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Abstract

In anthropological literature on gift exchange, Melanesia plays a major role since it is characterised by elaborate ceremonial exchange and reciprocity across the region. However, sharing is also widely found in Melanesia. In presentations of ethnographers, sharing has often been overshadowed by reciprocal exchange, but as described in this article, it is an integral part of the everyday in Melanesia. Not only is sharing part of solidarity among close kin but, as the case of boat building discussed in the article illustrates, it is also a mode of transfer with integrative force beyond kinship. I argue that sharing is particularly relevant in many contemporary settings such as the Mbuke Islands in Papua New Guinea that are characterised by work migration and an increasing dependency on the cash economy. These ongoing changes contribute to an increasingly uneven access to important resources. This, I argue, causes sharing to grow in scope and importance since it helps to even out growing inequalities. This is remarkable as the increasing influence of money has in other cases been considered as necessarily threatening sharing arrangements. In Mbuke it is the other way around: sharing is on the increase not despite growing monetarisation but, rather, because of it.

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Anders Emil Rasmussen

Introduction

On the Mbuke Islands in Papua New Guinea (PNG), like in other parts of Melanesia, sea transport is of great importance in inter-island traffic and exchange relations. Until the mid-twentieth century, locally produced sailing vessels such as outrigger canoes and catamarans tied the whole region of Island Melanesia together and were of paramount value (Finney 2007: 112; Rasmussen 2013: 8). The largest such vessels – those used for long distance traffic – have largely been replaced by imported fiberglass boats, causing the vessels and adjacent boatbuilding traditions to either become forms of heritage associated with historical and cultural identity or to disappear entirely (Finney 2007: 112; Rasmussen 2013: 8). Manus Province, where the Mbuke Islands are located, is an exception. Here the craft has survived and the big outrigger canoes, *n'drol*, are still of economic significance, whilst also having become a source of collective identity. For specialised boatbuilders the skill is a valuable asset and subject to a form of ownership (Rasmussen 2013: 74–75).

During my fieldwork on Mbuke Islands, I therefore spent considerable time hanging around boatbuilding sites. My aim was to document how local Mbuke men were building their large outrigger canoes, work which was typically done in groups including both specialised builders and 'helping hands'. Initially, I did not participate in the work but simply observed. Nevertheless, like the other men present who were almost as practically unhelpful as I initially was, I was treated with food, cigarettes, and betelnuts that were shared amongst the men present at the site. As one man told me when handing me some food: 'You should eat also!' When I queried, 'But I am not helping?', he replied: '[…] True, but you are here.'

In anthropological literature on non-monetary forms of transfer, Melanesia plays a major role since it is characterised by elaborate ceremonial exchange and reciprocity between persons and groups across the region (Akin and Robbins 1999). However, even in Melanesia, where key theories of 'the gift' found much inspiration (Malinowski [1922] 1983; Mauss [1925] 1990; Gregory 1982; Strathern 1988), sharing is also widely found (Gell 1992; Rasmussen 2015). In presentations by ethnographers, it has often been overshadowed by reciprocal exchange, but situations like the one sketched above

occur all the time, making sharing part of the everyday also in Melanesia. Not only is sharing part of solidarity amongst close kin (Gell 1992; Rasmussen 2015), but, as my case of boatbuilding illustrates, it is also a mode of transfer with integrative force beyond kinship. I argue that it is particularly relevant in many contemporary settings that are characterised by work migration and an increasing dependency on the cash economy such as the Mbuke Islands. These ongoing changes contribute to an increasingly uneven access to important resources. This, I ague, causes sharing to grow in scope and importance since it helps to even out growing inequalities. This is remarkable as the increasing influence of money has in other cases been considered as necessarily threatening sharing arrangements as well as gift-exchange practices (Bohannan 1959; Altman 2011: 194–196). In Mbuke it is the other way around: sharing is on the increase not despite growing monetarisation but, rather, because of it.

Background: many hands make a canoe

Building a large outrigger canoe is a major collaborative endeavour. In fact, the term 'canoe' is somewhat misleading, as one might associate with it small unstable vessels propelled by paddles. The term has roots in colonial times and has been integrated into English and local Pidgin, and for this reason I use it also. On the biggest of these vessels, known as *n'drol*, the main hull is up to 18 meters long and it can carry up to 30 people over long distances, propelled by a combination of sail and large outboard engines. These are vessels that, at certain stages of building, entail considerable collaborative work and require costly materials sourced from other islands (see also Rasmussen 2013). In Mbuke, building an outrigger canoe is therefore a vast display of wealth and it is generally expected that the work to build such a canoe is shared. This also means that food, betelnuts, and tobacco will be expected to be distributed amongst those sharing the work, in the first instance by the person 'commissioning' the boat. In fact, collaborative boatbuilding is a social activity that brings together several different modes of transfer: reciprocal exchange, commodity transactions, and sharing. Which mode of transfer participants take part in depends on several things: on the skills of the persons involved, the reasons for them being present at the building site, their relationship with the person organising the activity, and the future ownership of the vessel, amongst other things. It is not only visiting anthropologists who hang out at building sites; indeed, in situations like the one described above, I observed the presence of an unproportionally large number of 'helping hands', not all of them continuously or substantially contributing to the work effort. All of them were given a share of the food and of the tobacco distributed during the work by those who commission the work. This sharing is not a straightforward form of payment for work. Rather, boat-

