

THE GIFT

*Forms and Functions of Exchange
in Archaic Societies*

by

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I have never found a man so generous and hospitable that he would not receive a present, nor one so liberal with his money that he would dislike a reward if he could get one.

Friends should rejoice each others' hearts with gifts of weapons and raiment, that is clear from one's own experience. That friendship lasts longest—if there is a chance of its being a success—in which friends both give and receive gifts.

A man ought to be a friend to his friend and repay gift with gift. People should meet smiles with smiles and lies with treachery.

Know—if you have a friend in whom you have sure confidence and wish to make use of him, you ought to exchange ideas and gifts with him and go to see him often.

If you have another in whom you have no confidence and yet will make use of him, you ought to address him with fair words but crafty heart and repay treachery with lies.

Further, with regard to him in whom you have no confidence and of whose motives you are suspicious, you ought to smile upon him and dissemble your feelings. Gifts ought to be repaid in like coin.

Generous and bold men have the best time in life and never foster troubles. But the coward is apprehensive of everything and a miser is always groaning over his gifts.

Better there should be no prayer than excessive offering; a gift always looks for recompense. Better there should be no sacrifice than an excessive slaughter.

Havamal, vv. 39, 41-2, 44-6, 48 and 145, from the translation by D. E. Martin Clarke in *The Havamal, with Selections from other Poems in the Edda*, Cambridge, 1923.

INTRODUCTORY

GIFTS AND RETURN GIFTS

THE foregoing lines from the *Edda* outline our subject-matter.¹ In Scandinavian and many other civilizations contracts are fulfilled and exchanges of goods are made by means of gifts. In theory such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation.

This work is part of a wider study. For some years our attention has been drawn to the realm of contract and the system of economic prestations between the component sections or sub-groups of 'primitive' and what we might call 'archaic' societies. On this subject there is a great mass of complex data. For, in these 'early' societies, social phenomena are not discrete; each phenomenon contains all the threads of which the social fabric is composed. In these *total* social phenomena, as we propose to call them, all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral, and economic. In addition, the phenomena have their aesthetic aspect and they reveal morphological types.

We intend in this book to isolate one important set of phenomena: namely, prestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behaviour is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest. We shall note the various principles behind this necessary form of exchange (which is nothing less than the division of labour itself), but we shall confine our detailed study to the enquiry: *In primitive or archaic types of society what is the principle whereby the gift received has to be repaid? What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?* We hope, by presenting enough

data, to be able to answer this question precisely, and also to indicate the direction in which answers to cognate questions might be sought. We shall also pose new problems. Of these, some concern the morality of the contract: for instance, the manner in which today the law of things remains bound up with the law of persons; and some refer to the forms and ideas which have always been present in exchange and which even now are to be seen in the idea of individual interest.

Thus we have a double aim. We seek a set of more or less archaeological conclusions on the nature of human transactions in the societies which surround us and those which immediately preceded ours, and whose exchange institutions differ from our own. We describe their forms of contract and exchange. It has been suggested that these societies lack the economic market, but this is not true; for the market is a human phenomenon which we believe to be familiar to every known society. Markets are found before the development of merchants, and before their most important innovation, currency as we know it. They functioned before they took the modern forms (Semitic, Hellenic, Hellenistic, and Roman) of contract and sale and capital. We shall take note of the moral and economic features of these institutions.

We contend that the same morality and economy are at work, albeit less noticeably, in our own societies, and we believe that in them we have discovered one of the bases of social life; and thus we may draw conclusions of a moral nature about some of the problems confronting us in our present economic crisis. These pages of social history, theoretical sociology, political economy and morality do no more than lead us to old problems which are constantly turning up under new guises.²

THE METHOD FOLLOWED

Our method is one of careful comparison. We confine the study to certain chosen areas, Polynesia, Melanesia, and North-West America, and to certain well-known codes. Again, since we are concerned with words and their meanings, we choose

only areas where we have access to the minds of the societies through documentation and philological research. This further limits our field of comparison. Each particular study has a bearing on the systems we set out to describe and is presented in its logical place. In this way we avoid that method of haphazard comparison in which institutions lose their local colour and documents their value.

PRESTATION, GIFT AND POTLATCH

This work is part of the wider research carried out by M. Davy and myself upon archaic forms of contract, so we may start by summarizing what we have found so far.³ It appears that there has never existed, either in the past or in modern primitive societies, anything like a 'natural' economy.⁴ By a strange chance the type of that economy was taken to be the one described by Captain Cook when he wrote on exchange and barter among the Polynesians.⁵ In our study here of these same Polynesians we shall see how far removed they are from a state of nature in these matters.

