Denying the gift: Aspects of ceremonial exchange and sacrifice on Ambrym Island, Vanuatu
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Denying the gift
Aspects of ceremonial exchange and sacrifice on Ambrym Island, Vanuatu

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Abstract
This article takes up the well-known ‘obligation of a return’ suggested by Marcel Mauss. Through material from Ambrym Island, Vanuatu, Central Melanesia, we get a view of how the ceremonial process, and the sacrifice of pigs especially, builds on a distinction between ‘giving’ and ‘exchanging’. Supported by the phenomenological approach taken by Derrida on the gift as well as recent ethnographies parallel to the Ambrym case, the argument is that this very opposition is the driving force of the ceremonial process. It is argued that the sacrifice of pigs is about transforming gifts into reciprocity and thus the creation of autonomous persons.

Key Words
Ambrym island • ceremonial exchange • circumcision • [the] gift • Melanesia • mortuary ceremonies • sacrifice • Vanuatu

INTRODUCTION
Mauss’s essay on the gift (Mauss, 1990) has stimulated many fruitful approaches to forms of reciprocity and social dynamics (see Lévi-Strauss, 1949; Sahliins, 1972; Bourdieu, 1977; Strathern, 1988; Derrida, 1992). The gift represented the fossil of an ancient form of sociality, a total prestation that bypassed distinctions between economy, religion and politics. There has been much theorizing over this essay, and the various respondents have taken up different sides of it. One powerful notion of the essay was the idea that the gift contained an element of the donor’s ‘spirit’, inspired by the Maori concept of hau, that followed the gift in its life course around to the various recipients, and that this could explain why a gift has to be returned to its donor. The idea of ‘the person in the gift’ led Mauss to state the three moral obligations of reciprocity: obligations to give, to receive and to return. In Melanesian ethnography this idea of the gift has been extended by Gregory (1982), Munn (1986) and Strathern (1988), taking the evidence of the kula and other institutions to be about ‘personifications of relations’, that is, about animating social relations and thereby attributing personality to objects in exchange.
I will, in this article, propose another angle to this discussion. From the point of view of a Melanesian system of ceremonial exchange from the island of Ambrym in north central Vanuatu, I will suggest instead that the system pivots around an opposition between gift and reciprocity. I believe that it is the very contrast in perspective between the gift (as given for the growth and sustenance of persons) and the return (becoming Maussian ‘reciprocity’ that has the character of a circular economy) and the dialectical shifts between these different stages of social process that are crucial for the containment of the system as totality. Through a survey of things being passed back and forth in circumcision ceremonies and mortuary ceremonies I shall demonstrate the particular logic of gift and return in this society.

THE PROBLEM WITH CONCEPTS AND TERMINOLOGY

To a certain degree, my argument takes inspiration from Gell’s point (1992) that ‘sharing’ (what he calls ‘service economy’) and ‘exchange’ (what he calls ‘reproductive gift-exchange’) are different social phenomena in Melanesia. He proposes the challenging claim that whereas ‘gift exchange’ does not play any significant role among the Umeda of Papua New Guinea, it instead functions entirely on a system of ‘sharing’ – eating each other’s products and enjoying sexual relations that rely on moral statuses and concerns. He thus proposes in relation to Sahlin’s work (1972) that:

‘Generalized’ and ‘balanced’ are not two alternative forms of reciprocity; balanced reciprocity is reciprocity, because ‘balance’ (comparability of mutual sacrifices) is built into the notion of reciprocity as such: ‘generalised’ reciprocity is the absence of reciprocity, i.e. non-reciprocity. (Gell, 1992: 152)

There is indeed a problem with the terminology here. On the one hand we have the anthropological convention that ‘exchange’ or ‘reciprocity’ is already inherent in the term ‘gift’. That is the legacy of Mauss’s essay, wherein gift and economy merge together into one total, although ‘archaic’, phenomenon (see also Testart, 1998). We might term this the sociological understanding of the concepts. On the other hand we have the popular conception that the gift is radically different from economic transactions. Derrida has taken seriously this conceptualization, and he proposes that it is within such an understanding that the key to the understanding of the gift lies (Derrida, 1992). We might call this the phenomenological understanding of the gift. Using examples from French society and literature, he proposes to angle his approach from within the logic of the gift itself and not inside sociality as totality. The claim of the gift is in fact that it interrupts the circular motion of exchange and negates all further giving or return. It exists under the presumption that it cannot be reciprocated, since any return is a new start of economic circularity. So in the moment of being given, the gift must open up its own social space, outside economy and outside time. In this sense it implies a ‘radical forgetting’ of time and space, by denying its own condition for being a gift (see Derrida, 1992: 18). To give a gift is like putting a bookmark in a novel – it gives the reader a pause from the ongoing sociality and opens up a space outside of the chronological order of events. Since Mauss’s discussion turns into a question of reciprocity, Derrida’s point is that Mauss was in fact talking about ‘everything except the gift’ (see also Jenkins, 1998: 85). Derrida wants to draw attention to the phenomenology of the gift as an essential.
counterforce in the motion of social life, and the baseline of his argument seems to be
that any giving of a gift negates its own perspective. Its own impossibility opens up a
hole in the flow of sociality, and this is the real gift: a gift of time and a gift of an open
social space.

The problem with his essay is still its Eurocentric biases. For broader comparative
purposes we can accept Derrida’s phenomenological approach, but not necessarily his
conclusions as universally valid (see Laidlaw, 2000; Copeman, 2005). 2 Whereas we
might see in French society that the gift works as a negation of economic perspectives,
as in conflict with reciprocity and as a denial of sociological totalization, we might find
that things work differently in other places. However, if we should be willing to
concede, from Derrida’s and Gell’s suggestions, that gift and economic circulation are
functioning universally within a dialectical opposition, then we still need to study
specifically in what way the tension goes as well as how they are hierarchically ordered
(see Iteanu, 2004). In western society gifts are typically modelled after commodity
exchange, after economy, and even though gifts pretend to be a denial of reciprocity as
indicated by Derrida, they always stand to complement reciprocity – as a shadow play
of economy.