building is a social event for redistribution through sharing, with volunteers from the community at large. As we see below, these somewhat unhelpful helpers often received a bigger share of the food distributed during building than those specialised builders who were most important for the work. I therefore argue that in their case the distribution of food is neither payment nor part of reciprocal circles, but a kind of sharing.

In the past this was not the case, or at least not on a 'community' scale. Until the 1940s, each village was organised as clusters of settlements each centered around a dominant *lapan*, a form of big man (Crocombe 1965: 44), and men would build and maintain their canoes near their individual houses with help from a specialised builder (Crocombe 1965: 44; Rasmussen 2015: 178–180). Only after the colonial authorities started appointing *luluai*s (representatives of whole villages or islands) in government entities did Mbuke acquire one overall spokesperson (Crocombe 1965: 49) and, by implication, become viewed as one social entity, covering all the settlements. Similar points have been made for other parts of colonial and early postcolonial PNG and scholars have argued that it was not useful to describe PNG settlements and socialites as 'societies' or even 'social groups' (Wagner 1974; Strathern 1988). Rather, socialites were specific and dynamic social networks based on kinship and formed through alliances produced and reproduced in ongoing exchanges (Strathern 1988). Social formations that exist independent of specific persons or specific relationships, such as 'the community', did not exist (Wagner 1974). Tellingly, there is no equivalent word for 'community' in the Titan language, the language spoken by Mbuke people, and the English word is used. Historically '*lau*' was the only term used that would denote a larger group of people. But such a group was precisely related through kinship or alliance with a *lapan*. The word '*lau*' has been described as referring to the followers or constituency of a particular *lapan* (see Otto 1994: 225–226). The occupants of the clusters of settlements were the constituencies, the *lau*, of particularly powerful *lapans*. The *lapan* would help younger men with bride wealth and would lead trading expeditions, amongst other things, and the *lau* would give him loyalty and work in return (Fortune [1935] 1969: 94). The idea that the work – and adjacent distribution – should be shared with the whole community is, therefore, correspondingly new.

Hence it is part of my argument that sharing has grown in scale and scope in the Mbuke Islands. Ultimately, this can be attributed to the growing influence of money and the growing economic stratification related to it; and to the emerging notion of a community within and across which a moral obligation to 'enable others to access what is valued' (Widlok 2017) is articulated. Boatbuilding is one of the occasions at which the growing stratification becomes particularly apparent visually for everyone to see and materially manifest through the boats themselves. Therefore, these are also the occasions at which sharing expands as a remedy against growing discrepancies in

access to assets. Part of this transformation is the emergence of 'community' as a new and larger level of social organisation and as a category. It is in these contexts that sharing not only evens out inequalities of income (as a form of 'sharing out') but in which it also acts as socially integrating (as a form of 'sharing in') (Bird-David 2005: 207).

Singaut: demand sharing on Mbuke Islands

Mbuke Islands is a small group of islands populated by people who identify as members of the Titan ethic group. At the time of my census in 2009, approximately 40% of the population of around 1,000 persons was away as temporary work migrants in the county's bigger cities (Rasmussen 2015: 31–55). Consequently, the village economy is largely based on incoming remittances.

The Titan were previously specialised fishermen and sailors. They traded and exchanged with other groups in the region who, in turn, had specialised in small-scale farming, amongst other things (Mead 1930; Schwartz [1975] 1995). The Titan themselves owned no or very little land and did not practice farming. They therefore depended on other groups for the starch component of their diet. These groups in turn depended on them for fish and other trade goods. For considerable time the Titan monopolised sailing and boatbuilding, a monopoly they defended with force if necessary (Schwartz [1975] 1995: 114–115). This regional system of ecological and technological specialisations, and the barter-trade that came with it, eventually collapsed after the cash economy had replaced barter in the interaction between the various groups (Schwartz [1975] 1995: 114–115). Members of other groups started fishing for themselves and new kinds of vessels (fiberglass dinghies with outboard engines, in particular) destroyed the Titan monopoly on transport and trade across long distances (Rasmussen 2013: 11–12). But, seeing that the Titan had been an 'information society' (Harrison 1995: 12), which based its livelihood on boatbuilding knowledge since precolonial days, it was perhaps natural that they entered eagerly into formal school education when this was introduced in the middle of the twentieth century. Whatever the full range of reasons that led to this development (see Rasmussen 2015: 31–34), it is now the case that the Titan are one of the most highly educated ethnic groups in PNG and this now forms the basis of their livelihoods (Rasmussen 2015: 31–34).

