

# The Sacred Economy (An Anthropological Enquiry into the Development of Economic Relations and their Social Embodiment)

Vrnda Dhar<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Ankur Yadav<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student, Lady Sri Ram College for Women, Delhi University, Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, National Institute of Health and Family Welfare, New Delhi, India

**Abstract:** *All modern economic machineries are premised upon the tenets of the phenomenon of gift-exchange. Gift exchange and its constituent archetypes that have been observed in primordial societies, exist and breathe life into capitalist institutions that the post-modern and post-industrialist world is familiar with. Such parallels can be understood better when one furthers Marcel Mauss' obligations of exchange i.e. the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to reciprocate. While upholding commitments in an economic capacity between several parties, the object of gift-exchange assumes a personality of its own wherein it exhibits an uncanny resemblance to that of its giver or receiver. It marks the beginning of social embeddedness and social embodiment of an exchange, wherein it transcends its existence as a mere reservoir of currencies. It starts exuding moments of honor, reverence and prestige, caressing its direct implications upon one's self-concept and how one's perceived. This phenomenon of social embodiment is especially defined by the prevalence of myths and magic, religious connotations, sacrificial processions and most significantly, divinization which translates an economic exchange into a sacred one.*

**Keywords:** Gift-Exchange, Social Relationships, Symbolization, Collective Consciousness, Spiritual, Total Prestation, Potlatch, Kuka, Magical Rites, Ceremonial Exchange, Economic Trading, Gimwali, Vaygu'a, Mwali, Competition, Rivalry, Monetary Signs, Capital Accumulation, Capitalism, Exchange-Value, Dehumanize

## 1. Introduction

Things do not move about of their own accord, and what sets them in motion and makes them circulate in one direction, then another and yet another, is each time the will of individuals and groups to establish between themselves personal bonds of solidarity and interdependence. What essentially appears in the goals pursued, the decisions implemented, the actions voluntarily performed by the individuals and groups which make up a given society is not only the sum of their personal wills but personal or impersonal necessities that revolve around their social relationships, which blossom recurrently in the process of producing and reproducing them.

*From the moment most social relations in a society exist as and through the creation of personal bonds, as relations between persons, and from the moment these bonds are established by means of exchanging gifts which themselves entail the transfer and shifting of "realities" which can be of any kind ( women, children, precious objects, services) as long as they lend themselves to being shared , all of the objective social relations which form the basis of a society ( the kinship system, political systems) together with the inter-subjective personal relations which embody them, can be expressed and materialized by the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts and by the movements, the trajectories followed by the "objects" of these gift-exchanges. Thus, gift-giving and the gifts given both re-present, signify and totalize the social relations of which they are at once the instrument and the symbol. And, as gifts*

*are given by persons, and the objects given are originally attached, then detached in order to be again attached to persons, the gifts embody every bit as much the persons as their relationships. It is in this sense, for these reasons that the phenomenon of gift exchange is according to Marcel Mauss' expression - a "total social fact. It is because it represents the totalization and symbolization of the practices embedded in the giving and in the gifts, which materialize this entire process<sup>1</sup>.*

In such a system, one can possibly wonder and say that "things" merely no longer exist, there are only individuals. At the same time, the fact that human social relationships must assume the shape of relations between persons, inter subjective relations, becomes an extension of the whole universe. The cosmos becomes the anthropomorphic extension of the collective consciousness of humans and their society. The individual is connected to the whole universe, which extends beyond his individual scope and which is attributed to and moves beyond his society as well. At the same time, conversely the individual himself contains, in a certain fashion, his whole society and the entire cosmos. Therefore, when in a society where the bulk of social relations take the form of personal relations it is recurrently believed that things are also persons due to the practice of anthropomorphization of substances, then not only does gift-giving and gift – receiving encapsulate something of the essence of these social relations, it amplifies and it glorifies their presence and their reality in

<sup>1</sup> (Godelier, 1999)

the individual consciousness. Gift exchange amplifies their essence because the belief that things are endowed with a soul extends this form of relations beyond the boundaries of society, becoming one with the whole cosmos, for all substances and all relations that exist in the world.

