The Gift Must Always Move

by Lewis Hyde
Illustrated by Jay Kinney

Lewis Hyde is a poet and translator with the blessed ability to delve into dry subjects like the exchange of goods and reveal hidden realms of magic and mystery which affect our hearts as well as our pocketbooks. In showing us some radically different approaches to property among tribal peoples, and the lessons to be drawn from a deep reading of traditional fairy tales, Hyde makes clear how much we've lost in our long march through the aisles to the check-out line. This essay has as much to do with ineffables - gifts that grow, invisible spirits, and simple generosity - as it does with economics as we know and bemoan it. Hyde functions as a close friend helping us to understand the symbols in a strange dream, not as an orator on a soapbox.

In his willingness to fashion meaning from an atypical combination of sources, to address our spiritual and emotional sides, and to bring nature into the picture, Lewis Hyde is on common ground with Murray Bookchin's latest thinking (Towards a Social Ecology, Winter '81 CQ) as well as the voices in the nuclear disarmament movement.

Leyvis Hyde's poetry and writing have appeared in The Paris Review, The Massachusetts Review, and The American Poetry Review, among others. He has translated three books by Nobel Prize winner Vicente Aleixandre and is chairman of the Boston-area group working to form a national writers union. This essay originally appeared in slightly different form in The Kenyon Review, was reprinted in The Fifth Estate (where I first spied it), and with further revisions will form two chapters in Hyde's book. The Gift: Poetry and the Erotic Life of Property, to be published by Random House in February 1983. -Jay Kinney

Jay Kinney discovered "The Gift"and served as editor of the piece. Jay's talents range from editing (Anarchy comix) to cartooning (High Times) to journalism (the exhaustive survey of the Left in the Next Whole Earth Catalog).

Anthropologist Margaret MacLean did photo research at the University of California's Lowie Museum and provided invaluable scholarly perspective. She's now enroute to Peru, where she will be studying Inca royal architecture in the Cuzco Valley. —-Stephanie Mills

I WOULD LIKE TO WRITE an economy of the imagination. I assume any "property system" expresses our own spirit — or rather, one of our spirits, for there are many ways to be human and many economies. As we all know, capitalism brings to life and rewards its own particular spirits (aggression, frugality, independence, and so on). My question is, what would be the form of an economy that took the imagination as its model, that was an emanation of the creative spirit?

The approach I have taken to this question might best be introduced by telling how I came to it in the first place. Some years ago I sat in a coffee-house listening to someone read an exceptionally boring poem. In trying to imagine how or why the poem had come into existence, the phrase "commodity poem" came to mind — as if I had heard the language equivalent to a new Chevrolet. Even at that early point I meant "commodity" as opposed to "gift," for my own experience of poetry (both of reading and of writing) had been in the nature of a gift: something comes to us unbidden, alters our lives, and leaves us with a sense of gratitude — a form of "exchange," if you will, clearly unlike what happens to most of us in the marketplace.

I am obviously speaking of gifts in a spiritual sense at this point, but I do not mean to exclude material gifts. For spirits take on bodies and it is in that mixture that we Find human liveliness and attraction. Both economic and erotic life bring with them a mixture of excitement, frustration, fascination, and confusion because they must occur where body and spirit mingle, and it is in that union we discover the fullness of the world, or find it missing.

I should add that on a more mundane level my topic has found a source of energy in the situation of my own life. For some years now I have tried to make my way as a poet and a sort of "scholar without institution." Inevitably the money question comes up. You have to pay the rent. All artists, once they have passed their thirtieth birthday, begin to wonder how it is that a man or woman who wishes to live by his gifts is to survive in a land where everything is bought and sold.

These beginnings — the money question for myself and a sense of art as an "exchange" different from the market — became focused for me only after some friends had introduced me to the work that has been done in anthropology on gift exchange as a form of property. In many tribal groups a large portion of the material wealth circulates as gift and, not surprisingly, such exchange is attended by certain "fruits": people live differently who treat a portion of their wealth as gift. As I read through the ethnography I realized that in describing gift exchange as an economy I might be able to develop the language I needed in order to address the situation of the artist living in a land where market value is the value. At about the same time I began to read all the fairy tales I could find with gifts in them, because the image of what a gift is and does is the same in these tales as it is in the ethnography, but fairy tales tell of gifts in a manner closer to my final concern, the fate of the imagination.

I will not be able to fully describe what I mean by "gift" in the space of one essay. I want, therefore, to remark on two or three characteristics of a gift which shall not be addressed here.

One is that gifts mark or act as agents of individual transformation. Gift-exchange institutions cluster around times of change: birth, puberty, marriage, sickness, parting, arrival, and death. Sometimes the gift itself actually brings about the change, as if it could pass through a person's body and leave it altered. The best examples are true teachings — times when some person changes our life either directly or through the power of example. Such teachings are not like schoolbook lessons; they move the soul and we feel gratitude. I think of gratitude as a labor the soul undertakes to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. We work, sometimes for years, until the gift has truly ripened inside of us and can be passed along.

(Note that gratitude is not the "obligation" we feel when we accept a gift we don't really want.)

Second, when you give someone a gift, a feeling - bond is set up between the two of you. The sale of commodities leaves no necessary link. Walking into a hardware store and buying a pound of nails doesn't connect you to the clerk in any way — you don't even need to talk to him if you don't want to (which is why commodities are associated with both freedom and alienation). But a gift makes a connection. With many gift-exchange situations, the bond is clearly the point — with marriage gifts and with gifts used as peace overtures, for example.

Finally it must be said that gift exchange has its negative aspects. Given their bonding power, "poisonous" gifts and gifts from evil people must be refused. In a fairy tale, the hero is in trouble if he eats the meal given to him by a witch. More generally, anyone who is supposed to stay "detached" (a judge, for example) shouldn't accept gifts. It is also true that the bonds set up by gift exchange limit our freedom of motion. If a young person wants to leave his or her parents, it's best to stop accepting their gifts because they will only maintain the parent-child connection. As gifts are associated with being connected to a community, so commodities are associated with both freedom and rootlessness.

In part because of these restrictions, I do not feel that gift exchange is, in the end, the exclusive "economy of the imagination." But it is a necessary part of that economy; the imagination will never come to its full power until we are at home with the gifts of both the inner and the outer world. An elaboration of the nature of gift exchange must, therefore, precede any more precise qualifying remarks, and it is this elaboration which I begin here.

The opposite of "Indian giver" would be something like "white man keeper" (or maybe "capitalist"), that is, a person whose instinct is to remove property from circulation.

The Motion

WHEN THE PURITANS first landed in Massachusetts they discovered a thing so curious about the Indians' feelings for property that they felt called upon to give it a name. In 1764, when Thomas Hutchinson wrote his history of the colony, the term was already an old saying: "An Indian gift," he told his readers, "is a proverbial expression signifying a present for which an equivalent return is expected." We still use this, of course, and in an even broader sense, calling that friend an Indian giver who is so uncivilized as to ask us to return a gift he has given.

Imagine a scene. An Englishman comes into an Indian lodge, and his hosts, wishing to make their guest feel welcome, ask him to share a pipe of tobacco. Carved from a soft red stone, the pipe itself is a peace offering which has traditionally circulated among the local tribes, staying in each lodge for a time but always given away again sooner or later. And so the Indians, as is only polite among their people, give the pipe to their guest when he leaves. The Englishman is tickled pink. What a nice thing to send back to the British Museum! He takes it home and sets it on the mantelpiece. A time passes and the leaders of a neighboring tribe come to visit the colonist's home. To his surprise he finds his guests have some expectation in regard to his pipe, and his translator finally explains to him that if he wishes to show his good will he should offer them a smoke and give them the pipe. In consternation the Englishman invents a phrase to describe these people with such a limited sense of private property. The opposite of "Indian giver" would be something like "white man keeper" (or maybe "capitalist"), that is, a person whose instinct is to remove property from circulation, to put it in a warehouse or museum (or, more to the point for capitalism, to lay it aside to be used for production).

The Indian giver (or the original one, at any rate) understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead, the way a billiard ball may stop when it sends another scurrying across the felt, its momentum transferred. You may keep your Christmas present, but it ceases to be a gift in the true sense unless you have given something else away. As it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact, it is better if the gift is not returned, but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: the gift must always move. There are other forms of property that stand still, that mark a boundary or resist momentum, but the gift keeps going.

Tribal peoples usually distinguish between gifts and capital. Commonly they have a law which repeats the sensibility implicit in the idea of an

Indian gift. "One man's gift," they say, "must not be another man's capital." Wendy James, a British social anthropologist, tells us that among the Uduk in northeast Africa, "any wealth transferred from one sub clan to another, whether animals, grain or money, is in the nature of a gift, and should be consumed, and not invested for growth. If such transferred wealth is added to the sub clan's capital [cattle in this case] and kept for growth and investment, the sub clan is regarded as being in an immoral relation of debt to the donors of the original gift." If a pair of goats received as a gift from another sub clan is kept to breed or to buy cattle, "there will be general complaint that the so-and-so's are getting rich at someone else's expense, behaving immorally by hoarding and investing gifts, and therefore being in a state of severe debt. It will be expected that they will soon suffer storm damage. . .."

The goats in this example move from one clan to another just as the stone pipe moved from person to person in my imaginary scene. And what happens then? If the object is a gift, it keeps

moving, which in this case means that the man who received the goats throws a big party and everyone gets fed. The goats needn't be given back but they surely can't be set aside to produce milk or more goats. And a new note has been added: the feeling that if a gift were not treated as such, if one form of property were to be converted into another, something horrible might happen. In folk tales the person who tries to hold onto a gift usually dies; in this anecdote the risk is "storm damage." (What happens in fact to most tribal groups is worse than storm damage. Where someone manages to commercialize a tribe's gift relationships the social fabric of the group is invariably destroyed.)