Currently, Mbuke people depend on a combination of continued small-scale fishing and on high education and the well-paying jobs that education grants access to in PNG, such as public servants, politicians, and managers or specialists in the private sector in big cities around the country. However, the high level of education does not mean that everyone succeeds well in the education system; consequently, not everyone has access to a well-paid job. The difference between small-income generating local fishing and large-income

generating jobs away from the islands has created a situation of great economic inequality. People in the Mbuke villages depend largely on remittances. These most often take the form of solicited sharing, or demand sharing (Rasmussen 2015: 47–48). Sharing is a helpful mechanism and pragmatic solution to even out some of those growing inequalities. At the same time the notion of 'mechanism' is somewhat misleading since the process of eliciting and delivering remittances is subject to constant moral debate amongst migrants and villagers alike. Moral arguments are made concerning the obligation to share but also regarding the limits of this obligation (see also Martin 2009: 112; Rasmussen 2015: 142). The debate includes the whole social fabric of the islands because there is not only a marked inequality, in terms of access to money, between migrants and village-dwellers but also unequal access in terms of who is connected to relatives who work as migrants. Some have many successful migrants amongst their siblings and children and others have only a few or none.

Much sharing – both in the form of remittances asked for and sharing within the villages – is described, and debated, under the term *'singaut'*. '*Singaut*' is the word in Tok Pisin (PNG's lingua franca) for requesting or demanding. It is derived from 'to *sing* [call] *out* to' someone (to receive a share). We can consider *singaut* the local manifestation of what is comparatively known as demand sharing (Peterson 1993). Elsewhere I have termed these practices of sharing a '*singaut* economy' that takes place in relations amongst close kin and amongst friends (Rasmussen 2015: 47–58). The reason I have termed it an 'economy' is to place it in dialogue with – and as a complement to and critique of – Gregory's (1982) renowned description of two parallel economies in Melanesia, namely the gift economy and the commodity economy. Gregory (1997) later emphasised that these two economies are in fact not to be understood as two separate and distinct economies but as coeval principles of transfer that are not mutually exclusive. Likewise, I would claim that *singaut*, as a third economic principle (Rasmussen 2015: 27–55), is one form of transfer amongst other forms of transfer; and often, as we shall see, the boundaries between them are socially negotiated and morally disputed. As I show in more detail below, in the anthropological literature on Melanesia sharing is often overshadowed by the discourse on gift exchange governed by reciprocity under which sharing has also been subsumed (for example, Sahlins 1972).

There is reason to believe that across Melanesia there has always been some sharing practiced in everyday life (Gell 1992: 152), along with other forms of transfer. The remittances that are transferred from work-migrant relatives to people in the village are conceptualised and practiced locally as a form of sharing, and often this is described in direct opposition to exchange and reciprocity (Rasmussen 2015: 8). Concepts and practices that have been in use for daily sharing are now also used when talking about the incoming

remittance money. *Singaut* as a category includes numerous accepted forms of demand sharing, some more affirmative and pressing than others. Ceremonial exchange typically takes place very prominently between intermarrying descent groups (as elsewhere in Melanesia). By contrast, sharing of the *singaut* kind is very clearly associated with transfers *within* the descent group, but normatively not *between* descent groups, and it is considered shameful to *singaut* to an in-law (Rasmussen 2015: 47–53). Regarding the ethical dimension of these transfers, there is a marked moral critique associated with attempts to avoid sharing, which often centres on an articulation of emerging individualism associated with the cash economy, or with selfishness more generally.