In the societies of the type we are dealing with in this case, however, gifts are modeled
on production (see also Damon, 1983: 317; Weiner, 1980). This implies that gifts are
not perceived as returns on something else, or as part of the circulation of goods at all,
but first and foremost figure as investments in growth and with a future-oriented
perspective. Under such a logic of production, gifts simply cannot be returned – being
produced is not to be undone. In such a system economic circulation and ‘exchange’ has
the explicit purpose of always following after the gift as a purposeful shift of the direction
of social process. In such systems it might be that André Iteanu is right when propos-
ing a slight change of vocabulary and attention – towards a processual distinction instead
between ritual and exchange. Whereas the purpose of ritual, and the ritual sacrifice that
we have so far encompassed in the broadly termed ‘gift’, is to secure growth and repro-
duction, this all changes when ritual objects are put into circulation in exchange
ceremonies. Iteanu proposes the interesting claim that the relation between exchange
and ritual has never been clearly defined in anthropology, and that discussions about
Maussian reciprocity have tended to reduce ritual occasions to mere economic balance
or imbalance in chains of transactions. In his account we learn how the Orokaiva of
Papua New Guinea insist on the ritual importance of giving away food, and especially
pork, for accomplishing ritual efficacy. He stresses that the ritual sacrifice of food is
crucial for adding the aspect of social growth and reproduction to the whole exchange
ceremony (see Iteanu, 2004). This also brings the difficult concept of ‘sacrifice’ into the
discussion. There is a tendency to think of sacrifice only in relation to gods or the
spiritual domain, but in the light of Iteanu’s observation and the comprehensive litera-
ture on the crucial role of pig killing in Melanesia, it is somewhat strange that one has
altogether replaced ‘sacrifice’ with the concept of reciprocity.

With regard to what is going on in ceremonies in North Ambrym in Vanuatu the
concept of taobuan (literally, ‘killing pigs’) as a concept of ritual sacrifice becomes crucial.
The killing of pigs is a specific form of prestation that cannot be translated into other
forms of prestation. That is also why pig killing has not been replaced by monetary
contributions in the ceremonial economy. To kill a pig for someone, which has to be
eaten straight away, is a strong statement. Yams and taro can always be stored, given away again or planted in the garden just like money can be put away, but butchered pigs are unavoidably to be eaten. Furthermore, the way pigs are thought of in the society, connects them closely to the persons who breed them. The close identification between person and pig, the combination of pig care and pig killing, imbues pig sacrifice with emotional force, and indicates a dimension beyond the immediate horizon of the living (see Jolly, 1984). In this regard Marilyn Strathern has also pointed out how sacrifice of pigs among Hagen highlanders of Papua New Guinea tends to ‘to maximize the mediatory possibilities of gift-exchange’ (1988: 264), by adding the dimension of the ancestral realm to the give-and-take of interpersonal relations. The pig killing scales up the ceremonial exchange to an atmosphere of eternity and marks the act as infinitely ‘true’. The sacrifice of a pig is hence a specific symbolic statement, as the transformation from life to death underlines the perspective of this as an act of ‘finishing’ something. In Vanuatu social life there is no other way of achieving that effect, and this seems to be the main objective in the ceremonial cases where the recipient of a pig is allowed to hold its rope while the donor kills it with a wooden club.

At this point it might be useful to introduce briefly more of the concepts and vocabulary of gift and exchange in North Ambrym. Comparably with many other Melanesians, people here orient a large part of their productive attention towards ceremonies of death, circumcision and marriage (see also Guiart, 1951; Patterson, 1976; Allen, 1980; Rio, 2007). The practical modality of the ceremonies is centred around getting together the many heaps of food, of exhibiting them for a few hours and then finally dismantling them and distributing them to people. In fact, the production of food and going to the gardens is, on an everyday basis, always intentionally directed into this ceremonial sphere of food exhibition on Ambrym. If it were not for these events, there would be nothing to inspire garden work or cash cropping of that scale. The main reason for rearing pigs, maintaining gardens or raising money is always some future event of marriage, circumcision, death or fundraising for the Church. People also have to raise money for school fees, clothes, tobacco, kerosene and so on, but these things represent quite small costs compared to the costs of ceremonies.3

Ambrym ceremonies hence have a specific character: mobilizing people into short-lived ‘heaping up’ of food and wealth. Even if one has not got anything planned oneself, one always has to contribute to other people’s events. In the high season of ceremonies, in the months from May through to August, people run to and from events every week. I discussed this with a man in my village in the middle of a period of much ceremonial activity: of two circumcision ceremonies and two marriages within the same week, in July 1999. He was getting weary of running to and from ceremonies, carrying heavy burdens of food here and there. He said, ‘You know, Knut, I am so tired, now I don’t want to see any more food stored in my kitchen. I hope it is empty now.’ What he implied was that he was tired of carrying food around to ceremonies. The food he received in one ceremony had to be given away in another. The little food he ate in his house he either bought in the store or brought back in small portions from his gardens. All the yams and taro he received would have to be taken to other ceremonies. By being in his kitchen the food stood for more ceremonial work. As Munn describes for Gawa (1986), most of the food produced in the garden, and especially the nicest of the food, is intended to go out to ceremonial exchanges and not to one’s own immediate
consumption. On the level of village life this activity is peculiar. The food will eventually be distributed to kin of ‘the other side’, but equal amounts of food will also be carried home after ceremonies. People carry large heaps to and from places, seemingly without getting anything out of it.

But on closer inspection we realize that in this relational economy the amassing of food for short displays is highly significant and powerful, and can be revealing of several distinct significant moments. The heaping up of food and money is the vehicle that drives all social transformations on Ambrym, creating a motion that is crucial to Ambrym kastom and social reproduction. The directions of the food, as well as the shifts of intentionality and character of the food as its changes hands, thus become the clues to understanding this form of ceremonial event.

At the outset we need to recognize one particular feature of the system. At the core of the ideology of the buluim, the patrilineage, lies the notion that the father and son supply each other with everything they need in a mutual unmediated form of exchange, or ‘sharing’ if we take the lead from Gell. Even women are seemingly supplied internally between the two alternating generations, since the father always provides his classificatory ‘mother’ for his son as a wife. Furthermore, in this father–son relationship gifts flow back and forth under a complete ‘forgetting’ that these are gifts at all. The buluim builds on a metaphor of planting and nurture, where all necessary things are contained internally. However, in the life-cycle ceremonies of birth, circumcision, marriage and death, people are pressed by the outside parties to recognize the necessity of the Outside for this unmediated relationship. An aspect of maternal nurture is suggested, as one’s mother’s agnates present one with gifts of sustenance. This is creating a tension between the endogamous and exogamous perspectives of the buluim. One’s mother’s agnates regularly present one with gifts within a symbolism of creation and care; special red items at the initiation ceremony of young girls (yengfah), red puddings and mats at the maljel circumcision ceremony for boys, live pigs at marriages, and medicines and loans in the everyday context. These gifts follow in the same direction as the flow of women and blood, and they represent ‘gifts’ in the sense that we understand this concept in popular usage. They are not presented as returns on something else – on the contrary, their intentionality is constructed as giving motion to being itself. These gifts are constitutive of persons.