If we turn now to a folk tale we will be able to see all of this from a different angle. Folk tales are like collective dreams; they are told in the kind of voice we hear at the edge of sleep, mingling the facts of our lives with their images in the psyche. The first tale I have chosen was collected from a Scottish woman in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Girl and the Dead Man

ONCE UPON A TIME there was an old woman and she had a leash of daughters. One day the eldest daughter said to her mother, "It is time for me to go out into the world and seek my fortune." "I shall bake a loaf of bread for you to carry with you," said the mother. When the bread came from the oven the mother asked her daughter, "Would you rather have a small piece and my blessing or a large piece and my curse?" "I would rather have the large piece and your curse," replied the daughter.

Off she went down the road and when the night came wreathing around her she sat at the foot of a wall to eat her bread. A ground quail and her twelve puppies gathered near, and the little birds of the air. "Wilt thou give us a part of thy bread," they asked. "I won't, you ugly brutes," she replied. "I haven't enough for myself."

"My curse on thee," said the quail, "and the curse of my twelve birds, and thy mother's curse which is the worst of all." The girl arose and went on her

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way, and the piece of bread had not been half enough.

She had not traveled far before she saw a little house, and though it seemed a long way off she soon found herself before its door. She knocked and heard a voice cry out, "Who is there?" "A good maid seeking a master." "We need that," said the voice, and the door swung open.

The girl's task was to stay awake every night and watch over a dead man, the brother of the housewife, whose corpse was restless. As her reward she was to receive a peck of gold and a peck of silver. And while she stayed she was to have as many nuts as she broke, as many needles as she lost, as many thimbles as she pierced, as much thread as she used, as many candles as she burned, a bed of green silk over her and a bed of green silk under her, sleeping by day and watching by night.

On the very first night, however, she fell asleep in her chair. The housewife came in, struck her with a magic club, killed her dead, and threw her out back on the pile of kitchen garbage.

Soon thereafter the middle daughter said to her mother, "It is time for me to follow my sister and seek my fortune." Her mother baked her a loaf of bread and she too chose the larger piece and her mother's curse. And what had happened to her sister happened to her.

Soon thereafter the youngest daughter said to her mother, "It is time for me to follow my sisters and seek my fortune." "I had better bake you a loaf of bread," said her mother, "and which would you rather have, a small piece and my blessing or a large piece and my curse?" "I would rather," said the daughter, "have the smaller piece and your blessing."

And so she set off down the road and when the night came wreathing around her she sat at the foot of a wall to eat her bread. The ground quail and her twelve puppies and the little birds of the air gathered about. "Wilt thou give us some of that?" they asked. "I will, you pretty creatures, if you will keep me company." She shared her bread, all of them ate their fill, and the birds clapped their wings about her 'til she was snug with the warmth.

The next morning she saw a house a long way off. . . . [here the task and the wages are repeated].

She sat up at night to watch the corpse, sewing to pass the time. About midnight the dead man sat up and screwed up a grin. "If you do not lie down properly I will give you one good leathering with a stick," she cried. He lay down. After a while he rose up on one elbow and screwed up a grin; and a third time he sat up and screwed up a grin.

When he rose the third time she walloped him with the stick. The stick stuck to the dead man and her hand stuck to the stick and off they went! He dragged her through the woods, and when it was high for him it was low for her, and when it was low for him it was high for her. The nuts were knocking at their eyes and the wild plums beat at their ears until they both got through the wood. Then they returned home.

The girl was given the peck of gold, the peck of silver, and a vessel of cordial. She found her two sisters and rubbed them with the cordial and brought them back to life. And they left me sitting here, and if they were well, 'tis well; if they were not, let them be.

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There are at least four gifts in this story. The first, of course, is the bread which the mother gives to her daughters as a going-away present. This becomes the second gift when the youngest daughter shares her bread with the birds. She keeps the gift in motion, the moral point of the tale. Several things, in addition to her survival, come to her as a result of treating the gift correctly. These are the fruits of the gift. First, she and the birds are relieved of their hunger;

second, the birds befriend her; and third, she's able to stay awake all night and accomplish her task. (As we shall see, these results are not accidental, they are typical fruits of the gift.)

In the morning the third gift appears, the vessel of cordial. It is a healing liquid, not unlike the "water of life" which appears in folk tales from all over the world. It has power: with it she is able to revive her sisters. This liquid is thrown in as a reward

for the successful completion of her task. It's a gift, mentioned nowhere in the wonderful litany of wages offered to each daughter. We will leave for later the question of where it comes from; for now we are looking at what happens to the gift after it is given, and again we find that this girl is no dummy — she moves it right along, giving it to her sisters to bring them back to life. That is the fourth and final gift in the tale.[1]

1. This story illustrates almost all the main characteristics of a gift so I shall be referring back to it. As an aside, therefore, I want to take a stab at its meaning. It says, I think, that if a girl without a father is going to get along in the world, she'd better have a good connection to her mother. The birds are the mother's spirit, what we'd now call the girls' psychological mother. The girl who gives the gift back to the spirit-mother has, as a result, her mother-wits about her for the rest of the tale.

   Nothing in the tale links the dead man with the girl's father, but the mother seems to be a widow, or at any rate the absence of a father at the start of the story is a hint that the problem may have to do with men. It's not clear, but when the first man she meets is not only dead but difficult we are permitted to raise our eyebrows.

   The man is dead, but not dead enough. When she hits him with the stick we see that she is in fact attached to him. So here's the issue: when a fatherless woman leaves home she'll have to deal with the fact that she's stuck on a dead man. It's a risky situation - the two elder daughters end up dead.

   Not much happens in the wild run through the forest, except that everyone gets bruised. The girl manages to stay awake the whole time, however. This is a power she probably got from the birds, for they are night birds.

   The connection to the mother cannot spare her the ordeal, but it allows her to survive. When it's all over she's unstuck and we may assume that the problem won't arise again.

   Though the dilemma of the story is not related to gift, all the psychological work is accomplished through gift exchange.

This story also gives us a chance to see what happens if the gift is not allowed to move on. A gift which cannot move loses its gift properties. Traditional belief in Wales holds that when the fairies give bread to the poor, the loaves must be eaten on the day they are given or they will turn to toadstools. If we think of the gift as a constantly flowing river, we may say that the girl in the tale who treats it correctly does so by allowing herself to become a channel for its current. When someone tries to dam up the river, one of two things will happen: either it will stagnate or it will fill the person up until he bursts. In this folk tale it is not just the mother's curse that gets the first two girls. The night birds give them a second chance and one imagines the mother bird would not have repeated the curse had she met with generosity. But instead the girls try to dam the flow, thinking that what counts is ownership and size. The effect is clear: by keeping the gift they get no more. They are no longer vehicles for the stream and they no longer enjoy its fruits, one of which seems to be their own lives. Their mother's bread has turned to toadstools inside them.

Another way to describe the motion of the gift is to say that a gift must always be used up, consumed, eaten. The gift is property that perishes.

It is no accident that the gifts in two of our stories so far have been food. Food is one of the most common images for the gift because it is so obviously consumed. Even when the gift is not food, when it is something we would think of as a durable good, it is often referred to as a thing to be eaten. Shell necklaces and armbands are the ritual gifts in the Trobriand Islands and when they are passed from one group to the next, protocol demands that the man who gives them away toss them on the ground and say, "Here, some food we could not eat." Or, again, a man in

another tribe that Wendy James has studied speaks of the money he was given at the marriage of his daughter, saying that he will pass it on rather then spend it on himself. He puts it this way: "If I receive money for the children God has given me, I cannot eat it. I must give it to others."

Many of the most famous of the gift systems we know about center on food and treat durable goods as if they were food. The potlatch of the American Indians along the North Pacific Coast was originally a "big feed." At its simplest a potlatch was a feast lasting several days given by a member of a tribe who wanted his rank in the group to be publicly recognized. Marcel Mauss translates the word potlatch as "to nourish" or "to consume." Used as a noun, potlatch is a "feeder" or "place to be satiated." Potlatches included durable goods, but the point of the festival was to have these perish as if they were food. Houses were burnt; ceremonial objects were broken and thrown into the sea. One of the potlatch tribes, the Haida, called their feasting "killing wealth."

To say that the gift is used up, consumed, and eaten sometimes means that it is truly destroyed, as in these last examples, but more simply and accurately it means that the gift perishes for the person who gives it away. In gift exchange the transaction itself consumes the object. Now it is

true that something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were made an explicit condition of the exchange it wouldn't be a gift.

If the girl in our story had offered to sell the bread to the birds the whole tone would have been different. But instead she sacrifices it: her mother's gift is dead and gone when it leaves her hand. She no longer controls it, nor has she any contract about repayment. For her, the gift has perished.

This then is how I use "consume" to speak of a gift — a gift is consumed when it moves from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return. There is little difference, therefore, between its consumption and its motion. A market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum and the weight shifts from body to body.

I must add one more word on what it is to "consume" because the Western industrial world is famous for its "consumer goods" and they are not at all what I mean. Again, the difference is in the form of the exchange, a thing we can feel most concretely in the form of the goods themselves.

I remember the time I went to my first rare-book fair and saw how the first editions of Thoreau and Whitman and Crane had been carefully packaged in heat-shrunk plastic with the price tags on the inside. Somehow the simple addition of airtight plastic sacs had transformed the books from vehicles of liveliness into commodities, like bread made with chemicals to keep it from perishing.

In commodity exchange it's as if the buyer and the seller are both in plastic bags; there's none of the contact of a gift exchange. There is neither motion nor emotion because the whole point is to keep the balance, to make sure the exchange itself doesn't consume anything or involve one person with another. "Consumer goods" are consumed by their owners, not by their exchange.