So far anthropologists have tended to explain the moral obligations to pay remittances, and otherwise helping close kin in the villages in Manus Province, as indirectly or directly being caused by ceremonial exchange and the associated morality of reciprocity (Carrier and Carrier 1989: 213–214; Otto 1991: 247; Dalsgaard 2010: 231). It would be fair to say that gift exchange has received most of the attention in this part of PNG at the cost of sharing practices, which also play a large role but which should not be confused with gifts and reciprocity, also in terms of the morality involved (Rasmussen 2015). In fact, upon close reading, it turns out that the literature on Melanesia is full of examples of sharing, except that they are given less attention than situations of exchange. In *Moala*, his monograph about a Fijian island, for example, Sahlins (1962) mentions 'secular economic activities' – activities outside ceremonial exchange – and in this context also refers to the Fijian notion of *kerekere*, which literally means 'request' (Sahlins 1962: 203). *Kerekere* is therefore a request for sharing, which, Sahlins claims, primarily generates an implicit reciprocal obligation. This claim echoes Sahlins' comparative analysis of transfers which he put forward ten years later when he introduced the notion of 'generalised reciprocity' in his book *Stone Age Economics*: 'This is not to say that handing over things in such form, even to "loved ones," generates no counter-obligation', but that 'the expectation of reciprocity is infinite' (Sahlins 1972: 194). In this view, the time span of reciprocity is relative to the distance or closeness of the relationship between the exchanging parties. In other words, there is a longer time span between handing over things and the obligation to return them amongst relatives and a shorter one between strangers (Sahlins 1972: 196–197, 231–232), but both could ultimately be characterised in terms of reciprocity. Following this logic, we could say that in commodity exchange, to use Gregory's term, the distance of relationship is the farthest of all and so the time span of reciprocation the shortest of all. At its extreme it would be constituted by a totally alienated exchange, which would often be the case in a shop transaction. There reciprocity is balanced, it evens out immediately and entirely. By contrast, amongst

the very closest of relatives the time span of reciprocation is practically infinite, but it is nevertheless present in principle.

However, in *Moala*, where Sahlins discusses *kerekere* at length, he also makes clear that 'kerekere is not necessarily one side of a reciprocal transaction. It can be used repeatedly to effect a flow of goods from the affluent to those who are in need' (Sahlins 1962: 145–146). This, I would argue, is then actually no longer following the logic of reciprocity. Rather, it follows the distinct logic of sharing that Widlok (2017) and others have pointed out is not that of reciprocity at all (Woodburn 1998). The challenge facing the exchanging parties in gift exchange is, as Widlok (2019: 37) notes, 'how [and when] shall I reciprocate this gift?' As such, it is not that different from the concerns of people who, running up monetary debts in the local store, ask themselves, 'How shall I pay this back?' Therefore, gift giving and debt accountancy in commercial exchanges can in this regard be meaningfully placed on one and the same continuum (as Gell already noted in 1992). Widlok indicates that the key question facing a person involved in sharing is entirely different and would be something like: 'How do I respond to the fact that others need what I have'? This is different on a number of levels. The point of departure is not a problem of distributing an asset but rather one of responding to a need. The relationship to time is also not as linear in sharing as it is for exchange amongst kinsmen or strangers. Sharing can be said to be immediate or short-term, on the one hand, but at the same time it is also long-term in that sharing typically moves in waves or ripples whereby the person who receives (for instance a salary) would be expected to share parts of that with a relative who, in turn, may be expected to share it out further with other relatives back home in the village, and so forth. Finally, whereas gift giving and debt accountancy are often highly personalised transfers between particular persons or groups as a consequence of a track record of transfers that bind them to one another, no such particular relationship and indebtedness needs to be present in the case of sharing, as I point out in the following section.

Building big things – enabling others to access what is valued

During fieldwork in Mbuke, I noticed many instances of sharing as part of relations between close kin. This much was in line with what Sahlins had noted for *kerekere*, too. However, I also realised that sometimes sharing went much further and also beyond kinship altogether. In *singaut* someone typically asks for something that he or she needs, something that the potential giver is known to be in possession of, based on specific relationships (Rasmussen 2015: 115) – but also sometimes irrespective of any particular relationship, though only in certain types of situations. The case of housebuilding and, in particular, canoe building (with which I started this contribution) shows this very clearly: in these situations, kinship is not necessarily or even typically

the key. Rather, as Widlok argues in his contribution in this special issue, the key for understanding the transfer is the (shared) presence of those who demand and those who are in the position to give. In fact, various distinctly different kinds of transfers can take place as much amongst close kin as amongst more distant kin. Which mode of transfer is being employed will largely depend on the social situation and not on the specific (kin) relationship involved. Sahlins' model suggests that the degree of reciprocity necessarily maps on to the distance of kinship ties and that the latter would then determine the form of transfer chosen, but this is clearly not the case across the situations that I observed in Mbuke. It is not that kinship does not matter, but it is only one of the aspects that influences the overall social situation. In the case of building big things, such as houses or large outrigger canoes, we find that at various stages in these complex collaborative practices there is room for reciprocal exchange and also for sharing. Both can coexist and the degree to which they are realised may differ in accordance with the reason for social participants being present at the scene but also their performative skills to forge their presence and their unfolding relationships with others. Simply being in a specific kinship category does not predetermine the transactions that are going on, as the following example illustrates.

