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The Alchemy of Charity

Of Class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand

IN GENERAL, scholars have posited a radical distinction between societies where gifts predominate and "the class society, where private property and the commodity are the norm" (Morris 1986:2; see also Gregory 1982). While no one would deny the centrality of gift giving in the political economy of egalitarian societies, scholars have ignored and even denied its significance in class-stratified societies.[1] Thus, although Pierre Bourdieu portrays gift giving in precapitalist societies as "an elementary form of domination," he suggests that state-based societies have developed objective mechanisms of domination which are more indirect and impersonal (1977:189–191). Jonathan Parry indicates that gifts carry a social load in "primitive" societies "which in centralised politics is assumed by the state," adding that "in an economy with a sizeable market sector gift-exchange does not have the material significance it has for the many tribal societies in which it provides the only access to crucial scarce resources" (1986:467).[2] Similarly, David Cheal, while arguing for the symbolic and ritual importance of gift giving in complex societies, suggests that "gift transactions do not have as their principal purpose the redistribution of resources" and that "in modern societies there exist a variety of means of domination in which gifts play little part" (1988:3).

In his pioneering article on exchange in "stone age" societies, Marshall Sahlins (1972) defined three major types of reciprocity: balanced, generalized, and negative. Despite the fact that Sahlins himself argued that even "in the main run of primitive societies . . . balanced reciprocity is not the prevalent form of exchange" (1972:190), most work on gift giving has focused on balanced reciprocity.[3] This essay focuses on a form of "generalized" reciprocity, or unidirectional giving, current in Theravada Buddhism, namely, the institution of merit making as practiced by the *khon muang* in northern Thailand.[4] In Thailand and the other Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, numerous scholars have remarked that merit making or acts of generosity play a central role in village religious practices.[5] One 19th-century observer went so far as to present merit making as "the sum and substance of their religious faith and worship" (Young 1982:274).

But despite Theravada Buddhist merit making's centrality in village religious practices, scholars have failed to locate it within the broader context of class stratification. As a consequence, the prevailing paradigm of merit making has misrepresented major aspects of the character of the recipients, the donors, and their mutual interaction.

Grounded in a historical perspective, this essay draws upon 19th-century archival sources, oral histories gathered from over 500 elderly villagers living in over 400 villages scattered throughout the Chiang Mai Valley, and 90 interviews conducted in a single village within the Chiang Mai Valley of northern Thailand. Rather than relegating gift giving to the "ritual construction of small social worlds" (Cheal 1988:16), this essay argues that cross-class, unidirectional forms of giving such as charity may be important in mediating the processes of hegemony and resistance in the sociopolitical constitution of complex societies.

The Significance of Class

Dazzled by the myth of agrarian abundance, many scholars have been blind to the true character of the Thai rural political economy (see Bowie 1992). Even though "peasantries are generally characterized by marked social differentiation" (Roseberry 1989:122), the assumptions of the "homogeneity theorists" have dominated the literature on gift giving among the peasantry (see Cancian 1989). Various anthropological studies of Thai villages have also minimized, ignored, or denied internal village stratification. John De Young goes so far as to suggest that a class analysis would be

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"meaningless to describe a Thai village" (1955:28). Nevertheless, class stratification (understood in its minimalist sense) and poverty have long characterized Thai village life.

The flood of petitions, demonstrations, and assassinations which broke out in the mid-1970s made it clear that the Thai peasantry were facing difficulties. Research on land-ownership patterns and indebtedness of this period gave dramatic confirmation of widespread social disparities. Figures provided by the National Statistical Office showed that 34.9 percent of rural households in the central plains, 45.2 percent in the south, 63.6 percent in the north, and 74.7 percent in the northeast were living below the poverty level, earning less than $300 per year (Turton 1978:108). Land Development Department figures revealed that 48 percent of Thailand's 5.5 million agricultural households owned 16 percent of the cultivated land (Turton 1978:110).

While national statistics revealed overall economic disparities, anthropologists working in various regions of the country provided evidence of internal village stratification. Even those who denied internal differentiation provided evidence to the contrary. Writing of northern Thailand, De Young found 27.7 percent of villagers were tenants (1955:28). Konrad Kingshill noted that 14 percent of households in his village were landless (1976:30). Jack Potter determined that 32.5 percent owned no land at all and that 71 percent owned *less* than 5 rai (2.5 rai equal one acre), the minimum for subsistence (1976:56). In the village where I lived, 40 percent of the 400 households were completely landless and worked as wage laborers. A survey conducted in 1974 in Chiang Mai Province found that 36 percent of village households were landless (Turton 1978:112). More recent studies also detail internal stratification in other northern Thai villages, as well as elsewhere in Thailand.[6]

Although some scholars have suggested internal agrarian stratification is of recent origin, the earliest rural surveys, undertaken in the 1930s, already showed considerable evidence of stratification. Carle Zimmerman's 1930 survey found that 36 percent of villagers in the central plains were landless, 27 percent in the north, 18 percent in the northeast, and 14 percent in the south (1931:18; see also Andrews 1935). Research into 19th-century agrarian development also reveals agrarian stratification.[7] Lords and members of the rural elite usually had large surpluses of rice, while most ordinary villagers fell short.