The phenomenon of exchanging gifts is therefore extended beyond the world of humans and becomes a basic component of a collective practice that is religious, prevalently embedded in the relations between humans and the spirits and gods. Belief in the soul of things ceremonially glorifies persons and social relations because it makes them sacred. It divinizes the act of exchange and reciprocity which furthers into a network of redistribution. Gift-giving in this way carries a sacrificial connotation, which Marcel Mauss designated as the fourth obligation founding gift-exchange.

## 2. Underlying Theories

From Marcel Mauss' studies of four important groups of people we understand that the concept of potlatch occurs as a leading motive and in all groups, we see the archaic form of exchange- the gift and the Return gift. Moreover, in such societies we can observe the circulation of objects side by side with the circulation of persons and rights. It also tells us that the spirit of gift-exchange is characteristic of societies which have passed the phase of 'total prestation' between clans and between families but have not yet reached the stage of pure individual contract, the money market, sale proper, fixed prices and weighed and coined money.

Marcel Mauss reflects over the gift economy in terms of three significant underlying processes or obligations. The first obligation is the obligation to give. This is the true essence of potlatch. A chief of a clan must give a potlatch for himself, his son, his son-in-law or daughter and for the dead. In all such societies one is anxious to give: there is no occasion of importance when one is not obliged to invite friends to share the produce of the chase or the forest which the gods or totems have sent; to redistribute everything received at a potlatch; or to recognize services from chiefs, vassals or relatives by the means of gifts. Failing these obligations- at least for the nobles- etiquette is violated and the rank is lost. The potlatch - the distribution of goods - is the fundamental act of public recognition in all spheres, military, legal, economic and religious. The second obligation represents the obligation to receive. One does not have the right to refuse a gift or a potlatch. To do so would reek of fear of having to repay and of being abased in default. One would 'lose the weight' of one's name by admitting defeat in advance. In several circumstances, however, a refusal can be an assertion of victory and invincibility. It at times, appears that a recognized position in the hierarchy, or a victory through various previous potlatches allows one to refuse an invitation or even a gift without war ensuing. *In principle, gifts are always accepted and praised. You accept the gift and you do so because you mean to take up the challenge and prove that you are not unworthy. When chiefs confront each other in this manner they may find themselves in odd situations and perhaps they*

*experience them as such. Failure to give or receive, like failure to make return gifts, means a loss of dignity. The third obligation is embedded in the obligation to repay. Normally, the potlatch must be returned with interest like all other gifts. The obligation of worthy return is imperative. The person who cannot return a loan or potlatch loses his rank and even his status of a free man<sup>2</sup>.*

Mauss managed to identify several points shared by Kula and Potlatch, the first being the fact that the main goal of these gift-exchanges is not to amass wealth but to increase renown and prestige, to glorify the giver's name. He also saw that these gifts brought additional wealth to those whose strategy was crowned with success. In this way, in the Trobriand Islands of the Melanesian society, Kula resembles a sort of potlatch, also due to the extraordinary competition between partners who covet the same object. And this vying for renown extends beyond the narrow circle of the village or the tribe of those entering the Kula.

According to Malinowski, in treating the various customs and gift-exchange practices of the Kula, it's significant for us to understand the intensity of magical rites and into the analysis of spells. He derives his own understanding of Kula from the theories of myth and magic as magic looms paramount in the native's view of the Kula. Without any exaggeration magic, according to their own ideas, governs human destinies; that it supplies man with the power of mastering and conquering the forces of nature. *The main social interest, ambition in gardening, ambition in successful Kula, vanity and display of personal charms in dancing- all find their expression in magic. The magic of rain and sunshine can be used for good, as well as for nefarious purposes, and in this way they have a special interest in the Trobriands, because the most powerful system of this magic is in the hands of the paramount chiefs of Kiriwina. Malinowski discusses examples of economic magic in describing the construction of canoe and the fishing for shells. The communal garden-magic and the fishing magic of certain village communities show that the rites and ceremonial formulae are not merely a appendage, running side by side with economic efforts, without exercising any influence over these. Several gift exchanges and obligations emphasize the fact that magic has its roots in tradition, that it is the most immutable and most valuable traditional item, that it cannot leak into human knowledge by any present human interaction with spirits. At the same time, magic is conceived as something essentially human, It is not a force of nature, captured by man through some means and put to his service; it is essentially the assertion of man's intrinsic power over nature.<sup>3</sup>*