One day during fieldwork, I sat under the house of a man I shall here call Mike, chatting with him. Houses in Manus, like elsewhere in PNG, are built on stilts, which creates a shady space under the house where various activities take place. People may use it to cook or smoke fish and it is a favourite spot for making and repairing various things. More generally, this is a place where people hang out with others. Most houses on Mbuke Islands are made of what is locally termed 'permanent materials', such as fibre cement and plated iron or aluminium. But adjoining to the actual house is always a structure that houses the kitchen, most often made with a thatched sago leaf roof, which allows smoke from the kitchen fire to exit through the roof. On this occasion I noticed that the roof of Mike's kitchen had a new sago leaf roof, but that the roof had no gables. This is not ideal under the tropical weather conditions, as funnel winds and tropical thunderstorms can tear off the entire roof far more easily if there are no gables. What was particularly surprising was that he had the thatched sago-leaf sections for the work standing there all finished under the house, ready for finishing the new roof by adding the gables. From where we sat, we were looking at a pile of roof sections right in front of us. And so I asked him why he did not finish the roof, so to avoid the risk of having it destroyed by the weather and to avoid rain and wind entering his kitchen. 'I can't afford all the helping hands that I will get if I start the work,' he told me.

To understand Mike's dilemma, we need to know more about housebuilding practices in Mbuke: sago leaf sections for roofing are generally bought from neighbouring groups who grow sago palms and housebuilding

has in general become an activity that requires money to acquire building materials, even those that are locally referred to as 'bush materials' (such as sago leaves), as opposed to the 'permanent materials' already mentioned. In the past these materials would have been acquired through barter with members of neighbouring groups. But barter has been replaced by buying and selling after the system of regional specialisations collapsed. This means that even to build a house of local materials, one must always have access to considerable amounts of money. This money typically comes from work-migrant relatives. Mike was lucky regarding the sago leaves, though. At the time he was married to a woman from a neighbouring village where he had gotten sections of roofing through ongoing exchange relations based on marriage. However, he still had to save up for the voluntary help that he would get when he began putting up the roofing sections. As he explained to me, this would require him to give cigarettes, food, and betelnuts that the helpers would expect him, as the owner of the house, to provide to all who gave him a helping hand during the construction period. Unfortunately, he had not yet been able to save up sufficiently to have these provisions at hand for work to continue. He had already spent all his savings on food, cigarettes, and betelnuts when the first part of the roof was constructed. Then he ran out of sago leaves, but new ones had arrived in the meantime. In fact, it would not have been a big effort for him to put the remaining sheets up together with the carpenter from his kin group and thereby finish the kitchen within a few days. But Mike feared that many people would speak ill of him and label him as selfish if he did the remaining work without welcoming those who would inevitably offer their hands and presence to do the work – regardless of whether he needed their help or not. Hence, the social pressure was on him to allow others to come and join him to complete the construction, helpers who in turn would expect to be given a share because they were there.

This is not to say that no one can built a house without sharing with the whole community. Part of the particular social constellation sketched above is that Mike is the *lapan* of one of Mbuke's seven descent groups. For these leaders, often particularly rigid expectations to share are in place. These shares are due first and foremost to members of their own descent group and their alliances (such as in-laws), what would in the past have been the *lau*, the constituency. But leaders are now expected to act in ways that benefit the community more widely. This community concern (or obligation) has become increasingly important for the legitimacy of local leaders during the past decades (Rasmussen 2015: 175–176). Often local leaders would be challenged on the basis of their moral obligation to 'benefit the community' through large projects they were involved in, including building houses or vessels. There are particularly high expectations for them not to act selfishly by avoiding sharing but rather to use these occasions as opportunities to allow many community members access to resources that they otherwise would not easi-

ly be able to access. Whilst *lau*, at noted earlier, may be described as the constituency of a traditional leader, the persons in specific reciprocal relations with him, 'community' implies a kind of equality between all members and refers to a much larger scale. Simply by living in a village, which is no longer organised in terms of clusters but as a whole village, one becomes part of the village community (Rasmussen 2015: 183). And herein the dominant logic of transfers is not based on reciprocity between a leader and his constituency but rather follows the moral obligation to share with fellow community members irrespective of kin ties. Building a house has, therefore, become more complicated for people like Mike. What is true for housebuilding practices also holds for constructing canoes, to which I turn in the next section.

