



**AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL AND  
RITUAL DIMENSIONS OF GIFT AND GIFT  
EXCHANGE AMONG THE YORÙBÁ IN  
SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an examination of gift exchange as theorized by Marcel Mauss and later taken up by scholars from various scholarly disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, religion, folklore, and literature. All the scholars from these various fields of enquiry show how prevalent and interesting the gift exchange practice is. By using an anthropological approach, this paper addresses the social and ritual dimensions of the gift exchange practice among the *Yorùbá* with a view to critically analyzing some of these practices. In the first section, attempt is made to define what gift is; in the second section, Mauss' conception of gift is examined; in the third section, gift as theorized by various scholars is looked at and in the last section gift as it is practiced by the *Yorùbá* is looked at in detail in its social and ritual contexts. The paper concludes by showing the pervasiveness and the rewarding influence of gift among the *Yorùbá* in Southwestern Nigeria.

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## KEYWORDS

Gift exchange. Ritual. Sociality. *Yorùbá*. Marcel Mauss.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

For a strange and an unexplainable reason, none of the African scholars in general and the *Yorùbá* scholars in particular

in areas studies such as anthropology, sociology, history of religions, and cultural studies has ever deemed it necessary to undertake a detailed study on a theory as diverse, fascinating and imposing as the gift exchange theory is among the *Yorùbá* people. Few that does so, only makes reference to gift exchange as passing comments in connection with other subjects (FADIPE, 1970; FALOLA; ADEBAYO, 2000; OLÚPÒNÀ, 2011). Perhaps they do so because the theory of gift is not part of their research focus. This vacuum that is created in scholarship is tackled in this paper and hope to draw a lot of inspirations from Mauss' theory of gift and see what applies and what does not apply in the *Yorùbá* case (MAUSS, 1990). Other scholars are used in conversation with Mauss in order to interrogate the social and ritual practices of gift exchange noticeable among the *Yorùbá* people. There is going to be critical analysis within this cultural-historical context, the moral, spiritual, and unifying aspect of the concept of giving. The paper is focused by the *Yorùbá* aphorism: “*Bùnmi kí m'bùn o ni òpòlò nké*”, which means “Give me and I give you is what Toad is saying”.

## 2. MAUSS' LEGACY

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The three spheres of exchange according to Mauss (1990, p. 5, 13-14) are: obligation *to give*, obligation *to receive*, and the obligation *to return the gift received*. Mauss (1990) says it is not individuals but collectives (Durkheimian collectives) that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other, perhaps as far as the exchange system he considered is concerned. This practice of exchange, either of goods, money or objects, and women agrees with the way gifts are exchanged among the societies he considered. In explaining how people exchange goods or objects, Mauss (1990, p. 4) turns to the potlatch (which essentially means “to feed,” “to consume,” agonistic) ceremony of the indigenous peoples of the Northwest coast of North America and to the gift giving practices of some Polynesian and Melanesian peoples.

Mauss to be sure is interested in all types of gifts, but his examples of Polynesian and Native American are particularly

telling, because the participants in exchange do not like one another (or in any event are formally hostile to one another). Practices such as this according to Mauss (1990, p. 5) are not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other. The contracting parties according to him, are legal entities: clans, tribes, and families who confront and oppose one another either in groups who meet face to face in one spot, or through their chiefs, or both these ways at once. But this “obligatory give-and-take maintains, strengthens, and creates various social bonds – be they cooperative, competitive, or antagonistic” (MAUSS, 1990, p. 6). It is antagonistic in the sense that the aim is to crush a rival with obligations he cannot repay, to give so much that eventually reciprocation becomes impossible, of breaking it to one’s advantage, or at least this is the hope of each competitor (MAUSS 1990, p. 6). It is also true that, even though, “these total services” and counter-services are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, in the final analysis they are strictly *compulsory* (involuntary), on pain of private or public warfare (MAUSS, 1990, p. 14).

### 3. GIFT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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The idea of gift and gift exchange has been as old as the world began and it is a common phenomenon in every culture of the world. While it could be nuanced that the practice of gift varies from one culture to another as scholarly theories of gift have shown, yet there is a general consensus among scholars in the social sciences and humanities that Marcel Mauss’ theory of gift was the first to generate and provoke discussions cross-culturally. Through his epic book *The Gift: the forms and reason for exchange in archaic society*, Mauss has inspired generations of anthropologists, sociologists, historians of religion, and cultural theories to further explore clarifications in the social systems of exchange. Lewis Hyde (1983, p. xv; HYDE, 2007, p. xxi) claims that: “Almost every anthropology who has addressed him/herself to question of exchange in the last half century has taken Mauss’ essay as his/her point of departure.”

There is also a hint that Mauss' theory has influenced folklorists in a way that one has never thought of. Amy Shuman (2001, p. 495) a folklorist claims that "gift exchanges offer one of the most documentable and yet complex events for folklorist study." She in fact says that

[...] her work reflects on earlier work on gift giving as a performance of social relationships and addresses the problem of how gift giving operates both as a system of rules, obligations, and constraints and as a process of creating surplus, an excess of meaning produced by an excess of rules, social obligations, or material goods (SHUMAN, 2001, p. 495).

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1950, p. xxxiii-xxxv) says that "the essay on gift prefigured his own structuralism and claims that exchange is a basis of kinship relationships"<sup>1</sup>. Annette Weiner (1992, p. 13) grounds the theory of gift exchange on the "paradox of keeping-while-giving' into the social and political relations between women and men with foremost attention to their involvement in human and cultural production." Lewis Hyde (1983, p. xii, xv; cf. SAHLINS, 1972) adapted Mauss' theory of gift to the understanding of creative arts, but claims that Marshall Sahlins' theory of Stone Age Economics was very crucial to his inspiration on gift.

While it could be accepted that Mauss' theory of gift has influenced these scholars, Mary Douglas in her foreword to Mauss' book clearly demonstrates that Mauss' idea of gift did not spring out of a vacuum; Mauss' theory was an aversion to political philosophy's principle of utilitarianism of the English empiricism (MAUSS 1990, p. viii). According to Douglas, Mauss was largely influenced by his uncle, Émile Durkheim in this area, while Durkheim's idea was influenced in a similar way (MAUSS 1990, p. xi). The reason for this aversion is because principle of utilitarianism is the making of individualism; the essence of the French critique of utilitarianism. Maurice Godelier provides us with a brief history, to explain

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<sup>1</sup> According to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969), the basis of gift exchange is because of sexual relationship between men and women and that women are the most important "objects" to be exchanged.

the reason why Mauss takes interest in the theory of gift exchange. According to Godelier (1999, p. 4):

Mauss and the “*Essai sur le don*,” in which we see a man, a socialist who has just lost half of his friends in the First World War, take a stand at the same time against *Bolshevism*, contending that the market must be maintained, and against *laissez-faire* capitalism, asking the state to intervene and expressing the hope that the rich might rediscover the generosity of the ancient Celtic or German noblemen, so that society might not fall prisoner to the “cold reasoning of the merchant, the banker, and the capitalist.

