

# First Contact with Martha

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Over the course of one's life, one acquires many good friends and colleagues, but it is often hard to remember the exact day you first met. Not so with Martha. I have very vivid memories of our first meeting because it was a most memorable encounter. It was in July 1978, at a conference at King's College (Cambridge), to discuss recent ethnographic and theoretical developments on the *kula*—an enduring form of exchange in the south-eastern archipelago of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The Who's Who of British Social Anthropology were there: Professor Sir Edmund Leach, Professor Sir Raymond Firth and the next generation of Big Men of British Social Anthropology, such as Andrew Strathern and Michael Young. Also invited were Big Women of American Cultural Anthropology, such as Nancy Munn and Annette Weiner. The conference gathered all the ethnographers who had worked on the *kula* since Malinowski's time. It was a very select audience and I must say that I felt very ill at ease among the august company. As a PhD student, I was one of the least qualified people to be there. The only reason I was invited was that Jerry Leach, one of the organisers, thought that someone trained in economics (like me) might have something to contribute to the discussion. The only person less qualified than me to be there—I mistakenly thought—was this Aussie sheila named Martha. Unlike me, she had never even been to PNG and had not even begun her PhD. Moreover, she was not even a participant at the conference. She was employed as the conference rouseabout. Her job was to record the proceedings, prepare the coffee and so on.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Her recordings, I note, are available online from the Smithsonian Institute: [sova.si.edu/search?q=Kula](http://sova.si.edu/search?q=Kula). However, her role as recorder is not acknowledged.

The conference got off to a very inauspicious start with an introductory paper by Jerry Leach, a junior lecturer at Cambridge at the time. Professor Sir Edmund Leach, the co-organiser (but no relation of Jerry Leach), was at his cranky, irritable best. He had little respect for Jerry as an ethnographer and theorist and unleashed an attack on Jerry after his introductory speech, an attack that persisted throughout the next five days of the conference. Professor Sir Edmund's irritation with Jerry's theoretical position even frames the book that came from the conference, which they co-edited together (Leach & Leach, 1983). It contains a foreword by Jerry Leach that sets out an agenda and a cranky afterword by Professor Sir Edmund Leach that dismantles the argument in Jerry's Foreword, point by point.

When the conference proper got under way, I was amazed to hear the Aussie sheila ask the first question from her perch in the audio recording section. I confess that I had an attack of the Aussie cultural cringe. 'Jesus, love,' I thought to myself, 'you must learn to shut up. You are not even a participant at this conference.' So stunned was I by her intervention that I did not take in what she said—but I do remember the reaction. Far from being savagely attacked by Professor Sir Edmund and others, they listened sagely to what she was saying, nodding their heads and stroking their chins as if to say, 'hmm, interesting question'. This continued for the next five days of the conference. When I allowed myself to listen to what she had to say, I found myself thinking, 'hmm, yes, that *is* a well-informed question'.

This was because this young Aussie sheila was the best-informed person at the conference. As part of her job as Professor Sir Edmund's rouseabout, she prepared a bibliography of everything that had ever been published on the *kula*. At the time, Martha was transitioning from history to anthropology and—as are the ways of the historian—she had read not only every ethnographic account on the *kula* but also every relevant historical document she had been able to find in the archives. At that time, anthropologists were not into history, and they had little idea of the historical context of Malinowski's fieldwork, let alone a knowledge of, or interest in the writings on the *kula* that predated Malinowski.

During the conference, it became clear that the missing link in our understanding of the *kula* was the island of Tubetube. It was universally agreed that Martha would be the ideal person to fill in this gap in the literature by conducting fieldwork there, which, of course, she did when she took up a PhD scholarship at The Australian National University the following year (1978). I can say without fear of contradiction that Martha

was the best-prepared PhD student in the history of the discipline. Her review of the literature, which became her first book (Macintyre, 1983a), was exhaustive. Further, the conference gave her face-to-face access to the combined wisdom of all the ethnographers who worked on the *kula* ring. Her grasp of the history of the *kula*, and the extant comparative ethnography, was second to none.

Another world-first for Martha was the fact that she is the only PhD student in the history of the discipline who wrote her first article in the field after just one week's fieldwork. Such was the desire on the part of the *kula* volume editors to acquire up-to-date evidence on the *kula* in Tubetube that they delayed publication of the volume until her contribution arrived (Macintyre, 1983b).

That conference shaped the course of Martha's academic career over the next 40 years. She has maintained an active interest in PNG, revisiting the place many times. Martha's research interests have, of course, widened and moved on; however, what has remained unchanged is her capacity to keep asking the hard, thought-provoking questions based on well-grounded archival research and her lived experience as an anthropologist. Evidence for this comes in a recent essay of hers (January 2018) with a classic Martha-esque title: 'Was Derek Freeman "mad"?'

Classic Martha. What other Aussie sheila would be game enough to ask such an important question? Good luck in your future career, Martha. I look forward to reading some more of your pearls.

## References

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