The desire to consume is a kind of lust. We long to have the world flow through us like air or food. We are thirsty and hungry for something that can only be carried inside bodies. But "consumer goods" merely bait this lust, they do not satisfy it.

The consumer of commodities is invited to a meal without passion, a consumption with neither satiation nor fire. He is a stranger seduced into feeding on the drippings of someone else's capital without benefit of its inner nourishment, and he is hungry at the end of the meal, depressed and weary as we all feel when lust has dragged us from the house and led us to nothing.

Gift exchange has many fruits, as we shall see, and to the degree that the fruits of the gift can satisfy our needs there will always be pressure for property to be treated as a gift. This pressure, in a sense, is what keeps the gift in motion.

When the Uduk warn that a storm will ruin the crops if someone tries to stop the gift from moving, it is really their desire for the gift that will bring the storm. A restless hunger springs up when the gift is not being eaten.

The brothers Grimm found a folk tale they called "The Ungrateful Son":

ONCE A MAN and his wife were sitting outside the front door with a roast chicken before them which they were going to eat between them. Then the man saw his old father coming along and quickly took the chicken and hid it, for he begrudged him any of it. The old man came, had a drink and went away.

Now the son was about to put the roast chicken back on the table, but when he reached for it, it had turned into a big toad that jumped in his face and stayed there and didn't go away again.

And if anybody tried to take it away, it would give them a poisonous look, as if about to jump in their faces, so that no one dared touch it. And the ungrateful son had to feed the toad every day, otherwise it would eat part of his face. And thus he went ceaselessly hither and yon about in the world.[2]

This toad is the hunger that appears when the gift stops moving, whenever one man's gift becomes another man's capital. To the degree that we desire the fruits of the gift, teeth appear when it is hidden away. When property is hoarded, thieves and beggars begin to be born to rich men's wives.

A story like this says that there is a force seeking to keep the gift in motion. Some property must perish, its preservation is beyond us. We have no choice. Or rather, our choice is whether to keep the gift moving or to be eaten with it. We choose between the toad's dumb-lust and that other, more graceful perishing in which our hunger disappears as our gifts are consumed.

The Circle

"The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him - it cannot fail..." *-Walt Whitman*

A BIT OF MYSTERY remains in the Scottish tale "The Girl and the Dead Man": Where did the "vessel of cordial" come from? My guess is that it comes from the mother, or from her spirit, at least. The gift not only moves, it moves in a circle. The mother gives the bread and the girl gives it in turn to the birds whom I place in the realm of the mother, not only because it is a mother bird who addresses her, but also because of a verbal link (the mother has a "leash of daughters," the mother bird has her "puppies"). The vessel of cordial is in the realm of the mother as well (the original Gaelic means "teat of ichor" or "teat of health": it is a fluid that comes from the breast). The level changes, to be sure — it is a different sort of mother whose breasts hold the blood of the gods — but it is still in the maternal sphere. Structurally, then, the gift moves mother ⇨ daughter ⇨ mother ⇨ daughter. In circling twice in this way the gift itself increases from bread to the water of life, from carnal food to spiritual food. At which point the circle expands as the girl gives the gift to her sisters to bring them back to life.

The figure of the circle in which the gift moves can be seen more clearly in an example from ethnography. Gift institutions are universal among tribal peoples; the few we know the most about are those which Western ethnographers studied around the turn of the century. One of these is the Kula, the ceremonial gift exchange of the Massim tribes, peoples who occupy the South Sea Islands off the eastern tip of New Guinea.

There are a dozen or more groups of islands in the Kula archipelago. They are quite far apart — a circle enclosing the whole group would have a diameter of almost 300 miles. The Kula is (or was 60 years ago) a highly developed gift system conducted throughout the islands. At its heart lies the exchange of two ceremonial gifts, arm-shells and necklaces. These are passed from household to household, staying with each for a time.

So long as one of the gifts is residing in a man's house, Bronislaw Malinowski tells us, the man is able "to draw a great deal of renown, to exhibit this article, to tell how he obtained it, and to plan to whom he is going to give it. And all this forms one of the favorite subjects of tribal conversation and gossip.. ."

Malinowski calls the Kula articles "ceremonial gifts" because their social use far exceeds their

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2. In The Grimms' German Folk Tales, by Francis P. Magoun, Jr. and Alexander H. Krappe, translators. Copyright by Southern Illinois University Press. Reprinted by permission of the Southern Illinois University Press.

The uselessness of such "ceremonial gifts" seems to make it easier for them to become vehicles for the spirit of a group.

practical use. A friend of mine tells me that his group of friends in college continually passed around a deflated basketball. The joke was to get it mysteriously deposited in someone else's room. The clear uselessness of such objects seems to make it easier for them to become vehicles for the spirit of a group. Another man tells me that when he was young his parents and their best friends passed back and forth, again as a joke, a huge open-ended wrench that had apparently been custom cast to repair a steam shovel. The two families found it one day on a picnic and for years thereafter it showed up first in one house, then in the other, under the Christmas tree or in the umbrella stand. If you have not yourself been a part of such an exchange you will easily turn up a story like these by asking around, for such spontaneous exchanges of "useless" gifts are fairly common, though hardly ever developed to the depth and elegance that Malinowski found among the Massim.

The Kula gifts, the armshells and necklaces, move continually around a wide ring of islands in the Massim archipelago. Each travels in a circle; the red shell necklaces (considered to be "male" and worn by women) move clockwise and the armshells ("female" and worn by men) move counterclockwise. A person who participates in the Kula has gift partners in neighboring tribes. If we imagine him facing the center of the circle with partners on his left and right, he will always be receiving armshells from his partner to the left and giving them to the man on this right. The necklaces flow the other way. Of course these things are not actually passed hand over hand; they are carried by canoe from island to island in journeys that require great preparation and cover hundreds of miles.

The two Kula gifts are exchanged for each other. If a man brings me a necklace, I will give him in return some armshells of equivalent value. I may do this right away or I may wait as long as a year (though if I wait that long I will give him a few smaller gifts in the interim to show my good faith). As a rule it takes between two and ten years for each article in the Kula to make a full round of the islands.

Because these gifts are exchanged for each other the Kula seems to break the rule against equilibrium that I set out in the first section. But let us look more closely. We should first note that the Kula articles are kept in motion, though this does not necessarily mean there is no equilibrium. Each gift stays with a man for a while, but if he keeps it too long he will begin to have a reputation for being "slow" and "hard" in the Kula. The gifts "never stop," writes Malinowski. "It seems almost incredible at first . . . , but it is the fact, nevertheless, that no one ever keeps any of the Kula valuables for any length of time.. . . 'Ownership,' therefore, in Kula, is quite a special economic relation. A man who is in the Kula never keeps any article for longer than, say, a year or two." The Trobriand Islanders know what it is to own property, but their sense of possession is wholly different from the European. The "social code . . . lays down that to possess is to be great, and that wealth is the indispensable appanage of social rank and attribute of personal virtue. But the important point is that with them to possess is to give — and here the natives differ from us notably. A man who owns a thing is naturally expected to share it, to distribute it, to be its trustee and dispenser."

The motion of the Kula gifts does not in itself assure that there will be no equilibrium, for, as we have seen, they move but they are also exchanged. Two ethics, however, govern this exchange and both of them insure that, while there may be a macroscopic equilibrium, at the level of each man there will be the sense of imbalance, of shifting weight, that always marks a gift exchange. The first of these ethics prohibits discussion: 'The Kula," writes Malinowski,

When I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere) it is as if the gift goes around a corner before it comes back.

"consists in the bestowing of a ceremonial gift, which has to be repaid by an equivalent counter-gift after a lapse of time.

.. . But [and this is the point], it can never be exchanged from hand to hand, with the equivalence between the two objects discussed, bargained about, and computed." A man may wonder what will come in return for his gift, but he is not supposed to bring it up. Gift exchange is not a form of barter. 'The decorum of the Kula transaction is strictly kept, and highly valued. The natives distinguish it from barter, which they practice extensively [and] of which they have a clear idea. . .. Often, when criticizing an incorrect, too hasty, or indecorous procedure of Kula, they will say: 'He conducts his Kula as if it were [barter].' " Partners in barter talk and talk until they strike a balance, but the gift is given in silence.

A second important ethic, Malinowski tells us, "is that the equivalence of the counter-gift is left to the giver, and it cannot be enforced by any kind of coercion." If a man gives a second-rate necklace in return for a fine set of armshells, people may talk, but there is nothing anyone can do about it. When we barter we make deals and if someone defaults we go after him, but the gift must be a gift. It is as if you give a part of your substance to your gift partner and then wait in silence until he gives you a part of his. You put your self in his hands. These rules — and they are typical of gift institutions — preserve the sense of motion despite the exchange involved. There is trade, but these are not commodities.

We commonly think of gifts as being exchanged between two people and of gratitude as being directed back to the actual donor. *Reciprocity*, the standard social science term for returning a gift, has this sense of going to and fro between people (the roots are re and pro, back and forth, like a reciprocating engine). The gift in the Scottish tale is given reciprocally, going back and forth between the mother and her daughter (until the very end).

Reciprocal giving is a form of gift exchange, but it is the simplest. The gift moves in a circle and two people do not make much of a circle. Two points establish a line, but a circle lies in a plane and needs at least three points. This is why, as we shall see, most of the stories of gift exchange have a minimum of three people. 1 have introduced the Kula circuit here because it is such a fine example. For the Kula gifts to move, each man must have at least two gift partners. In this case the circle is larger than that, of course, but three is its lower limit.

