FLAG REPORT

Flag # 112
Ed Roski MN '90 and Peter Keller FN '84 Expedition Co-Leaders
Kula Ring Expedition, Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea

PROJECT OVERVIEW

From November 1 to 10, 2013, expedition co-leaders Ed Roski MN '90 and Peter Keller FN '84 traveled almost 1000 nautical miles on the MV Golden Dawn circling the groups of islands that make up what has been known as the Kula Ring of Milne Bay Province in Papua New Guinea. The purpose of the expedition was to examine the status of the Kula Tradition since our visit to the area in 2003, and to collect material for the Bowers Museum's permanent display on Oceanic cultures entitled "Spirits and Headhunters: Arts of the Pacific Islands".

Island groups visited include the Trobriands, the Marshall Bennetts, Woodlark, the Calvados Chain, the Louisiade Archipeleigo, the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, and the Amphlett Islands. We found that the modern age has all but eliminated traditions in the region. The Kula exchange appears alive and well only in the most remote islands out of reach of regional Ferries and Cruise Ships.
THE PROJECT

The Kula Ring is a ring of islands and island groups located in the Milne Bay Province in eastern Papua New Guinea.

In this region a ceremonial system of exchange and bartering has taken place between the islands for perhaps hundreds of years. In the Kula Exchange, relatively worthless items including six foot lengths of red spondylus shell beads known as "bagi" or "soulava" travel counterclockwise around the ring in exchange for beaded white shell armbands known as "mwali" which travel clockwise through the system. The exchange of the bagi for the mwali is very ceremonial and strictly monitored. At the same time, valuable bartering takes place using mostly very fine greenstone ax blades for land, canoes, and even brides. Other items such as pottery from the Amphlett Islands and Canoe Splashboards are also used in the bartering process.

The Kula exchange usually involves only the village chiefs and may take place as often as once a year or as little as once every ten years. What has been most important in the Kula exchange is that it takes groups of mostly young men in beautiful seagoing canoes over sometimes hundreds of miles of open ocean to neighboring islands to trade and perhaps marry. In a region where many of the islands have populations that number in the low hundreds, this is incredibly important. Noted Anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski best brought the Kula to the world in
his classic 1922 work "Argonauts of the Western Pacific" -- he directly confronted the question of "why men risk their life and limb to travel across huge expanses of dangerous ocean to give away what appear to be worthless trinkets”.

Our mission is to examine the status of this important exchange network 91 years later.

**EXPEDITION DIARY**

November 1, 2013: ALOTAU - Ed was on the phone to the office by 4 am and Peter was up by 5am. The annual canoe festival was very exciting with canoes from all over Milne Bay coming in for this event. It was a great opportunity to see every type of canoe from the large ocean going Kula canoes to the smaller, coastal sailing vessels. The photography was fantastic and Ed alone took over 700 photos. Peter took almost as many. By 3:30 pm we secured funds for our expedition from the bank (no easy task since one bank has to communicate with another with very poor phone systems), got a 75 hp fast boat for upcoming island explorations, and we set off on our way. Due to very strong southeasterly Trade winds, Craig has reversed the route from clockwise around the Kula Ring to counterclockwise. We have 15 hours of rough seas to get to our first stop, Panapompom Island in Deboyne Lagoon. We plan on getting out very early and want to especially concentrate on Panaeati, where it has been reported that many of the Kula Canoes are built. From here we will continue east down the Calvados Chain to Bagaman Island where we plan on spending the night and then we are on to Sudest where we know many of the lime spatulas are made. It’s interesting that none of the islands in the southeast of Milne Bay, including Sudeast and Rossel participate in the Kula exchange, but do manufacture many of the barter goods, such as lime spatulas, and are an important source for the red spondylas shell beads used in the exchange necklaces that are known as bagi or soulava.
November 2, 2013: DEBOYNE LAGOON- Last night was extremely rough due to the severe southeastern winds. At about 2:30 in the morning we were awakened by a loud bang and a lot of crew commotion as we bent the boat’s stabilizer. As a result, we are running about three hours and will get to Deboyne Lagoon around 9:30 am. We plan on transferring to the small fast boat to do exploration of the islands for the better part of the day. We encountered a small coastal sailing boat in open ocean and with rough seas, were very impressed with the courage and sailing skills of these sailors. Our first island was Torlesse Island in the Toresse Island group just between the Conflict Group and Deboyne Islands. Craig suggested we stop there since it’s an island that virtually no one goes to. We found only three families there and they were quite old. Because they were old, they all had betel-nut mortars, aka dep deps, and we collected three very fine ones. We then moved on to the canoe making island of Panaeti in Deboyne Lagoon where things were very quiet. There was not a lot of canoe making going on. We found a few splashboards, an ebony sago stirrer, and some very simple dep deps. We saw no sign of Kula activity. We then crossed over the lagoon in rough seas to Panapompom Island where, ten years ago we found lots on Kula exchange greenstone blades, the blade carriers, and Bagi. Again, there was very little except two strands of Bagi and some common splashboards. On the southeastern tip of the island we found a village that had the remains of a Japanese Bomber’s propeller with remains of the engine in the surf zone. By 4:30 pm we called it a day, collecting 13 betel-nut mortars from the older villagers who no longer had teeth due to the betel-nut, and a few splashboards. The Kula appears to be all but gone in this area. As the sun sets, we head southeast down the Calvados Chain to start very early at Bagaman Island we are working our way to Sudest Island.