In the systems of the past we do not find simple exchange of goods, wealth and produce through markets established among individuals. For it is groups, and not individuals, which carry on exchange, make contracts, and are bound by obligations;⁶ the persons represented in the contracts are moral persons—clans, tribes, and families; the groups, or the chiefs as intermediaries for the groups, confront and oppose each other.⁷ Further, what they exchange is not exclusively goods and wealth, real and personal property, and things of economic value. They exchange rather courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dances, and feasts; and fairs in which the market is but one element and the circulation of wealth but one part of a wide and enduring contract. Finally, although the prestations and counter-prestations take place under a voluntary guise they are in essence strictly obligatory, and their sanction is private or open warfare. We propose to call this the system of *total prestations*. Such institutions

seem to us to be best represented in the alliance of pairs of phratries in Australian and North American tribes, where ritual, marriages, succession to wealth, community of right and interest, military and religious rank and even games⁸ all form part of one system and presuppose the collaboration of the two moieties of the tribe. The Tlingit and Haida of North-West America give a good expression of the nature of these practices when they say that they 'show respect to each other'.⁹

But with the Tlingit and Haida, and in the whole of that region, total prestations appear in a form which, although quite typical, is yet evolved and relatively rare. We propose, following American authors, to call it the *potlatch*. This Chinook word has passed into the current language of Whites and Indians from Vancouver to Alaska. Potlatch meant originally 'to nourish' or 'to consume'.¹⁰ The Tlingit and Haida inhabit the islands, the coast, and the land between the coast and the Rockies; they are very rich, and pass their winters in continuous festival, in banquets, fairs and markets which at the same time are solemn tribal gatherings. The tribes place themselves hierarchically in their fraternities and secret societies. On these occasions are practised marriages, initiations, shamanistic seances, and the cults of the great gods, totems, and group or individual ancestors. These are all accompanied by ritual and by prestations by whose means political rank within sub-groups, tribes, tribal confederations and nations is settled.¹¹ But the remarkable thing about these tribes is the spirit of rivalry and antagonism which dominates all their activities. A man is not afraid to challenge an opposing chief or nobleman. Nor does one stop at the purely sumptuous destruction of accumulated wealth in order to eclipse a rival chief (who may be a close relative).¹² We are here confronted with total prestation in the sense that the whole clan, through the intermediacy of its chiefs, makes contracts involving all its members and everything it possesses.¹³ But the agonistic character of the prestation is pronounced. Essentially usurious and extravagant, it is above all a struggle among nobles to determine their position in the hierarchy to the ultimate benefit, if they are successful, of their

own clans. This agonistic type of total prestation we propose to call the 'potlatch'.

So far in our study Davy and I had found few examples of this institution outside North-West America,¹⁴ Melanesia, and Papua.¹⁵ Everywhere else—in Africa, Polynesia, and Malaya, in South America and the rest of North America—the basis of exchange seemed to us to be a simpler type of total prestation. However, further research brings to light a number of forms intermediate between exchanges marked by exaggerated rivalry like those of the American north-west and Melanesia, and others more moderate where the contracting parties rival each other with gifts: for instance, the French compete with each other in their ceremonial gifts, parties, weddings, and invitations, and feel bound, as the Germans say, to *revanchieren* themselves.¹⁶ We find some of these intermediate forms in the Indo-European world, notably in Thrace.¹⁷

Many ideas and principles are to be noted in systems of this type. The most important of these spiritual mechanisms is clearly the one which obliges us to make a return gift for a gift received. The moral and religious reasons for this constraint are nowhere more obvious than in Polynesia; and in approaching the Polynesian data in the following chapter we shall see clearly the power which enforces the repayment of a gift and the fulfilment of contracts of this kind.

CHAPTER I

GIFTS AND THE OBLIGATION TO
RETURN GIFTSI. TOTAL PRESTATION
MASCULINE AND FEMININE PROPERTY
(SAMOA)

IN our earlier researches on the distribution of the system of contractual gifts, we had found no real potlatch in Polynesia. The Polynesian societies whose institutions came nearest to it appeared to have nothing beyond a system of total prestations, that is to say of permanent contracts between clans in which their men, women and children, their ritual, etc., were put on a communal basis. The facts that we had studied, including the remarkable Samoan custom of the exchange of decorated mats between chiefs on their marriages, did not indicate more complex institutions.¹ The elements of rivalry, destruction and fighting seemed to be absent, although we found they were present in Melanesia. We now reconsider the matter in the light of new material.

