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### **The Gift as Psycho—Communicative**

Our only measure of truth is our perception of truth. The undeniable tradition of metamorphosis teaches us that things do not remain always the same. They become other things by swift and unanalyzable process. It was only when men began to mistrust the myths and tell nasty lies for a moral purpose that these matters became hopelessly confused.

—Ezra Pound, 1918

There is no better example which best exemplifies the tradition of metamorphosis than the exchange of a “gift” among cultures. The words of Ezra Pound echo the mutable and distorted efforts of man to understand his world. Every civilization holds an integral place for gift exchange. And, in the situation of cultural exchange, an extremely sensitive perspective is required. What occurs in the consciousness of one gift—giver does not necessarily occur in the consciousness of a giver from another culture. The mythology of gift giving among cultures works as a symbol of the collective unconscious, where each giver and receiver engages with the consciousness of the “gift” itself. Therefore, to minimize distortion and bias in cross—cultural gift exchange, one must seek the function of the “gift,” and differentiate the element of relationship between giver and receiver. If the gift is a work of art, then one must consider that a product of the unconscious has been shaped by the conscious mind. The ethnographer must then ask himself; how do I engage with both the giver and the “gift?” Thinking about gift as a psychodynamic communicative process entails an intense look at the metamorphosis of exchange. For the purpose of this brief study, including how and what is signified in the gift, the analysis will draw on interpretive anthropology and psychological contributions.

There are several senses of “gift” that lie behind these concepts, but a common theme is the notion that a gift is a thing received. It cannot be purchased. It cannot be acquired by individual effort, nor through an act of will. A gift is a bestowed experience, tangible or intangible (Lewis xi). From this definition, and in order to understand the cross—cultural significance of gift, it is important to be concerned with three operations of the “gift” itself.

First, there is the inner life of “gift”. Most often this aspect revolves around the work of art or artist, which comprises talent and a sense of true creation. Every culture offers its citizens an image of art, and the spirit of an artist's gift. The inner life of a gift resides in the transformative process of the maker's hands. The artist's engagement with his work becomes authentic when he or she recognizes the gratuitous element of being bestowed upon by a creative spirit (Lewis xii). C. G. Jung's theory of creativity echoes Platonic ideas where Jung Writes:

“The unborn work in the psyche of the artist is a force of nature that achieves its end either with tyrannical might or with the subtle cunning of nature herself, quite regardless of the personal fate of the man who is its vehicle” (Jung 75). Jung understood the bestowal of gifts upon artists. And, if the function of myth and Indian lore is to put man in function with nature, then gift giving within Indigenous cultures resembles a power and sacredness unrecognizable by Western culture; hence, commerce is king.

The Quiche Mayan culture illustrates this sacredness of "gift" within their ancient text, the Popol Vuh. This document explains that when the Quiche left the city of Tulan—Civan, the people were given "a gift... (by) the great father Nacxit." Later in the document it states that the people considered this bundle a symbol of power and majesty, representing authority and sovereignty (Recinos 205). The "gift" was a stone; "the stone of Nacxit, which they used in their incantations. " Wrapped in the skins of snakes and jaguars, this bundle was honored as their principal god, and the people were instructed to keep the precious gift" (205). Thus, because of the relationship between giver and gift, the dynamics of the gift continued to change as it moved from city to city. With each migration, the people possibly received an increased awareness of the sacredness and security of the god.

In a second sense, a gift which cannot be given away ceases to be a gift; hence, the outer life of "gift" seeks to move the heart, or revive the soul, or delight the senses, or offers courage for living (Lewis xii). The experience of receiving the gift is also transformative as the receiver feels the spirit of the artist and then awakes his own spirit to beauty. Of course, this outer life assumes that the work is received by an individual as a "gift."

Herein lies the aspect of audience, and the transformative nature of "gift. " How a culture or individual treats a gift determines whether the gift remains as a spirit of creation, or whether it emerges into a commodity. This tender balance is the greatest difficulty among cross—cultural gift exchange. What was once a beaver skin given as an offering to keep warm, is now a marketable fur devoid of the essential component of "gift." Most tribal cultures seem to separate the gift from capital.