November 3, 2013: CALVADOS CHAIN – Today we got off the boat by 6 am in order to visit the villages before the people go out to tend their gardens. We found three small villages on Bagaman and were fortunate to find a man who is very active in Kula Exchange. He showed us a very important Mwali that he traded last year at Woodlark, where he has traditionally traded
each year. Over time, he said that he has traded with most of the Woodlark villages. Other trade items that he is involved with include Bagi, greenstone blades (along with their wooden presentation handles), and splashboards. He took us around his village and in addition to several more betel-nut mortars we managed to acquire three very large, very old greenstone blades with their presentation handles. He then accompanied us to the other small villages on the island and helped us acquire sago stirrers, one ebony walking stick, and a canoe bailer.

By 9 am we said goodbye to Bagaman and were off to several islands along the Calvados Chain that are seldom visited. All told, we explored a total of six islands: Pena Numara, Pena Krusima, Taipwa, Abagagaheia, Gigila, and Penawina. We saw very little evidence of Kula Exchange here, but the islands are metamorphic with abundant greenstone ax blades. We also saw lots of presentation hafts for the blades, many of which were still in the process of being carved. This suggests that these very finely polished ax blades are being actively bartered for everything from a wife to a canoe. At each village we inquired where the blades were being made, and consistently got the answer that they have not been made, but often found in the stream beds in the hills above the villages. The literature talks about quarries and blades “factories” on the hills above Woodlark Island, and they may have been traded to these islands in the past, or they may, in fact, been made on these islands as well. Certainly the banded schists that make up these islands would be conducive to greenstone facies. It is worth noting that on Abagagaheia, we saw abundant quartz interbedded with the schist that looks like a promising gold prospect. We also found only three of the turtle shell spatulas that were so common when we visited the area ten years ago, everyone knew about them, but no one had any. The splashboards were very common, and at Pena Wina, they had a very interesting snake motif running the full length of the Board.