It will be of interest to note that, before Mauss writes his book, Malinowski had earlier carried out a detailed study on the exchange of *Kula* among the natives of New Guinea, which Mauss’ theory also addresses (MALINOWSKI, 1961, p. 81-104; cf. Douglas’ preface to MAUSS, 1990, p. vii). This paper also takes interest in Mauss’ gift theory, because it offers fascinating resonances to the practice of exchange and reciprocity among the *Yorùbá* in Southwestern Nigeria, but with the exception of potlatching and *Kula ring* in Oceania and Polynesia; practices that do not exist among the *Yorùbá* in Nigeria<sup>2</sup>.

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## 4. DEFINITION OF THE “GIFT”

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In the preface to his book, *Sociology of giving*, Helmuth Berking (1999, p. viii) says:

To give means to acquire a power, to carry out a symbolic exchange, to initiate relationships and alliances, to attribute rights and duties, to objectify subjective meanings and systematically to classify alter egos. It means to dress up strategic orientations in altruistic motives, to make social challenges look like simple

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<sup>2</sup> Both *Kula ring* and *Potlatch* systems of exchange are agonistic and of high interest, and the ultimate purpose is to demean, disgrace and put the receiver in perpetual debt so that he would not be able to reciprocate. In fact *potlatch* literally means “killing wealth” because it involves wanton destruction of properties and wasteful expenses. See Mauss (1990, p. 4, 9, 84; cf. MALINOWSKI, 1961, p. 81-97).

acts of charity, to honor and shame, to hierarchize and stratify, to solidarize, to knit forms of mutual recognition, to become equal and intimate.

A careful examination of this definition presents to us three important reasons why people exchange gifts. First and foremost, people give to others to prove how better they are materially than others as an example we find in Melanesian society which Mauss devotes his time on. Secondly, people give with a view to initiating relationships and form alliances as we see in the example of marriage alliances all over the world. Lastly, people give with the aim of showing hospitality or they are purely motivated by altruistic motives.

Hyde (1983, p. xiii) shows how a gift can be a source of acquiring power, when he says that:

Every culture offers its citizens an image of what it is to be a man or woman of substance. There have been times and places in which a person come into his or her social being through the dispersal of his (her) gifts, the “big man” or “big woman” being that one through whom the most gifts flowed.

Hyde’s insight is an accurate representation of some modern day *Yorùbá* “wealthy” people, who not only use gift to acquire power but also to maintain a kind of hierarchical and stratified structure – a kind of “show off,” a “here we are; we are more than anyone else attitude”<sup>3</sup>.

## 5. GIFT IN COMPARATIVE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Mauss’ theory of *gift* “sprung from the fusty debates of library researchers on comparative religion; yet it was said that his interest is not primarily religion, but about politics and

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<sup>3</sup> In order to avoid a sweeping generalization, it is good to say that some very thoughtful and kind wealthy and rich people exist in *Yorùbá* society, the problem is that majority of the wealthy and rich people give with the aim of maintaining hierarchical structure in the society.

economics” (see Douglas’ foreword in MAUSS, 1990, p. x). Douglas claims that, “Following Durkheim, Mauss also considered that every serious philosophical work should bear on public policy” (MAUSS, 1990, p. x). Mauss’ theory of *gift* takes not so much serious interest in economic markets and, not too much interest in individual self-interest but on the way the collectives have an overriding influence on individuals (cf. LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1969, p. 52). Bourdieu criticizes Mauss’ and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ “phenomenological” approaches to gift exchange, on the ground that they make a complete break with the native experience and the native theory of that experience, positing that it is exchange as a constructed object which “constitutes the primary phenomenon, and not the individual operations into which social life breaks it down” (BOURDIEU, 1977, p. 4). For example, while Mauss thinks in terms of rigid formalistic system of circular or continuous practice of “I give you and you give me as soon as I did” kind of exchange practice, Lévi-Strauss argues that gift as experienced is more important than the givers or exchangers of gift<sup>4</sup>. It is for this reason that Bourdieu took up Mauss and Lévi-Strauss for their inaccurate interpretations of native conception and practice of gift exchange. According to Bourdieu (1977, p. 5),

[...] phenomenological and objective analyses bring light to antagonistic principles of gift exchange: the gift as experienced, or at least, meant to be experienced, and the gift as seen from outside.

Antoon Vanderveelde (2000, p. 2), in his edited volume *Gifts and Interests*, asserts that:

Most economists tend to privilege the role of market exchange in the explanation of social coherence; Mauss, on the contrary, together with those he inspired, tends to privilege the logic of gift.

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<sup>4</sup> Lévi-Strauss inherited his ideas of objects being of more value than the Persons who give the objects from Ferdinand de Saussure who claims that language is more important than the speakers of language. Catherine Bell (1997, p. 78) claims that Bourdieu (1977, p. 14) uses the ritual of gift-giving to challenge explicitly structuralist models of ritual that have depicted gift exchange as an ordered system in which reciprocity establishes relatively egalitarian relationships and facilitates certain functions. According to Bell, Bourdieu demonstrates that the actual giving and receiving of gifts involve complex strategies of challenge, domination, and honor.



Vandavelde (2000, p. 2), however, contends that:

It must be granted that gifts and commercial exchanges have something in common in reference to the notion of reciprocity. The existence of this common element undoubtedly explains the reductionist attempts of Maussians as well as economists. Both pretend to be capable of explaining the essential characteristics of rival model.

Vandavelde is thinking along Marshall Sahlins' economic model by arguing that gift should be seen in terms of economic exchange. Douglas (1978 apud MAUSS, 1990, p. 15) challenges this posture and claims that she had attempted to apply the theory of gift "to our consumption behavior," arguing that "it is much more about giving than the economists realize". In actual fact, there is a clear distinction made between the market economy and the gift economy in the *Yorubá* society. Franz Boas (1966, p. 77) clarifies issue when he argues that, "the potlatch gift exchange is governed by the principle of interest as the general principle underlying all competitive gift exchange systems." Here Boas is referring only to competitive gift exchange systems and not the gift economy as it's widely practiced.