Vicissitudes of nature exaggerated this disparity. Missionary Hugh Taylor wrote a moving account of an 1892 drought in the northern Thai kingdom of Lampang. Three successive years saw rice failures. By 1892 famine was widespread. The shortage of food was so severe that villagers were even begging for coconut husks to mix with their rice. The price of coconut husks (otherwise used as kindling) rose to the price of four pounds of rice in ordinary times, a stunning index of desperation (Taylor n.d.:114). Of his relief efforts, Taylor commented, "We had to post a guard to keep the people from crowding in on us too hard . . . sifting the starving from the merely hungry" (n.d.:113).[8] His assistants reported finding dead bodies in deserted houses and village wells "filled with starved bodies that the neighbors were too weak to bury" (n.d.:114).

While famines of this severity were not the norm, evidence for significant agrarian poverty is provided by oral histories. In the course of my interviews in 1984-86, I asked at least one or two elderly villagers in each of 273 villages located throughout eight districts in the Chiang Mai valley if people in their respective villages fell short of rice in the past and, if so, for how many months out of the year. Respondents in only nine villages (3.3 percent) claimed their villagers were wholly "self-sufficient." In the remaining 96.7 percent of villages, at least some households fell short of rice for at least two or three months each year. In nearly half (48.7 per cent) of the villages, the *majority* of households fell short of rice at least two or three months each year (see Bowie 1988). Remarkably, the Chiang Mai valley is one of the most fertile rice-producing areas in the country.

Repeated in numerous interviews was a sense of relentless poverty forcing villagers to unceasing industry. Villagers often traveled long distances to find work or food (see Bowie 1988). Of life in the past, villagers often commented, "Bo daj yuu, bo daj yang" [Couldn't rest, couldn't stop]. As one 79-year-old woman explained, "In the past no matter how tired or lazy one felt, one had no choice but to work." She continued, citing an old saying:

> If one didn't leave the house, one didn't eat [Bo ook baan, ko bo daj kin]. If one didn't search, one didn't eat [Bo soo, ko bo daj kin]. If one didn't get up, the stomach would soon cry out [Bo luk, thong ko hong].[9]

Archival sources and oral histories, together with a more careful reading of other scholars' findings, reveal that a majority of villagers were beset with poverty, while a minority enjoyed relative wealth.

Poverty of a Paradigm: Of Monks and Beggars

Merit making has generally been defined as the giving of gifts to the Buddhist monks and the Buddhist wat (temple).[10] Such gifts range from offerings of food to new temple buildings. The scholarly focus on the monkhood parallels conservative interpretations of Theravada Buddhist doctrine. As Frank Reynolds explains, "The Theravadins . . . have placed a strong emphasis on the virtue of generosity"; but of the forms discussed in the canonical and postcanonical literature, "clearly the

most important and effective type of giving is that directed to the Buddha and/or the *sangha* (Buddhist monkhood)" (1990:71–72). A short story written by Surasinghsamruam Shimbhanao (pen name Samruam Singh) narrates an incident when a famous abbot learns that a sick woman had been trying to make merit for her dead father by giving to beggars. "What?" the abbot replies in outrage, "That's no way to make merit on your father's behalf. To make merit for a deceased person, you must go to the temple" (Bowie 1991:78).[11]

Contrary to the narrow doctrinal interpretation suggesting that only the sangha or Buddhist monkhood are appropriate recipients, most villagers have a broader conception of merit making which includes charity to the poor.[12] Villagers generally use the phrase *tham bun* (to make merit) to refer to a wide range of good deeds or good actions occurring throughout everyday life, regardless of institutional setting. Acts ranging from helping villagers whose homes had burnt to giving fruit to anthropologists can be meritorious.[13] As one villager whom Kingshill interviewed explained:

> One priest told us that the Lord Buddha taught that we should present gifts to all living creatures, not only to priests, but also to other people who are in need, or even to animals. Thus merit can be made by giving gifts to anyone. [1976:192]

The prevalence of this liberal interpretation of merit making was confirmed in my survey interviews with 90 household heads in 1978–79. When I asked villagers whether they believed that giving to the temple made more merit than giving to the school or hospital, only 14 percent (13 individuals out of 90) responded that giving to the temple was more meritorious; 46 percent responded that giving to a school or hospital made more merit and the other 40 percent replied that all were equally meritorious. When I asked villagers if people who went to temple frequently were more meritorious than those who did not, a surprising 42 percent disagreed. When villagers were asked if it was necessary to build expensive and beautiful temples, 42 percent again disagreed. Some 52 percent of villagers felt that monks should help villagers with worldly matters rather than just focusing on their own salvation. When asked if Buddhism was primarily oriented toward personal salvation rather than toward improving society, 59 percent disagreed.[14] For many villagers Buddhist practice involves more than "religious action in which monks officiate and participate" (Tambiah 1968:43).

