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LEVELS AND CONVERTIBILITY

LEVELS, in Dumont's sense of the term, are denoted—for the modern observer—by a contradiction or a 'logical scandal' (1979: 400). While this logical scandal is perceived as such only by the observer (who understands it through the filter of our modern ideology, which values only the individual and thus denies the existence of levels), it implies for the culture under study a specific type of social and ideological organization characterized by the separation of different levels. In such a social system, elements are not to be understood solely in their mutual opposition, but simultaneously with their relative position to a third element—a value. Each element carries indissolubly both an oppositional meaning and a valuation. Each element is then ontologically part of a level and does not conflict with elements pertaining to other levels, even if these are logically contradictory.

Thus levels are not abstract theoretical constructs invented by anthropologists. They are social facts as Durkheim defines them and they assert themselves out of the ethnographic observation of specific societies. Nonetheless, they have largely eluded anthropologists because they conflict with our traditional conception of social anthropology and our modern ideology.

In the study of exchanges, the bias appears clearly in transactional theories, which consider that exchanges are centred on individuals and thus that all the objects of exchange are convertible to a common standard of value. The theoretical implication, that objects of exchange are devoid of any transcendent value, is obviously false—at least in the Melanesian context, where it is necessary to recognise the reality of levels. The following case-study of the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea, while not aiming to reconstruct the whole configuration of

This paper owes a great deal in its English form as well as in the clarification of many ideas to Bette Clark, to whom I would therefore like to express my thanks. Further substantial help in the elaboration of this paper has been provided by my colleagues of the CNRS team ERASME.

values of the society, will demonstrate how, even in the restricted fields of ceremonial prestations, levels are a structural feature.

In a report published in 1969, Schwimmer relates the opinion of Sivepe villagers when confronted with the idea of equating all the goods constituting a brideprice with money:

Sivepe people expressed some horror at the thought that this should be referred to as a 200 dollar bride price; to them the gift of pig, bark cloth, food and traditional valuables were gifts of a special type that could not be equated with money. I asked one informant whether this was perhaps a modern trend? 'Not modern but silly,' he replied (Schwimmer 1969: 82).

In this passage, Schwimmer implies that recently introduced items cannot be assimilated to traditional ones. In my subsequent field studies, I discovered that the informants' answers had to be understood in a radically different way. Modern items can in fact be used simultaneously with traditional goods in brideprice and any other kind of prestation. However, whatever the nature of the goods, *in every ceremony there are different levels of prestations, and the goods offered at different levels can never be simply added up*. To illustrate this proposition, I will briefly describe the cycle of initiation ceremonies as I witnessed them and as they were later explained to me.¹

This cycle, which has already been described by Williams (1930), is divided into three parts. In the first part, called Jape, the villagers offer their children to the spirits of the dead,² in order to invite them into the village. When the time for performing an initiation has been decided, the children are secluded away in allied villages or small houses built in the bush. Those who are initiated prepare the ceremony. For about a week, during the day, they roam the bush to obtain sufficient game from their ancestors. At night, their preparations consist of welcoming all the groups from the other villages who are willing to take part in the ceremony. Together, they chant special ritual songs in order to welcome the spirits, and they practise all the secret musical instruments: *sepiripa*, the long

1. All Orokaiva rituals include offerings of different foods (pig, taro, banana, yam, sugar-cane); some include shell jewels and feathers. Nevertheless, I will here confine myself to describing offerings of pigs, since they are the most important ones. Wild pigs are identified with the spirits of the dead: both wander in the bush, neither having dwellings nor names. The spirit is an image, *ahihi*; the pig when domesticated becomes a body, *hamo*. Somehow the wild pig is like the external body of the spirit.

When piglets are captured by men for domestication, they are treated exactly like children, carried in a string bag, breast-fed, given a name and a location in the village under the house of their 'mother' and 'father' (their owner). Domesticated pigs are thus equated with children.

2. For the Orokaiva, the spirits of the dead, ancestors, and primeval characters are one and the same thing. They are all dead people, *ahihi* (also, 'image without a body'). They interact with the living in different ways, according to the occasion. In initiation they are collectively Jape, but they are further distinguished by different names, and each acts in a different way. When they attack the people in the bush, they are *onderi* and then take on any kind of appearance. In myth they are always characterized by their dual nature—of wild animals (most often wild pig) and men.

flutes, *umbuvupa*, the bullroarer and *kornipamoni*, the shell of a nut called *puga*. Women as well as men take part in these preparations, all the participants assembling the specific paraphernalia that they will use during the ceremony. Each group of men is identified by the name of the ancestral character it represents, while all the women are collectively called *sivoropoka*, a character terrifying to all men. All the non-initiated keep away from the hunt as well as the night-time preparations because everything concerned with Jape is secret; should a non-initiated person hear or see anything of it he would be afflicted with physical deformities such as baldness, prominent testicles or distorted joints. The produce of the hunt is hidden away in a small hut built specifically for this purpose in the bush, not very far from the edges of the village.