The mythology of a society plays a key role in this balance between creation and commodity. Where does man's importance lie? Where is the mark of a worthy citizen? Is the mark in the getting or giving of products? If the marketplace of a society operates primarily on product as commodity, then the citizen is placed in a situation where worthiness depends upon acquisition (Lewis 27). However, if a society revolves around product as relationship, then an exchange occurs and a circular philosophy emerges as structure. There is a type of union between opposites: commerce and relationship. The "gift" therefore becomes androgynous wherein the anima of creation (eros) is fused with the animus of logic (logos). Gift giving as a psycho— communicative process allows a successful completion of the collective unconscious. People who circulate gifts within a group interconnect on a level where the inner life of "gift" increases, which allows for the transformative power among relationships. Several indigenous cultures demonstrate that gift exchange preserves the living spirit of a gift.

One culture which sets in motion a unique sense of "gift" as androgynous rather than commodity is the Massim tribe, which occupies the South Sea islands near the eastern tip of New Guinea. In this culture there is a ceremonial gift exchange called the Kula and revolves around two items: armshells and necklaces. Both of these items circulate throughout the islands, passing from household to household (Lewis 13). Much of the tribal conversation and gossip are the stories of how the gift was obtained and who will receive the gift at the next Kula.

The Kula gifts, the armshells and necklaces, move continually around a wide ring of islands in the Massim archipelago. Each travel 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. . . As a rule, it takes between two and ten years for each article in the Kula to make a full round of the islands (Lewis 13).

It seems that in this culture the gifts never stop. As these gifts are exchanged for each other, the Kula breaks the rule against an economic relation with "gift." Bronislaw Malinowski, a renowned ethnographer, spent several years living with the Massim people, and reflected in these words: "It is the goal of every ethnographer to grasp the native's point of view... to realize his vision of his world" (Minh—ha 73).

Consequently, with the Kula, the equivalence of a counter—gift is left to the giver, and it cannot be enforced by any kind of coercion. Here, a part of the creator's substance is given to a partner, wherein the creator must then wait in silence for any type of return gift. Gifts are never given hand to hand. The exchange must never take the form of barter (Lewis 15). Western society would find this point of view quite uncomfortable. After all, the Massim people's consciousness with "gift" differs from Western society in that it is circular rather than reciprocal.

When a gift moves in a circle, no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to; therefore, according to Malinowski, the motion of the gift is beyond the control of the personal ego (Lewis 16). This type of gift consciousness can also be seen among Native American tribes participating in the potlatch ceremony.

The Kokuyon tribe of Manitoba, Canada, celebrates the potlatch based upon a cycle of gifts. This tribe has developed a relationship to the natural abundance of their environment and according to their mythology, all animals live as humans. Salmon, in particular, are treated with an elaborate welcome during the fishing season. The first fish caught is taken to an altar where it is sprinkled with eagle down and a formal speech of welcome and thankfulness is given. The celebrants then sing songs as gifts in the hope that bounty will continue for the tribe, and the earth will continue to give its gift of winter food. The gift cycle is complete when the bones of the fish return to the sea, wherein the tribe believes that the salmon will revive and return to its home after reverting into human form. This first fruit ceremony is a key element in the myth which declares that certain objects be treated as gifts. The harmony lies in the belief that the exchange preserves the increase and inner life of the gift (Korp, lecture).

Marcel Mauss noted sociologist whose classic work on gift exchange is highly regarded, noticed in 1924 that gift economies tend to be marked by obligation. However, in further research by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, the obligation undergoes a transformation when gift exchange takes place in smaller units such as families. One remarkably interesting fact which requires further study is the consciousness of gift exchange when it involves body parts such as transfusions or transplants. Are there cultures where body parts are expected to be given? How is this research to be interpreted in another cultural tradition?

These are questions which lead to more study.

To surmise, the research mentioned in the previous paragraph indicates the continued symbolization of gift giving, and its connection with the function of myth to transform. Have we as a Western society remained in a reciprocal method of giving, rather than the circular pattern of sustaining the inner life of "gift?" Perhaps we too should resist the sociological function of our culture in the same way that Joseph Campbell propelled himself forward as a 'maverick' in symbolic and hero mythology. As Westerners, we have been raised in individualism with a neglect of the communal; hence, our gift consciousness has been a mode of reciprocal obligation, without acknowledging the sacred. Just as the Navajo song or chant is episodic, our gift giving would become transformative as the gift moves from one person to another. What new myth could be created as Americans allowed gifts to circulate? (The closest existence of this seems to be in passing on antique furniture or jewelry among family members).

In conclusion, there is the suggestion that America transform the commodity approach to gift exchange and emerge from the depths of the material world of the unconscious. Citizens have been cut off from the consciousness of increase in the "gift." In an androgynous sense, a fully integrated circular pattern of gift exchange would assist in final individuation, a symbol of the metamorphosis Self in communal living.

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