Perhaps no single aspect of village life reveals villagers' conceptions of merit making as clearly as their compassionate treatment of the poorest among them, the beggars. In my years in the countryside, I never heard a villager say anything derogatory about a rural beggar. Kingshill's account, virtually unique in its description of beggars, parallels my own experience:

> One day while we were visiting the Kamnan [subdistrict chief] at his house, a young girl appeared at his steps, asking for rice. Without any ado, the Kamnan called his daughter to give the girl half a pint of rice. She had come from a district in the neighbouring province of Lampoon, which she had left early the same morning together with some other villagers. They are poor people who do not have enough rice to last them all year. At that time the new harvest was not yet in, and, therefore, the people had to go out begging. [1976:192]

Beggars traveled long distances, often to areas where they were strangers, in part to hide their personal difficulties from their neighbors, in part because they had exhausted their credit among fellow villagers, and in part because most villagers in their home villages were also falling short of rice at about the same time. In a poignant account one former beggar described how she and her husband walked four or five days distance to beg for rice. She recalled they could only collect small amounts of rice, since they often had to carry their tired children as they journeyed as well. Contrary to Sahlins's remarks regarding generalized reciprocity in simple societies, Buddhist charity is often predicated not upon giving to close kin but to complete strangers.

Because conservative Theravada teaching suggests that the effectiveness of a gift depends on the worthiness of the recipient, scholars frequently conclude that "the Buddha and the *sangha* are, of course, without comparison, the most worthy recipients" (Reynolds 1990:72). Monks are frequently described as the highest status of Buddhist society; even the kings show obeisance to the members of the sangha. Remarkably, village practices reveal significant similarities in the treatment of monks and beggars. The very act of giving food to beggars is suffused with religious connotations. When beggars came to homes in the village where I lived, whoever was present would immediately get a bowl of rice from the kitchen (see Figure 1). The beggar never actually asked for rice; instead, he stood quietly just inside the gate, face downcast, until he was noticed. If he was particularly aggressive, he might cough quietly to catch people's attention. Before villagers poured the rice into his bag, they first removed their shoes. They then held the bowl above their heads briefly and then poured it into his bag. With eyes still downcast, the beggar then raised his hands (a gesture called a *wai*) in thanks and mumbled a blessing. The interaction between donor and beggar directly parallels aspects of the ritual pattern of offering food to monks, with the primary exception that monks would not wai members of the laity. The close parallel between giving to the "highest" status members of society (the monks) and the "lowest" (the beggars) is striking.

Figure 1
Beggar visits village home. Photo by Katherine A. Bowie, July 1986.

The language of begging intimates that the poor are themselves making merit by allowing those who are better off to part with material possessions and thus practice nonattachment, in much the same way as monks have been described as a "field of merit" for donors.[15] The most common phrase for begging is "khoo thaan" (to ask for gifts), *thaan* (from the Sanskrit *dana*) also referring to gifts given to monks. Beggars themselves commonly used the phrase "baj hap thaan" (going to receive gifts), identical to the phrasing of monks. One woman used the phrase "tu phra phae maetaa" (going as a monk providing compassion), explaining she blessed those giving her rice. Intriguingly, the Sankrit/Pali term for monk, *bhikku*, translated literally, means "beggar" (Swearer 1981:7, 77).

Buddhist temples are also integrated into the political economy of poverty. A common expression for begging is "khoo kin taam wat taam waa" (to ask for food from the temple and temple community). As De Young observes, the food gathered by the monks on their early morning rounds is "taken back to the temple to feed the temple boys, beggars, and dogs that throng the wat" (1955:114). Beggars are also an invisible part of many temple festivals, generally appearing after the festivities are over. Often coming considerable distances, some sift through the offering trays outside the temple, separating the candles and small coins from the offerings (see Figure 2). After the monks have finished their meal, the poor are invited to eat or allowed to take home the surplus food offerings, especially the perishables. During the northern cycle of *salak* celebrations (which occurs toward the end of Lent before the new rice harvest is ready, a time when many villagers are beginning to experience shortages), beggars often travel from temple to temple (see Figure 3). The prevailing paradigm of merit making has ignored the interaction between the apparent otherworldliness of Buddhism and the this-

Figure 2
Father and daughter search for coins and candles after temple ceremony. Photo by Katherine A. Bowie, October 1984.

Figure 3
Beggars sorting offerings after temple festival. Photo by Katherine A. Bowie, October 1984.

worldly need for charity; it has focused on giving to monks rather than giving among the laity.

Wealth in a Paradigm: Constraints on Donorship

In addition to overlooking village conceptions of appropriate recipients, the prevailing paradigm of Buddhist merit making has narrowed village definitions of donorship, failing to consider relative wealth and ability to give. Stanley Tambiah and Howard Kaufman rank merit-making acts. Tambiah lists them in order of meritoriousness: completely financing the building of a wat, either becoming a monk oneself or having a son become a monk, contributing money to the repair of a wat or making *kathin* (post-Lent ceremony) gifts, giving food daily to the monks, observing every *wanphraa* (holy day), and strictly observing the five precepts (1970: 146–147). Although writing of a different region, Kaufman's list is very similar (1960:183–184).[16]

Such rank orders illuminate central assumptions in the prevailing paradigm of merit making. All villagers are assumed to be equally capable of following the precepts, giving food to the monks, and even building temples; the only criteria differentiating donors is their individual desire to make merit. Furthermore, these rank orderings are based upon debatable ethical presuppositions that privilege a single act such as temple building over the sustained virtue required of a person who daily follows Buddhist teachings.[17] Major donors, if defined by absolute material gifts, are only a tiny fraction of the total village population.[18] By emphasizing absolute amount of material goods given and ignoring relative ability to give, the existing paradigm privileges the rich in this life and the next. Impoverished villagers are virtually excluded.