Moral debates: the community canoe and he who wants to be alone

During the building of large sailings canoes in Mbuke Islands, the future owner of the canoe, or more generally the person heading the organisation of the construction process, is often responsible for feeding everyone who is present at the building site. This is above all a moral expectation. Not everyone can or will meet this expectation, but not to do so comes at a cost. It is an expectation that holds for many people in the villages and the failure to live up to it will generally result in moral critique. As soon as the work of hollowing out the large log for a canoe begins on the beach, many men will show up to spontaneously to volunteer a helping hand. Most often these 'helpers' are way too many to be practicable. Meanwhile, a few specific men with specialised skills have been actively asked for help and these will typically have been recruited within and amongst those with whom ongoing exchange relationships exist and who are amongst the limited number of specialised boatbuilders on the islands (Rasmussen 2013). These are often relatives within the same descent group or in-laws from intermarrying descent groups who are engaged in ongoing exchange and reciprocal relations.

As soon as someone talks about building a canoe or simply starts doing preparatory work, the moral obligation to allow others to help is there. If the preparations are carried out avoiding public spaces and the scrutiny of the public eye or if it is openly declared that the future owner will not need any voluntary help, this will raise moral objections. Intending to do the work alone or exclusively with the help of a few specialised builders invites community criticism that uses the same terminology as when people talk negatively about others who refuse to share food or money. 'That man wants to be alone' is then a widespread formulation. The implied negative moral judgement is not always clear-cut since it depends on a number of conditions, including the size of the canoe, where the canoe owner sourced the building materials, and, more generally, the owner's situation: Did he save up for years by selling fish at the market? Or did a wealthy migrant brother wire him a

load of money? The latter would be a prime target for moral pressure to use some of the remittance earning to share food with the helping hands that would volunteer. The communication practices in this process are indirect, often through the choice of location for the building process. In some cases, this can lead to the somewhat absurd situation of a fairly big vessel being built tucked away under a house where there is not really room for it, but where it is somewhat out of the public eye and, notably, where smaller vessels that do not entail these moral obligations are usually built. The largest canoes, thus vessels whose main hull is over nine and up to eighteen meters in length, will attract many helping hands and are generally built on communal land rather than near individual houses.

During my very first period of fieldwork on Mbuke Islands, I had made it known that I was interested in following and participating in the building of a large outrigger canoe. When eventually construction started on such a canoe, it was organised that I could be part of that. A wealthy migrant relative had already sponsored a large log for his brother and their group. It had been roughly hollowed out, but the building had come to a stop due to reasons very similar to those that made it hard for Mike to finish his kitchen: money had run out. The remaining materials – for the boom construction, outrigger float, platform deck, and so on – were to be found in the local bush or, alternatively, on and amongst retired vessels. But they were not for free. They had to be accessed through various forms of exchange relations or even bought or lent. Various debates and conflicts can occur in the process. In one particularly interesting case during this canoe building process, a tree of a species of wood suitable for various planks had already been felled months earlier, but this had triggered a dispute not just over the tenure of the land on which the tree had grown but over ownership of the tree itself – two aspects which are not always the same thing. At the end, the tree trunk was left in the bush because the dispute could not be resolved. Eventually it was agreed upon that the dispute could be ended by giving the tree to a neutral third party, namely the community. Through this solution both parties in the conflict received credit for 'benefitting the community'. But in any case, the biggest monetary expense was the provision of food, cigarettes, and betelnuts for sharing amongst the volunteers who were offering their help during the building of the canoe.

Organising work for the building of this canoe in which I was involved was carried out by the *lapan* of whose household I had become a member. He did not do any of the actual work of building, though, since in this case a master builder was appointed. But the burden of organisational work consisting of the preparation of (some) food every day for a period of over several months, and many other things, were left to him. As I was part of his household, the money I contributed to this household ended up buying large quantities of cigarettes and food for the project, which for me was a perfect

way of contributing to the community and to the men who threw themselves into the building process.

In canoe building, the specialised builders are crucial for the project and, as already noted, their participation often ties into ongoing relations of reciprocity amongst kin. One specialised canoe builder will usually be heading the work. The rest of the men present, usually termed the 'helping hands', show up and help with simpler tasks and otherwise hang around during the building process. They are still treated with food and other things even though they might not always be particularly helpful, or might even be totally incapable as is sometimes the case for returned work migrants who never learnt the basic skills of village life. They receive their share simply because they are present. Some are hardworking and participate every day, others less so. There are also those who seem to appear just as food and cigarettes arrive, this group often consisting of young men, and their conspicuous appearance on the scene is often tolerated. Very little differentiation is made between those who contribute heavily to building activities and those who contribute only lightly or occasionally. It is generally the head builder who distributes the foodstuffs and tobacco on behalf of the organiser who is typically the future owner, but in this particular case was my *lapan*.