Laidlaw (2000, p. 619) also claims that "the most widely recent analysis of gift in anthropology has been Gregory's opposition between gift and commodity exchange" (cf. GREGORY, 1983, p. 103-17). Gregory, according to Laidlaw, emphasizes that gifts and commodities create different kinds of debt; and therefore different kinds of relationships between transactors. Hyde (1983, p. 67) understands the necessary "bondness" and "obligation" inherent in gift, when he claims that:

Because of the bonding power of gifts and the detached nature of commodity exchange, gifts have become associated with community and with being obliged to others, while commodities are associated with alienation and freedom. The bonds established by a gift can maintain old identity and limit our freedom of motion.

Approaching the concept of gift from the ritual dimension, Mircea Eliade posits that ritual of gift has been practiced in the realm of the gods; it is only replicated by humans. According to Eliade (2005, p. 33-34),

[...] the curious system of ritual commerce – *the potlatch* – which is found in the American Northwest, and to which Mauss has devoted a well-known study, is only the repetition of a practice introduced by the ancestors in mythical times.

Catherine Bell (1997, p. 78-79), following Eliade's ritualistic model, points our attention to the religiously-motivated gift, by showing that the best known examples of religious rituals are those in which people make offerings to a god or gods with the practical and straightforward expectation of receiving something which may be concrete or abstract in return<sup>5</sup>. Bell (1997, p. 79), in fact, further claims that Edward B. Tylor's (1958) theory of ritual sacrifice implies a kind of "the gift theory," as the logic of human-divine transactions<sup>6</sup>. While Jacques Godbout (1998) supports Bell's position, he however links the idea of a gift to both spiritual and social life. He balances the two positions on the idea of a gift – utility theory, which is based on market demands or operations and the gift economy theory, which derives from communal existence and thereby enhances trust and solidarity.

While all these theories and others not mentioned here look very fascinating and informative, they seem to have excluded the importance of women from the practice of gift exchange. Annette Weiner's *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving* (1992), challenges this posture as her theory turns our attention to the importance of women in the practice of gift exchange. According to Weiner (1992, p. x):

The theoretical thrust of this (her) book is the development of a theory of exchange that follows the paradox of *keeping-while-giving* into the social and political relations between women and men with foremost attention to their involvement on human and cultural production. The traditional social theories that simply segregate women and men into respective domestic

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Bell observation is very apt; there are many instances when gifts people offered to God, gods or goddesses might just be for non-concrete material things such as protection, blessing with long life and preservation of already gotten wealth.

<sup>6</sup> It must be pointed out here though that Tylor (1958) actually thinks that not all gifts giving to the gods have correspondence material rewards in return; one can give to the gods and the gods reciprocate in form of long life and protection.

and political spheres and that view men's production as the foundation of political hierarchy are no longer tenable.

Her theory is on the importance of women in preserving and protecting *Inalienable objects* that should not be totally given out. Lévi-Strauss (1969, p. 63) alludes to an inevitable fact of the importance of women in the practice of gift exchange by claiming that by including "women [...] a whole volume would not be sufficient to enumerate the instances of it." Hyde also observes, there is no justification why women should not be part of conversation on gift exchange. He claims that certain theorists have demonstrated that some cultures (including the *Yorùbá*) have made women parts of the "objects or things" to be exchanged as in marriage or in sexual relations (HYDE 1983, p. 93-108).

## 6. GIFT EXCHANGE PRACTICE AMONG THE *YORÙBÁ*

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Gift exchange is crucial to the social and religious life of the *Yorùbá* in Nigeria as well as throughout West Africa. Their worldview, arguably, makes no rigid distinction between the sacred and the profane. To this traditional community, gift, giving and receiving are anchored by certain mythic narratives and ritual practices. To most *Yorùbá* indigenous people as well as the Western society, the idea of gift has many meanings. In both, gifts can be voluntary or involuntary. A gift sometimes connotes the quality, trait, or endowment bestowed on humans by the Divine. Among the *Yorùbá*, however, a gift is eternal, morally obligatory, and voluntary, all at once. It is also interesting and enjoyable at one time and disinteresting and painful at other times<sup>7</sup>. In some sense and just as gift theorists have argued, at the superficial level, it is looked upon as something informal and unbinding, but at the social level, it is formalized and institutionalized.

Among this traditional community, gift becomes important as something both divine and human. It is crucial

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<sup>7</sup> Gift becomes painful according to the *Yorùbá* when people who received gifts from one, turns out to be one's enemies.

precisely because it is simultaneously sacred and social. There are, it seems, some propelling social forces that make this seemingly voluntary phenomenon obligatory<sup>8</sup>. Among the *Yorùbá*, gift exchange defines the various levels of people's identity: religious, social, political, and gender. The notion of reciprocity is expressed profoundly in some of their aphorisms, pithy sayings, proverbs, and songs. For example, they say: "Give me and I give you is what the toads are shouting underneath the river." It must be pointed out however, the real life situation of the people does not make conditions as easy as this proverb tries to show.

The gross inequalities among the *Yorùbá* people bring about difficulties and struggles to realize this ideal. Real life as it is lived is far from the ideal especially in a situation wherein some individuals who received gifts, might not be able to reciprocate, leading to negative reciprocity. Still referring to the same experience, Aafke Komter seems to agree with Fiske by claiming that in every known society, "authority ranking" in social relationship is characterized by asymmetry and inequality (KOMTER, 2005, p. 22; cf. FISKE, 1991, p. 25). According to this system, people construe each other as differing in social importance or status; a situation where highest ranking people in a social relationship often have the prerogative of being accorded the initiative of action, being the first who are allowed to make choices or to voice a preference. How this is handled among the *Yorùbá* is part of the discussion in the latter part of this paper. Gift giving/exchange affects several levels of interactions between humans and the spiritual, and among humans, the spiritual, and natural objects.

## 7. VARIOUS MEANINGS OF THE WORD "GIFT" AMONG THE YORÙBÁ

A word can have various meanings to the *Yorùbá* people especially in relation to and as an equivalent to English words. For example, the word *gift* means different things to the dif-

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<sup>8</sup> Many of the *Yorùbá* proverbs show how important gift giving is; givers of gifts are praised why stingy persons are severely rebuked, given derogatory remarks and put to shame.

ferent *Yorùbá* dialects because of their diversities and their language variations. “Èbùn” is gift; that is why people name their children “ÈbùnOlúwa” (the “Gift of God”). “Oore” (kindness) could also mean *gift*, hence some parents name their children *OoreOluwa* (kindness of God). This can also be expressed when a person has been helped through an act of compassion shown by another person as in rendering help in form of paying school fees, or when a person is advised to do something which eventually comes out well. The person who had been advised would say, *Oore nlá ló se mí*, “He has shown me a great kindness” or *Ó b̀̀nmi ǹ̀eb̀̀n nlá*, “He has given me a great gift.” Another *Yorùbá* word for gift is *Ore* [almsgiving]. If one met an old man or an old woman or a beggar and gave him or her some money, instead of seeing what was given as merely *èb̀̀n-gift*, he or she would rather see it as “*ore*”-alms, even though he did not beg for it. He or she will say “*Ó ta mí l’óre*” (he has given me alms or charity).