The vocabulary and conceptualizations of the ceremonial flow of smaller and larger prestations builds on the principle that each and every one of them marks particular points in this process and every single prestation has a particular term. As we shall see in the death ceremony the word used for a certain prestation of pigs is ton ton, which is only used for this specific payment and not others. The same verb is also used for planting yams, hence the verb relates the prestation of the pigs to this special capacity that this act has for the mortuary ceremony. This prestation of live pigs is therefore more like planting a yam than making a ‘payment’ or giving a ‘gift’. The concept explicitly builds on an analogy between the death ceremony and the planting of a yam in the ‘motherly’ earth of the garden. In all ceremonies we see similar concepts that are not primarily intended as economic concepts. But that is also all the more reason to understand the various events as they emerge in practice. I will present a few examples that can serve to illustrate this system as a conceptualized process, and that can help us sort out our terminological difficulties.
In terms of concepts of giving there are several words and ceremonial moments that carry the motif of the gift. One such concept is weweran. Before a man is about to marry he goes a round to his mesong (MB/DH/FSH) and ina (FZ/MBW) to ask them to give a hand in the marriage payments. His mother's brothers will give cows, rice, green food and money depending on their will. The concrete meaning of the word weweran maybe explains the character of this prestation. Were is a verb that means to present food or valuables to someone, and seems to be used whenever there is an exhibition of the things given. The prefix we- indicates a search for something, and the verb weweran literally means to ‘search for prestation’ and they are given as aid to raise the main prestation of the foan brideprice. Another instance of the same verb root is sewere. The verb sewere is a general term for ‘giving a hand’ to ceremonial exhibitions. It is not formally arranged in heaps, like the weweran, which is an institutionalized prestation in itself, but merely given as contributions to arrangements of food heaps. All people going to a ceremony always have to carry some food with them when they arrive. This is their sewere that they add to one of the two sides of the ceremony (tabefang; ‘side of fire’). Sewerean is hence a general word used for assistance and for participation. The most common word for ‘present’ (in Bislama) is seneuan, a noun formed from the verb to ‘send-go’ (sene-UA).

Interestingly, Paton, in the dictionary of Lonwolwol language from West Ambrym translates the prefix se- as both ‘to cut open’ and ‘to bail out, of liquid’ (1979: 175). Both things refer to the outpouring movement of a flowing substance, characteristic to the movement of a sliced-open container that contains something fluid (a coconut, a body or some such thing). Similarly both seneua and sewere describe acts of giving, of pouring out of oneself in an outwards movement.

In the process of ceremonial exchange there is, after all this giving, ‘pouring out’ and assembling of food and wealth, a shift in the vocabulary. One now enters into a language of exchange. Up until this point the flow of things has been directed at the ceremonial ground, but now the perspective is instead towards the shift that is going to take place. In the context of weddings the brideprice is called foan or fofoan, which draws on the meaning of fo as a term for ‘to cover over’. It is hence a return for the received object (or subject) that is not necessarily similar to it, but that takes its place. This then represents a turn of the ceremonial motion, since so far there have only been gifts ‘pouring out’ of the participants. By the fofoan (the ‘coverage’) all these gifts are turned against the bride and used to cover for her. At his point people say that there has been an ‘exchange’. The parties, the two sides, are now seen to sere wejel. The ceremonial ground will at that point be defined by the dual structure, composed of the two men, the two sides of food heaps, and the audience sitting around watching. The swift exchange that takes place comes after the final pig killing that will conclude and ‘finish’ the affair between the two sides. The root concept for exchanges is the word jel, that can mean to ‘walk about’ or to ‘pass around’ and hence to go from one place to another.

Whereas the gifts and various contributions that lead up to a ceremonial exchange open up the roads and keep them open, the exchanges, in a sense, close off roads. It is interesting to have a look at the use of the term wejel to see how this concept of ‘balanced replacement’ is conceptualized. It expresses the agency of an exchange as having a direction; one prestation seeking a similar prestation to take its place. The party orchestrating the event – the side of the groom in marriage, the side of the deceased in a mortuary ceremony or the side of the boys being circumcised – hence set up their heaps of food,
in a sense, to attract a similar heap of food and a similar mobilization of people on the other side.

What we get from this terminology and ceremonial process is a view of gifts (as seneuan, sewaran and so on) that take the shape of special puddings, root-crops, live pigs, mats and care as an idea of giving life, growth and roads. Prestations of killing pigs and money make out the ‘counter-gift’, to mark something that is reciprocated, finished, materialized and settled. To kill a pig for someone is hence often a sign that something is complete and over with. The most crucial transformation that takes place on Ambrym in this regard is the shift that ceremonies represent from giving and amassing to exchanging and ‘finishing’. This process is important, since it lets a perspective of the future overtake that of the past, going from a view from within to a view from without.

In line with this process, I will lead this discussion in another direction than that attempted by Gell. Whereas he saw sharing and reciprocity to be alternative social forms historically and regionally, I will argue that it is the very tension between ‘non-reciprocity’ and ‘reciprocity’ within the same society that is the explicit motif for all ceremonial prestations on Ambrym. It is hence in relation to the somewhat paradoxical concept of ‘gift-exchange’ – that is, a reproductive system that works through a social process where ‘free’ gifts are turned into reciprocity – that my Ambrym ethnography will be focused. The contrast between gifts given and defined as ‘life sustenance’ for the constitution of the person and the inversely motivated reciprocity defined as the exchange of equal prestations between self-sustained persons is what actually makes Ambrym ceremonial prestations meaningful.

**MOTIONS AGAINST THE GIFT**

Within this context, I would argue that Derrida's claims can, in fact, be investigated on a comparative basis directly in relation to Mauss's claims about the ‘obligation of a return’. My claim would be that, phenomenologically speaking (that is, from within the perspective and intentionality of giving of a gift), the tendency on Ambrym is not towards an obligation of a return, but the denial of a return. Sociologically this might seem unheard of, since killing a pig for someone is also recognition of an ongoing relation. However, with regard to ‘the logic of practice’ this takes a surprising turn when we try to understand the rationality of each prestation and the systemic order of prestations throughout a person’s life. It will turn out that the return of a gift is intentionally negating the perspective of the first gift and as such cannot be seen as a continuation of it. What the Ambrym material conveys is not so much the gift as a denial and radical forgetting of economy (as it is in Derrida's framework) but the other way around. What we see in Ambrym ceremonial prestations is a ritual defence system against the gift, and the intentionality of the many ceremonial prestations is to deny the perspective of the gift itself.

I believe this line of argument has also appeared previously in several ethnographic contributions, where it seems that it is the very tension between gifts and reciprocity that is the clue to understanding the exchanges taking place. In these outbreaks of alternative visions of the gift there is a marked uneasiness with certain Maussian assumptions.