We stayed out exploring until dark when we headed back to the Golden Dawn for a shower, dinner, and a movie.
November 4, 2013: SUDEST ISLAND – We got underway by 5 am heading east along the Calvados Chain stopping just across from Grass Island where we began exploring villages. Much to our surprise, we began to see a lot more stone ax blades of various sizes as well as the hafts. We also found a good number of both large wooden presentation spatulas and the turtle shell. After interviewing several of the people in different villages, we learned that the stone blades are very much a part of the Kula bartering system, and that the blades have different values depending on the size, thickness, and form. The larger and thinner the blade, the more valuable it is for bartering purposes. Smaller blades are used as announcements; they are being placed under mats in the village where the upcoming exchange is to take place at the exchange feast itself, the finer blades are presented using the wooden hafts as what one person said, “they are the pots for the flowers”. According to Malinowski in his classic work “Argonauts of the Western Pacific”, these stone axes were of the highest value in bartering for goods such as land, canoes, or wives. He reported that the rough stone was quarried on Woodlark at the Soluga Quarries on top of Undalai mountain and the roughed out pieces were sent to Kiriwina for finishing and it is here that they took on their fine polish. They were then sent to Katava for distribution into the exchange network. The largest and thinnest of them were called “vaygu’a (articles of high value), and were specifically called “beku”. Since the introduction of steel blades, the lesser greenstone blades have minimal value, while the larger, thinner blades are more valuable than ever.
We also acquired an amazing beaded presentation piece for bagi. It is a large circular piece that is meant to hang on the end of the long bagi strands. A double six foot strand is typically over 1000 kina in value. By 10:30 am we returned to the Golden Dawn to continue our way to Sudest, where the spatulas are thought to be made and some reports suggest the greenstone blades may come from. It is worth noting that more common reports still have them quarried and manufactured at Woodlark. We’ll hopefully sort this out soon. While our morning on Panatinane Island and Grass Islands and their surrounding islands was incredibly productive, both for what we were able to collect and for the information that we derived from the villagers regarding Kula in the area, the afternoon on Sudest was a major disappointment. The few villages that we could find were made up almost entirely of young people with no knowledge or interest in their culture, we found and learned very little. We have a fifteen hour run tonight and decided that we would cut out Budibudi and go directly to Woodlark to start tomorrow in the field. Budi Budi is now visited by Cruise Ships and given its small size, we determined it wasn’t worth the extra time that it would take away from the rest of our journey.

November 5, 2013: WOODLARK - We traveled over 16 hours and over 100 nautical miles from Sudest to Woodlark over fairly rough seas. We arrived at Woodlark at 10 am. The largest village on the south coast of the island is Wabunuma Village, which is where we planned to spend the morning. Before heading in, however, we checked out a small village opposite the main village, but found very little. It was interesting that there were a number of the small Kula canoe models that the children us to race. They are very well made, with a lot of canoe detail. I hope we can get one for the Museum when we are in Gawa where these canoes are made. When we went ashore at Wabunuma, we immediately saw a Kula canoe with all the shell decorations. Ed and I took a photo with the Explorers Club flag in front of the canoe since it best symbolizes the Kula Exchange that we are following. While Ed and Peter explored the village on top, which turned out to have very few people since they already left to tend their gardens in the bush, Lesley looked for the owner of the Kula canoe. When she found him, we were astounded to see the inside of his hut filled with more Mwali than we have ever seen. He has been actively participating in the Kula Exchange for his entire life, and is determined to keep the exchange going. After taking a lot of photos, we explored up the beach and found a polishing/grinding stone for the stone axes that we were able to obtain for a display at the Museum. Our next goal was to find the source of the greenstone for the treasured ax blades. We did find in the area, a fair number of flaked blades, confirming that the greenstone is mined on Woodlark, and roughed out to be sent to Kirawina for polishing. The quarry for the greenstone, according to MacGregor((1894) is on the top of Undalai Peak on the Suloga peninsula.
The largest village in the area is on Mwapwas Island, at the mouth of Suloga Harbor. We headed west about an hour to the island to check it out and find a guide to the area. Unfortunately, it started to rain very hard, and we couldn’t begin to get up the small hills due to the very slippery clay. This coupled with the rough surf and the verticle cliffs of the shoreline, precluded our climb to the Undalai site. However, MacGregor (1894) gives a very good description. “The Suloga quarry is where the best stone axes in the eastern half of New Guinea are made”. He anchored at Wavepu Bay on the western side of the Suloga Peninsula and found a streambed full of chipped debris from making the axes. He also reports burial caves which are relatively common to the northern Massim Islands. Seligmann and Strong (1906) reported their experience at locating the quarry. “At an elevation of about 700 feet (we found it to be about half that) was a natural clearing and one of those places where trees do not grow. . .this open space was some acres large with plenty of chips about and two remarkable standing monoliths. Among the chipped debris were grinding stones used to manufacture the blades.” Since we could not get to the site, we will have to be content with the previous reports. We did obtain several flaked blades, and, as noted above, a grinding stone. Together, it will make an excellent exhibition on these important forms of currency.
November 6, 2013: ALCESTER ISLAND – We left the harbor at Soluga around 6:30 am for our three hour run to Alcester. Alcester is a remote island visited by very few people, except for their active participation in Kula exchange. We arrived at Alcester Island around 10 am and immediately located the main village on the beach. The island is made up largely of coral so we could see high cliffs with obvious caves. About 280 people live on the island, divided between the village on the beach, and scattered around the flat top of the island. The chief had the central hut, and after introducing ourselves, he invited us to go upstairs to see his Kula Exchange material. He had about four Mwali and a couple of ‘Bagi, which he uses annually exchange with Woodlark or islands in the Engineer Group to the southwest. Ed and I explored the top of the island to see their school and church as well as a very small skull cave with only one skull. Our guide informed us that they have thrown most of the old skulls into the ocean. There really wasn’t much else on the island, so we were on our way to Gawa by noon, expecting to arrive in the Marshall Bennetts by 5 pm. We plan to get the word out that we are there so we can get moving at 6 am in the morning.