Circular giving differs from reciprocal giving in several ways. First, when the gift moves in a circle no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to. I continually give armshells to my partner to the west but, unlike a two-person give-and-take, he never gives me armshells in return.

The whole mood is different. The circle is the structural equivalent of the prohibition on discussion. When I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere) it is as if the gift goes around a comer before it comes back. I have to give blindly. And I will feel a sort of blind gratitude, as well. The smaller the circle is — and particularly if it is just two people — the more a man can keep his eye on things and the more likely it is he will start to think like a salesman.

But so long as the gift passes out of sight it cannot be manipulated by one man or one pair of gift partners. When the gift moves in a circle its motion is beyond the control of the personal ego and so each bearer must be a part of the group and each donation is an act of social faith.

**If, when we work, we can look once a day upon the face of mystery,
then our labor satisfies.**

What size is the circle? In addressing this question I have come to think of the circle, the container in which the gift moves, as its "body" or "ego." Psychologists sometimes speak of the ego as a "complex" like any other: the Mother, the Father, the Me — all of these are important places in the field of the psyche where images and energy cluster as we grow, like stars in a constellation.

The ego complex takes on shape and size as the Me — that part of the psyche which takes everything personally — retains our private history, how others have treated us, how we look and feel and so on.

I find it useful to think of the ego complex as a thing which keeps expanding, not as something to be overcome or done away with. An ego has formed and hardened by the time most of us reach adolescence, but it is small, an ego-of-one. Then, if we fall in love, for example, the constellation of identity expands and the ego-of-one becomes an ego-of-two. The young lover, often to his own amazement, finds himself saying "we" instead of "me." Each of us identifies with a wider and wider community as we mature, coming eventually to think and act with a group-ego (or, in most of these gift stories, a tribal-ego), which speaks with the "we" of kings and wise old people. Of course the larger it becomes the less it feels like what we usually mean by ego. Not entirely, though: whether an adolescent is thinking of himself or a nation of itself, it still feels like egotism to anyone who is not included. There is still a boundary.

If the ego widens still farther, however, it really does change its nature and become something we would no longer call ego. There is a consciousness in which we act as part of things larger even than the race.

When I picture this I always think of the end of "Song of Myself' where Whitman dissolves into the air:

> I effuse my flesh in eddies,
> and drift it in lacy jags.
>
> I bequeath myself to the dirt
> and grow from the grass I love,
>
> If you want me again
> look for me under your boot-soles.

Now the part that says "me" is scattered. There is no boundary to be outside of, unless the universe itself is bounded.

In all of this we could substitute "body" for "ego." Aborigines commonly refer to their own clan as "my body," just as our marriage ceremony speaks of becoming "one flesh." Again, the body can be enlarged beyond the private skin, and in its final expansion there is no body at all. When we are in the spirit of the gift we love to feel the body open outward. The ego's firmness has its virtues, but at some point we seek to slow dilation, to use another term of Whitman's, in which the ego enjoys a widening give-and-take with the world and is finally abandoned in ripeness.

The gift can circulate at every level of the ego. In the ego-of-one we speak of self-gratification and, whether it's forced or chosen, a virtue or a vice, the mark of self-gratification is its isolation. Reciprocal giving, the ego-of-two, is a little more social. We think mostly of lovers. Each of these circles is exhilarating as it expands and the little gifts that pass between lovers touch us because each is stepping into a larger circuit. But again, if the exchange goes on and on to the exclusion of others, it soon goes stale. D.H. Lawrence spoke of the *egoisme á deux* of so many married couples, people who get just so far in the expansion of the self and then close down for a lifetime, opening up for neither children, nor the group, nor the gods. A folk tale from Kashmir tells of two Brahmin women who tried to dispense with their alms-giving duties by simply

giving alms back and forth to each other. They didn't quite have the spirit of the thing. When they died, they returned to Earth as two wells so poisoned that no one could take water from them. No one else can drink from the ego-of-two. It has its moment in our maturation but it is an infant form of the gift circle.

In the Kula we have already seen a fine example of the larger circle. The Maori, the native tribes of New Zealand, provide another, similar in some ways to the Kula, but offering new detail and a hint of how gift exchange will feel if the circle expands beyond the body of the tribe. The Maori have a word, hau, which translates as "spirit," particularly the spirit of the gift and the spirit of the forest which gives food. In these tribes when hunters return from the forest with birds they have killed they give a portion of the kill to the priests who, in turn, cook them at a sacred fire.

The priests eat a few of the birds and then prepare a sort of talisman, the mauri, which is the physical embodiment of the forest hau. This mauri is a gift the priests give back to the forest where, as a Maori sage once explained to an Englishman, it "causes the birds to be abundant..., that they may be slain and taken by man."

There are three gifts in this hunting ritual; the forest gives to the hunters, the hunters to the priests, and the priests to the forest. At the end, the gift moves from the third party back to the first. The ceremony that the priests perform is called whangaihau, which means "nourishing hau,'" feeding the spirit. To give such a name to the priests' activity says that the addition of the third party keeps the spirit of the gift alive. Put conversely, without the priests there is a danger that the motion of the gift will be lost. It seems to be too much to ask of the hunters to both kill the game and return a gift to the forest. As we said in speaking of the Kula, gift exchange is more likely to turn into barter when it falls into the ego-of-two. With a simple give-and-take, the hunters may begin to think of the forest as a place to turn a profit. But with the priests present, the gift must leave the hunters' sight before it returns to the woods. The priests take on or incarnate the position of the third thing to avoid the binary relation of the hunters and forest which by itself would not be abundant. The priests, by their presence alone, feed the spirit. Every gift calls for a return gift, and so, by placing the gift back in the forest, the priests treat the birds as a gift of nature. We now understand this to be ecological. Ecology as a science began at the end of the nineteenth century, an offshoot of the rising interest in evolution. Originally the study of how animals survive in their environments, ecology had as one of its first lessons the teaching that beneath all the change in nature, there are steady states characterized by cycles. Every participant in the cycle literally lives off the others with only the ultimate energy source, the sun, being transcendent. Widening the study of ecology to include man means to look at ourselves as a part of nature again, not its Lord. When we see that we are actors in natural cycles then we understand that what nature gives to us is influenced by what we give to nature. So the circle is a sign of an ecological insight as much as of gift exchange. We come to feel ourselves as one part of a large self-regulating system. The return gift, the "nourishing hau" is literally feedback, as they say in cybernetics. Without it, that is to say, with any greed or arrogance of will, the cycle is broken. We all know that it isn't "really" the mauri placed in the forest that "causes" the birds to be abundant, and yet now we see that on a different level it is: the circle of gifts enters the cycles of nature and in so doing manages not to interrupt them and not to put man on the outside. The forest's abundance is in fact a consequence of man's treating its wealth as a gift.

The Maori hunting ritual enlarges the circle within which the gift moves in two ways. First, it includes nature. Second and more importantly, it includes the gods. The priests act out a gift relationship with the deities, giving thanks and sacrificing gifts to them in return for what they give the tribe. A story from the Old Testament will show us the same thing in a tradition with which we are more familiar. The structure is identical.

In the Pentateuch the first fruits always belong to the Lord. In Exodus the Lord tells Moses: "Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine." The Lord gives the tribe its wealth and the germ of that wealth is then given back to the Lord. Fertility is a gift from God and in order for it to

continue, its first fruits are returned to him as a return gift.

In pagan times this had apparently included sacrificing the firstborn son, but the Israelites had early been allowed to substitute an animal for the child, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Likewise a lamb was substituted for the firstborn of any unclean animal. The Lord says to Moses:

All that opens the womb is mine, all your male cattle, the firstlings of cow and sheep. The firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem.

Elsewhere the Lord explains to Aaron what is to be done with the firstborn. Aaron and his sons are responsible for the priesthood and they minister at the altar. The lambs, calves, and kids are to be sacrificed: "You shall sprinkle their blood upon the altar, and shall burn their fat as an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord; but their flesh shall be yours. . . As in the Maori story, the priests eat a portion of the gift. But its essence is burned and returned to the Lord in smoke.

The gift cycle has three stations and more — the flocks, the tribe, the priests and the Lord. The inclusion of the Lord in the circle — and this is the point I began to make above - changes the ego in which the gift moves in a way unlike any other addition. It is enlarged beyond the tribal ego and beyond nature. Now, as I said when I first introduced the image, we would no longer call it an "ego" at all. The gift leaves all boundary and circles into mystery.

The passage into mystery always refreshes. If, when we work, we can look once a day upon the face of mystery, then our labor satisfies. We are lightened when our gifts rise from pools we cannot fathom. Then we know they are not a solitary egotism, and they are inexhaustible. Anything contained within a boundary must contain as well its own exhaustion. The most perfectly balanced gyroscope slowly wears down. But when the gift passes out of sight and then returns we are enlivened. Material goods pull us down into their bones unless their fat is singed occasionally. It is when the world flames a bit in our peripheral vision that it brings us jubilation and not depression. We stand before a bonfire or even a burning house and feel the odd release it brings, as if the trees could give the sun return for what enters them through the leaf. When no property can move, then even Moses' Pharaoh is plagued with hungry toads. A sword appears to seek the firstborn son of that man who cannot be moved to move the gift. But Pharaoh himself was dead long before his firstborn was taken, for we are only alive to the degree that we can let ourselves be moved. And when the gift circles into mystery the liveliness stays, for it is "a pleasing odor to the Lord" when the first fruits are effused in eddies and drifted in lacy jags above the flame.

