed alternative reading by Leinhardt, to abolish it would be 'to destroy the system of ranking in the society, the relations between tribes and their chiefs, even the relations between friends and kinsmen.' Without the Moka, the relations within Ongka's community and between it and neighbouring communities would simply collapse.

How to use the video

Students can either be asked to view the whole film prior to the session, or to concentrate on analysing a five-minute clip during the session. If they have watched the whole film, they may be expected to comment on the build-up to the Moka and all

the negotiation and persuasion Ongka needs to engage in to make the event a success, and the discussion can be broadened. If excerpts are to be used instead, students will need a short outline to contextualise the documentary and the clip(s). This should be kept as factual as possible since it is intended that students do the analytical work necessary to link the film to concepts already explored in the session and to aspects of their own practices.

Excerpts recommended include those showing Ongka's preparations for a mini-moka ceremony (part of the process of feeding pigs into the system). For example, the private scene of Ongka alone and talking to the camera about how pig-giving replaced fighting in his community is useful. As he speaks, Ongka is stuffing his hat with straw prior to donning his head dress as part of the preparation for the ceremony. The public scenes of his efforts to gather in pigs are also useful, since they reveal the tenuous nature of his status as 'big man' and show that he cannot order his people, he can only persuade. The mini-moka, which is used as an incentive for people to bring pigs along, is a further useful extract. It is an occasion for Ongka to demonstrate his skill in speech-making, and to make promises about building houses and marrying young girls. The donors can also be seen dancing to celebrate their achievements.

Ask students to consider the following broad questions as they watch:

- What differences and parallels are there between the exchange/reputation system presented in the video and exchange/reputation practices in your own cultural world?

- What are the difficulties in interpreting unfamiliar practices such as these?

Students should be given five minutes for discussion in small groups or pairs after viewing. Their ideas should then be fed back to the class. Questions designed to elicit useful information from students and to help them to compare the Moka with their own practices might include:

- What kind of gift is the Moka? (symbolic aspects of gift-giving/intention behind gifts/gifts and poisons)

- What is its role in terms of maintaining social relations? (Relate to Beattie example about Christmas)

- What does Ongka gain by giving the Moka? (Reciprocity/status)

- Issues of face (as Ongka cajoles others to offer gifts)

- How/why is gift-giving framed with ritual and ceremony?

2.5 Linguistic aspects of exchange: face, politeness and compliments

Introduce students to linguistic/symbolic aspects of exchange, co-operation and the maintenance of social boundaries with reference to the sociolinguistic work on face and politeness. Brief lecture on the relationship between 'face' and social relationships leading into discussion on compliments (see background notes).

Groupwork on Manes article on compliments, using questions on handouts. Feedback to whole class. Focus on cross-cultural aspects and the usefulness of looking at compliments as part of an ethnographic project. A reminder that, as language students, we are looking not just at what people do, but also at what they say – in other words we are particularly interested in those social practices that are made up of talk.

Remind students that they are looking at a group and not a speech act like complimenting, but that a study of compliments can form part of a wider study of how exchange/gift-giving between a group is a channel along which social relations run. The student project in Las Palmas described in the background notes is a good example of using compliment study as part of a wider project on social relations.

2.6 How concepts of exchange and local level politics have been used in student ethnographic projects

Information on this is given at the end of the Background Notes in this unit. Examples could be summarised by the teacher, or alternatively photocopied and given as handouts for students to take away. It is important that they be given the opportunity to see how others have used aspects of local level politics as an organising theme for their project.

Finally, also mention exchange and reciprocity as they apply to the fieldwork situation and to working with informants, and relate this to what students already know about the ethics of ethnographic research.

3. Advice and comments

The wealth of materials available for this unit demonstrates the universal nature of exchange relationships. Given the likelihood that students will draw on some of these concepts during fieldwork and when writing their ethnographic project, teachers may wish to spread the materials over more than one session. Alternatively, as we have already suggested, a selection could be made according to the group of students and the emphasis required.

Whatever the case, this is a session where the teacher needs to cover quite a lot of concepts while relating them to student examples and to student assignment data. Student contributions are generally rich and abundant in terms of the examples of exchange they bring to the session, and the danger is that this apparently very accessible subject can be allowed to slip off the analytical rails and into the realms of the anecdotal. It is therefore vital that students do the reading carefully before the session in order to save time and to be allowed a brief (and almost unavoidable) debate about Bailey's notion that 'no gift is uncontaminated' and whether the chocolates they bought for their girlfriend/boyfriend really were nothing more than spontaneous expressions of affection with no expected reciprocation.

Student comment

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It is amazing to realise all the ritual that goes with what we would normally think of as a kind gesture.

On Monday, we talked about Bailey's text *Gifts and Poisons*. First of all, I found it good to talk in detail about a homework reading, as it is one of my major critique points of this course that we are made to read masses of articles and hardly ever talk about them in class. We emphasised the difference between social and economic relations, which I found rather interesting. Moreover, this article also gave me some ideas for my assignment e.g. the difference between particularistic and universalistic behaviour.