Ranking temple building as the most virtuous form of merit making masks intravillage class differences. First, as Tambiah himself points out, temple building "is open only to the rich" (1968:69). Second, although underwriting the costs of temple building is only possible for the wealthy, villagers of all classes contribute to the process of temple building. Some donate money; others donate labor and building materials (see discussion in De Young 1955:133). Third, building or repairing temples is not always lauded. In the village in which I lived, the village elite decided to tear down the old temple and build anew under pressure from the abbot and his lay relatives. Many poor opposed this decision, some wanting to preserve the old teak temple and others believing that other issues should take precedence.

Class differentiation has various consequences for ordination into the monkhood. In the past the village elite were most likely to be ordained. De Young notes that village surveys in the north showed that about half of all village males had served as temple boys: "Those that do not do so generally come from families that cannot spare the boys from farmwork" (1955:118). From his study of 36 leading villagers in 1953–54, Kingshill concludes that "70 percent of the village 'leaders' have at one time or another been a priest or novice" (1976: 164).[19] Today the sons of the village elite are the least likely to be ordained since they are most likely to pursue advanced secular education. Temple boys, novices, and monks today generally come from the poorest families where there are too many mouths to feed and too few opportunities for employment.

Wealth affects not only who is ordained but also the sponsorship and form of the ordination ceremonies. Although the meaning of sponsorship is changing as fewer sons of the village elite become ordained, nonetheless "the costs of the reception and ceremonies . . . preclude a poor man from being asked to become a sponsor"

(Moerman 1966:153). A poor villager who wishes to be ordained must either find a wealthy sponsor or pool resources from kin and neighbors. In the latter case he is unlikely to have a lavish ordination. (See De Young 1955:120 for comparative descriptions.)

Offering food to the temple is by far the most commonly cited form of merit making. Tambiah downplays its importance:

> Giving food daily to the monks is possible for almost every village household—for it involves only the setting apart of a portion of the family's cooked food. Since it is a daily act and relatively inexpensive, and because almost all indulge in it, it has a low position with no scarcity value. [1968:69]

Nonetheless, a more careful reading shows that class differentiation affects even this simplest and most common form of merit making. As De Young writes, "The actual cash outlays of farm families for merit-making contributions vary tremendously according to economic status, the devoutness of the household, and special circumstances" (1955:130). Some poor households spend *nothing* on merit making and even avoid attending the temple because "they cannot afford a baht for the collection bowl" (Kaufman 1960:35–36; see also De Young 1955:130–131). Even Tambiah's own data suggest significant differences in villagers' ability to give daily food offerings to monks. As his survey of 106 village families indicates, although 59 percent offered food to the temple at least once a week, another 41 percent either never offered food or only offered food on unspecified occasions during the three-month period of Buddhist Lent (Tambiah 1970:144–145). Understood in the context of chronic poverty, it is not surprising that so many villagers found it difficult to offer food to anyone outside their immediate family. The failure to appreciate the extent of poverty results in underestimating the sacrifice involved for poor villagers in giving food away.

The prevailing interpretations of merit making have implied that the more one gives in absolute financial resources, the more merit one receives. In contrast, many villagers stress intention and relative ability to give. In his 1948 study of San Pong village, De Young recorded a considerable range in money and gifts given, varying "from a high of 1,000 ticals ($50) to a low of 15 ticals ($.75)" (1955:130–131). While the average household contributed about 25 percent of its total cash expenditures toward merit making, the range was from 7 percent to 84 percent (1955:131; see also Zimmerman 1931). Although De Young suggests that the wealthy families gave more (both absolutely and relatively), poor villagers where I lived were adamant that the poor gave far more in proportion to their ability than did the rich. As they argued, a landless villager who gives one baht out of a daily income of five baht is being far more generous than the rich man who gives 500 baht, regardless of whether his earnings are 5,000 baht or 50,000 baht, because the poor villager is sacrificing basic needs while the rich villager is merely giving up money for luxuries.

Definitions of merit making that are primarily oriented toward temple building, ordination, and giving offerings to the temple are skewed in favor of the elite. They provide the poor little hope of being "good Buddhists." As Charles Keyes writes, "The poor person suffers not only in the here and now, but also lacks the means to alter his or her place in the moral hierarchy in the future" (1990:184). Such definitions cater to the rich and condemn the poor to their poverty. In fact, villagers recognize a broad array of acts as meritorious, such that the poorest beggar makes merit receiving alms.