I described the motion of the gift earlier in this essay by saying that gifts are always used, consumed, or eaten. Now that we have seen the figure of the circle we can understand what seems at first to be a paradox of gift exchange: when the gift is used it is not used up. Quite the opposite in fact: the gift that is not used will be lost while the one that is passed along remains abundant. In the Scottish tale the girls who hoard their bread are fed only while they eat. The meal finishes in hunger though they took the larger piece. The girl who shares her bread is satisfied. What is given away feeds again and again while what is kept feeds only once and leaves us hungry.

The tale is a parable, but in the Kula ring we saw the same as a social fact. The necklaces and armshells are not diminished by their use, but satisfy faithfully. Only when a foreigner steps in to buy one for his collection is it "used up" by a transaction. And the Maori hunting tale showed us that not just food in parables but food in nature remains abundant when it is treated as gift, when we participate in the moving circle and do not stand aside as hunter or exploiter. Gifts are a class of property whose value lies only in their use

Our generosity may leave us empty but our emptiness then pulls gently at the whole until the thing in motion returns to replenish us. Social nature abhors a vacuum. Counsels Meister Eckhart, the mystic: "Let us borrow empty vessels."

and which literally ceases to exist as gifts if not constantly consumed. When gifts are sold they change their nature as much as water changes when it freezes, and no rationalist telling of the constant elemental structure can replace the feeling that is lost.

In E.M. Forster's novel A Passage to India, Dr. Aziz, the Moslem, and Fielding, the Englishman, have a brief dialogue, a typical debate between gift and commodity. Fielding says:

> "Your emotions never seem in proportion to their objects, Aziz."
>
> "Is emotion a sack of potatoes, so much to the pound, to be measured out? Am I a machine?
>
> I shall be told I can use up my emotions by using them, next."
>
> "I should have thought you would. It sounds common sense. You can't eat your cake and have it, even in the world of the spirit."
>
> "If you are right, there is no point in any friendship ... , and we had better all leap over this parapet and kill ourselves."

In the world of gift, as in the Scottish tale, you not only can have your cake and eat it too, you can't have your cake unless you eat it. Gift exchange and erotic life are connected in this regard. The gift is an emanation of Eros, and therefore to speak of gifts which survive their use is to speak of a natural fact: libido is not lost when it is given away. Eros never wastes his lovers. When we give ourselves in the spirit of that god he does not leave off his attentions; it is only when we fall to calculation that he remains hidden and no body will satisfy. Satisfaction derives not merely from being filled but from being filled with a current that will not cease. With the gift, as in love, our satisfaction sets us at ease because we know that somehow its use at once assures its plenty.

Scarcity and abundance have as much to do with the form of exchange as with how much material wealth is at hand. Scarcity appears when wealth cannot flow. Elsewhere in A Passage to India,

Dr. Aziz says, "If money goes, money comes. If money stays, death comes. Did you ever hear that useful Urdu proverb?" and Fielding replies, "My proverbs are: a penny saved is a penny earned; a stitch in time saves nine; look before you leap; and the British Empire rests on them." He's right. An empire needs its clerks with their ledgers and their clocks saving pennies in time.

The problem is that wealth ceases to move freely when all things are counted and priced. It may accumulate in great heaps but fewer and fewer people can afford to enjoy it. After the war in Bangladesh, thousands of tons of donated rice rotted in warehouses because the market was the only known mode of distribution and the poor, naturally, couldn't afford to buy. Marshall Sahlins, an anthropologist who has done some of the best work on gift exchange, begins a comment on modern scarcity with the paradoxical contention that hunters and gatherers "have affluent economies, their absolute poverty notwithstanding." He writes:

> Modern capitalist societies, however richly endowed, dedicate themselves to the proposition of scarcity. [Both Samuelson and Friedman begin their economies with "The Law of Scarcity"; it's all over by the end of Chapter One.] Inadequacy of economic means is the first principle of the world's wealthiest peoples. The apparent material status of the economy seems to be no clue to its accomplishments; something has to be said for the mode of economic organization.
>
> The market-industrial system institutes scarcity, in a manner completely unparalleled and to a degree nowhere else approximated. Where production and distribution are arranged through the

behavior of prices, and all livelihoods depend on getting and spending, insufficiency of material means becomes the explicit, calculable starting point of all economic activity.

Given material abundance, scarcity must be a function of boundaries. If there is plenty of air in the world but something blocks its passage to the lungs, the lungs do well to complain of scarcity. The assumptions of market exchange may not necessarily lead to the emergence of boundaries, but they do in practice. When trade is "clean" and leaves people unconnected, when the merchant is free to sell when and where he will, when the market moves mostly for profit and the dominant myth is not "to possess is to give" but "the fittest survive," then wealth will lose its motion and gather in isolated pools. Under the assumptions of exchange trade, property is plagued by entropy and wealth can become scarce even as it increases.

A commodity is truly "used up" when it is sold because nothing about the exchange assures its return. The visiting sea captain may pay handsomely for a Kula necklace, but because the sale removes it from the circle it wastes it, no matter the price. Gifts that remain gifts can support an affluence of satisfaction, even without numerical abundance. The mythology of the rich in the overproducing nations that the poor are in on some secret about satisfaction - black "soul," *gypsy duende*, the noble savage, the simple farmer, the virile gamekeeper — obscures the harshness of modern capitalist poverty, but it does have a basis, for people who live in voluntary poverty or who are not capital intensive do have more ready access to "erotic" forms of exchange that are neither exhausting nor exhaustible and whose use assures their plenty.

If the commodity moves to turn a profit, where does the gift move? The gift moves toward the empty place. As it turns in its circle it turns toward him who has been emptyhanded the longest, and if someone appears elsewhere whose need is greater it leaves its old channel and moves toward him. Our generosity may leave us empty but our emptiness then pulls gently at the whole until the thing in motion returns to replenish us. Social nature abhors a vacuum. Counsels Meister Eckhart, the mystic: "Let us borrow empty vessels." The gift finds that man attractive who stands with an empty bowl he does not own.[3]

The begging bowl of the Buddha, Thomas Merton has said, "represents the ultimate theological root of the belief, not just in a right to beg, but in openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the interdependence of all beings.... The whole idea of compassion, which is central to Mahayana Buddhism, is based on an awareness of the interdependence of all living beings.. .. Thus when the monk begs from the layman and receives a gift from the layman, it is not as a selfish person getting something from somebody else. He is simply opening himself to this interdependence. ..."

The wandering mendicant takes it as his task to carry what is empty from door to door. There is no profit; he merely stays alive if the gift moves toward him. He makes its spirit visible to us. His well-being, then, is a sign of its well-being, as his starvation would be a sign of its withdrawal. Our English word beggar comes from the Beghards, a brotherhood of mendicant friars that grew up in the thirteenth century in Flanders. There are still some places in the East where wandering mendicants live from the begging bowl; in Europe they died out at the close of the Middle Ages.

As the bearer of the empty place the religious mendicant has an active duty beyond his supplication. He is the vehicle of that fluidity which is abundance. The wealth of the group touches his bowl at all sides, as if it were the center of a wheel where the spokes meet. The gift gathers there and the mendicant gives it away again when he meets someone who is empty. In European folk tales the beggar often turns out to be Wotan, the true "owner" of the land, who asks for charity though it is his own wealth he moves within, and who then responds to neediness by filling it with gift. He is godfather to the poor.

Folk tales commonly open with a beggar motif. In a tale from Bengal, a king has two queens, both of whom are childless. A faquir, a wandering mendicant, comes to the palace gate to ask for

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3. Folk tales are the only "proof" I shall be able to offer for these assertions. The point is more spiritual than social: in the spiritual world, new life comes to those who "give up."

alms. One of the queens walks down to give him a handful of rice. When he finds that she is childless, however, he says that he cannot accept the rice but has a gift for her instead, a potion that will remove her barrenness. If she drinks his nostrum with the juice of the pomegranate flower, he tells her, in due time she will bear a son whom she should then call the Pomegranate Boy. All this comes to pass and the tale proceeds.

Such stories declare that the gift does move from plenty to emptiness. It seeks the barren, the arid, the stuck, and the poor. The Lord says "all that opens the womb is mine" for it is He who filled the empty womb, having earlier stood as a beggar by the sacrificial fire or at the gates of the palace.

The Increase

THE GIFT THE BEGGAR gives to the queen in this last folk tale brings the queen her fertility and she bears a child. Fertility and growth are common fruits of gift exchange. Think back on all we have seen so far — the Gaelic tale, the Kula ring, the rites of the firstborn, feeding the forest hau, and so on — fertility is often a concern and invariably either the bearers of the gift or the gift itself grows as a result of its circulation.

Living things which we classify as gifts really grow, of course, but even inert gifts, such as the Kula articles, are felt to increase — in worth or in liveliness — as they move from hand to hand. The distinction — alive/inert — is not always useful, in fact, because even when a gift is not alive it is treated as if it were, and whatever we treat as living begins to take on life.

Moreover, gifts which have taken on life can bestow it in return. The final gift in the Gaelic tale revives the dead sisters. Even if such miracles are rare, it is still a fact of the soul that depression — or any heavy, dead feeling — will lift away when a gift comes toward us. Gifts not only move us, they enliven us.

The gift is a servant to forces which pull things together and lift them up. There are other forces in the world that break things down into smaller and smaller bits, that find the fissures in stones and split them apart or enter a marriage and leave it lifeless at the core. In living organisms, the atomizing forces are associated with decay and death, while the cohering forces, the ones that wrap the morning-glory around a fence post or cover the ashy slopes of a new volcano with little pine trees, these are associated with life. Gift property serves an upward force. On one level it reflects and carries the form of organic growth, but above that, at the level of society and spirit, the gift carries our own liveliness. We spiral upward with the gift, or at least it holds us upright against the forces that split us apart and pull us down.