André Iteanu has pointed to an important flaw in the discussion about the Maori hau. His claim is that in the Maori texts the hau is only mentioned in relation to hierarchical
relations, as an expression of a spiritual relation between A and B, such as that between a person and a forest spirit. This needs to be reciprocated and the hau of the gift will return. Any passing on of the object to a C, as an egalitarian relation, is ridded of the hau and is made to circulate freely inside the general economy. The ritual sacrifice hence marks the end of the hau and the start of free reciprocity. In this way exchange encompasses ritual, or ‘exchange is superior to ritual’ and ‘all rituals are invariably followed by exchange’ (Iteanu, 2004: 111). This might seem surprising to followers of Mauss, but this approach places an important distinction into what has been an all too general view of reciprocity. Earlier, Roy Wagner had described how the Daribi of Highland New Guinea warded off the influence of matrilineal consanguine relatives by engaging in reciprocity in order to ‘buy off’ their influence. Ceremonial payments towards matrilineal relatives here have the function of lifting away their influence, of buying off the potential ‘Curse of Souw’. That would be the equivalent of Iteanu’s ritual stage in ceremonial exchange. The mother’s agnates are here seen, as in Ambrym, to contribute to a person’s constitution, and the mother’s brother is called a ‘cause man’ (see Wagner, 1967: 77). In Wagner’s view there is hence an opposition between the gift of substance (blood) from relatives and the payment that is the return on this gift. He comments that whereas ‘only substance can “relate”, only reciprocity can discharge’ (1967: 87), indicating that the ritual payment gets rid of the gift of motherly blood and installs reciprocity as the new order. In a similar vein, Marilyn Strathern has brought into this discussion an idea of ‘making incomplete’ as the achievement of many specifically Melanesian rituals. In these most significant events people aim to free themselves from social influence, and throughout life become more and more ‘incomplete’ – that is, independent of the relations that constituted them (see Strathern, 1993). She also points out how this situation between giving and receiving is asymmetrical, and how this is reflected in the pig killing:

The sacrificing congregation do not want an exchange of messages; they want to be made healthy, to experience the effects of ancestral blessing in an unmediated form. The last thing they require is a return ‘gift’ from the spirits. The asymmetry partly explains the destructive element in sacrifice: the gift is properly destroyed, for it is not a gift which is sought in return. (Strathern, 1988: 264)

It is thus only by paying attention to the way things are given and the meaning of the material items given that we can really understand the processual character of exchange and reciprocity (see also Ernst, 1978; Schieffelin, 1980; Iteanu, 1985). In such a counter intuitive effort Valeri discovered among the Huaulu of Seram a similar logic to the one described by Wagner. Valeri stresses how ideas of gifts and commodities represent dialectical shifts within an exchange cycle. He explicitly deals with the constitution of ‘bride price’. It turns out that this is constructed differently among wife-givers and wife-receivers. Bride price is presented as a ‘purchase’ among the wife-takers and a ‘gift’ among the wife-givers (Valeri, 1994). Paradoxes such as this work on the fact that gifts are not always what people want, and people might then instead try to press them into economic terms – transforming prestations intended as gifts to become instead ‘debts’, ‘commodities’ and ‘payments’. Such a shift of perspective, then, also takes away the ‘givenness’ of the gift, and explicitly makes it into economy. From the Indian context we have seen in
a number of publications how gifts of dan work. In situations where one tries to get rid of one’s inauspiciousness, the dan is a ‘poisonous’ gift that threatens to destroy the recipient morally and physically (Raheja, 1988; Laidlaw, 2000). In Parry’s case from the Benares funerary priests, much attention is therefore paid to the process of ‘passing on’ the negative substance of the gift. When the Mahabrahmans (funeral priests and Brahmans) of Benares receive dan at the mortuary ceremony and services they not only take on the sins of the jajman landholder, but also take upon themselves the identity of the deceased: the priest becomes the deceased (Parry, 1980: 96). The following process of ‘ingesting’, ‘taking out’, ‘transferring’ and ‘passing on’ of negative influence is indeed a process of transforming this lethal gift into something that can be contained socially. What is at first – in its being given – a ‘free’ gift of personalized substance is, in the next instance, turned into a social phenomenon where the priests try to transform this negative substance into social currency.

Through these examples we see how, under certain regimes of value, gifts figure crucially as the constitution of the person, and a lot of social energy seems to be invested in the ‘radical forgetting’ or denial of this social fact. For that purpose reciprocity, or social circulation at least, seems to be a key response.

SHIFTS OF PERSPECTIVE

With regard to the Ambrym material, I find this discussion stimulating. What is interesting is that these various ideas of ceremonial prestations are based on much the same opposition between gift and return as the one outlined by Derrida – with opposite values, however. On Ambrym, the giving of blood, mother’s milk and mats for ‘skin’ and ‘coverage’, as well as the many of the smaller ‘outpouring’ gifts given as aid in seneuan or seweran, are truly gifts of life. These gifts therefore come from the realm outside of the buluim, from people who take up the position of third parties in relation to the dyad of father and son (see also Rio, 2005). But such gifts cannot be returned, or rather, they cannot return as the same. People cannot give back ‘life’. And my point here is that they cannot accept it as a gift either, and the purpose of the ritual sacrifice is just to deal with this issue. In relation to Derrida’s points, the challenge for people on Ambrym is not that the category of the gift is impossible or paradoxical – on the contrary they appreciate gifts as lifegiving and empowering. But the perspective of these gifts is disturbing to live with and needs to be circumvented in order for the person to constitute himself as an autonomous and independent agent. Separateness as a person has to be won and the separateness of autonomous beings is what allows reciprocity.

In order to gain a more detailed view of how this works I will give a brief account of a maljel ceremony for some boys that took place in North Ambrym in 1999. This ceremony was rather special, as the boys’ mother’s family belonged to a little group that had recently joined the Apostolic Live Ministry Church, an indigenous church in the area. They demanded that the ceremony be performed ‘without kastom’; hence without the whole ceremony of seclusion, dancing and singing. The focus of the ceremony this time was only to exchange food and to sacrifice pigs. The operation of circumcision had been done at the clinic independently of this ceremony. The whole appearance of this ceremony was therefore stripped down to the bare essentials of what was expected of the event.
Whenever a ceremony is planned on Ambrym, a man and his brothers start extracting foodstuffs, pigs and money from their relatives. This circumcision ceremony serves as an example. For some months the father of the boys who were to be circumcised started collecting food and money for the boys' payment to their mother's brothers. The father had been planning this for a year, planting his gardens and saving money. When he was ready he sent word to all his sisters (ina of the boy) that they had to prepare to 'give a hand' on a specific date: 'to prepare the food of the boys' mother.'