When everything is ready, the children are gathered at night close to the village. They are each armed with a stick, and are warned 'You will see the spirit Jape and you will hear him'. They are told that Jape will attack them, and that they will have to defend themselves with the sticks. He might kill them, but if they behave as instructed, nothing will happen to them. They must neither laugh, nor eat anything, even if offered to them; otherwise, they will be killed immediately with a spear. If seized by the spirit, they should call out the name of their ancestor and they will be released. Then the children are brought into the village where they form a line. Strange noises can be heard in the darkness and, suddenly, a huge row of Jape spirits that they cannot yet see rushes at them and the ground trembles. The spirits' attacks go on through the night and into the morning. However, the spirits do not content themselves merely with attacking the children, but destroy all the symbols of social life. They burn or damage the houses, steal fruit from the palm trees that mark the limits of the village, and pull the trees down to the ground by attaching ropes to their tops. They kill the domestic pigs, provoke brothers to fight each other, induce adultery and, finally, they damage the bodies of all the participants.

There are two ways in which the children can escape maltreatment, depending on the type of ritual that their fathers have organised. If a platform has been built for them, they will try to climb on top of it, where they will be out of reach of the spirits. Alternatively, if each father has tied down the domesticated pig that he will later present at the time of his child's decoration, the initiate can step onto the body of the immobilised pig and stay there safely. 'When the spirits see that such a big pig will soon be offered for the child, they are satisfied and will not treat him roughly.'

Nonetheless, the spirits will not stop their destruction of the village until they are presented with a prestation called *ji be torari*, 'the wild fruit' (literally 'the fruit that has been collected from the trees'). This prestation is brought from the bush by some of the villagers and consists of the produce obtained by all the participants in the hunt,³ plus a large quantity of wild fruit and vegetables. This prestation to the spirits, *ji be torari*, has some special features. First, it remains

3. When hunting for this ceremony, people gather any kind of wild game (*o*). Each type of animal can be specified by a name prefixed by *o*: *o aisi* (bandicoot), *o gumba* (cuscus), *o ohu* (pig). The meat of all these animals is called *o*. Pigs are different from other animals only in that they alone are the ones to be domesticated.

secret until the last moment, which clearly distinguishes it from all other prestations, invariably made in the open with as many witnesses as possible. Secondly, it bears the name *jì be torari*, which implies that it is composed of wild fruits of the forest, the domain of all non-human beings. Thirdly, it will never be returned (*mine iraera*), unlike all other ceremonial prestations. When this prestation has been made, all the visitors return home and the village will be left *siosa*, as the villagers call it, meaning 'upside down' or 'meaningless'.

In the afternoon of the same day the second part of the initiation ceremonies begins. First, the children are taken away and secluded in special houses built for them on the edge of the village. Their pigs (the pigs that will be killed for them later) are kept under the same houses. For a period of three to seven years the initiates are not allowed to go out of the house, have sexual intercourse, speak loudly, or wash. The spirit Jape watches over them: should they break any of these rules, they are immediately killed. The spirit also induces the children to grow by feeding them abundantly, by smoking them through burning magical plants under the house, and by anointing their bodies with coconut oil. The spirit is usually embodied by men and women related to the children's parents through a brother-sister link, for the children cannot be seen by their mother or father during this period. If everything goes well, their bodies will grow big and handsome, and their parents will be surprised and proud when they eventually see them. If, on the other hand, the children are killed and buried secretly in the bush, their parents will say that the spirits have taken them away; they cannot complain because, in the beginning, they offered their children to the spirits.