To speak in this manner risks confusing biological "life" with cultural and spiritual "life" — a confusion I would like to avoid for the two are not always the same. They are linked, but there is also a gap. In addressing the question of increase let us therefore take a gift at the level of culture — something inorganic and inedible in fact — and see how far we can go toward explaining its felt increase without recourse to the natural analogy.

The North Pacific tribes of the American Indians (the Kwakiutl, Tlingit, Haida, and others) exchanged as ceremonial gifts large decorated copper plaques. These coppers were always associated with the property given away at a potlatch — a ceremony that marked important events such as a marriage or, more commonly, the assumption of rank by a member of a tribe. The word potlatch means simply "giving." [4]

Coppers increased in worth as they circulated. At the time when Franz Boas witnessed the exchange of a copper in the 1890s, their worth was reckoned in terms of woolen Hudson Bay Company trade blankets. To tell the story briefly and in terms of the increase involved: one of the

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4. I cannot here tell the story of potlatch in its full detail, but I should note that two of its better known characteristics in the popular literature - the usurious nature of loans and the rivalry or "fighting with property" — while based on traceable aboriginal motifs, are really post-European elaborations. The tribes had known a century of European trade before Boas arrived. Marcel Mauss declared potlatch "the monster child of the gift system." So it was. As first studied, potlatch was the progeny of a "civilized" commodity trade mated to an aboriginal gift economy; some of the results were freakish.

tribes in Boas's report has a copper to give away; they invite a neighboring tribe to a feast and offer them the gift.

The second tribe accepts, putting themselves under the obligation to make a return gift. The transaction takes place the next day on a beach. The first tribe brings the copper and the leader of the second tribe lays down 1000 trade blankets as a return gift.

Then things get interesting. The chiefs who are giving the copper away don't accept the return gift. Instead they slowly replay the entire history of this copper's previous passages, first one man saying that just 200 more blankets will be fine and then another saying that really an

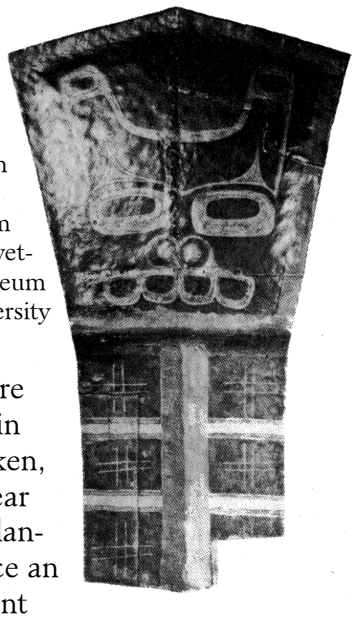
additional 800 will be needed to make everyone feel right, while the recipient of the copper responds saying either "What you say is good, it pleases my heart," or else begging for mercy as he brings out more and more blankets. Five times the chiefs ask for more blankets and five times they are brought out until 3700 are stacked up in a long row on the beach.

When the copper's entire history has been acted out, the talk stops. Now comes the true return gift, these formalities having merely raised the exchange into the general area of this copper's worth. Now the receiving chief, on his own, announces he would like to "adorn"' his guests. He brings out 200 more blankets and gives them individually to the visitors. Then he adds still another 200, saying, "you must think poorly of me," and telling about his forefathers.

These 400 blankets are given without any of the dialogue that marked the first part of the ceremony. It is here that the recipient of the copper shows his generosity and it is here that the copper increases in worth. The next time it is given away, people will remember how it grew by 400 blankets in its last passage.

Before I comment on this exchange I must describe a second situation in which coppers were felt to increase in value. Several occasions called for the actual destruction of a ceremonial copper. The Tsimshian tribes, for example, would break a copper when they held a potlatch to honor a dead chief and recognize his heir. During this "feast for the dead," a masked dancer would come forward with a copper and instruct the new chief to break it into pieces and then give these pieces to his guests. The chief would take a chisel and cut the copper apart. Among the Kwakiutl when Boas studied them, a man would sometimes break a copper and give the pieces to a rival who would then try to find a copper of equivalent value, break it, and give back the pieces of both. The man who had initiated the exchange was then obliged to hold a potlatch, distributing food and valuables at least equal to the new (and broken) copper he had received. Sometimes the initial recipient of a broken copper would find a second one, break it, and then throw them both into the sea, an action which brought him great prestige. Most coppers did not end up in the water, however; even when broken, the pieces were saved and continued to circulate. And if someone succeeded in gathering up the parts of a dismembered copper, Boas reports, they were "riveted together, and the copper... attained an increased value."

The spirit of the gift increases because the body of the gift is consumed.



A copper which, in an act of supreme pride and seeming indifference, may well have been broken at a potlatch. Its value has been enormously enhanced by being retrieved (from a river, perhaps) and riveted back together. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

It is clear in the literature that coppers increased in worth as they were broken, but I'm not sure it is clear why. To suggest an explanation I want to introduce an image of dismemberment and increase from a very different culture. There are several ancient gods whose stories involve being broken and then brought back to life — Osiris in Egypt, Dionysos in Crete and Greece, and Bacchus in Rome, to name a few. I shall take Dionysos as my example here.

Carl Kerenyi, the Romanian historian of religion, introduces his book on Dionysos by saying that his first insight into the god of wine came to him

in a vineyard — he was looking at the grapevine itself and what he saw was "the image of indestructible life." The temples are abandoned but the vine still grows over the fallen walls. To explain the image, Kerenyi distinguishes between two terms for "life" in Greek, *bios* and *zoë*. Bios is limited life, characterized life, life that dies. *Zoë* is the life which endures; it is the thread which runs through *bios*-life and is not broken when the particular perishes. (In this country we call it "the gene pool.") Dionysos is a god of *zoë*-life.

In his earliest Minoan forms Dinoysos is associated with honey and with honey-beer or mead. Both honey and grape juice became images of this god because they ferment: "A natural phenomenon inspired a myth of *zoë*," writes Kerenyi, "a statement concerning life which shows its indestructibility ... even in decay." When honey ferments what has rotted not only comes back to life — bubbles up — but its "spirit" survives. Moreover, when the fermentation is drunk the spirit comes to life in a new body. Drinking the mead is the sacrament of remembering the god.

The association of Dionysos with honey is very early; wine soon replaced mead as the spirit drink, but the essentials of the image remained the same. In later centuries Greek celebrants of Dionysos would sing of the dismemberment of their god as they crushed the grapes through the wine presses.

Dionysos is a god who is broken into a higher life. He returns from his dismemberment as strong or stronger than before, the wine being the essence of the grapes and more powerful. The Tsimshian tribes called the fragments of a copper given away at a mortuary potlatch "the bones of the dead." They stand for what does not decay although the body decays. To dismember the copper after the death of the chief and then to declare the pieces, or the reassembled copper, to be of increased value, is to declare that human life participates in zoë-life and that the spirit grows even though, or perhaps because, the body dies. In terms of the gift: the spirit of the gift increases because the body of the gift is consumed. When a copper is exchanged for blankets the increase comes as a sort of investment, but when coppers are broken it comes simply through consumption. People feel the gift is worth more just because it has been used up. Boas, when he discusses the potlatch, lumps feasting and the breaking of coppers together in the same paragraph; both are "eating the gift" as much as the destruction of property.

But I should stop here, for I have already strayed back toward explaining the increase of gifts by way of natural metaphors. Not that it is incorrect to speak in this manner; inorganic gifts do become the vehicles of *zoë*-life when we choose to invest it in them.[5] But there is a different sort of "investment" — one which can be described without invoking the gods of vegetable life — in the exchange of a copper as Boas has recorded it for us. To begin with, each time the copper passes from one group to another, more blankets are heaped into it, so to speak. The increase is not mysterious or metaphorical: each man really adds to the copper's worth as it comes toward him. But it is important to remember that the investment is itself a gift, so the increase is both concrete (blankets) and social or emotional (the spirit of generosity). At each transaction the concrete increase (the "adornment") is a witness to the increase in feeling. In this way, though people may remember it in terms of blankets, the copper becomes enriched with social feeling, with generosity, liberality, good will.

Coppers make a good example here because there is concrete increase to manifest the feeling, but that is not necessary. The mere passage of the gift, the act of donation, contains the feeling and therefore the passage alone is the investment. In folk tales the gift is often something seemingly worthless — ashes or coals or leaves or straw —

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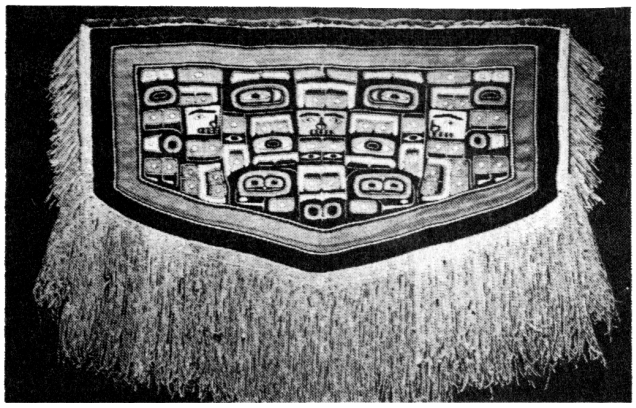
5. A confusion between organic liveliness and cultural or spiritual liveliness is inherent to a discussion of gift exchange. As Mauss first pointed out, in an exchange of gifts, "things... are to some extent parts of persons, and persons... behave in some measure as if they were things." In the case of the mortuary potlatch, a material "thing" symbolizes a biological fact, the survival of the group despite the death of the individual. But it may be that the group would not survive as a group (and individual life would not survive, then, either) if these "biological" facts could not be expressed symbolically. We are social and spiritual beings; at some level biological, social, and spiritual life cannot be differentiated.

but when the puzzled recipient carries it to his doorstep he finds it has turned to gold. Such tales declare that the motion of the gift from the world of the donor to the doorsill of the recipient is sufficient to transmute it from dross to gold.[6] Typically the increase inheres in the gift only so long as it is treated as such — as soon as the happy mortal starts to count it or grabs his wheelbarrow and heads back for more, the gold reverts to straw. The growth is in the sentiment, it can't be put on the scale.