We suspect that the Marshall Bennetts will be our best area, with Kula canoe building on Gawa, traditional kite fishing, on Iwa, and exceptional carving on all three islands.
November 7, 2013:
GAWA/KWAIAWATA/IWA ISLANDS-
By 6 am we were on the beach and lots of villagers were there to greet us. Ed and Peter decided to climb to the top of this coral and limestone island; the trek was very steep, very slippery from last night’s rains, and very rough. After an hour, we made it to the top where the main village is located and were surprised by the large number of villagers that were very friendly and helpful. It was reported that the island has a population of about 1200, and we saw a school and a hospital, of sorts. We learned that in the Marshall Bennett Islands, the greenstone ax blades were used primarily for buying land, and only rarely to buy a bride. Unlike the southern Massim area, they are never used to buy canoes.
During the two hours that Ed and Peter stayed in the village, Ed was fortunate to collect 54 betel-nut mortars and pestles in just this one village. They also had crude stone axes, a hardwood paddle that Peter bought to use as a walking stick to help him climb back down to the beach, and lime spatulas made of turtle shell, whale bone, wood, cassowary bone, and marlin fish bone. We also managed to acquire a full scale model of a Kula canoe for the Museum, as well as a carved wooden bailer, the first one that we’ve seen on this expedition.
Everyone seems to be used either bailer shells, or more commonly, cut off plastic bottles. We also acquired a number of wave splitters and splashboards from the Kula canoes for the Museum. By noon, we said goodbye to Gawa and went an hour northwest to Kwaiaiwata where we found very little and since the island was far too steep to climb to the village, didn’t learn much about Gawa’s sister island. Finally, we left around 1 pm for the last of the three Marshall Bennett Islands, Iwa. Iwa is similar to the structure of the other two islands that we visited; it is structured like a layer cake of coral and limestone with three layers. It should be noted that skull caves are common here because of the limestone. Ed and Peter decided it was worth the climb/hike to the village on top of the island.

Due to the amazing downpour of rain, the rocky hike as much like walking up a waterfall.

We passed the school and hospital on the way to the village, and noted that while primitive, they were well cared for. After about an hour walk, we came to the flooded village. We were thoroughly soaked, and getting wet wasn’t an issue any more.

The chief was having his birthday celebration and his house was decorated with his Kula wealth and flowers. The village trade largely with Gawa and Woodlark Islands.

Soon, villagers emerged from all corners of the village with items that they wanted us to buy. Ed did obtain quite a few betel-nut mortars, while Peter was learning about the Kite Fishing unique to Iwa. We secured a sample of the hooks and spider web that are used in the unique form of fishing. We then made the even more difficult trek back to the beach down very slippery rocks.
We agreed to meet at 6 am on the beach if anyone had anything they wanted to sell. In the meantime, we looked at the many Kula Canoe houses on the beach.

Between Iwa and Gawa, we saw well over a dozen Kula canoes with their white shell decoration and striking white and red wave splitters and splashboards. We learned that the large canoes that we saw on Gawa and Iwa are called “nagega”, while the smaller, lighter canoes are called “masawa”. The splashboards are called “Lagim” and the wave splitters, or prowboards are called “tabuya”. We observed many mwali on these islands suggesting a very active Kula exchange.