The system of contractual gifts in Samoa is not confined to marriage; it is present also in respect of childbirth,² circumcision,³ sickness,⁴ girls' puberty,⁵ funeral ceremonies⁶ and trade.⁷ Moreover, two elements of the potlatch have in fact been attested to: the honour, prestige or *mana* which wealth confers;⁸ and the absolute obligation to make return gifts under the penalty of losing the *mana*, authority and wealth.⁹

Turner tells us that on birth ceremonies, after receiving the *oloa* and the *tonga*, the 'masculine' and 'feminine' property, 'the husband and wife were left no richer than they were. Still, they had the satisfaction of seeing what they considered to be a great honour, namely, the heaps of property collected

on the occasion of the birth of their child.'¹⁰ These gifts are probably of an obligatory and permanent nature, and returns are made only through the system of rights which compels them. In this society, where cross-cousin marriage is the rule, a man gives his child to his sister and brother-in-law to bring up; and the brother-in-law, who is the child's maternal uncle, calls the child a *tonga*, a piece of feminine property.¹¹ It is then a 'channel through which native property¹² or *tonga*, continues to flow to that family from the parents of the child. On the other hand, the child is to its parents a source of foreign property or *oloa*, coming from the parties who adopt it, as long as the child lives.' 'This sacrifice of natural ties creates a systematic facility in native and foreign property.' In short, the child (feminine property) is the means whereby the maternal family's property is exchanged for that of the paternal family. Since the child in fact lives with his maternal uncle he clearly has a right to live there and thus has a general right over his uncle's property. This system of fosterage is much akin to the generally recognized right of the sister's son over his uncle's property in Melanesia.¹³ We need only the elements of rivalry, fighting and destruction for the complete potlatch.

Now let us consider the terms *oloa* and more particularly *tonga*. The latter means indestructible property, especially the marriage mats¹⁴ inherited by the daughters of a marriage, and the trinkets and talismans which, on condition of repayment, come through the wife into the newly founded family; these constitute real property.¹⁵ The *oloa* designates all the things which are particularly the husband's personal property.¹⁶ This term is also applied today to things obtained from Europeans, clearly a recent extension.¹⁷ We may disregard as inexact and insufficient the translation suggested by Turner of *oloa* as foreign and *tonga* as native; yet it is not without significance, since it suggests that certain property called *tonga* is more closely bound up with the land, the clan and the family than certain other property called *oloa*.¹⁸

But if we extend our field of observation we immediately find a wider meaning of the notion *tonga*. In the Maori,

Tahitian, Tongan and Mangarevan languages it denotes everything which may be rightly considered property, which makes a man rich, powerful or influential, and which can be exchanged or used as compensation: that is to say, such objects of value as emblems, charms, mats and sacred idols, and perhaps even traditions, magic and ritual.¹⁹ Here we meet that notion of magical property which we believe to be widely spread in the Malayo-Polynesian world and right over the Pacific.²⁰

2. THE SPIRIT OF THE THING GIVEN (MAORI)

This last remark leads to a contention of some importance. The *taonga* are, at any rate with the Maori, closely attached to the individual, the clan and the land; they are the vehicle of their *mana*—magical, religious and spiritual power. In a proverb collected by Sir G. Grey²¹ and C. O. Davis,²² *taonga* are asked to destroy the person who receives them; and they have the power to do this if the law, or rather the obligation, about making a return gift is not observed.

Our late friend Hertz saw the significance of this; disinterestedly he had written 'for Davy and Mauss' on the card containing the following note by Colenso: 'They had a kind of system of exchange, or rather of giving presents which had later to be exchanged or repaid.'²³ For example, they exchange dried fish for pickled birds and mats.²⁴ The exchange is carried out between tribes or acquainted families without any kind of stipulation.

But Hertz had also found—I discovered it amongst his papers—a text whose significance we had both missed, for I had been unaware of it myself. Speaking of the *hau*, the spirit of things and particularly of the forest and forest game, Tamati Ranaipiri, one of Mr. Elsdon Best's most useful informants, gives quite by chance the key to the whole problem.²⁵ 'I shall tell you about *hau*. *Hau* is not the wind. Not at all. Suppose you have some particular object, *taonga*, and you give it to me; you

give it to me without a price.²⁶ We do not bargain over it. Now I give this thing to a third person who after a time decides to give me something in repayment for it (*utu*),²⁷ and he makes me a present of something (*taonga*). Now this *taonga* I received from him is the spirit (*hau*) of the *taonga* I received from you and which I passed on to him. The *taonga* which I receive on account of the *taonga* that came from you, I must return to you. It would not be right on my part to keep these *taonga* whether they were desirable or not. I must give them to you since they are the *hau*²⁸ of the *taonga* which you gave me. If I were to keep this second *taonga* for myself I might become ill or even die. Such is *hau*, the *hau* of personal property, the *hau* of the *taonga*, the *hau* of the forest. Enough on that subject.'

This capital text deserves comment. It is characteristic of the indefinite legal and religious atmosphere of the Maori and their doctrine of the 'house of secrets'; it is surprisingly clear in places and offers only one obscurity: the intervention of a third person. But to be able to understand this Maori lawyer we need only say: 'The *taonga* and all strictly personal possessions have a *hau*, a spiritual power. You give me *taonga*, I give it to another, the latter gives me *taonga* back, since he is forced to do so by the *hau* of my gift; and I am obliged to give this one to you since I must return to you what is in fact the product of the *hau* of your *taonga*.'