*Yorùbá* believes that no state of thing is constant in life; a person who begs for alms today could start to give tomorrow. It must however be pointed out that, the usage of these words varies from one sub-ethnic *Yorùbá* community to another, since there are as many sub-ethnic *Yorùbá* dialect groups in Nigeria as are in the Diasporas. Hospitality is a form of gift in Africa generally (HEALEY; SYBERTZ, 1996, p. 168-196). In all these varied explanations of gift, one thing is very clear; it is only when two or more people engage in mutual logic of gift and reciprocity that social solidarity is maintained.

## 8. OF MAUSS’ GIFT TO HUMANS: SOCIAL ASPECT OF THE YORÙBÁ PRACTICES OF GIFT EXCHANGE

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Arnold van Gennep (1960), himself a positivist and contemporary of Henri Hubert, Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, shows in his classic book *The Rites of Passage*, the analysis of the ceremonies accompanying an individual’s “life crises.” He pointed out that, three major phases distinguish such ceremonies namely; *separation*, *transition*, and *incorpora-*

tion. The three stages are believed by Gennep to be present at each “life crises”<sup>9</sup>. Life crises are identified as birth, marriage, puberty, kingship coronation and funeral rites; this can also be extended to other social aspects of life. He later adapted and applied this theory to seasonal changes. With a careful study of *Yorùbá* life and culture, one discovers that their ceremonies follow van Gennep three stages and are usually accompanied by elaborate practice of exchange of gifts. As already said Lévi-Strauss (1969, p. 53) even observed this in his study of kinship and marriage customs. In the *Yorùbá* society for instance, the birth of a child is welcome into the family with great pomp and pageantries.

The *Yorùbá* has the philosophy that makes presentation of gifts to a new born to be socially acceptable and morally and spiritually necessary. The reason they claim for this practice is that a new born is regarded as “a blood from heaven” (*omo titun, èjè Òrun*). A gift to *èjè Òrun*, even though on the surface is a social thing, has a spiritual implication. The *Yorùbá* people believe that, *Orí omo titun ló n pe omo titun w’áyé*. (The head of a new child brings another new child into the world). Head, among the *Yorùbá* has double-layered meaning: Inner and the Outer heads. The Inner head is metaphysical or spiritual while the outer is physical. In essence, it is usually the belief of the people that the inner head of a person affects the totality of a person’s “being” or of one’s “becoming.” So, the inner head is what is referred to here.

It is also normative that a person should give a gift to a new child, because what a person gives is what she/he gets. Various kinds of gift items are usually given. It ranges from money (in ancient times it was cowry shells), and material things such as clothes, and consumable items such as food materials to the mother on behalf of her newborn. This is apart from food as a gift to a woman before she delivers a new baby. In this case, however, it is because of the new baby. In exchange for all the gift items received, there are usually elaborate presentations of food and drinks on the day of naming ceremony from the parents to their guests. Just like, it is close-fistedness or a sign of malicious intention to refuse to give a

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<sup>9</sup> I have the notion that Gennep is not thinking about “life crises” in negative term; each of the stage is part of social activities that human beings often look forward to participating in.

gift to a new born especially by the close relatives or friends of the parents of the new born, it is also morally and spiritually wrong to refuse gifts of food and drinks at this important occasion. The *Yorùbá* will say, *A kii ri omo titun ki á má yò* (We cannot see a new child, and refuse to rejoice)<sup>10</sup>.

The parents of the new child see it as a moral obligation to give adequate attention to the new born, through nurturing and caring and of buying of special dresses, sending the child to a very good school as at when due and so on. The underlying reason goes beyond parental care or a gratuitous giving as might be seen in many other societies of the world especially in the West; it is a longing for the time the child will start to reciprocate parental initiating gifts. Thus it is usually proverbially and metaphorically expressed that, *Oore tí a se fún Adire kò gbé, tí ó bá yá, á se omitoro ata sí ni l.énu*. [A care (or a gift, or kindness) given to a chicken is not in vain, when time comes it shall give or provide soup (sweet) into my mouth]. It is clearly shown in one sense here that *Yorùbá* typically give with a view to getting back or we can say giving is a “means to an end” not an end in itself in the sensibility of the *Yorùbá* people. A child, who is nurtured and well-taken care of, is also morally obligated to reciprocate when the child grows up. At least the parents have poured “cold water in the front, it is time for them to start to walk on a wet ground.” This proverb implies that all the years that the parents have been taking care of their child were periods of wetting the plant awaiting it to produce fruits.

In Ilé-Ifè- the acclaimed cradle of the *Yorùbá* race<sup>11</sup>, songs are one of the various means by which local women usually express their expectations of reciprocity of what they have expended on their children. One of the songs goes like this:

*Òmò mì Á rá kàà fún mi ní tèmí dò / 2x*  
*Òmò mì Á rá kàà fún mi ní tèmí / 2x*  
*Mi Ò r'òdo Ógbè l'asìkò itójúú omo*  
*Mi Ò r'ója Ífè l'asìkò itójúú omo*  
*Mi Ò bórogún jà, ki nsìkà sá lá jogbe*  
*Mi Ò bí 'mo méjì ki nfi kàn sé'só owó*  
*Òmò mí Á rá kàà fún mi ní tèmí.*

<sup>10</sup> Mauss (1990, p. 8-10) has another version of this gift exchange among the Polynesia.

<sup>11</sup> See Akinjogbin (1992).

It means:

*My child will buy a car for me / 4x  
I do not go to Ogbè's river at the time of baby's care  
I do not go to Ifè Market at the time of baby's care  
I have no time to fight my step wife (in a polygamous setting)  
And I do not act wickedly to my co-residents.  
I do not have two children, and use one (as charm) for money  
My child will surely buy a car for me<sup>12</sup>.*

Many people in the Western world might consider taking care of one's child to be motivated by purely altruistic or gratuitous kind of gift; a gift, which is given freely without any need for return. Apart from this, this song might raise certain number of questions: Why reference to a motor car and not to a house or something that is more durable like a landed property? Why should a child not think about setting up a big business for his or her mother? Or does this have any connection with another song that says:

I will not forget my mother that serves as my vehicle (car) into the world? If there is any connection, what implication does this have for the *Yorùbá* community? We can analyze epistemically that in the past three to four decades, to own a car in the *Yorùbá* society was interpreted as a luxury; a show of affluence, a social class stratification, an indication that "one has arrived".