SECTION THREE

1.   Assignment

Gift/favour/ exchange	Relationship symbolised	Obligations	Wider Implications

OHT – from L. Milroy, *Social Networks.* 1980,20

We might show these two general network types as in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, with the individual whose network is being studied shown by a star, and the other people in the network by dots. Contact between the individuals is shown by a line. The two networks are said to be of *high density* and *low density* respectively.
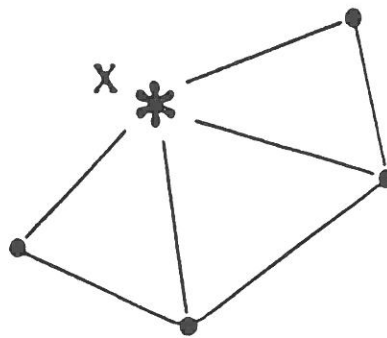
Figure 1.1 *High-density personal network structure: X is the focal point of the network.*
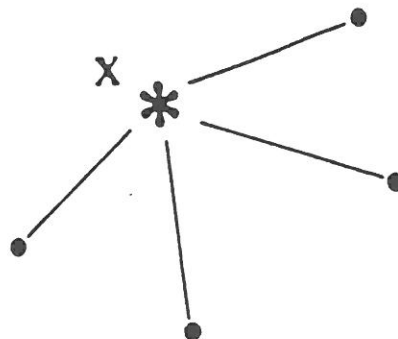
Figure 1.2 *Low-density personal network structure: X is the focal point of the network.*

HANDOUT 1 – extract from *Native Land* (1989) by Nigel Barley, pp.27-8

Some activities are determinedly kept out of the monetary sphere. One of the oddest aspects of English culture seen from Africa is the firm line drawn between money and sex/love. Any mixing, if not actually illegal is certainly held to be morally degrading and the stuff of Sunday newspaper headlines. Hence modern English do not pay dowries or bride prices, and regard cultures that do so as shocking. In the days of colonialism marriage payments were always suspected by the British of being a covert form of prostitution or slavery. The English family is regarded as a sphere within which the normal rules of economic interaction do not hold. The only circumstance in which the partners of a marriage calculate the economic value of their individual contribution is in the case of divorce. It is a sign that the lawyers have been called in and the marriage is effectively over.

For the moment however, let us note the importance of giftgiving among the English. Gifts are separated from the monetary sphere by the insistence that the indication of their price be removed and that any indication of their price be removed and that they should be regarded as mere material tokens of the real gift – the sentiment that lies behind them. Hence aphorisms such as 'it's the thought that counts'. Cash gifts are the most difficult to make in a culture and so a number of cultural forms have been devised to convert 'money' to 'gift' – book token, gift cheque and so on. Gifts should ideally be removed from the economic sphere by lavish wrapping. (It is no contradiction of this that some shops provide a wrapping service for gifts – in exchange for payment). The high point of this tendency is seen at Christmas, when richly wrapped gifts are presented as the fruit of an indoor tree.

HANDOUT 2 – repertoires (Davis)

Part of the British repertoire

alms-giving
altruism
arbitrage
banking
barter
bribery
burglary
buying/selling
charity
commodity-dealing
corruption
donation
employment
exploitation

expropriation
extortion
futures trading
giving
huckstering
insider dealing
insurance
marketing
money-lending
mortgaging
mugging
pawning
profiteering
prostitution

reciprocity
renting
retailing
robbery
scrounging
shoplifting
shopping
simony
social wage
swapping
theft
tipping
trading
wholesaling

fine and delicate. This is the irony of man's existence in society. If you make no exchanges, you do not belong; if you make the exchanges, the messages which you intend to invoke solidarity, may be interpreted as a challenge. The gift requires the counter-gift, and the inappropriate return constitutes a challenge. *Gift*, as Mauss points out, is a German word for poison. No-one can doubt this, for it is a feature of everyone's life. The overgenerous gift, so big that it cannot be returned, becomes a humiliation. In short, it is not that some exchanges are co-operative and others are competitive: *all* exchanges have the seeds of both these opposed things within them.

From the apparent triviality of housewives in Valloire wearing aprons to go shopping, from the petty competition to keep a balance in obligation and preserve one's good name, from the malice of tiny manoeuvres to spread gossip emerge the fundamental dilemmas of being human and living in society. The two left-hand cells of Diagram 1 stand for competition, disorder and self-interest; the right-hand side embodies the rules which point men in the direction of co-operation, altruism and service to the community. On the right is duty, the community, the society, *dharma,* continuity and stability: on the left is *artha,* self-interest, the individual, change and uncertainty. But only on formal occasions do people resolve this conflict by the simple assertion that what is on the right is good and what is on the left is bad: when it comes to planning their responses and initiatives, all four modes of action are taken into account.

Questions

1. In what ways can the Valloire housewives' strategy of donning an apron be linked to the concept of reputation?

2. Can you think of any examples of laconic 'cues' in a community of which you are member?

3. Does the vignette of this aspect of life in the Valloire tell us anything about the workings of small communities in general?

4. What is meant by the term 'moral community'?

5. What are the likely differences in the way we conduct our dealings with those inside and those outside the boundaries of the moral community to which we belong?

6. How do you think Bailey's comments on 'Codes and Signals' could be useful to you during your fieldwork?

7. In what ways can ideas of egoism and altruism be said to constitute 'political resources'?

8. What are the implications of Bailey's suggestion that no gift is uncontaminated?

that not only are certain cultural values reflected in compliments and responses but in addition compliments serve to encourage or reinforce these values, although we are not, even as givers and receivers of compliments, always aware of this. Indeed, positive reinforcement through compliments may itself be seen as valued in our society; as we all learned as children, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

Discuss these questions in groups

1. What was the last compliment you received?

2. Who gave you that compliment?

3. Do you find that, in the group, compliments were given more for appearance or ability?

4. How did you respond to the compliment? What did you answer?

5. Do your answers correspond to what Manes says, or do you detect cultural differences?

6. Why is ethnography useful in studying speech acts cross-culturally?

Acknowledgements