Magic bridges over the cleavage between the supernormal world of myth and the normal, ordinary happenings of to-day. The language of spells represents this belief through the constant allusions to myth, similes in which the present canoe is invited to imitate the mythical one. The spell is by far the most significant constituent of magic. The spell is part of the

<sup>2</sup> (Mauss, 1970)

<sup>3</sup> (Malinowski, 1922)

magic which is secret and known only to the esoteric circle of practitioners. When a magic spell is handed over either by purchase or inheritance, only the spell has to be taught to new recipient, it is usually taught incrementally while the payment is received in that manner. For instance, the final spell of the Kula, by which the approaching canoe shakes the mountain is chanted by a trio of magical reciters, is thrown directly towards the Koya.

The gift economy can also be understood as a stimulation model of the co-evolution of an economic and Ceremonial exchange system. This perspective encapsulates the phenomenon of Kula ring in the context of three processes of such a complex macrostructure: the development of an economic trading network, the spread of peaceful relationships and the evolution of a ceremonial exchange system. This argument can be furthered in the understanding of three significant aspects. *Recirculation of material resources- the exchange of Kula valuables is an elaborate constantly self-renewing treaty-like contract which sustains peace between otherwise hostile local groups, that lack centralized authorities, allowing them the security to trade valued resources which are differently distributed throughout quite varied Island ecologies. The second aspect being the Prestige competition- is that the Kula is a process through which the members of small local descent groups, who would find openly aggressive face-to-face competition intolerably disruptive, are able to compete against one another as individuals by seeking prestige in an external field of action, the theatrical trading of Kula shells. The third aspect lies in social communication in Durkheimian understanding, which suggests that the exchange of Kula valuables is an externalized concrete expression of an abstraction, the valued network of person-to-person relationships which constitutes the social order.*<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Substantive Elements

The Trobrianders are among the most advanced of these people. Today as prosperous pearl fishers, and before the arrival of Europeans as flourishing potters and stone workers, they have always been good businessmen and sturdy sailors. Malinowski discusses the whole system of inter-tribal and intra-tribal commerce known as the Kula as a kind of grand potlatch; it is a vehicle of a great inter-tribal trade extending over all the Trobriands. Kula trade is aristocratic and is distinguished from the straightforward exchange of useful goods known as the 'gimwali', as it is a procedure unworthy of Kula. The ceremony of transfer is done with solemnity. The object is disdained or suspect; it is not accepted until it is thrown on the ground and most of the time one remains actuated by the mechanisms of obligation which are resident in the gifts themselves. *The most important things that are exchanged are vaygu'a, a kind of currency. These are of two sorts: mwali, the finely cut and polished armshells worn on great occasions by their owners or relatives, and the soulava, necklaces worked by the skillful turners of Sinaketa.*

<sup>4</sup> (Ziegler, 2007)

*According to Malinowski, these currencies go in a sort of circular movement, the armshells passing regularly from west to east, and the necklaces from east to west. In theory, these valuables never stop circulating.*<sup>5</sup> It is wrong to keep them too long or to be 'slow' and 'hard' with them; they are passed on only to predetermined partners in the armshell or necklace direction. They may be kept from one Kula to the next one while the community gloats over *vaygu'a* which its chief has obtained. The gift received is in fact owned, but the ownership is of a particular kind. It is at the same time property and a possession, a pledge and a loan, an object sold and an object bought, a deposit, a mandate; for it is given only on condition that it will be used on the behalf of, or transmitted to a third person, the remote partner. This is what truly constitutes the economic, legal, and moral complexities. This institution also has its mythical, religious and magical aspects. *Vaygu'a* are not indifferent things; they are more than mere coins. A magical formula, the 'spell of the conch-shell, is used after invoking them to charm or attract towards the partner, the things he means to ask or receive. The ritual is very long and is repeated several times; its purpose is to enumerate everything forbidden in the Kula, everything to do with hatred and war which must be conjured away so that trade can take place between friends.