November 8, 2013: IWA TO VAKUTA ISLANDS – Promptly at 6 am, we headed for the beach where about 100 villagers were waiting to sell whatever they had. We secured a canoe bailer, splashboard, and wave splitter for the Museum exhibit. Ed got more betel-nut mortars which
brings his collection to over 200 so far. We also got a few Massim bowls, which are rare on this trip due to the switch to aluminum and plastic by the villagers. We left Iwa around 8 am for our next stop, Vakuta. Vakuta is located just to the south of the Trobriands main island, Kirawina. Much of the Kula trade is reported to stem from this little-visited island. We arrived just after noon and rounded the southern tip of the island for the west side that is protected from the constant southeasterly trades. There are three villages on the island, but only the village of Vakuta is of any significance. We found a guide at a small village at the end of the bay, located right on the beach, who took us through the maze of mangrove swamp to the village of Vakuta.

![Photo of Vakuta village](image)

It was a very busy place with lots of kids and many motorized speed boats bringing in supplies that were mostly sugar, flour, and rice. The village was quite large and we went through all of it. Except for some betel-nut mortars for Ed, there was very little tradition left. We did see the grave of a prominent sailor that had suggestions of Kula, but little else. What was interesting was the fine greenstone ax blade that was offered to us for 1000 kina. That was the same price as a similar blade that we saw on Iwa Island and ten times the price being asked in the Calvados Chain to the south. By 4 pm we were back on the Golden Dawn to begin our 20 hour run back to Alotau.
November 9, 2013: ALOTAU - We had very calm seas on our overnight run, and came into East Cape far earlier than planned, so we took the opportunity to head over to Hiliau Bay on the north side of East Cape to explore a spectacular Skull Cave which contains over 100 skulls that are so old that the mineralization of the stalactites in the cave literally have mineralized over many of the skulls.
The skulls typically had round holes of varying size in them suggesting that these were the skulls of enemies rather than ancestors. After a very interesting visit to the cave, we continued our way into Alotau, arriving in the mid afternoon. We had a drink on the lawn of the International Hotel and returned to the Golden Dawn to pick up Craig and his wife, Kam for dinner at another local hotel.

November 10, 2013: HONIARA, SOLOMON ISLANDS - We said our goodbyes to the Golden Dawn and met our plane at 9 am for our 90 minute flight to Honiara, Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands.

EXPEDITION RESULTS

As reported in the above log of the expedition, the Kula exchange and other traditions previously observed on these islands have been substantially diminished. While Kula canoe making was still very active in the Marshall Bennett Islands, particularly on Gawa, very little canoe manufacturing was seen on Panaeti Island in Deboyne Lagoon in the southern Massim area. Very little Evidence of Kula exchange was seen until we got far to the southeastern reaches of the ring in the Calvados Chain and then north to Woodlark Island, Alcester Island, and the Marshall Bennett Islands. Very little activity was noted in the Trobriands, where Bronislaw Malinowski did most of his work probably because of its proximity to the main island and the advent of cruise ships making the Trobriands one of their routine ports of call.

It was very interesting that greenstone ax blades and their presentation hafts where abundant and relatively inexpensive in the Calvados Chain and Woodlark Island. Greenstone was reported by many researchers to have been quarried on Woodlark, which explains their relative abundance. However, in the Calvados Chain we were told that they find the blades in stream beds and in the bush, suggesting a more ancient origin, possible also from Woodlark. It is worth noting that the we blades had literally ten times their value when seen in the northwest Kula.

The Kula exchange appears to now be between specific villages on specific islands and is not necessarily circular at this time. The entire system, as well as most other traditions, is gravely endangered in this remote area of New Guinea due to modernization and easier access to the outside world. In many instances, plastic and rubber have replaced what even ten years ago were finely carved bowls and canoe bailers. A plastic bottle or rubber float cut in half makes an excellent, but aesthetically challenging substitute. Gold prospecting on several of the islands, especially Sudest and Woodlark, have a taken people out of their traditional gardens and fishing gardens where so much of their traditions have come from.

We did manage to add to the Bowers Museum's Oceanic collections with the addition of a dozen finely carved canoe splashboardss, two very fine Kula Canoe models, an impressive representation of greenstone ax blades and their presentation hafts, and a significant quantity of miscellaneous items such as sago stirrers, bagi, mwali, and betel-nut mortars.