A young graduate from college (university) thinks about how he or she could get a car; first, for status definition and classification and perhaps secondly which might be nuanced as only secondary to the first reason, for easy mobility. The second reason can easily be subsumed and diffused into the first.

Even though building a house for one's mother is more reasonable than buying a car, but riding about in a car that

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<sup>12</sup> This song is very common during naming ceremony or during the birthday ceremonies of babies in Ilé-Ifè, the cradle of the *Yorùbá* society. I first heard this song from mothers with newborns who usually came for their neonatal vaccines, while training as a Nurse at the Ife University Teaching Hospitals Complex (Comprehensive Health Center Branch, Eléyèlè, Ilé-Ifè) in 1984.



one's child has given makes more sense. It makes one more visible, nobler and more honorable than being confined (in a house built by one's child) in one corner of the city. It is showing to the larger society that riding a car is a reward; a return (reciprocal) gift for having taken good care of one's child when he or she was young. Komter (2005, p. 23) in fact thinks that "for men cars are often symbols of *status*, power, virility, and sportsmanship." Another important reason is that, women in those days did not need to ask for houses from their children because they were already living in their husbands' houses. Having an additional house becomes a luxury rather than a necessity. To build a house for one's mother becomes imperative if and only if one's mother had divorced one's father, otherwise the child could decide to bring his or her mother into his or her personal house; a practice, which is very common among the *Yorùbá* people both at home and perhaps in the *Diásporas*.

It must be clearly spelt out here though, it is not only women that expect reciprocity, or a return gesture as a result of what they have expended on their children; men are also not left out in getting rewards from their children when their children are financially strong enough. This song aptly leads to a proverb that expresses an expectation of a returned gesture of gift(s) from one's child when one has become very old. *Yorùbá* people will say; *Ti Òkété bá ti d' àgbà tán omú Omo rè ló má n' mu*. [When a giant land rat (resembling a squirrel but bigger with a long tail without fur) has become grown up (metaphorically referring to parents) it sucks its child's breast]. A child's breast here refers to the "goods" that the child brings to her/his parents as she/he has become capable to reciprocate. Jacques Godbout (1998, p. 41) also alludes to this practice of reciprocity of gift from children to their parents when he says that, "In other societies, the child begins to give in return quite soon, by producing and procreating." Godbout is quite correct, but there is also an expectation of the "goods" in this case, money and material objects such as clothes, shoes and so on; meaning that it does not stop at only production and procreation.

Komter (2005, p. 1) says that, "when we are giving care or help to our elderly parents, we are demonstrating social solidarity; at the same time we are giving a (non-material) gift

to another person.” In another instance, Komter (2005, p. 29) argues that:

Between parents and children reciprocity is often experienced in a special way: adult children often feel obliged to give their parents attention by visiting them or inviting them to dinner, because of what their parents have done for them when they were small children.

Among the *Yorùbá*, what a grown up, well-to-do child does to take care of his or her parents at the due time, is more or less a balanced reciprocity, and is never compared or lumped up together with a gift that is given to another person. This is the subject of the next paragraph.

## 9. GBÀ FÚN RÁJÍ N'ÍLÉ ÒHUN NI GBÀ FÚN GBÀDÀ L'ÓKO

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The above proverb shows the force of inter-subjective relationships as mediated by gift economy among the *Yorùbá*. Interestingly, Mauss shows how this practice was also present among the Trobriand people of coastal tribes and those of the Agricultural tribes (MAUSS, 1990, p. 29). The proverb itself means: “Help me give this gift to *Rájí* at home, is to help me receive this gift in return for *Gbàdà* in the farm.” *Gbàdà* who stays in the farm settlement has set the pace; with a view to receiving a return gift (different thing entirely and at a delayed time too) from *Rájí* at home, provoked by *Gbàdà*'s first gesture of giving. Beyond this material exchange, there is the complementary and solidary role these different gifts are playing in this situation. The man in the farm has foods, vegetables, fruits, and other farm products. Yet his case is like a proverbial Robinson Crusoe who was alone in the island where not all his needs could be met; at least with all his adventure and enjoyment with company of nature (animals and plants), he was still in need of human companionship, e.g. a wife (DEFOE, 2008). The man in the farm would need clothing and implements such as cutlass, hoe, and go-to hell (an agricultural instrument

for plucking cocoa), or even may be such things as small as salt to be given to him. The proverb in itself may not particularly refer to this kind of scenario; it might just refer to the insufficiency of humans to provide for all their needs.

This type of exchange is never to be confused with *trade by barter system* of economy, wherein things are exchanged for money. This practice also poses a challenge to an analogous relationship to *Kula* system known as *Wasi*, an exchange practice that was common among the New Zealand (MAUSS, 1990, p. 29). In the New Zealand's case, return gifts come with interest; in the *Yorùbá* case, there is no interest, it is pre-eminently social and moral practice. It is "a kind of exchange that produces a friendly feeling between two persons' involved" (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1969, p. 55)<sup>13</sup>. There is also a sense in thinking that *Òwè* could be likened to a form of reciprocity<sup>14</sup>. According to Komter (2005, p. 26-30), there are four basic meanings of gifts. In one of these basic meanings, she says that:

Gifts reflecting community are not always material; also help offered disinterestedly, without any felt obligation, may illustrate community, as shown by a female respondent: "My daughter has to work many hours. Sometimes she has a day off, and she has enormous pile of clothes to be ironed. And then I say: come on, I will help you." Asked if she feels obligated to help, she says "No. If I would feel it as an obligation, then I wouldn't do it anymore. I simply do it because it's normal."

It only shows that this kind of exchange practice can be seen and interpreted in various ways in many societies and not necessarily a unique feature of the *Yorùbá* society. There are peculiarities involved though, and that is why a practice of gift in one society cannot be used to make a hasty generalization for all the societies of the world.

<sup>13</sup> Although, this does not translate into a permanent sense of friendship; at least there are good examples of people who have behaved like friends in one instance and in another have demonstrated morbid hostility to each other.

<sup>14</sup> Fálolá and Adebayo (2000) say a lot about *Òwè* practice in *Yorùbá* society. It is a kind of rotational help among farmers, whereby a farmer is helped to make his farm at certain days and he in return lends helping hands to others when the time is due.

## 10. GIFT TO THE GODS: RITUAL OR SACRIFICIAL ASPECT OF GIFT EXCHANGE

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Gift exchange is central to every religious belief and practice all over the world, that one cannot ignore its importance in the relationship between humans and the god(s). Mauss recognizes the all important aspect of this practice in his theory that he even thinks that gods are interested in accepting gifts from human beings. According to Mauss (1990, p. 14):

A fourth theme plays a part in this system and moral code relating to presents: it is that of gift made to men in the sight of the gods and nature... the mythological element that we scarcely yet understand is too strong for us to leave it out of account...