*The first gift of a vaygu'a has the connotation of vaga, opening gift. It definitely enables the recipient to make a return gift, the yotile, which has been translated into the clenching gift by Malinowski. One can avenge payment by non-magic or a show of resentment if the yotile doesn't come up to expectations*<sup>6</sup>. It is obligatory and must be equivalent to first gift or it may taken by force or surprise. To receive one of these gifts means that one is desirous of entering into and remaining in partnerships. The gift usually comprises of a large polished stone axe or whalebone knife. To receive it is actually to commit oneself to return the *vaga*, the first desirable gift.

The underlying motives that arise out of the extraordinary competition embedded in the process of gift-exchange comprise of rivalry, show, and a desire for greatness and wealth. There are arrival gifts; there are other analogous gifts of departure, called *talo'i* on Sinaketa and of leave-taking; they are always superior to the gifts of arrival. Another significant form of exchange takes the form of display which is known as *sagal* which is essentially a great and frequent distribution of food, made at harvests, during the construction of the chief's house, the building of canoes and funeral ceremonies.

### 4. Analysis

For the members of these societies, individuals as well as groups, caught up in this perpetual machinery from which there is no escape (except for a few individuals whose duties

<sup>5</sup> (Mauss, 1970)

<sup>6</sup> (Mauss, 1970)

and positions place them beyond rivalry, such as the families of chiefs who claim to have descended from the gods), it is as if the valuables given and received in potlatch (and the potlatches themselves) had a life of their own which endlessly evokes their existences and meanings, turning humans from subjects to objects and leaving them dominated by this round of wealth that they themselves set turning.

This phenomena is evident in capitalist market societies, wherein wealth consists primarily of monetary signs, where the money accumulated becomes the capital and the product of production, followed by sale, and purchase of commodities of all kinds. These may be material or immaterial; the specific and concrete reality of each commodity is significant especially as it underpins an exchange-value and this is transformed into money which generates capital. Once, at some point in history, the machinery is set in motion which enables and necessitates the accumulation of capital, the continual transformation of commodities and money into capital and vice versa, it is no longer possible to halt the circulation of commodities and money in any capacity. We find ourselves in a world where commodities produce commodities by the means of commodities, becoming the face of the mythology of capital.

We must also take the comparison further and examine the difference between the forms of consciousness which exist in an economy dominated by gift-exchange and in a market-driven economy where intellectual and manual labor are also commodities. *In societies dominated by the obligation to give ( and in the case of potlatch societies by the obligation to outgive ), objects seem ultimately to take the place of persons, objects behave like subjects. In societies, dominated by the obligation to sell and to make money, to make a profit by competing in the sale of goods and services, people are again treated like objects. Both processes dehumanize the nature of exchange to an extent. Whether the sacred things that are not given or the valuables that are given appear to have an indwelling spirit which drives them, or the commodities have an exchange-value, a price which fluctuates independently of conscious awareness and the control of those who produce or consume them, we are in either case in the presence of man-made world, but ones which have become detached from man. They often crush him, but in all events they dominate him.*<sup>7</sup>

## References

- [1] Godelier, M. (1999). *The Enigma of the Gift*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [2] Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: G.Routledge & Sons.
- [3] Mauss, M. (1970). *The Gift* . London: Cohen & West LTD.
- [4] Ziegler, R. (2007). *The Kula Ring of Bronislaw Malinowski* . Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

---

<sup>7</sup> (Godelier, 1999)