The potlatch can rightly be spoken of as a good-will ceremony. One of the men giving the feast in the potlatch Boas witnessed says as the meal begins: "This food is the good will of our fore-fathers. It is all given away." The act of donation is an affirmation of good will. When someone in one of these tribes was mistakenly insulted, his response, rather than turning to a libel lawyer, was to give a gift to the man who had insulted him; if indeed the insult was mistaken, the man would make a return gift, adding a little extra to demonstrate his good will, a sequence which has the same structure (back and forth with increase) as the potlatch itself. When a gift passes from hand to hand in this spirit it becomes the binder of many wills. What gathers in it is not only the sentiment of generosity, but the affirmation of individual good will, making of those separate parts a *spiritus mundi*, a unanimous heart, a band whose wills are focused through the lens of the gift. Thus the gift becomes an agent of social cohesion and this again leads to the feeling that its passage increases its worth, for in social life at least, the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts. If it brings the group together, the gift increases in worth immediately upon its first circulation, and then, like a faithful lover, continues to grow through constancy.

I do not mean to imply by these explanations that the increase of coppers is simply metaphorical, or that the group "projects" its life onto them. For that would imply that the liveliness of the group can be separated from the gift, and it cannot. If the copper disappears, so does the life. When a song moves us we don't say we've projected our feelings onto the melody, nor do we say our lover is a metaphor for the other sex. Likewise the gift and the group are two separate things; neither stands for the other. We could say, however, that a copper is an image for the life of the group, for a true image has a life of its own.

Every mystery needs its image. It needs these two, the ear and the song, the he and the she, the soul and the word.



Chilkat Blanket. One of these could take as long as a year to make. Thus the fact that scores of them might be given away in a potlatch takes on added significance. In the H.R. MacMillan Collections in The Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

Every mystery needs its image. It needs these two, the ear and the song, the he and the she, the soul and the word. The tribe and its gift are separate but they are also the same — there is a little gap between them so they may breathe into each other, and yet there is no gap at all for they share one breath, one meal for the two of them. People with a sense of the gift not only speak of it as food to eat, they also feed it (the Maori ceremony "feeds" the forest hau). The nourish-ment flows both ways. When we have fed the gift with our labor and generosity, it grows and feeds us in return. The gift and its bearers share a spirit which is kept alive by its motion among them, and which in turn keeps them both alive. When Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux holy man, told the

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6. In a typical example from a book of Russian folk tales, a woman walking in the woods found a baby wood-demon "lying naked on the ground and crying bitterly. So she covered it up with her cloak, and after a time came her mother, a female wood-demon, and rewarded the woman with a potful of burning coals, which afterwards turned into bright golden ducats."

The woman covers the baby because she's moved to do so, a gratuitous, social act. Then the gift comes to her. It increases solely by its passage from the realm of wood-demons to her cottage.

The increase comes to a gift as it moves from second to third party, not in the simpler passage from first to second.

history of the Sioux "sacred pipe" to Joseph Epes Brown, he explained that at the time the pipe had first been given to him, his elders had told him that its history must always be passed down, "for as long as it is known, and for as long as the pipe is used, [the] people will live; but as soon as it has been forgotten, the people will be without a center and they will perish."

The increase is the core of the gift, the kernel. In this essay I speak of both the object and its increase as the gift, but at times it seems more accurate to say that the increase alone is the gift and to treat the object involved more modestly as its vehicle or vessel. A Kwakiutl copper is a gift, but the feeling involved — the good will of each transaction — is more clearly embodied in the excess, the extra blankets thrown in at the end by each new recipient. And certainly it makes sense to say that the increase is the real gift in those cases in which the gift-object is sacrificed, for the increase continues despite (even because of) that loss; it is the constant in the cycle, not consumed in use. The Maori elder who told of the forest hau distinguished in this way between object and increase, the mauri set in the forest and its hau which causes the game to abound. In that cycle the hau is nourished and passed along while the gift-objects (birds, mauri) disappear.

Marshall Sahlins, when he commented on the Maori gift stories, asked that we "observe just where the term hau enters into the discussion. Not with the initial transfer from the first to the second party, as well it could if [the hau] were the spirit in the gift, but upon the exchange between the second and third parties, as logically it would if it were the yield on the gift. The term profit is economically and historically inappropriate to the Maori, but it would have been a better translation than spirit for the hau in question."

Sahlins's gloss highlights something which has been implicit in our discussion, though not yet stated directly — the increase comes to a gift as it moves from second to third party, not in the simpler passage from first to second. This increase begins when the gift has passed through someone, when the circle appears. But, as Sahlins senses, profit is not the right word. Capital earns profit and the sale of a commodity turns a profit, but gifts that remain gifts do not earn profit, they give increase. The distinction lies in what we might call the vector of the increase: in gift exchange it, the increase, stays in motion and follows the object, while in commodity exchange it stays behind as profit. (These two alternatives are also known as positive and negative reciprocity.)

With this in mind we may return to a dictum laid out earlier — one man's gift must not be another man's capital — and develop from it a corollary, saying: the increase which comes of gift exchange must remain a gift and not be kept as if it were the return on private capital. Saint Ambrose of Milan states it directly in a commentary on Deuteronomy: "God has excluded in general all increase of capital." Such is the ethic of a gift society. Just as one may choose to treat the gift as gift or to take it out of circulation, so the increase may either be passed along or laid aside as capital.

I have chosen not to allow this essay to wander very far into the labyrinths of capitalism, so I shall only sketch this choice in its broadest terms. Capital is wealth taken out of circulation and laid aside to produce more wealth. Cattle devoured at a feast are gift, but cattle set aside to produce calves or milk are capital. All peoples have both and need both. A question arises, however, whenever there's a surplus. If you have more than you need, what do you do with it? What happens to the gravy? Capitalism as an ideology addresses itself to this choice and at every turn applauds the move away from gift and calls that sensible ("a penny saved .. .").

Capital earns profit and the sale of a commodity turns a profit, but gifts that remain gifts do not earn profit, they give increase.

The accumulation of capital has its own benefits, but the point here is that whatever those benefits, if they flow from the conversion of gifts to capital then the fruits of the gift are lost. To recall our earlier tales, when a goat given from one tribe to another is not treated as a gift, or when any gift is hoarded and counted and kept for the self, then death appears, or a hungry toad, or storm damage. Capitalism as a system has the same problems on a larger scale. Somewhere property must be truly consumed. The capitalist, busy turning all his homemade gravy back to capital, must seek out foreigners to consume the goods (though as before they get only the dumb consumption of commodities). And what was a toad in the psyche or storm damage in the tribe now becomes alienation at home or war and exploitation abroad, those shades who follow capital whenever it feeds on the gift.

I have explained the increase of gifts in three ways in this section: as a natural fact (when gifts are actually alive), as a natural-spiritual fact (when gifts are the agents of a spirit which survives the "consumption" of its individual embodiments), and as a social fact (when a circulation of gifts creates community out of individual expressions of good will). In each of these cases the increase pertains to an "ego" or "body" larger than that of any individual participant. Thus to speak of the increase of gifts is to speak of something simultaneously material, social, and spiritual. Material wealth may well be produced in the course of a commerce of gifts, but no material good becomes an item of commerce without simultaneously nourishing the spirit (of the ecosystem , of the group, of the race .. .). To reverse the vector of the increase may not destroy its material portion (it may even augment it), but the social and spiritual portions drop away. Negative reciprocity does not feed the hau. To say, then, that the increase of a gift must itself be a gift is to ask that we not abandon the increase-of-the-whole in favor of a more individual and more plainly material growth.

To restate this choice in slightly different terms, a circulation of gifts nourishes those parts of our spirit which are not entirely personal, parts which derive from nature, the group, the race, or the gods. Furthermore, although these wider spirits are a part of us, they are not "ours"; they are endowments bestowed upon us. To "feed" them by giving away the increase they have brought us is to accept that our participation in them brings with it an obligation to preserve their vitality. When, on the other hand, we reverse the direction of the increase — when we profit on exchange or convert "one man's gift to another man's capital" - we nourish that part of our being (or our group) which is distinct and separate from others. Negative reciprocity strengthens the spirits — constructive or destructive — of individualism and clannishness.

In the present century the opposition between negative and positive reciprocity has taken the form of a debate between "capitalist" and "communist," "individualist" and "socialist"; but the conflict is much older than that, an essential polarity between the part and the whole, the one and the many.

Every age must find its balance between the two, and in every age the domination of either one will bring with it the call for its opposite. For where, on the one hand, there is no way to assert identity against the mass, and no opportunity for private gain, we lose the well-advertised benefits of a market society — its particular freedoms, its particular kind of innovation, its individual and material variety, and so on.

But where, on the other hand, the market alone rules, and particularly where its benefits derive from the conversion of gift property to commodities, the fruits of gift exchange are lost. At that point commerce becomes correctly associated with the fragmentation of community and the suppression of liveliness, fertility, and social

feeling. For where we maintain no institutions of positive reciprocity, we find ourselves unable to participate in those "wider spirits" I just spoke of — unable to enter gracefully into nature, unable to draw community out of the mass, and, finally, unable to receive, contribute toward, and pass along the collective treasures we refer to as culture and tradition. Only when the increase of gifts moves with the gift may the accumulated wealth of our spirit continue to grow among us, so that each of us may enter, and be revived by, a vitality beyond his or her solitary powers. ■

Circa 1904: A Tllnglt potlatch in Sitka, Alaska. Participants are dressed to the nines, holding ritual objects.