When the Jape ceremony is finished, the village also needs help because everything has been destroyed. Not only houses, trees, animals, and all the other material manifestations of the village but also social relationships are in an alarming state. No one is permitted to leave the village, have sexual relations, cook food, climb trees, wash or comb hair, or cut trees or grass. All social and personal activities cease. Gradually, one by one, all the prohibitions will be lifted for the villagers, and life will resume its normal, more active course. Just as the trees which have been attacked by the spirits 'will bear more and bigger fruit', so the village will intensify its efforts to produce all the garden vegetables (particularly taro) which are needed for the next part of the ceremony. This effort will be two-fold, because not only will people have to plant extended or extra gardens in order to ensure an abundant harvest, but they will also have to solve all the social and personal problems that have developed over the previous few years, that is, during the first part of the ceremony. Should any problem be left unresolved, the harvest would immediately be threatened by sorcery or by the ill will of the spirits of the dead.

After a few years—perhaps from three to seven—when the harvest is ready for the next stage of the ceremony, the children come to be called *eha mei*, 'new children', with new and strong bodies. The village itself is a new village, restored from the state of disarray in which the spirits had left it, with a new crop of garden food and new (or at least renewed) relations between the villagers. This new village will now engage in a huge *pondo* or ceremonial feast.

When they have plenty of crops, the men of the village build a large ceremonial platform called *o oho* in the centre of the village. Each one of its stilts represents one of the pigs that will be killed. The father of every initiate chooses one man to decorate his child from head to toe. A few weeks later, when these men have the decorative paraphernalia ready, the villagers collect their vegetables from the gardens and bring them ceremonially to the village, installing them on the platform. When everything is ready, the women of the village take the children down to the river before daybreak, for their first wash in several years. Then, not far from the village, they clear a small area in the bush where the children will be decorated. Late in the afternoon all the children, now adorned, are gathered and brought into the centre of the village, together with groups of dancers, who have been assembled and prepared by those responsible for the decoration in order to enhance the beauty of the children. When the parents see their children grown and decorated, they are amazed at how big and beautiful they have become. The ritual transformation is now over for the children. They climb onto the platform, where they can be seen by all the other participants. The parents then secure the pigs (which they are about to offer for the transformation of their children) with strips of bark-cloth, and lay them down at the foot of the platform. Then, rushing up and down, they bring all the vegetables down to the ground, where they arrange them in piles. The pigs are carried up to the platform, where they are slaughtered with spears and cut up. The pieces are brought down and placed on top of the piles of vegetables. Each pile is publicly allocated to those people who have helped to 'form the child's body', the largest pile generally going to the person who did the decoration.

The people who have received food immediately return to their villages, where they in turn redistribute it to all those who had helped them gather the decorative paraphernalia, and to their kin, co-villagers and friends. At the end of the night, the man who initially received the offering will probably be left with nothing but a little taro and a tiny piece of pigfat. Back in the village where the ceremony took place, the father of the initiate keeps the decorations that adorned his child. In order to recover these objects, the decorator will have to give the child's father the exact amount of food that he himself was given, and as soon as possible. This return prestation, being exactly equal to the first one, is called *pondo mine* (return *pondo*). The decorator therefore gathers food from the people to whom he has previously given part of the *pondo* he had received, and he complements this with all the vegetables from his garden and some domesticated pigs. After receiving *pondo mine*, the father distributes it in *hande* prestations to the people who have helped him prepare the initiation ceremony, and to those who have contributed some food to the initial *pondo*. Like the decorator, he is left with nothing by the end of the night. Except for the decorator, who will have to return the feathers and the shell jewels to the people from whom he borrowed them, the initiation is now finished.

In order to simplify, I have described each prestation as being composed of only two stages: the first, when the food is given to the people on the platform, this prestation being called *pondo* (or *pondo mine* when it is returned); and the second, when this first prestation is shared in the receiver's village. Each of these

prestations is called *hande*. Actually, everyone who receives something in the second phase shares it again amongst his friends and kin, etc. These *hande* prestations continue throughout the night that follows the ceremony. Each household cooks part of the food and passes the rest on to other people; each house shares dinner that night with guests from other houses or visiting young people. This carries on until all the food is finished (*indari irae*). Eventually, some people will succeed in abstracting some meat from their guests. This meat can be put away and preserved for further use by smoking, but this is very rarely done.

These two types of prestation, *pondo* and *hande*, have distinct characteristics. *Pondo* is given for a reason (*amila be*, or ceremonial action involving transformation of the body) that must be publicized before the food is given away. It is said to be given 'for the body' (*hamo*) of the person who receives it, and requires freshly killed domestic pigs. Furthermore, during initiation—which is the most important ritual occasion—the pigs are slaughtered and cut up on top of the platform. It requires a very prompt return gift (*mine*), exactly equivalent to the first one, and involves villages or groups of people—not individuals—as givers and receivers. The people who are particularly active in *pondo* are called *pondo embo*, who are supposed to consume all their food during this activity. On the other hand, *hande* is given for no specific reason other than the desire to give, which comes from the 'inside of man' (*jo*); it is thus given for the *jo*, and not the body of man. It never involves freshly-killed domesticated pig not given previously in a *pondo*, but is often made with wild game. It involves relations between individual persons, and there is no obligatory return (*mine iraera*). Those who like giving in this way are called *hande embo*, but they are under no obligation to give all their food away in this manner.