The father, John, in company with his household, had produced five pigs. In addition to these he bought one huge pig in cash. He also killed two of his own cows. He also received by way of extraction from various relatives the rest of the pigs he needed. These contributions came from all kinds of relatives: affines, agnates and mother's agnates of John. They were registered as loans to John, the father of the boys, and they were to be returned sometime in the future when the donors would need them. The borrowings went into the larger framework of ongoing relations of debit and credit that make out the relations between the hamlets. John here simply used his allies, through his sisters mainly, but also through his mother and father, to collect the capital he needed for the ceremony. In addition to these pigs he had borrowed money to buy tinned food and people also brought in green vegetables to give him a hand in making the heaps of food big. The paradox that it was the same people who would later be paid by the sons was not mentioned during this stage. All that was said was that the ceremony was about the boys 'paying' (geje) their mother's agnates. This moment was the culmination of a long period of raising capital, of gardening and of working copra and selling woodcarvings to tourists.

On the day of the big payment, all of this food, which had by now amounted to 12 well-grown live pigs, two cows, tinned meat, 50 yams and lots of taro, was arranged in 12 heaps on the ground outside the father's house. The heaps were arranged in two straight lines. During the day many of the relatives of the mother and father of the boys arrived in their hamlet. All the mother's kin from her natal village had walked the two hours' walk in the early morning, and people from the whole district arrived during the morning hours. Everyone carried some food with them: yams, taro, rice or tinned food. In the list of the debts now held by John towards his relatives, these yams and taro were not mentioned. Still, of course, no one returned empty-handed from the exchange either and they were all duly paid back later. As the food now literally flowed into the open field, coming with all the people now gathering in this hamlet, it was distributed to the different heaps by John's household members. The clearing came to be divided into two sides. On one side were the 12 heaps that were going to be shared out among the mesong of the boys. The name of the recipient was written on a piece of paper on each heap. Even though it was said that the payments were to mesong (MB), it appeared from the names that there were also tubiung (FWBS, MF), ina (FZ, MBW) and raheng (MZ). On each piece of paper were written three to five names, which then in fact did not point out people from a genealogical point of view, but from the hamlets that these people lived in. Some of the names on the papers were impossible to put in the category where they had been placed; and when I asked about this, people replied that they now stayed in this and that hamlet. The important thing was to direct attention towards specific hamlets in the district where the boys would find their wur, or 'passage'. This was, after all, a gift of food and the names on the sheets of paper indicated who would cook the food together.
On the other side of the open field all the food that the boys’ mother’s kin and father’s sister’s kin had brought from various other hamlets was laid onto one large heap. This was going to be given to the boys and their father’s agnates as a counter-prestation. These two sides were then again divided into two sides. On one side the 12 heaps were divided into lines, one for the mesong on the mother’s side and one for mesong on the father’s side. On the other side were the two larger heaps, both representing counter-prestations from the mesong; one representing the mother’s side (the mother’s brothers) and one representing the father’s side (the father’s sister’s husbands). The construction of heaps on the open field now amounted to a diagrammatic representation of the boys’ kin.

This whole gathering of food amounted to an enormous display in John’s hamlet. At around 11 o’clock the exchange was ready to start. But now it was no longer John who was in charge, but one of his fathers: John’s father’s brother, the elder man in the hamlet. As their grandfather, he was the classificatory brother of the boys, and shared their position in kinship relations. He walked up to the lines of heaps and declared who should come and get the pigs. The men thus called in now came up to accept the sacrifice of the pigs. I use the concept of ‘sacrifice’ for drawing attention to the crucial role of the pig killing as a ritual act. It is clear that pig killing (taoboan) as sacrifice is necessary and central to any Ambrym ceremony that expresses an alteration of status. Therefore John now stood beside the heap of food with one of the boys in his arms and held a small stick to the boy’s hand. As the mesong of the boy took the rope of the pig, the boy hit the pig with the stick, to symbolically kill the pig for the mesong. This was to mark that this was his sacrifice to his mesong. Then an elder brother of the boy stepped in and really killed the pig with a blow to the head. This procedure was now repeated for all the 12 heaps of food, given to 12 different groups of mesong.

The total capital that John had produced and extracted from various relations had been assembled just for a few hours as one large whole. Now it was again fragmented. We realize that in the moment of display the boys were given a complete set of mesong relatives, and the display in that sense amounted to a gift of a diagram of their concrete kinship cosmos. This meant a concretization of the kinship situation, since some specific mesong were pointed out to be significant among the many mesong relatives that existed for the boys around Ambrym. But the boys were not only given this diagram of relatives as either mother’s kin or father’s kin, they were also handed over the whole capital of their father. It was now left in their hands, standing as their payment to their mesong. It was completely forgotten that the capital was partly assembled between the same people who now received it as sacrifice. Like the now abandoned practice of throwing away of the mat of the mesong and all the motherly influences, this act of sacrifice was meant to free the boys from their debts to their mother’s hamlet. It was a payment of the mother’s milk, the mother’s blood and the whole contribution of the mother’s hamlet in producing the boys.9

There should also now have been a session where each of the mesong came up with a red mat and put it on the boy’s head, which his father would immediately lift off and pay for in cash. This is analogous to the lifting off of the red mat of the new bride who comes into a household. In that case it is the father of the groom who pays to lift off the mat as a gesture to demonstrate that he is taking her into his care. In the maljel ceremony the gesture used to indicate that the father took over the care of his son: he
took him into his custody and relieved him of his motherly influence. John commented afterwards that it was a relief to him not having to do this payment since this was normally a very costly session.

After the speech by the mesong of the boys, the two boys were placed in the middle of the square with their mother. All the people present (except the boy’s household members) lined up to give them small gifts. People had brought soap, plaited mats, calico, and some just gave small amounts of money. As people walked by, some of them squirted baby powder over the two boys. This ‘throwing of gifts’ (kounseneuan) was very similar to the throwing of presents at the bride and groom in marriage, where the recipients sit with their heads bent down, with a sad and mute expression, as if they are under attack by the donors with the baby powder. In the end the mother and boys were buried in presents: the boys all white from the powder, sitting in the midst of a heap of soap and calico.

Once this was over the work of distributing all the food began. The mesong of the boys and their household members began taking apart the 12 heaps. The agnates of John began to dismantle and distribute the two big heaps on the other side. He was now paying back all his debts to the people who had contributed the same morning with food, food that had been put into the 12 heaps. The result was that people carried back much the same amount as they had thrown in – but, importantly, food that came from the other ‘side’ and not their own products.