The actual practice of sharing sometimes takes the form of a distribution, but often it follows a kind of collective demand sharing mode. During every event of building houses and canoes that I have been part of during two years on the islands, I would quite frequently hear someone say, excessively loudly, something like 'Let's hope people don't go around saying that we are hungry' or 'Hey, I sure could smoke a cigarette, right now'. These sorts of comments were intended to make the chief builder distribute cigarettes to everyone in the vicinity of the building site. They were prompts which would cause the head builder to announce that food was coming soon or to distribute cigarettes.

During the building of the large outrigger canoe that I documented, I noticed that vast amounts of food were not only consumed on the spot but were sometimes carried away from the building site when food was served. Initially I was under the impression that it was the wives of the builders who were given food prepared by those who had enrolled their husbands in the work, compensating for the fact that these men therefore could not go fishing to feed their families as they otherwise would. But it soon became clear to me that the women who came with large empty bowls which they filled up with food and carried back to their houses were mostly not the wives of the specialised builders who did most of the work. In fact, it was the wives of the *lapan* in charge, the prospective owner, and the specialised builders who were more often the ones cooking the food because paying and providing for the food was expected of the prospective owner and also of specialised builders involved. By contrast, those who carried food away were mostly the

wives of the spontaneous helpers. It appeared that two different modes of transfer were involved here. The specialised builders made their contributions as part of much longer-term reciprocal relationships with the organiser. They were often related to the organiser as in-laws, for example brothers of the organiser's wife, and therefore following distinct kinship obligations. Apart from these long-term (transgenerational) exchanges that were parts of the overall gift economy, there were also other exchanges, for instance short-term exchanges such as buying large trees from people on other islands. But apart from these exchanges, sharing formed the other main mode of transfer involved. The families represented by the helping hands received shares that were clearly not in any way proportional to their contribution to the project, nor reciprocations of earlier exchanges in gift-giving cycles. Rather, I would argue, the case of people making themselves present at particular moments constitutes a distinct mode of transfer whereby the presence itself was sufficient to elicit a share. The larger part of the substantial distribution and transfers that took place in conjunction with building projects had fairly little to do with the logic of payment or reciprocal obligation which went on in other contexts.

It is important to underline that there is ongoing moral debate about what happens and should happen during the boatbuilding process. Many people disagree as to whether or when sharing should take place. For instance, there may be disagreement as to whether it is fair that the wives of helpers carry food away or whether it should only be consumed by the men on the building site, and so on. Then there are always the particularities of a situation that influence the course of the distributions. During the particular canoe building process I discussed above, the future owner of the vessel (whose relative had obtained the log) had himself been heading a certain part of the canoe building process, whilst the person appointed by the *lapan* in charge headed the rest of the work. During the process the future owner of the canoe suddenly decided to name the vessel after his mother and her place of origin. The general wish of the community was, however, to name it after my place of origin since I had documented the building process and this would add to the fame of the community. I did not want to be caught in the middle of this debate and was quick to argue that, seeing that the vessel was now named, it would be bad luck to rename it, according to custom of my homeland. This got us out of the pickle – or at least that was how the resolution was explained to me – and the canoe kept its local name. But, interestingly, the man who had created this pickle was afterwards criticised for undermining the interests of the community. Hence there is often some competition between the interests of kin relations and those of the wider community which can play out in these contexts. Part of the discourse with which the owner was criticised was that that part of the canoe the building of which he had headed would quickly fall into disrepair because he had prioritised his personal kinship alliances

above the shared interest of the wider community. Such a connection between disregarding moral expectations and the loss or disrepair of things are often made in related contexts. For instance, instances when money was lost quickly were related to the refusal to share when this was morally expected when demands for it was made (Rasmussen 2015: 104–106). In the past, such negative consequences would be ascribed to the agency of ancestors, who were generally the strict upholders of the moral code and who would fiercely punish their own descendants for moral breaches (Fortune [1935] 1969).

Whilst the building process that I have discussed was taking place, a younger man was also building a large canoe on one of the other islands. He attempted to build his canoe in secrecy and out of the public eye. I, for one, only realised that the canoe was being built late in the process. This seemed strange to me, as everyone was always eager to help me get as much information as possible on the craft of building canoes. When I asked my adoptive father, the *lapan*, he explained that it was not a 'real canoe' and that it would go into disrepair quickly. He said that it was in fact a 'garbage canoe', even though the man who was building it was a skilled canoe builder. The reason for this negative judgement was that the man had built it himself and had refused the help from others. He had started the building process near his house, indicating that the canoe was not the big kind of canoe that would attract helpers. The value and quality of the canoe was, at least according to my host, lowered by the breech of the moral obligation to share in conjunction with the building process. In other words, the refusal to share in these contexts not only did damage to the wider community but also lowered the value of the boat itself. Doing things on your own, without sharing, was a risk that people like Mike with his unfinished kitchen were clearly not happy to take. The consequences were not only a public moral debate and open criticism but, arguably, were also material in nature and undermined the main purpose of the building effort. The *lapan* explained that, in his opinion, the tendency to *e mo ye* ('that man him', or to want to be alone) as opposed to wanting to share was increasing amongst the Mbuke and that the case of the man and his garbage canoe was part of this tendency. The young man who built the canoe in an 'alone' sort of way in turn argued that the canoe was small and that he had the right to build the canoe in the way he wished. And so the debate continued. What it shows is that the course such a project takes depends on many things and on the way in which moral arguments are intertwined with very practical matters. In the case of leaders, and men aspiring to be leaders, and their wives, there are much clearer expectations of sharing and distribution in conjunction with their projects than in 'smaller' cases. However, in some constellations, including the one of the young man, people may find it easier to ignore public opinion, even at the peril of ending up with a 'garbage canoe'.