Merit Making: A Weapon of the Weak

In addition to its narrow definition of both donors and recipients, the prevailing paradigm portrays the decisions of donors as voluntary and self-oriented. Thus the common explanations for gift giving have emphasized villagers' desire to seek "a prosperous rebirth" (Moerman 1966:159; Tambiah 1968:41), to improve one's "relative position on the sacred hierarchy" (Keyes 1990:175; Kirsch 1975:183), to obtain "protective magical power" (Terweil 1976:401), to gain social prestige (Burr 1978:106; Keyes 1983:268), to achieve a happy and virtuous state of mind (Ingersoll 1966:73; Keyes 1983:268), to accumulate the merit necessary for them and their dead parents to be born into a wealthier and higher status in that society (Potter 1976:36, 40), and to have a "long life, good health, prosperity, a happy marriage and family" (Kirsch 1977:249). Russell Sizemore and Donald Swearer, after considering whether there is any obligation of the fortunate to help the more unfortunate in Buddhist doctrine, conclude that, to the extent any obligation exists, the ethical reasoning involved in this assessment does not invoke the principle of justice but simply "the virtue of the individual giver" (1990: 11–12).

By portraying merit making as a purely discretionary act of donors, the role of the poor in shaping the behavior of the wealthier has been ignored. This portrayal ignores the extent to which morality is responsive to social context and merit-making practices are the result of an interaction between donors and recipients, each of whom are embedded in a broader political economy. The line between hegemony and resistance is never clear. The subaltern classes can rarely afford to risk expressing their discontent openly (e.g., Scott 1985, 1990; Scott and Kerkvliet 1986). But as Antonio Gramsci wrote, "Undoubtedly, the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the

tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed" (1971:161). Accordingly, a hegemonic ideology must appear to serve the interests "not only of elites but also of subordinate groups whose compliance or support is being elicited" (Scott 1985:337). E. P. Thompson summarizes the resultant ambiguity well: "Even 'liberality' and 'charity' may be seen as calculated acts of class appeasement in times of dearth and calculated extortions (under threat of riot) by the crowd: what is (from above) an 'act of giving' is (from below) an 'act of getting' " (1978a:150).

Morality, as David Little and Sumner Twiss have written, "provides a way of responding to what we call the 'problem of cooperation' among self-interested, competing and conflicting persons and groups" (1978:27). Although subject to continual renegotiation, when rich and poor claim to share common ethical principles, morality can become a weapon of the weak against the strong. As James C. Scott explains, the dominant ideology can be turned against its privileged beneficiaries not only because subordinate groups develop their own interpretations "but also because of the promises that the dominant classes must make to propagate it in the first place" (1985:338). Buddhist merit making, although it may be construed as legitimating wealth, also imposes moral pressure on the wealthy to be generous. The famous merchant Sudatta shared his wealth with others. He was praised by the Buddha and known by his honorific name Anathapindika, "he who gives food to the poor and powerless" (see Falk 1990: 126–131). As Phra Rajavaramuni, one of Thailand's most famous monks, writes, the accumulation of wealth becomes evil unless "the wealthy person acts as a provider or resource of wealth for society or as a field where wealth grows for the benefit of one's fellows" (1990:53).

The social force of morality is reinforced by the fact that major merit-making activities are public rituals, even "ostentatiously public" (Kirsch 1977:247). Keyes observes that merit making is a means to social prestige, "that a person acquires in the eyes of others . . . the social recognition of being a person of virtue" (1983:268). Similarly, Thomas Kirsch comments that "the publicity that surrounds so much of Buddhist ritual suggests that more than individual religious interests and goals are involved in these performances. They manifest social as well as religious values" (1973:196). The publicity surrounding large merit-making events pressures the elite to give generously in accord with their means and publicly affirms the virtue of generosity.

Spirit sanctions and accusations of witchcraft further reinforce the ethic of generosity. Although less extensive today, witchcraft and other forms of spirit possession were common explanations of illness and misfortune. Spirit doctors extracted, sometimes through beating the patient, the name of the possessing spirit or witch. In northern Thailand, witches were usually affluent villagers who were called *phii ka* (greedy spirits). As Hallett explains,

> These spirits are said to be reinforced by the deaths of very poor people, whose spirits were so disgusted with those who refused them food or shelter that they determined to return and place themselves at the disposal of their descendants to haunt their stingy and hard-hearted neighbours. [1890:106]

Greedy spirits could be expelled from their villages and their property confiscated. In extreme cases they were executed. Similarly, when a ruling lord of Chiang Mai fell ill, the spirit medium, herself a member of the royal family, told him that "the spirits were displeased at his oppression of the people and advised him at once to abolish certain vexatious taxes" (Hallett 1890:105).

The failure of the elite to live up to the implicit promises in their own moral code can instigate criticism or gossip, as illustrated by F. G. Bailey's "politics of reputation" (1971). As Keyes writes, "villagers must rely upon social esteem and disparagement as the main methods of ensuring compliance with moral norms" (1990:184). Keyes describes the case of a wealthy village entrepreneur who owned a rice mill, a village store, a truck, and a large herd of pigs, in addition to some land. Although he had contributed generously at public merit-making events, he had also sponsored many house-blessing rites. Thus, despite this public generosity, he was seen as according greater emphasis to religious endeavors in which "the primary participants as well as sponsors were his family" (1990:183). While many villagers respected his diligence, "others also saw him as one obsessed by seeking after wealth *(ha ngoen)*, sometimes to the detriment of others in the village" (1990:183).