In fact, an important aspect here is the gift that the boys receive without being aware of it. They are given the food and the pigs by their father as a ‘free gift’ – but in line with Gell’s observations this takes the form of ‘sharing’ – being in fact what he calls ‘non-reciprocity’ (1992: 158). This important gift again gives them the ability to take up their own position in the kinship system. Thus it is their father who sets them up as independent agents. The awareness of this begins with the sacrifice that itself stands for indebtedness and the killing of pigs that marks a repayment. The boys are hence made to pay their father’s debts, but by simultaneously making them their own debts. But through that shift of perspective between father and son, and the transfer of agency that comes with it, there is an achievement gained for the system as totality – of having released the boys from a gift relation to a reciprocal relation. They experience the father lifting off the mat that the mother’s brother had put there. The relation between father and son now substitutes for the relation between the son and his mother’s brother. Paradoxically this does not mean that the boy is finished with his mother’s brothers; on the contrary, it is the start of a lifelong interdependency. The sacrifice marks the start of the relationship as reciprocal, and like all Ambrym ceremonies this event also has a clear future-oriented reproductive capacity.

If we take a closer look at what is happening in the processual appearance of this ceremony we can see that the most important thing going on is the killing of pigs by the boys. While the mother’s brothers hold the rope of the pig the boys are made to symbolically strike the pigs with a stick. This form of sacrifice cannot be said to be merely a return on a previous gift. It instead marks the beginning of a reciprocal relation with mother’s agnates. And further, as the boys in the maljel ceremony, with the help of their father, reciprocate the gift of life, the life force that they are given by their mother’s hamlet, they turn the perspective around and negate the character of giftness. Through this sacrifice of pigs attention is given to the fact that the boys have up until now
depended on the nurture of their mother as well as the life-giving gifts of their mother’s agnates in the form of puddings and mats.

However, this ceremony also implies the start of a lifelong focus on this tense relation with the mother’s agnates. They keep claiming their rights to one’s life. For instance, if one spills blood this will have to be compensated to them. And in every smaller or larger event throughout life payments are made to these relatives for the same purpose – freeing oneself from their containment. This is in addition to status ceremonies (taoboan) where adult men kill highly valuable pigs for their mother’s kin. These sacrifices of tusked boars are directly aimed at making adult men register their greatness as free from influence from kin.

TURNING INFLUENCE AROUND – MORTUARY CEREMONIES

Naturally this lifelong engagement reaches its conclusion in mortuary ceremonies. Although very similar to the other kinds of ceremonies, death (meran) represents maybe the most comprehensive ceremonial set of prestations on Ambrym, and food exhibitions can go on for months on end. In the order of gifts and counter-prestations in the mortuary ceremonies we see a whole series of prestations where one type of gift is directly countered by another and different type. We see there the structural composition of the various gifts and sacrifices. The order of events is set up around the reciprocity between the dead person’s hamlet and the hamlets of his/her sisters, mothers and daughters. In comparison with the Massim mortuary prestations (see Damon and Wagner, 1989; Battaglia, 1990), we have here no exchange of valuables as ‘durables’. The things being given are mats, calico and blankets, live pigs, pork, meals of food with rice and meat or pudding, yams and taro.

All these things carry with them certain packages of meaning as they come into the ceremonial sphere. Yams and taro exemplify respectively male and female influences, and when put together these vegetables make out a ‘completed’ prestation. Distinctions are made between live and dead pigs and between boars and sows. Sows are often given alive in order to symbolize growth and sustenance or as pork when it is being intended to feed someone in communal meals. Boars are being used alive for compensation or payment, as a return on something, or as sacrifice to make manifest that something is settled. Pigs with full-circle tusks are sacrificed in order to finish something off and to settle something once and for all. Mats stand for the ‘wrapping’ of the person in outside influence and care given by people from other hamlets and villages. As we have seen, gifts of mats figure in many different ceremonies. A newborn baby is provided with a banana-leaf sleeping mat by his/her mother’s brother, which, in a boy’s maljel ceremony is ‘lifted’ and paid for by the father. In addition, the father of the boy also has to lift off a red mat and pay for this to the mesong of the boy at a later stage in the ceremony. At weddings a similar red mat is ‘lifted’ off the head of the bride by the father of the groom, to symbolize that she is now in his care. In addition to this use of particular kinds of mats, at all ceremonies the visiting people coming in from outside hamlets contribute with plaited pandanus mats and bed linen as a symbol of care and life-sustenance.

There is, then, a certain grammar to the order of events, since all the things being given stand for something in particular and in opposition to something else. I suggest that this process revolves around a transformation of perspective; going from a focus on the constitution of the dead person and over into his capacity of constituting others.
begins with the ‘death pig’ (*bu ne meran*), a boar that is symbolically killed by the dead person himself immediately after death. A stick is held to his hand, whereas one of his brothers will kill the pig. It is being sacrificed for his/her *tubiung* (MF/DS) as a return on the ‘gift of life’ that he has received from the mother’s hamlet. We have learnt that it is again compensating the mother’s relatives so that he can be set free from their influence.

For the next days and weeks the corpse is now visited by incoming people from near and far who come to mourn him and who bring him mats and blankets. These people are related to him through his sisters, mothers and daughters. They come to cover him with their care, both made manifest in their crying and their wrapping him up in mats. All these female relatives also cover up the corpse with their surrounding presence, as they stay with him day and night, singing and crying and watching over him. The dead person is hence now constituted anew by these female relatives, like he was constituted by them in the original moment of birth. For this ‘labour’ of caring and crying, all the visitors are being fed by the deceased’s agnates.

In the next major contribution, the *tontonan* (‘planting’) that takes place weeks after the moment of death, this impression of female influence and constitution of life is beginning to turn around. It consists in live pigs (while live boars are given for dead men, live sows are given for dead women) accompanied by pork and heaps of yams and taro. These things are given to the people who have provided a ‘passage’ for the deceased. But unlike the ‘death-pig’, this prestation is given not as sacrifice, but as a ‘completed’ prestation of live and dead pigs as well as food consisting of both yams and taro. The deceased person’s *buluim* is hence at this stage beginning to feed those who originally provided life-sustenance for the deceased.

Simultaneously a new date is set for the agnatic kin of the dead person to come to receive a return for this in the respective hamlets of the recipients of the *tontonan*. Proto-typically this would be made out by sacrifice of pigs on the part of the deceased person’s sisters and daughters to his/her sons and brothers. The next prestation, called *felmubuan*, is in a sense the reversal of the sacrifice of the ‘death pig’. People emphasized to me that this sacrifice of pigs was meant as a contribution to the dead person since the children of these sisters and daughters would *wur* (‘have passage’) to the deceased person’s hamlet. So at this stage the image of the dead man has been turned around; it is no longer his constitution that is at issue, it is, on the contrary, him as constituting a passage for the next generation.