It is because of the centrality of gift exchange to ritual or religious practices that will necessitate some time to be devoted to how it is practiced among the *Yorùbá*. In this section there is going to be first, analysis of how gifts are presented to the gods in the sight of men and second, proceed to show how gifts are presented to men in the sight of the gods. Òsun Òsogbo annual festival will provide us with a good example of how gifts are presented to this goddess.

*Yorùbá* mythical story acclaims Òsun as the goddess of fertility, protection and blessings (MURPHY; SANFORD, 2001; ÒGÚNGBILÉ, 2002). Òsun happens to be one and only woman of the *Yorùbá* principal divinities that were sent by *Olódùmarè* from planet heaven to the earth in order to perform the work of creation<sup>15</sup>. Because of her importance among these divinities, and the unique role she had played not only in establishing a town now known as Òsogbo (ÒGÚNGBILÉ, 2002) but also in the rituals of the *Yorùbá* people, she is accorded the dignity and honor of her own. She possesses the ability to give children to barren women and power to heal the sick and the afflicted by means of her

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<sup>15</sup> See details about the *Yorùbá* myth of creation in Idòwú (1962) and Akinjogbin (1992).

medicinal water from the river<sup>16</sup>. In recognition of its global significance and its cultural value, the Sacred Grove was inscribed as a Unesco World Heritage site in 2005<sup>17</sup>. The Ìyá Òsun, who now embodies Òsun, is the High Priestess in charge of the worship and veneration of the Divinity on a daily basis and at the annual festival. Through divination, Ìyá Òsun determines the (gift) offerings that Òsun requires. It is Ìyá Òsun (a female priest) and the Àwòrò Òsun (a male priest) who tell the people whether the (gift) offerings are acceptable or not. The people do not only come to commemorate this festival through offering of gifts in form of money, animals, and clothing materials but also to ask for blessings of diverse kinds including especially children for the barren women in return.

Among these gifts, some are thrown into Òsun River, and others are presented to the Ìyá Òsun or Àwòrò Òsun (Òsun-Priest), depending on what the divination says. During this author's last ethnographic visit to this festival in August 16th and 17th, 2006 many devotees were throwing money of higher denominations, expensive clothes, live animals like ram and sheep and also birds like pigeons and cocks into river Òsun. It only shows that the gods themselves are not left out in the symbolic exchange practice of give and reciprocity<sup>18</sup>. As humans are using their offerings (sacrifices) to curry the favor of the gods/goddesses; the gods are expected to deliver blessings in return. This kind of rite or sacrificial offering to divinity offers fascinating resonance to what Durkheim (1995, p. 345-350) witnessed during the rites of *Intichiuma*; the rites that was intended to bring about fertility of the animal or plant species that serves as the totem of the clan. In another place,

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<sup>16</sup> The river is named after this goddess known as River Òsun located in Òsogbo. The *Yorùbá* believe that the river has medicinal properties and had been in use for different ailments before the advent of Western Medicine.

<sup>17</sup> See the Unesco website: <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1118>> for details.

<sup>18</sup> One only needs to read a comprehensive work of George Bataille (1991, p. 46-61). The author assumes that sacrificing to the gods as practiced by the Aztecs of Mexico, was just a wasteful consumption as opposed to activity (productive) oriented-perspective such as work as seen in the Western world. Upon the pyramids, human sacrifices took place in Mexico. The purpose of this wasteful sacrifice (wasteful consumption as Bataille calls it) by the Aztecs of Mexico was that sacrificing to the Sun would continue to produce light for them. Human sacrifice was prevalent in the *Yorùbá* religious worship in the ancient times as well; they thought doing so will help them ward off evil and also receive abundant harvests.

he claims that there remains a mutually reinforcing exchange of good deeds between the deity and his worshippers (DURKHEIM, 1995, p. 350).

Mauss goes further to suggest that the exchange of presents between men, the “namesakes” – the homonymms of the spirits, incite the spirits of the dead, the gods, things, animals, and nature to be “generous towards them.” In his opinion, the relationship that exists between these contracts and exchanges among humans and those between men and the gods throw light on a whole aspect of the theory of sacrifice. Mauss believes that both the dead and the gods are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world, with them it is most necessary to exchange and in fact the easiest and safest to exchange (MAUSS, 1990, p. 16). This seems very interesting, because all the worshippers of the *Yorùbá* indigenous religious traditions offer gifts in form of sacrifices to the ancestors (the living dead) or the gods and goddesses because they believe that they would not only be blessed but they also believe that doing so would help ward off evils from their midst. Reflecting on Bell’s abstract not necessarily concrete blessings, the *Yorùbá* traditional worshippers believe that gods can decide on whatever pleases them to give in return for the appropriate and correct sacrifices offered to them. Erédùmí (late chief Matthew Akínyemí) the custodial of Òrànmíyàn sacred grove in Ilé-Ifè, gave this information that annually he had to offer sacrifices unto Ògún during Olójó festival in order to ask for blessings and protection for the entire *Yorùbá* race<sup>19</sup>.

One should not lose sight, however, of criticisms that were being raised against Mauss’ conception of sacrifice. First, in Mauss and Hubert’ initial rejection of sacrifice as a form of gift exchange, which was later incorporated by Mauss into his theory of gift (HUBERT; MAUSS, 1981). Secondly, Maurice Block claims that Hubert’ and Mauss’ notion of sacrifice have been fundamentally criticized by a number of writers; and their main thrust of the criticism is that Hubert and Mauss were unjustifiably influenced by the prominence they gave to Vedic sacrifice and sacrifice as understood in the Judaeo-

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<sup>19</sup> The author had interactions with Chief Matthew Akínyemí more than three times in his house and palace at Ilé-Ifè in 2011 and 2012, respectively. Chief Akínyemí died in July 2013 at the age of 78 years according to the information received from the family.

Christian tradition; an attempt to see what are in reality quite specific models, derived from particular places and periods, to be used to build a universal theory (HUBERT; MAUSS, 1981, p. 28-40). In the next paragraph, attention is focused on gifts given to humans on behalf of or in the sight of the gods.

Masking tradition is a common phenomenon in at least five continents of which African and Oceanic are prominent. In his book, John Mack (1996, p. 20) says that

In ritual and religious use, as today in Africa or Oceania, mask-wearers may be thought to be possessed by and therefore to become, a spirit or god. It is not a performance: the mask is the spirit.