Although condemnation of selfishness and encouragement of selfless giving nurtures the moral economy of Thai villagers, the threat of physical force lies in reserve. History records the more dramatic peasant uprisings. (For a review of the literature, see Bowie 1988:9–16.) Less dramatic but no less effective are the more individual acts of theft and vandalism, often correlated with dearth. During the severe famine in Lampang in 1892, Taylor remarked that no one dared travel from Chiang Mai to Lampang in groups smaller than 50, since "dacoits [bandits] ranged the country, robbing the undefended of what little rice they had" (n.d.:111, 116). He even observed that "some of the rich neighbors who had rice in their bins and would not sell to the less fortunate had their rice and bins burned by incensed people" (n.d.:115). During such periods, villagers told me they hid rice in their pillows and the eaves of their houses.

Even the sticky rice soaking in the crocks overnight in preparation for cooking was not spared.

As recently as the mid-1970s, villagers resorted to similar tactics. When rice prices doubled before the harvest of 1978, I heard landless villagers contemplating a range of options, from theft and staging demonstrations at the district or provincial office to joining the clandestine communist movement. Some villagers attacked trucks transporting rice. On one occasion I visited a wealthier village woman who had just sold a small basket of unmilled rice to a poorer villager. Usually wealthier villagers preferred selling their surplus rice in bulk rather than climbing up into their granaries each day to sell small amounts. As she climbed down from her granary and noticed my presence, she commented that, if wealthier villagers did not help out their poorer friends and neighbors by selling rice in small amounts that they could afford, soon the poor would steal or even storm the granaries by force. By being generous she was able to take pleasure in her charity, gain respect and gratitude from her less fortunate villagers, and keep her granary under her own control. Thus even acts of compassion contained a more complex subtext. The rich gave not merely because it made them feel good and improved their personal karmic standing but also because there was social pressure from the poor to do so.

Although merit making served as a weapon of the weak, its moral pressure never sufficed to eliminate the political or economic differences between rich and poor. Acts of charity masked inequality with a veil of legitimacy. Thus the elite could appear generous giving rice to a beggar or alms to a monk; the institution of merit making allowed the elite to keep both the setting and the amounts of charity under their control. As is characteristic of hegemonic ideological mechanisms, merit making entails some sacrifice or restraint by the elite but does not "touch the essential" (Gramsci 1971:161). Merit making bound the haves with the have-nots, the givers with the receivers, in a relationship in which gifts were "sacrificed" for the maintenance of social inequality.

The institution of merit making mitigated interclass tensions. On the one hand, merit making protected the status quo for the elite, and, on the other hand, it softened the agony of the neediest, providing them with temporary relief from the hardships of economic inequality. Merit making did not simply deal with metaphysical, otherworldly concerns, but with physical, this-worldly suffering. Historically, merit making represented the outcome of a detente between classes, with neither the rich nor the poor fully victorious or defeated. The rich could give in delimited contexts and maintain control, or they could be short-sighted and risk more dramatic forms of peasant resistance. Merit making was not simply the result of the generosity of an elite concerned for an even better rebirth; it was also the result of the moral and social pressure of the poor.

The Alchemy of Giving: Hegemony and Resistance

Scholars of gift giving have long recognized the power of unreciprocated gifts to generate inequality. As T. O. Beidelman argues, "Exchange inevitably involved altering equals to unequals" (1989:232). Even in fundamentally egalitarian societies, exchange is a means "of gaining power over people and control over resources" (Weiner 1976:220). Much of the inherent efficacy of gift giving has been attributed to gratitude. As Sahlins explains:

> A gift that is not yet requited in the first place "creates a something between people": it engenders continuity in the relation, solidarity—at least until the obligation to reciprocate is discharged. Secondly, falling under "the shadow of indebtedness," the recipient is constrained in his relations to the giver of things. The one who has benefited is held in a peaceful, collaborative, circumspect, and responsive position in respect to his benefactor. [1972:208][20]

While for Sahlins and many others, gratitude contributes to the consensual character of hierarchy, for Bourdieu the recipient's sense of indebtedness transforms gift giving into "an elementary form of domination," "restricting the debtor's freedom and forcing him to adopt a peaceful, co-operative, prudent attitude" (1977:190, 195).[21] Noting the "social alchemy" of the gift and generosity, Bourdieu suggests that "gentle, hidden exploitation is the form taken by man's exploitation of man whenever overt, brutal exploitation is impossible" (1977:192). As my analysis of Buddhist merit making suggests, Bourdieu's insights bear consideration in the discussion of forms of domination in complex societies as well.

The existing literature on the establishment of hegemony generally focuses on such social and cultural institutions as the educational and religious systems, or what Stuart Hall has called the "family/school/media triplet" (1988:44). Although balanced reciprocity is also important, this essay has shown that unidirectional forms of giving (most notably charity) provide insight into interclass relations.[22] Remarkably, despite the obvious political significance of such social institutions ranging from domestic charities and not-for-profit foundations to political action committees and foreign aid programs, anthropologists have ignored the role of charity in complex societies. The significance of gift giving in the political economy of complex societies deserves more attention.