After this there is another prestation on the part of the dead man’s agnatic kin called *wohopati* (literally, ‘the fruits of the mats’), wherein all donors of mats and blankets are paid by the killing of sows. The pork is distributed mainly in the hamlets where the deceased man’s/woman’s mother came from or where his daughters have married into. This is then specifically an expression that the care, nurture and ‘wrapping’ provided by the people of these hamlets during the first phase of mourning has been turned into a relation of reciprocity instead of sustenance. The capacity of independent agency has been retrieved among the deceased’s *buluim*, and this hamlet is now feeding these other hamlets with pork.

In the final ceremony of *tatagoro bongon* (‘for tying around his mouth’) the visitors of other hamlets bring yams to the dead person’s hamlet. These are mixed with the hamlet’s own produce and then again returned to the visitors. The larger imagery of this final
ceremony seems to be the focus on exchange, seemingly to demonstrate that there has not only been a change of personnel since the death, but also a change of perspective. As the son takes over for the dead father in the hamlet, the people who were wuren (mother’s agnates) to that hamlet are now mokuen (affines), and as they provided life-sustenance for the dead man it is now his sons who provide life-sustenance for them. The buluim of the dead has hence been freed from the outside influence, instead now focusing on how it itself is influencing others.

I have only hinted here at some of the meanings in these complex practices following a person’s death. I have left out enormous amounts of details about mourning procedures, taboos, smaller prestations as well as the whole arena of talk and interpersonal affairs going on simultaneously with all this in order to convey the structure of the process. In this death ceremony there is thus a changeable perspective also in the larger picture of the prestations given back and forth. First the dead man frees himself of his mother’s hamlet by killing the ‘death pig’, and then his own hamlet is constituted as the basis of the nurture of the other places by giving these other hamlets a total gift of live and dead pigs as well as yams and taro. In this way the dead person’s placing is turned into a centre of creation, and his corpse and spirit are then planted in his own hamlet through the tontonan prestation. The whole situation is turned completely around and the buluim can finally, although for a short moment, pretend that it is self-sustained.

FROM GIFTS TO RECIPROCITY
I believe that it appears clearly from these different prestations how gifts and the returns do not have the same character. My suggestion is that they are instead contrary social acts, ‘counter-gifts’ in the true sense (see Figure 1). So it is in no way a question of returning the ‘spirit’ of the gift. We could turn things around and say that it is not the ‘person in the gift’, it is the ‘gift in the person’ that is at issue and that is being sacrificed. Furthermore, this gift of life and sustenance that has to be returned – not as a return of the same, but in a turn of perspective – is returned as a non-gift. If we go back to the division set up by Derrida and Gell between gift and reciprocity, we see how the gift is returned as something else – as reciprocity.

Figure 1. The flow of gifts as life-sustenance and the counter-prestations made to ‘ward off’ this flow.
We see this as a pattern in all Ambrym exchanges. Live pigs, raw and cooked food as well as mats come into the hamlet as ‘heavy’ gifts, and people are then aware that they will have to be returned. The giving of live pigs (gifts) and the oppositional act of sacrificing pigs (non-gifts) are hence structured on the marked opposition between the gift and its counter-prestation. As the people of a buluim basically see themselves as self-sustained, the concrete arrival of the live pig and the further internalizing of the mother’s agnates’ substance as blood or mother’s milk opens up this ideology to the concrete presence of this outside party in their midst. The way of stopping this presence is by way of ‘warding off’ this gift by a counter-prestation that is not presented in the form of a gift. It is instead called ‘exchange’ (sere wejel) or payment (geje) and is most often made in the form of a sacrifice (taoboan). In a sense this process then shifts explicitly from a phenomenological viewpoint and into a sociological viewpoint and the system of the ceremonial sphere functions on this dialectic. The father in the maljel, in a sense, makes the boys state that ‘we are not constituted by you; we are independent actors engaging with you in exchange’. The person who has been constituted by the gift hence ‘turns against’ the giver and becomes an independent actor through reciprocating the gift (see Figure 2). The killing of a pig or ‘paying back a debt’ are thus statements that the perspective of the gift is denied, or at least forgotten. By making it into explicitly a ‘payback’, a ‘return’ on the gift, it simultaneously destroys the character of the previous gift and forces it into being reciprocity.

If we follow Iteanu (2004), we could say that the boys are here returning the hau of the initial gift and that from this moment reciprocity is set free, without the hau. This also represents the dissolution of hierarchy and constitutes the boys as equal in their ability to circulate wealth and pigs to their relatives.

We see this explicit split between the characters of gift and counter-gift clearly in the Ambrym marriage ceremony also. The father of the groom hands over money and pigs as bride price to the bride’s brother. This again is a payment to his mesong – his mother’s brother, since the bride is his ‘mother’ (raheng) – and it works as a counter-payment for the prestation of the ‘mother’ who contributed blood to the buluim. But, as a matter of fact, the groom uses the same occasion to hand over live pigs to the bride’s brother’s sons – as an addition to the money given as bride price. He is now their ‘new’ mother’s...
brother, since their mother was necessarily a ‘sister’ of him (through the classificatory rule of sister exchange). Likewise, throughout their life people are pressed into gift relations with their mother’s kin at all important ceremonies, and use every opportunity to free themselves from them.

There are, therefore, always two different kinds of flows going on, but one is always a negation of the other. In this way the gift is continually overtaken by exchange. From an observer’s viewpoint it is a paradoxical process, since the counter-gifts also enable further ‘passage’ and further gifts to come back. But from a situated perspective, everything is in order since gifts are always turned into reciprocity, and since no one is forced to give up their perspective. This is a system that effectively transforms gifts into reciprocity, a system of exchange where the items of exchange are merely standing forward as claims in the perspective of the other party. I believe my argument can meet with Marilyn Strathern’s claim that ‘what people exchange is always a totality: one perspective for another; your view of my asset for my view of yours’ (1992: 188). The effort is all the time to take the perspective received and turn it around and negate it. Accordingly, the concept for exchange in North Ambrym, *serewejel*, is not a concept of exchanging same for same, but rather an idea of substituting one thing for a quite different thing. Exchange as such is an expression not of social stability and balance, but of social movement and transformation, and, with Strathern, we could add: ‘Far from exchange relations providing some secure integrative framework, they problematize interactions by challenging persons to decompose themselves, to make internal capacities external’ (1992: 188).

**CONCLUSION**

As we have seen for most of these ceremonies the main aspect of the ceremony is the man who stands out to make some kind of gift or counter-gift to either side of his relatives, and this one-man prestation is a one-way prestation. This is a combination of a singular intentionality combined with the totalizing perspective. The outcome of this combination is a complete version of reciprocity where the perspective of the ‘gift’ is forgotten. All the activities of the outpouring gifts of all the participants as well as the ‘gift of life’ (in *maljel*), the gift of a ‘mother’ (in marriage), the gift of a ‘passage’ (in death) and so on, are covered over at the point where it turns into *sere wejel*. The two sides then appear to substitute for each other, by exchanging each other’s products in what now seems to be a completely balanced form of dual reciprocity. This produces an imagery of closure since the relation between two sides is now ‘stuck’, settled within the future-oriented exchange relation. Society now stands out as being made of duality, of two parties feeding each other, and engaging in a harmony of its two interdependent parts. At this moment the whole construction of the ceremonial ground pretends that there is no third party, that there is no outside, that there are no gifts, only reciprocity.

