

Frazer and the social function of gift exchange norms

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Abstract. Why is there a norm of reciprocity in certain societies – the recipient of a gift should give a gift in return? Or what is its function? Sir James Frazer provides an unobvious answer to the function of such a norm in one society: it serves to establish who is alive.

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“Frazer’s volumes were paper boats

Sunken with their reference notes.”

Some societies have norms of reciprocity concerning gift exchange, that is to say, if you receive a gift you ought to give something in return. Perhaps there is no law which says you must, and in some societies nor will you be regarded as evil, but it is said that you ought to do this. Why? Well, let us leave aside the rationale society members would give and focus on the social function which such a norm plays. A seemingly obvious claim is that meeting the norm functions to maintain social ties between individuals and groups. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer presents us with another function, in one society at least:

In the backwoods of Cambodia live two mysterious sovereigns known as the King of the Fire and the King of the Water. Their fame is spread all over the south of the great Indo-Chinese peninsula; but only a faint echo of it has reached the West. No European, so far as is known, has ever seen them; and their very existence might have passed for a fable, were it not that till a few years ago communications

were regularly maintained between them and the King of Cambodia, who year by year exchanged presents with them. The Cambodian gifts were passed from tribe to tribe till they reached their destination; for no Cambodian would essay the long and perilous journey. (1894: 54)

Frazer draws attention to how certain gift exchanges function to establish existence. “But could not someone just fake the gift?” I presume there has to be something in the character of the gift such that no one else could do that. But maybe the situation is: if you can produce a gift that convinces, then that makes you a Cambodian king too, with its gift exchange obligations!

Appendix

With the functionalist revolution, which focused on the functions of rituals rather than origins and claimed that to understand the function one has to understand the social system a ritual is part of, Frazer was judged unreadable for professional anthropologists (Strathern 1987: 251). But there are parts of Frazer which can be reframed for functionalist interests, though perhaps only few (see citations in Strathern 1987: 262). Frazer was not explicitly concerned with the function of gift exchange when writing about Cambodian kings.

References

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume 1*. New York: Macmillan.

Strathern, M. (With comments, including by I.C. Jarvie) 1987. Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 28 (3): 251-281.