Although charitable giving provides insight into a strategy of elite hegemony in complex societies, its

analysis poses three related challenges. First, although charity may appear unidirectional to its participants, when charity is considered in the context of a class-stratified society in which exploitation has generated social inequality, it is not so easy to determine the directionality of relative benefits. As Terence Turner remarks, "Exchange as it exists in any society must be understood in relation to the total process of social production, circulation, and reproduction of which it forms but one moment or aspect" (1989:260). In a complex society, what appears at one moment as generalized reciprocity suddenly may easily be transformed into part of the negative reciprocity of exploitation. As Sahlins observed in another context, "*noblesse oblige* hardly cancelled out the *droits du seigneur*" (1972:205)

Second, charitable giving may not be wholly voluntary. Jonathan Parry suggests that "an elaborated ideology of the 'pure gift' is most likely to develop in state societies with an advanced division of labour and a significant commercial sector" (1986:467). But even Parry sees gift giving in complex societies as largely "voluntaristic," observing that "with renewed ideological stress on the autonomy of the market go renewed *pleas* for philanthropy to assume the responsibilities it denies" (1986:469, emphasis added). Charity is not seen as a central component in the social apparatus of domination and inequality.[23] In viewing charity as optional, scholars have been bewitched by what Maurice Bloch has described as the ideological "bifurcation between commerce and charity":

> In the modern world, according to its apologists, there is, on the one hand, the world of money, which pretends it has nothing to do with social obligation, and another separate antithetical world, the world of charity where those who have benefited from commerce salve their consciences by "free gifts" to inferiors, an act which they see as in no way caused by an obligation on their part but merely as due to the internal prompting of their consciences. [1989:168]

Although Parry and others would emphasize the role of religion and conscience in generosity, one may wonder how many would give if the only sanctions were otherworldly. As Bronisław Malinowski commented, "Whenever the native can evade his obligations without the loss of prestige, or without the prospective loss of gain, he does so, exactly as a civilized business man would do" (1972:30). Northern Thai merit-making practices were not voluntaristic but were forged by the interaction of donors and recipients in the crucible of a class-stratified society characterized by significant poverty.

Third, generosity does not always meet with gratitude. Scholars of egalitarian societies have already noted the extent to which interpretation plays a role. As Raymond Firth explains, while Marcel Mauss and others represented gift exchange as "conventional, almost automatic," in fact "what the social anthropologist sees in practice is often some degree of uncertainty as to whether to give and whether to reciprocate" (Firth 1967:17). Even in cases where the giver intends to be generous, the receiver may impute selfish motives.[24] The possibility of resentment is heightened in class-stratified societies, particularly if recipients feel their labor creates the wealth of the elite. As Mauss comments in a passage that echoes Marx's view of the alienation of labor,

> It appears that the whole field of industrial and commercial law is in conflict with morality. The economic prejudices of the people and producers derive from their strong desire to pursue the thing they have produced once they realize that they have given their labour without sharing in the profits. [Mauss 1967:64]

An ethic that holds that inequality "is only due to sin and greed" is also likely to conclude that "the balance ought to be redressed" (Troeltsch 1960:116). Thus, as Alvin Gouldner notes, we should "avoid the 'Pollyanna Fallacy' which optimistically assumes that structures securing 'satisfactions' from others will invariably be 'grateful' and will always reciprocate" (1960:164). The incidents of theft, vandalism, and wholescale uprisings both in Thailand and elsewhere serve as evidence of the limits of gratitude in contexts of perceived inequality.

Conclusion

Ulf Hannerz has argued that "a considerable part of the unfinished business of anthropology involves developing a coherent theoretical stance towards complex cultures" (1986:362). Aram Yengoyan suggests that the shift from primitive societies to whole civilizations raises new issues "such as the nature of class, the role of ideology, and the constitutive value of hegemony" (1986:369). In this essay I have taken a "gatekeeping concept" from the anthropology of traditional societies, which has tended to "treat the world of gift exchange as non-exploitative" (Parry and Bloch 1989:9), and shown its relevance for the understanding of class dynamics. In bridging the divide between simple and complex societies, I also contribute toward returning the discussion of gift giving back to Marcel Mauss's concern with morality in our own society. Mauss himself made the central point of this article when he wrote in passing, "Generosity is necessary because otherwise Nemesis will take vengeance upon the excessive wealth and happiness of the rich by giving to the poor and the gods" (1967:15).

The practice of morality receives its definition in historical context and from social debate. Merit making, to be fully understood, must be located in the history of the political economy in which it took shape. Explaining that "every class struggle is at the same time a

struggle over values," E. P. Thompson notes that morality is not "some 'autonomous region' of human choice and will, arising independently of the historical process" (1978b:171). Charitable giving is a complex language expressing both domination and resistance. As this reanalysis of the merit-making paradigm has suggested, generosity should not be located in the margins of volition and religion. Rather, it is central to the political dynamics of the relations between elites and subalterns in class-stratified societies.

Notes

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1. The role of gift giving in complex, class-stratified societies is receiving increasing attention. Examples include Caplow 1984, Cheal 1988, Davis 1972, Hyde 1983, Kettering 1988, Marshall 1985, Morris 1986, Raheja 1988, and Werbner 1990. See also Blau 1964, Homans 1958, Schwartz 1967, and Simmel 1950, although such sociological work generally focused on balanced reciprocity and consensus, failing to engage class stratification and conflict (see Gouldner 1960:177).