I will now try to identify the contexts of these offerings. As I have shown elsewhere (1983a), the whole of the ritual can be understood in the following way.

The villagers ask the spirits to enter the village. In so doing, they expose themselves as a human society to total destruction, because they negate the fundamental separation between men and spirits and between village and bush. When everything that is human has been destroyed by the ceremony of Jape, the spirits are given 'wild foods' (in the offering of *ji be torari*) to make them desist. Nevertheless, the children that have been exposed to the wrath of the spirits are now under their power in the ceremonial *oro* house. Gradually, the village recomposes itself by performing all the necessary rituals around this house. When everything is ready, the village exchanges domestic pigs with other villages,⁴ and the children, by now grown up, are freed from their captivity. The

4. Most often, the decorator of a child belongs to a different village from that of the parents. He is generally the mother's brother of either the child or the father, and affines usually live in different villages. In those cases, although prestations are given in the name of individual persons, they have the significance of inter-village exchanges (see Iteanu 1983a and 1983b). Nevertheless, the father

whole process ends when the children stand in full decorative costume on the platform for the slaughter of the pigs, where they are finally differentiated from them. The pigs' bodies will be cut into pieces but the children's bodies remain whole, at least for the time being, though they may later be killed in warfare, and themselves cut into pieces and eaten. Thus it is through initiation ceremonies that the subject and object of exchange are differentiated. Pig and man will not be identified again, and then only individually, until the man's death, when his buried body is transformed into that of a pig or some other wild animal that returns to the forest. While initiation differentiates the children from the pigs collectively, death nullifies this difference for one person only. For an individual subject, the period of time between initiation and death is his (or her) span of life as a subject. For the society as a whole, for as long as the initiation ceremony is regularly repeated, the difference between the subject and the object of exchange is perpetuated—men have pigs to kill in *pondo* and meat to share in *hande* prestations.

Three hierarchically ordered contexts of exchange (which do not coincide with the tripartite division of the initiation) can be distinguished within the initiation ceremony. A closer look at the nature of the prestations themselves will make this point more evident.

In the first instance men are interacting with spirits. Their contact allows them to separate the pigs from the children and, by so doing, to transform the pigs into objects of exchange. In the second instance the pig as a whole is slaughtered and cut up on the platform; and in the third instance the pieces of pig are distributed and then eaten. Initially, the child is not distinguished from the pigs, and the two form a unity which is clearly demonstrated when the child, in the first part of the initiation ceremony, steps onto the body of the pig that will later be killed for him. When alone, he is attacked by the spirits, but he and the pig combined constitute a totality very much like the spirits acting in the myth, where man and pig cannot be distinguished. Because child and pig together resemble the spirits, the spirits leave the child alone. Thus the pig is to be understood as a part of this pig-child totality, which is split in two in the initiation rite. In the subsequent instance the live pig itself is a totality; after being cut up, the pieces of pig are parts of a whole of higher rank, the pig as a whole.

I have demonstrated that these so-called 'contexts' of offering are *hierarchically ordered levels* by illustrating that the objects circulating at each level are always parts of a whole that circulates at a higher level. An object circulating at a higher level is ceremonially divided, and then circulated on a lower level, and so on. In

might sometimes choose a co-villager as decorator. In those cases the return of the *pondo* prestation must take place at once. This rule, stated by the informants, underlines the double characteristic of the *pondo* prestation: 1) there can be no unilateral *pondo*—not even for a moment—within the village; 2) the very idea of *pondo* being negated, by the fact that it occurs between partners of the same village, means that the requirement of a quick return, which characterizes *pondo* prestations, must be strengthened. Altogether, whatever the choices of the fathers, globally the initiation *pondo* always involves several villages, and is conceived as such.

contrast, an object that has circulated at a lower level can never be recirculated at a higher level. Thus higher levels of exchange encompass lower levels.

With this understanding of levels of exchange and the uni-directional circulation of objects across them in Orokaiva ritual, it now becomes clear why—in the passage I quoted earlier—the Orokaiva find ‘silly’ the idea of summing up all the prestations involved in a brideprice. For them, prestations at different levels are different ‘things’ and cannot be added up.