GIFT EXCHANGE: FURTHER READING

A simple start-up library on gift exchange would have to include these four books:

The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies, by Marcel Mauss; 1967,130 pp.; $4.95 postpaid from W.W. Norton & Co., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110.

This is the classic "Essay on the Gift," first published in France in 1924. The nephew of Emile Durkheim, a Sanskrit scholar, a gifted linguist, and a historian of religions, Marcel Mauss belongs to that group of early sociologists whose work was still rooted in philosophy and history.

His essay begins with the field reports of turn-of-the-century ethnographers, but goes on to cover the Roman laws of real estate, a Hindu epic, Germanic dowry customs, and much more. Short - but full of ideas.

Stone Age Economics, by Marshall Sahlins; 1972, 348 pp.; $9.95 post paid from Aldine Publishing Company, 200 Saw Mill River Road, Hawthorne, NY 10532.

Contains an excellent chapter on "The Spirit of the Gift" which applies a rigorous *explication de texte* to part of the source material upon which Mauss based his essay and goes on to place Mauss's ideas in the history of political philosophy. Turns out Thomas Hobbes had a model of society which certain data from the ethnographers was beginning to call into question.

The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Brotherhood, by Benjamin Nelson; 1969,

310 pp.; $2.95 postpaid from University of Chicago Press, Department LDP, 5801 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637.

Seems like an oddball in a list of books on gift exchange. The connection is this: the Old Testament contains a "double law" which allows a Jew to charge "rent" on a loan to a stranger, but forbids him from charging it to a friend. The prohibition on usury was therefore an injunction in favor of gift exchange: among brothers the increase on wealth should not be reckoned and charged, it should be treated as a gift. Nelson's book is a history of the idea of usury — and therefore a history of the idea of gift exchange — from the Old Testament into the modern era.

The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy, by Richard M. Titmuss; 1972, 339 pp.; $3.95 postpaid from Pantheon Books, Random House, 400 Hahn Road, Westminster, MD 21157.

A study of how we handle the human blood which is to be used for transfusions. Titmuss compares the British system, which classifies all blood as a gift, with the American, a mixed economy in which some blood is donated and some is bought and sold. —Lewis Hyde

POTLATCH: Another View

by George Woodcock

A ceremonial perhaps even more dramatically characteristic of the Coast culture was the potlatch, the great giving feast which illustrated admirably the close link between the social life of the Coast Indians and the extraordinary abundance of their environment. In describing the potlatch, it is necessary to reemphasize the high development of the idea of clan or lineage property as distinct from personal property. Winter villages and summer camps might be widely scattered, but in the intervening vastnesses the fishing waters, clam beaches, and hunting and berry-picking grounds were all traditionally attached as property to various clans or extended family groups. Such rights were ancient, deriving from mythical ancestors and rarely relinquished, so that lineages often possessed rights over sites far distant from their existing villages, from which their forefathers had moved so long ago that no one — even in a society with complex oral traditions — could remember the event. Such rights were always owned collectively, though the clan or house chief might appear as titular possessor; it was understood that their produce would be so distributed that no living member of the lineage would be allowed to starve through ill- fortune, sickness, or plain ineptitude. Yet parallel to such collective ownership of the means of production, with its built-in insurances against misfortune, there had developed a degree of private ownership of tangible chattels and intangible rights based on the surplus productivity of a society functioning in the midst of natural abundance.

Among tangible chattels, slaves were perhaps the most important. Slaves might be bondsmen for debts contracted and not paid in a society highly conscious of the obligations related to property. More often they were prisoners taken in the raiding wars along the Coast ; such prisoners were not absorbed into the victorious tribe by adoption, as happened so often among the Plains Indians, but became the absolute property of their captors and could be used or sold or killed or liberated as their owners wished. It has been estimated — probably with some exaggeration — that in some northern villages as many as a third of the in-habitants were slaves, mostly Salish from around Puget Sound and the Gulf of Georgia, captured in raiding expeditions by fiercer tribes like the Haida and the Kwakiutl.

Canoes, blankets, and carved dishes were also important items of property, while engraved sheets of copper acquired immense prestige, which meant exchange value (sometimes ranging up to 16,000 blankets for a single copper) through being sold from chief to chief at ever- increasing prices. These "coppers" were even given individual names and the most costly gained a fame far outside their owners' villages, which made ambitious chiefs willing to pay all they owned and to run into debt for the glory of possessing them. The greatest glory came from being willing to destroy a copper in potlatch competition with other chiefs; the rival who could not destroy a copper of equivalent value was deeply shamed.

Intangible property among the Coast Indians was in some ways the most valuable property of all, since on its innumerable manifestations depended a man's standing in society; or rather, his seating, since it was where he sat at a potlatch or during a winter ceremonial and the order in which he received gifts that determined his rank and thus deeply affected his honour.

Such intangible properties included the rights to names, dances, and songs, to family crests, to membership of certain secret societies, and even to the names of pet dogs. Such rights were rigidly guarded and could be acquired only through inheritance, marriage, gift, purchase, victory in war, or murder.

But rights were inseparable from the obligations that custom attached to them. Possession without validation was pointless,

and validation involved the liberal outlay of material property. A chief of the Kwakiutl or more northerly peoples could only dance the dances that supernatural beings had given to his ancestors, or assume his hereditary title, or give his son a prestigious name, or celebrate the puberty of his daughter, or raise a totem pole to record his greatness and his family's legends interpreted in appropriate crests, after he had validated his pretensions by a potlatch feast. At this feast, which might take years of preparation if the chief's obligations were large, the guests would arrive dancing their personal dances and singing their songs on the prows of the great ceremonial canoes. And the host chief would not merely feed his guests extravagantly, sometimes for many days on end; he also gave away as many material goods as he had been able to amass or borrow from his fellow clansmen, matching the gifts to the rank of the recipients. The more he distributed, the greater his prestige; the greater also the shame of his guests if, at their own

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Reprinted from Peoples of the Coast: The Indians of the Pacific Northwest, by George Woodcock; 1977, 208 pp. $18.95 postpaid from Indiana University Press, Tenth & Morton Sts, Bloomington, IN 47405.

later pot- latches, they failed to give even more magnificently. For, especially in the post-contact years when possessions became more abundant, competition was a feature of the potlatch system, and in this way it became a substitute for physical combat when growing European power on the Coast put an end to the raids which passed for warfare; but the terms of warfare and its rhetoric of hostility and contempt were transferred to the potlatch. The host chief would boast (either personally or through a kinsman who acted as orator) of his own generosity; and he would taunt his guests with their meanness, while his clansmen sang songs insulting the visitors and sometimes even exhibited carved wooden caricatures of them. Guests would be subjected to tests which they had to pass if they were not to lose face, such as drinking in a single draught an immense wooden ladleful of oolichan oil.

Yet, though a chief might temporarily beggar himself by a particularly lavish potlatch, he usually gained not merely prestige but also eventual profit, since a mechanism of economic adjustment was provided by the fact that, for the sake of their own good names, his guests would be obliged to return his gifts with increase whenever they held their own potlatches. Some anthropologists, notably Ruth Benedict, have seen the potlatch as combining the elements of usury and insurance, as well as that of conspicuous spending, in a primitive anticipation of capitalism, but the intangible aspects of the occasion should not be forgotten; it was pride far more than the desire for profit that was being satisfied, and the occasion was always — except in the rare "play potlatches" of the Bella Coola and some Kwakiutl groups — related to the validation of some potent ancestral right.

The occasions when pride was clearly in the ascendant over profit were those in which a chief anxious to show his special superiority and to shame his rivals most effectively would destroy his goods instead of giving them. I have already referred to the destruction of coppers; even more spectacular in terms of prestigious waste were the so-called grease feasts, when the fires within the houses would be fed with great quantities of oolichan grease and valuable canoes were dragged in to augment the flames, while, to preserve their own prestige, the guests refused to abandon their seats as the flames scorched and blistered them. Occasionally at such feasts the house itself would be allowed to burn as part of the grand gesture; and very often slaves, who were mere chattels without rights, were immolated at key points in the festivities.

Such destruction of property must not be seen as an act of genuine renunciation like the burning of his house by a Doukhobor who wishes to show his contempt for material goods. The Coast Indians had the highest respect for material wealth, and for this reason the chief who destroyed it gained enormous respect; the rival whom he challenged to match his achievement, and who failed, would lose so much face — and so shame his lineage — that suicide might become his only escape from social ruin.

At first glance, it seems as though in every way the potlatches expressed and aggravated a desire for individual self-glorification rare among primitive peoples. Yet it should cautiously be remembered that the chief was only the temporary bearer of names and privileges belonging to the lineages,

whose prestige was collectively enhanced by his actions — a fact recognized by his kinsmen who would eagerly share in his efforts to gather goods for the potlatch so that the honour of the house and the clan should be sustained. A lack of individualism as we understand it is suggested by the fact that, while still alive, chiefs would relinquish titles and even secret society roles to their recognized heirs, who in the northern tribes with matrilineal systems of inheritance were likely to be not their natural sons, but the sons of their sisters.

The potlatch and similar customs spread down the whole Pacific coast from the Aleutians to the Columbia estuary, and they were imitated by inland tribes as far as the foothills of the Rockies. No ceremonial act in this whole region was recognized unless it had been validated by giving; and even the commoners, dancing their spirit dances among the Salish, would celebrate their initiatory performances by distributing gifts among the witnesses. They still do, as I have experienced by receiving gifts as a spectator, and therefore a witness, in a Vancouver Island long house. ■