2. Yet J. Davis's pioneering study of the United Kingdom notes that "the value of manufacturers' sales of gifts is greater than sales by the shipbuilding and marine engine industry, and approaches the total sales from coal mining" (1972:412).

3. Malinowski suggests that "most if not all economic acts are found to belong to some chain of reciprocal gifts and counter-gifts, which in the long run balance, benefiting both sides equally" (1972:40). But understanding "equivalence" is complicated; see Gouldner 1960:172 on heteromorphic and homeomorphic reciprocity, Foster 1990 and Strathern 1987 on "relations of contrast rather than their mensurability," Bourdieu 1977:5 on the role of time, or Marshall 1985 and Werbner 1990 on the role of inflation.

4. Although various ethnic groups reside in the mountains of northern Thailand, the *khon muang* are the major group living in the fertile mountain valleys. Historically, many khon muang were war captives (see Bowie 1996). See Tannenbaum 1989 for a discussion of Shan merit making.

Sahlins described generalized reciprocity as "transactions that are putatively altruistic," in which "the expectation of a direct material return is unseemly" (1972:193–194). Because I find the phrase an oxymoron, I prefer "unidirectional giving." I concur that merit making involved monks and laity in complex exchanges (e.g., Tambiah 1968, 1970). But because the ideology of merit making urges no consideration of return and because gifts were often also to complete strangers, I discuss merit making as an example of unidirectional giving.

5. Examples include Darlington 1990:118; Hanks 1962; Keyes 1983:267; Kingshill 1976:10, 189–196; Kirsch 1973:191, 1977:246; Nash 1965:115; Spiro 1970:92–113; Tambiah 1968:117; and Terweil 1976:401.

6. Potter 1976 and Turton 1978 provide pioneering studies of agrarian stratification.

7. Bowie 1988. See also Calavan 1974 and Ganjanapan 1984.

8. See McGilvary 1912:351 for another account of this famine. Sir Ernest Satow writes of an earlier serious drought in the area in 1885, which also affected thousands (n.d.:200).

9. For other such village sayings, see Bowie 1988.

10. See, for example, Kirsch 1977:248; Moerman 1966:140, 158; Strenski 1983:465; and Tambiah 1970:53.

11. Surasinghsamruam's stories are based on actual village events. (See the introduction to Bowie 1991.)

12. Manning Nash includes giving food and hospitality to laymen in Burma (1965:116; see also Darlington 1990:121).

13. A sense of the variety is given in Burr 1978:104, Darlington 1990:118–141, Kingshill 1976:193, Potter 1976:36, and Young 1982:277.

14. Over half (58 percent) believed that stealing a Buddha image was worse than exploiting another person. Although this response appeared to contradict a social orientation, villagers explained the theft of the Buddha harmed the public good. Oppressing an individual was bad but affected only that individual. Although I differentiated five internal village classes, I found similar percentages of rich and poor agreed or disagreed with these particular questions.

15. For more on "fields of merit," see Lehman 1981; Spiro 1970:280, 410; and Strenski 1983:473.

16. For discussions, see Kingshill 1976:191–196; Kirsch 1975:183–184, 1977:246; Potter 1976:36; Sharp and Hanks 1978:59; and Strenski 1983:470.

17. Kaufman's list places ordination first, with temple building second. Nonetheless, becoming a novice, attending temple, obeying the eight precepts on holy days and observing the five precepts at all times rank lower than giving food to the monks (1960:183–184).

18. Although sponsoring kathin ceremonies is frequently listed as one of the merit-making activities, they are almost wholly "sponsored by government agencies, private companies, and wealthy families" (R. Davis 1984:200; see also De Young 1955:138; Sharp and Hanks 1978:197).

19. Class differences did not end with ordination. Thus, as Keyes notes, "Kings and lords also appointed monks as abbots of the major wats within their domains. These abbots typically came . . . from elite families" (1987:37). Archival sources note some monks wore silk robes, while others wore cotton (Cort 1886:147). Some monks only ate meals "prepared by the temple boys from supplies sent by wealthy Buddhists" (De Young 1955:114).

20. See also earlier authors such as Cicero 1991:20, Gouldner 1960:171, Simmel 1950:392–395, and Westermarck 1908:154.

21. Sahlins's argument is internally contradictory. While noting that the elite need more economic resources to be generous, he suggests that "the material advantage is on the subordinates' side" (1972:205). With this exchange of rank or prestige for material goods, distinguishing "balanced" from

"generalized" reciprocity becomes difficult (e.g., Blau 1964). While presenting a consensual model of hierarchy, Sahlins concedes, "If the affluent do not play the game, they ordinarily can be forced to disgorge" (1972:211; see also 1972:257).

22. Analyses by Parry (1986) and Raheja (1988) of unilateral giving *(dana)* in India have been pioneering. But both focus on religious ideology rather than class politics.

23. See also Weber 1963:216–222.

24. As Emerson explains, "We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten" (1929:286). Mauss himself observes that "charity wounds him who receives" (1967:63), and Bourdieu notes that a gift "may be spurned as an insult" (1977:9; see also Seneca 1887:1).

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