To investigate further the nature of levels I will turn to the two other major Orokaiva ceremonies: marriage and funerals. When a girl marries she is secretly taken away during the night by the groom to his own village. In the morning, when the girl’s parents see that their daughter has disappeared, they will call on all their relatives to help search for her. An armed party is formed, which travels to the village of the groom. Upon arriving, the girl’s kinsmen insult and shame the groom’s family, and even destroy their village, thus behaving exactly like spirits towards their future affines. They will not desist until their request for prestations, called *o sobu* (‘the pig for having walked in the morning dew’), are satisfied. These prestations are retained by the recipients, and indeed will never be returned. Only when they are satisfied do they start discussing the brideprice, which always includes a domesticated pig. It is said to be the ‘body’ or the ‘grease of the bride’, and thus the parents of the girl will not eat any of it. When they have obtained a satisfactory brideprice (*dorobu*) the party returns with it to the girl’s village, where the father redistributes most of it, always including all of the pig, since he and his family can eat none of it.

Here again we have three levels of prestations. At the first level, by acting like spirits the bride’s party achieves a transformation opposite to that of the initiation, in confusing the girl with the pig in the brideprice. They leave the girl, but take the pig to give to the father of the bride as if it were his daughter. Because they have agreed on this occasion to deny the difference between the girl and the pig, they are given *o sobu* prestations. At a second level the father receives a pig and taro from his in-laws in a *pondo*-like way. At a third level he redistributes it in a large *hande* to his friends, kin and co-villagers.

One finds the same three levels of offerings in the funeral ceremony. To be brief, I will describe the case of a husband who dies before his wife.

When a man does not move any more (*wasiri irae*), he is declared dead (*pehari*). While one man blows a conch-shell to call the mourners from other villages, the co-villagers of the dead man surround him and begin to mourn. This involves acting like pigs and singing a special mourning song which recalls the deeds of the deceased. Gradually, mourners from the surrounding villages join the party, imitating the behaviour of pigs. The crying continues all night, and in the morning the body is buried, soon to change into wild animals. The mourners eat nothing during the night, but in the morning some of the people from the deceased person’s village gather food that belonged to the deceased to share among the mourners. This prestation is called *si ta indari*, the ‘food for the tears’.

The mourners eat and then they leave the village, carrying away the food which has been left over. The widow then goes into seclusion in the house in which the deceased has been buried. She will not wash, nor have sexual relations, etc., but she sews a mourning jacket (*baja*) that represents the image (*ahihi*) of her dead husband. During her seclusion she is fed by the relatives of the dead man. When it is time for her to cease mourning and come out of seclusion her brother organizes a ceremony. He gives a pig and taro to the relatives of the dead man. The widow comes down from the house, takes off the mourning jacket, and puts it over the body of the pig. She is then free to leave and remarry if she wishes, and the relatives of the deceased distribute the pig and taro in a large *hande*.

Here also the first prestation is given for a change that has taken place to the body. This is the reverse of the transformation that takes place during initiation, where pig is separated from man: the mourners merge pig and man by performing the ritual which transforms the man's body into a pig. For this they are given *si ta indari*, a prestation that will never be returned. Again, this level of prestation involves a relation between spirits and men. The spirits have caused the man to die, and the mourners themselves act like spirits, adopting behaviour that is at once human and pig-like. The prestation of a pig by the widow's brother, while marking the end of the transformation of the dead, is also seen as a return for the brideprice. The deceased had given a pig to his in-laws at the time of marriage. These in-laws now have to bring a pig in order to get back their sister, a prestation which will not be reciprocated. Finally, the *hande* is very much like all the other *hande* that I have mentioned.

Figure 1 sums up all the prestations I have described. All the first-level prestations involve relations with spirits (even in the case of marriage, where the spirits are not 'true spirits' but affines acting like spirits). They acknowledge a change in the relative position of human and pig: in initiation, children are

	Initiation	Marriage	Funeral
1st level	Jape—Children given to spirits and separate from pigs. <i>Ji be torari</i>	Affine acting like spirits. Girl given for a pig. <i>O sobu</i>	Deceased given to spirits and trans- formed into pig. <i>Si ta indari</i>
2nd level	<i>Pondo</i> → ← <i>Mine pondo</i>	<i>Dorobu</i> →	<i>Pondo</i> ←
3rd level	<i>Hande</i>	<i>Hande</i>	<i>Hande</i>

Figure 1

separated from pigs; in marriage, a woman is confused with a pig; in the funeral, humans and wild animals are merged. At the second level, the *pondo* of the initiation ceremony is equal in its structure and its components to the sum of the *dorobu* of the marriage and of the *pondo* of the funeral, the return prestation of the initiation being, at least in principle, less delayed than in the second case. At the third level, all the *hande* prestations are equivalent.