As in many other Melanesian societies, the North Ambrym flow of objects and substances is, on the whole, guided by a motion of productivity, growth and regeneration. When giving someone a gift here, I intrude on his integrity as a person. I give myself the opportunity to partake in his production as a person. I lay claims to being his creator, and I might also, in the end, lay claims to consuming him. The material object given provides the important and necessary objectivity for this transformation of him as a person. This makes us realize that the gift in this type of society is hierarchical:
in other words, the gift creates hierarchy in Dumont’s sense (see Dumont, 1980), since the gift places the recipient in the position of being a product of the giver and interiorizes the recipient as internal to the giver. If I give you a gift, I thereby build you, create you, stand you up as a person more or less different from what you were before. The gift moves the recipient forward in his life. In Ambrym this is stereotypically what we see in the relation between an ego and his mother’s brother. The gift calls him in from the sphere exterior to his buluim, to be subjected to the formation of the will of the giver. But this is only in the perspective of the gift in its giving. Upon its receiving, this all turns around. A gift is not what one wants in Ambrym socialization, and hierarchy as such is resisted. Hierarchy in the encompassing sense is not welcomed, and, as we have seen, this society maintains its structure by paradoxically both assuming hierarchy and denying it.

What we learn here is that gift-theory should not be taken for granted as a naturalized mechanism working from the same premises in all societies. We might, then, easily confuse a payment that is meant to negate a gift to be its obligatory return. We should base our evidence not on the sociology of prestations as a balanced equation, but on cosmological considerations and on how people deal with their relationships and their own constitution within these. How people react to gifts is thus a good parameter of how the social world, hierarchy and cosmos are constructed in that society. Perhaps, in this regard we can see a sensible correction to the division between commodity-based and gift-based societies.

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Notes
2 Taking inspiration from Derrida’s approach, Laidlaw’s angle with regard to his Indian material is that ‘Mauss’s The Gift is about many things, but on the face of it gifts as such are not among them’ (2000: 626), implying that social phenomena such as the dan gifts of ‘poison’ in India or other forms of inconvenient or unacceptable gifts have no place inside the Maussian tradition where gifts are exchange.
3 My impression is that money for these more private purposes is taken out of the money figuring in ceremonies rather than vice versa. If people are clever they take out small amounts of money for their private spending when handling the large amounts of money circulating before ceremonies.
4 All ceremonies of kinship have this character of going on between the ‘two sides of a place’ (tahiwere), that is, introducing a division between mother’s kin and spouse’s
kin, even though one is always related through kinship with both sides (see Rio, 2005; 2007).

5 The few words used for economic transactions in Bislama (Vanuatu national version of Neo-Melanesian) do not cover the wide distribution of meanings in the Ambrym vocabulary of prestations. The simplicity of the Bislama words and meanings is now slowly transforming and overriding the Ambrym language words. In Bislama, *pem* can be used for almost every act of giving, buying or selling and takes away the previous nuances of prestations that used to be different. This has influenced also the Ambrym verb *geje* that has now taken over as a universal term for economical transactions. The language is hence conforming to the realm of stores and market economy, and, hand in hand with a disappearance of the vernacular counting-system, the meanings of traditional prestations are about to disappear from the vocabulary.

6 It is an ‘identical exchange’, to follow Foster (1995: 144).

7 The objection of Bourdieu was that gifts can only become a system of reciprocity if seen by an omnipresent spectator and removed from practice. In *time* one does not know if our gifts will really be reciprocated. If the full circle of the *kula* was a practical reality the counter-gift would already be fulfilled by the instance of giving; but that would also cancel the gift itself. He points out that the essence of the gift is its paradoxical gap between the subjective truth that we give without expecting a return and the objective truth that a return will come. The passage of time covers over this gap and makes the practices appear as a naturalized flow of gifts and not reciprocities (Bourdieu, 1977). Gasché has also made a similar point: that a ring of prestations cannot simultaneously be based on gifts *and* reciprocity. If it is based on gifts the giver cannot be positioned in the ring, because he would then not be giving, but returning something coming around. He has to be on the outside of the ring, since for him to be in the ring means that reciprocity is primary and that he is already in debt (Gasché, 1997). By depicting gift giving as circular, Mauss and Malinowski are blamed for taking away the practicality of giving.

8 The concept of *wur* denotes the relationship of the person to the people in the hamlet where his or her mother was born. Literally *wur* means passage, such as a passage on a beach used for canoes or the legitimate passage into a hamlet, but is used as a verb, for example, ‘I *wur* to that place’.

9 For the sake of argument I am simplifying a complex set of prestations. Different things go on at the same time. We could in one sense see this exchange as an exchange between John and his affines. Under the terms given in bride payments described earlier in the article, his wife is given to him by his wife’s brother. The products of this relation between husband and wife must then necessarily be credited to the wife’s brother in some way. Both the food that the couple produces and the children they raise thus always then bear the mark of this pledge between the husband and his wife’s brother. However, it is clear that the pledge of the child must be different from the pledge of his parents, even though they are designated by this pledge. John’s handing over the complete amount of his own capital into the hands of the boys is the Ambrym fashion of recycling the pledge of the parents into a completely new pledge of the boys themselves with their *mesong*. This implies a change of perspective and direction. From another angle we can see that it was also the fruits of John’s
relations to his wife that were now handed over to the boys’ mesong. This was mainly the food he had produced and the pigs he had reared, but John was also, in a sense, handing over the boys themselves to their mesong. By setting up these specific mesong, and not others, as a certain kind of relative, the boys were given to the mesong as a future relation of reciprocity. The boys would now follow the ‘road’ to these particular mesong in the future. There were from now on 12 places where the boys would have confirmed relations to their mesong, places where they could go to ask for help when they needed it. Of course, the whole gift is also a new turn of the marriage relation itself, and we could have perceived it as a continued payment of John for his wife. But in practice people here use the maljel ceremony to make this payment and do not see it as bride wealth, and that makes it a different thing.

10 I am describing the proceedings of ceremonies of dead men here since that is specifically what I have experienced. Most of these things should be the same for women, even though those ceremonies are less elaborate.

11 ‘Heavy’ in the sense that people sense them as carrying with them the seriousness and burden of the kin relations that they represent.

References


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