This is very true among the *Yorùbá*; in particular, masker or *Masquerade*, who is believed to be the spirit of the ancestors (also called the spirit of the living-dead), is assumed by the *Yorùbá* traditional worshipers to normally come and visit the living every year to proclaim blessings and also serves as protective guardian to the people. In fact, it is not uncommon, in the lineages where ancestral cult is venerated, that the masquerade(s) would appear as a result of the death of an elderly individual, usually a man, for the purpose of performing the rites of *transition* of the dead person from this mundane world of humans to be *incorporated* into metaphysical realm of the spirit.

Many African scholars know and appreciate the important roles the ancestors are playing in the lives of the people; hence they have devoted enough space to this cultural phenomenon in their various studies<sup>20</sup>. All these scholars and various others do not only believe that ancestors play crucial role in maintaining order and morality; they also believe that they can be placated by offering gifts in the time of existential needs. According to Benjamin C. Ray (2000, p. 103, my emphasis):

The ancestral spirits bless, protect, warn, and punish their living relatives, depending upon how much their relatives *neglect or remember* them....In the family compounds, the masked (*Egúngún*) performers receive praises and *gifts* and give their blessings in return [...].

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<sup>20</sup> See Wándé (1976), Idowu (1962), Mbiti (1969), Ray (2000), and Olúpònà (2011).

Mauss (1990, p. 17) also claims: “Gifts to humans and to the gods also serve the purpose of buying peace. In this way evil spirits and, more generally, bad influences, even not personalized, are got rid of”. There is a sense in thinking that among Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian denominations, gifts to pastors or priests are regarded as directly giving gifts to God.

## **11. OF THE MAGICAL ÈGBÈJÍ AND THE MORAL AMBIGUITY OF RECIPROCITY**

*Ègbèjí se aremo fún Àgàn, Àgàn n' yò, Àgàn má yò mó, eni tó se aremo fún Ni, leè pa ni l'ómo ní gbà tó bá dàgbà* (A woman, who rejoices because *Ègbèjí* has solved her problem of barrenness, should stop rejoicing because the same *Ègbèjí*, who gave the child, could kill the child when the child grows up). This proverb shows the complexity and problematic of gift and reciprocity among the *Yorùbá* society. *Ègbèjí* is believed to be a powerful medicinal man in the *Yorùbá* worldview; through esoteric power he is capable of giving children as a gift to women who are barren. According to the African Traditional Religious scholars, Supreme God is too high and too remote to be involved in the affairs of men<sup>21</sup>. In fact, he is not conceived of as a lone creator of the universe and the habitation of men. So God in the *Yorùbá* conceptual belief does not create by fiat as seen in the Christian religious orientation. He employed the helps of other divinities that are lesser than himself and a human being like *Àjàlá'* who was saddled with the responsibility of moulding people's inner heads. It is here we can understand and appreciate the import of the above proverbial statement. The proverb shows that certain humans possess the ability endowed by *Olódùmarè* on them to bring about certain changes (positive or negative) in the world. This looks like Max Weber's notion of *charisma*, by which it is possible for certain individuals to be divinely or uniquely endowed with super-ordinary gifts (WEBER, 1993, p. 2-3, 29).

Unfortunately, here we see that women are at the receiving end, the objects to be manipulated by men as opposed to

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<sup>21</sup> See Wándé (1976), Idòwú (1962), Mbiti (1969), and Awólálú (1979).



human subjects in their own rights. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2006, p. 169) correctly observes:

There is a negative connotation attached to women who refuse to be objects to be categorized by men as “good” or “bad,” “wives” or “harlots,” mothers to be placed on pedestals or wives who are no more than instruments of production and reproduction.

Yes, this is very true! Women are usually saddled with the burden of solving the riddle behind barrenness in *Yorùbá* society since they are assumed to be primary causes of barrenness in the social and cultural sensibility of typical *Yorùbá* men. This negative attitude to barren women usually forces them to visit the *Ègbèjí* (some to other local priests, Imams and Pastors) – a skilful and powerful herbalist – who is believed to have the mystical power that could solve the riddle behind barrenness.

Some *Ègbèjí* who lacks good and sound morality might demand for any reward of gifts’ from his female clients including sexual intercourse<sup>22</sup>. A refusal could lead to a sudden calamity and unwanted setback. This aspect of gift culture would need a further exploration in the future. It is this author’s suspicion that Weiner’ *Inalienable possession*: the paradox of keeping-while-giving was a response to negative treatment of women in the society she studied. One can interrogate Weiner’ and use her to critique the same practice among the *Yorùbá* and her critique might provide a useful theory in bringing to light the importance of women in the political, social and economic life in their respective communities all over the world.

## 12. THE PROBLEM OF GIFT

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Gift may become problematic and paradoxical especially when it (gift) is suspected to be too much. *Yorùbá* people will say; “*Bí Oore pò a ma dí èbi.*” [If there is too much kindness (gifts) it can turn to blame (curse)]. Or *Yorùbá* might say

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<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, this attitude is rampant among some *Yorùbá* pastors and Muslim clerics as well, so it is not only the *Yorùbá* traditional herbalists that are involved in this ugly practice.

“*Ore n’wòn, eniyan s’oro*,” (Acts of kindness (giving gifts) should have a limit, because people are difficult). These proverbs and many others point to the limit and put restraint on how much a person could give and this is connected to another aspect of the *Yorùbá* way of concealing a thing away from the outsiders. Peel (2000, p. 87) notes this problem, during his ethnographic research among the *Yorùbá*, and he says,

[...] gift-giving was not conceivable outside the moral frame of the community, which was itself defined as a social entity by the networks of giving and receiving; beyond it stood strangers, people to be exploited and feared because they might exploit you.

He says this with respect to how both the *Yorùbá* people and the Europeans have been suspecting one another with respect to presents and charity. Wicked supernatural forces like witches and wizards are believed to always misinterpret too many acts of kindness as “show off,” display of grandeur of wealth, proof that “I am better off than others.” Hence these mystical forces are believed to actually use their malicious powers to cause calamity, disaster, and death. Godbout (1998, p. 41) also observes this notion of giving too much when he says

Children are modernity’s god, royalty for whom one can sacrifice all; where any other category of individual is concerned, to give too much is soon seen as suspect, bizarre, abnormal [...].

### 13. A BRIEF DISCUSSION ON NEGATIVE RECIPROCITY

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The way I am using Negative Reciprocity in this paper is quite different from the way Marshall Sahlins used it, although it is somewhat related. According to Sahlins (1972, p. 193-199), “negative reciprocity is characterized by suspicion and exploitation, which dominates interactions among strangers.” In the ancient *Yorùbá* society, there are categories of people to whom the expectations of return gifts do not apply, not necessarily because all these categories could not afford to give but cultural arrangement also allow for such. For

example, the kings among the ancient *Yorùbá* people especially are expected to receive gifts from their subjects on a constant basis because of their exalted positions as the community leaders (PEMBERTON III; AFOLAYAN, 1996)<sup>23</sup>. All cadres of workers are expected to bring their gifts to the king's palace annually and at the time of Oba' festival referred to as *Ìborí Oba* (ritual of the King's head). It was believed that as the vicegerent of the gods, he not only had the right to receive gifts but he was also assumed the owner of the land people occupied either to do their farming or their trades.