Conclusion

The building of large things is the ultimate demonstration of wealth in Mbuke villages. These are diagnostic events that show the importance of sharing and that of presence in a setting that has for a long time been described mostly in terms of long-term gift exchange. The building of large things is a social situation where it is not the specificity of kinship ties that govern (all) transfers but where (re)distribution is facilitated through sharing as allowing others access to what is valued (Widlok 2017). In Mbuke the dominant form of sharing in such settings is articulated with reference to the moral obligation to 'benefit the community' or 'help the community'. This is a new level of social organisation that has emerged during the late colonial and postcolonial era (Rasmussen 2015: 120–140). What is important to note is that this is not the only way in which community is being built. There are institutions, such as the medical aid post or the school, which are also often associated with benefits to the community (Rasmussen 2015: 140–147). Beyond these direct forms of building the community institutionally and materially, the community also appears as a moral entity as it is invoked as the social place where sharing must take place. Sharing at collaborative work endeavours not only allows more members of the village community to benefit from remittances than those who have close relatives who migrated. It also allows 'the community' to emerge as a frame of reference for structuring transfers beyond the established long-term gift exchange relations in kin networks or the precolonial barter exchange relations between different locations.

In the Mbuke Islands, the building of a house or a canoe provides a context in which sharing takes place on a community-wide level. As I have argued, it is the manifestation of a mode of transfer that has always existed but was previously limited largely to everyday small exchanges amongst kin and co-residents. The sharing of food, cigarettes, and betelnuts with passive bystanders and with uninvited not particularly helpful helpers is levelling out new inequalities that have emerged through migrant work and remittances. As such it is a kind of levelling practice, a function that, as Widlok (2017: 26–27) has argued, sharing often fulfils. It may not be coincidental that sharing is morally expected in exactly those situations that are also the strongest and potentially most problematic demonstrations of inequality and self-interest. As a result, the owning of big assets such as boats and houses will alter the social position of the owner and, in a sense, they must pay everyone in the community for this for it to be morally defensible. The moral debates and accusations of selfishness concerning emerging individualism in Melanesia is often contrasted with the relational personhood embedded in exchange relations that is undermined by individualism (Sykes 2007; Robbins 2004, 2007). But here we see that relational personhood based on gift exchange can also be a potentially selfish raising of personal status and, thereby, at odds with the ethics of village solidarity and sharing. As we have seen, the special-

ised builders are crucial for the project and they are almost always persons with whom ongoing exchange relations exist. But then there are all the others who show up and help with simpler tasks and otherwise hang around during the building process as they are only needed during a few crucial moments in the process. Sharing in this case is, therefore, not a kin-based economy as we know it from contexts of ceremonial gift exchange; in some sense, it effectively stands in opposition thereto.

Based on an analysis of boat- and housebuilding in Mbuke Islands, this contribution explored community-scale sharing and, within that, particularly the levelling effects involved in sharing. Boats and houses can be spectacular demonstrations of wealth. They are also demonstrations of – in most cases – being well connected, of having access to particular kinds of kinship networks that also extend to successful work migrants who have moved from Mbuke to the big cities of PNG. I have argued that these potentially problematic demonstrations of wealth have led to many and massive distributions taking place at these events to which the owner of things of paramount value are morally committed. The building events are complex as they consist of a series of transactions which reconfirm and reconstitute many different sets of relationships. Exchange relations with specialised builders are strengthened and tie into multiple ongoing exchange relations. But there is also extensive sharing with the wider community taking place. The organiser of such an event does what relatives tend to think he should do, namely take care of his and their family interests through exchange and the building of canoes. However, he also does what is today generally expected from a member of the community: sharing food and other things with those who volunteer to be present as helpers. The co-occurrence of sharing and gift giving is in a sense the material expression of a double moral commitment, namely to key kinship alliances in the villages and to the community at large.

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