The hierarchy of levels of exchange that I have shown in these three rituals, if not sufficient to give us a total picture of the structure of Orokaiva society, nonetheless allows us to re-evaluate the notion of reciprocity which has often been considered as the paramount structural value in Melanesian societies. Among the Orokaiva, in fact, reciprocity, and especially immediate reciprocity, is required only for *pondo*, a subordinate level of exchange. What, then, is the value of reciprocity here?

The Orokaiva explain all their ceremonies as being a repetition of the activities of their ancestors. The rituals (*o ohu ta wasiri*, 'pig's behaviours') have been handed down by the ancestors and they are repeated because they are the only way to keep in touch with them. Orokaiva society is not structured by principles of descent: genealogy is replaced by ritual in its function of linking ancestors with the living (Iteanu 1983b). While men never modify any part of the ceremonies, they act in rituals through their food prestations. It is man's specific and original attribute to give food in ritual, choosing the amount, the quality and the presentation. At the higher level, that of relations with the spirits, perfect repetition of the rituals is valued. At the lower level of *pondo* (relations between villages, in which men exchange pigs), the value of repetition appears in the *mine*—one prestation being the exact repetition of the other—and the return gift must be made as soon as possible. This confirms the superiority of initiation over marriage and funerals: the first implies more or less immediate return, while the other two entail a delayed return. This superiority is congruent with the fact that, while in initiation 'true spirits' are present, in marriage and at funerals there are only men acting as spirits. At the lowest level, repetition ceases to be important, and *hande* depends only on the will (*jo*) of individual subjects, to which the value of repetition becomes subordinated. Reciprocity is thus for the Orokaiva a subordinated value which reasserts at a lower level the primacy of a superior value, namely repetition of the ritual cycle.

Finally, a few conclusions on the topic of levels. For the anthropologist levels at first sight appear as a 'logical contradiction'. However, this does not give rise to any conflict or intellectual discomfort in the society studied. On the contrary, this 'contradiction' seems to be, for the people, the most obvious, or at least the wisest thing in the world. This is so because, in the indigenous view of that society, each fact is perceived in its relation to the society as a whole—a

conception which implies the existence, in that society, of a paramount value and a hierarchy, and, within the hierarchy, of levels. For the people, then, things are not contradictory because, belonging to different levels, they are not comparable one to another: they are hierarchically ordered and, in relation to the whole, bear different values.

In societies structured by exchange, kinship theories, alliance theories, economic theories and even transactional theories have failed to explain the fundamental unity of the cycle of exchange, because they have ignored the value that is to be found both in the objects and in the actors of exchange.

In the Orokaiva case, for instance, analysing each exchange as a discrete event would never explain why, in the initiation *pondo*, one has to reciprocate the food prestation, while in the mourning ritual, in fairly similar circumstances, no return prestation is required. On the other hand, considering all the Orokaiva exchanges to be governed by a similar objective standard of value leads to a similar, if opposite, mistake. In such a system of exchange an anthropologist should not call, for instance, a pig a pig without stating at once its relative position within the global cycle of exchange or, to put it in Dumont's terms, without specifying the level in which it stands in relation to the configuration of values.

For the anthropologist levels become apparent when changes of level occur in the performance of any social activity. These changes of level can take different forms in different societies, and even within the same society. One well-known form of this is reversal (see Tcherkézoff 1983). In the Orokaiva case the changes of level take the form of ritual partition of the object of exchange, which restricts convertibility. Since levels are hierarchically ordered, objects of exchange can only circulate towards less-valued levels—partition compels them to circulate in only one direction.

The recognition of levels allows us not only to understand the global structure of the exchange cycle, but also to reconsider notions like reciprocity, whose only claim to superior value is its supposed universality (see Schieffelin 1980). Reciprocity is attributed a subordinated value by the Orokaiva, and this certainly applies also to many other Melanesian societies. Thus a recognition of the very existence of levels within the exchange cycle, in societies where exchange forms the core of the social structure, gives us the best chance of achieving a true comparative theory of exchange, since it helps us to perceive the culturally specific hierarchy of values.

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