This should not, however, be confused with the levies and taxes the king exact in those days. Every annual ceremony was an occasion for the king to receive gifts. The new yam festival, the ancestral festival, and the festivals to commemorate the remembrance of the principal divinities were all occasions for the king to receive gifts. This was usually expressed in the proverbs of the people that “*Gbé rù mí kò sí 'l'àfín, à fi sò mí lérù kalè,*” [Help me to lift load (apparently referring to gifts) does not happen in the king's palace, except help me to bring my load down]. This practice, however, is vastly fading away in many *Yorùbá* towns, obviously because of the modernization process, and for the fact that many of the modern kings in the *Yorùbá* society are elites who have their businesses or are doing consultancy work and need not rely or depend on their subjects to take care of them. As a matter of fact, many kings have been contributing immensely to the towns or cities they are ruling by donating a large sum of money towards infrastructural development and social amenities.

Apart from this, each local government's chairman (mayor) gives monthly stipend to the king in each city. This author's observation shows that, it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a poor person to rule the people as a king in the *Yorùbá* society in this era of modernity, regardless of the choice of the Ifá Oracle. A modern *Yorùbá* king is expected to be generous and open-handed towards his subjects. My recent ethnographic field work carried out at Òsogbo and Ilé-Ifè during the ritual festivals of Òsun Osogbo and Olójó Festivals respectively showed that the traditional kings in

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<sup>23</sup> One can even argue that because these kings are acting in their capacities on behalf of the gods they were meant to be treated like the gods by giving them gifts and honoring them.

both cities played major roles in providing for the festivals and the people.

The second group of people, exempted from gift exchange, is the alms beggars because of their poor condition. In fact, with respect to alms-giving to the poor, Mauss (1990, p. 17-18) says, “among the Hausa in the Sudan, when Guinea corn is ripe, fevers may spread. The only way to avoid fever is to make presents of this grain to the poor.” He states further that:

Alms are the fruits of a moral notion of gift and of fortune, on the one hand, and of a notion of sacrifice, on the other. Generosity is obligation, because nemesis avenges the poor and the gods for the superabundance of happiness and wealth of certain people who should rid themselves of it.

Peel (2000, p. 86) notices that “On the other side was the idea of charity, as the religious obligation to give to the poor, irrespective of their status.” The third category of people is the lazy people. Lazy people in particular are derogatorily implicated in the negative reciprocity of gift-giving. Thus the *Yorùbá* people will say; “*Àgbàtán làá n gbòle, bí a dá’so fún òle àá paá l’áró.*” [If we wanted to help a lazy man, it must be very total, before you make (give a gift of) cloth for a lazy man you must properly soak it in an indigo dye]. Whether lazy people are giving such consideration anymore, especially in this modern age is a good topic to be explored in further studies.

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## 14. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, the argument is not only that gift exchange is a common phenomenon among the *Yorùbá* in Southwestern Nigeria, but also that the practice of gift and reciprocity among them is expansive and very diverse. The paper has shown to a certain extent how some of the practices of this exchange of gift differ from elsewhere, namely, among the Polynesians and the South American people. The *Kula* system of gift, which Mauss claims possesses a kind of “spirit” of the first giver, that puts the moral obligation on the receiver to

return a gift with interest seems to be absent; ethnographic experience and native knowledge of the practice of gift exchange among the *Yorùbá* people have not shown that.

This paper has also shown that whereas, the practice of gift could be seen as moral duty; it could also be seen as complicated, bizarre as it is enigmatic. This has been demonstrated with few examples above. But the purpose of gift has always been with an end in view; either to create social solidarity, to help other individuals in needs, and or to carry out a symbolic exchange. For example, almsgiving (*saqada*), which is one of the five fundamental pillars of Islam, is commonly practiced by the Muslims all over the world. In the Christian Bible, many examples show the importance of gift as seen in Proverbs 18:16; 19:6; 21:14 and so on.

Experience has also shown in recent times that some religious leaders, especially prosperity preachers among the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians, gift giving to God and pastors are encouraged among members in order to get bountiful harvests in return. This issue of prosperity preachers had already been taken up by many scholars that may not need to be repeated here. There is need, however, to conclude with this Ifa oracular corpus (*Ese Ifa*) which says:

*Ó d'Ifá fún Èhìn-Ìwà  
Tí Í se ègbón Òní  
Èrò Isìnpé, tí 'rori Èhìn-Ìwà  
L'a se n s'Òní L'óore.*

Oracle was declared to Èhìn-Ìwà (“After-Being”-personified)  
Who is the senior of Oni (“Today”, personified)  
O ye people of Isìnpé, it is on account of Èhìn-Ìwà  
That we are hospitable (*giving gift*) to Òní (my emphasis).

Bolaji Idowu (1962, p. 8) observes that

[...] often story is clearly and sufficiently implied in lines as in this one just quoted, or told in a full narrative. After the story has been told and the “*Odu*” (corpus) has been said, the enquirer was advised to always be hospitable so that he may have a good “After-life”.

# UMA ANÁLISE DAS DIMENSÕES SOCIAIS E RITUAIS DA DÁDIVA E A TROCA DE DÁDIVAS ENTRE OS YORÙBÁ DO SUDOESTE DA NIGÉRIA

## RESUMO

Este artigo é uma análise da troca de dádivas teorizada por Marcel Mauss e, posteriormente, retomada por estudiosos de várias disciplinas acadêmicas, como a sociologia, antropologia, filosofia, religião, folclore e literatura. Todos os acadêmicos especializados nesses vários campos de investigação mostram quão dominante e interessante é a prática de troca de presentes. Por meio de uma abordagem antropológica, este trabalho trata as dimensões sociais e rituais da prática de troca de presentes entre os *Yorùbás*, com vistas a analisar criticamente algumas dessas práticas. Na primeira seção, é feita a tentativa de definir o que é dom; na segunda seção, a conceitualização do dom de Mauss é examinada; na terceira seção, o dom teorizado por diferentes estudiosos é observado; e, na última seção, é analisado como o *Yorùbá* está sendo praticado em detalhe em seus contextos sociais e rituais. O artigo conclui mostrando a difusão e a influência do dom entre os *Yorùbás* do sudoeste da Nigéria.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Troca de dádivas. Ritual. Sociabilidade. *Yorùbá*. Marcel Mauss.

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