Interpreted thus not only does the meaning become clear, but it is found to emerge as one of the *leitmotifs* of Maori custom. The obligation attached to a gift itself is not inert. Even when abandoned by the giver, it still forms a part of him. Through it he has a hold over the recipient, just as he had, while its owner, a hold over anyone who stole it.²⁹ For the *taonga* is animated with the *hau* of its forest, its soil, its homeland, and the *hau* pursues him who holds it.³⁰

It pursues not only the first recipient of it or the second or the third, but every individual to whom the *taonga* is transmitted.³¹ The *hau* wants to return to the place of its birth, to its sanctuary of forest and clan and to its owner. The *taonga* or its *hau*—itself a kind of individual³²—constrains a series of users

to return some kind of *taonga* of their own, some property or merchandise or labour, by means of feasts, entertainments or gifts of equivalent or superior value. Such a return will give its donor authority and power over the original donor, who now becomes the latest recipient. That seems to be the motivating force behind the obligatory circulation of wealth, tribute and gifts in Samoa and New Zealand.

This or something parallel helps to explain two sets of important social phenomena in Polynesia and elsewhere. We can see the nature of the bond created by the transfer of a possession. We shall return shortly to this point and show how our facts contribute to a general theory of obligation. But for the moment it is clear that in Maori custom this bond created by things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is a person or pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself. Secondly, we are led to a better understanding of gift exchange and total prestation, including the potlatch. It follows clearly from what we have seen that in this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence. To keep this thing is dangerous, not only because it is illicit to do so, but also because it comes morally, physically and spiritually from a person. Whatever it is, food,³⁵ possessions, women, children or ritual, it retains a magical and religious hold over the recipient. The thing given is not inert. It is alive and often personified, and strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place.

3. THE OBLIGATION TO GIVE AND THE OBLIGATION TO RECEIVE

To appreciate fully the institutions of total prestation and the potlatch we must seek to explain two complementary factors. Total prestation not only carries with it the obligation to repay gifts received, but it implies two others equally important: the obligation to give presents and the obligation

to receive them. A complete theory of the three obligations would include a satisfactory fundamental explanation of this form of contract among Polynesian clans. For the moment we simply indicate the manner in which the subject might be treated.

It is easy to find a large number of facts on the obligation to receive. A clan, household, association or guest are constrained to demand hospitality,³⁴ to receive presents, to barter³⁵ or to make blood and marriage alliances. The Dayaks have even developed a whole set of customs based on the obligation to partake of any meal at which one is present or which one has seen in preparation.³⁶

The obligation to give is no less important. If we understood this, we should also know how men came to exchange things with each other. We merely point out a few facts. To refuse to give, or to fail to invite, is—like refusing to accept—the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse.³⁷ Again, one gives because one is forced to do so, because the recipient has a sort of proprietary right over everything which belongs to the donor.³⁸ This right is expressed and conceived as a sort of spiritual bond. Thus in Australia the man who owes all the game he kills to his father-and mother-in-law may eat nothing in their presence for fear that their very breath should poison his food.³⁹ We have seen above that the *taonga* sister's son has customs of this kind in Samoa, which are comparable with those of the sister's son (*vasu*) in Fiji.⁴⁰

In all these instances there is a series of rights and duties about consuming and repaying existing side by side with rights and duties about giving and receiving. The pattern of symmetrical and reciprocal rights is not difficult to understand if we realize that it is first and foremost a pattern of spiritual bonds between things which are to some extent parts of persons, and persons and groups that behave in some measure as if they were things.

All these institutions reveal the same kind of social and psychological pattern. Food, women, children, possessions,

charms, land, labour, services, religious offices, rank—everything is stuff to be given away and repaid. In perpetual interchange of what we may call spiritual matter, comprising men and things, these elements pass and re-pass between clans and individuals, ranks, sexes and generations.

4. GIFTS TO MEN AND GIFTS TO GODS

Another theme plays its part in the economy and morality of the gift: that of the gift made to men in the sight of gods or nature. We have not undertaken the wider study necessary to reveal its real import; for the facts at our disposal do not all come from the areas to which we have limited ourselves; and a strongly marked mythological element which we do not yet fully understand prevents us from advancing a theory. We simply give some indications of the theme.

In the societies of North-East Siberia⁴¹ and amongst the Eskimo of West Alaska⁴² and the Asiatic coast of the Behring Straits, the potlatch concerns not only men who rival each other in generosity, and the objects they transmit or destroy, and the spirits of the dead which take part in the transactions and whose names the men bear; it concerns nature as well. Exchanges between namesakes—people named after the same spirits—incite the spirits of the dead, of gods, animals and natural objects to be generous towards them.⁴³ Men say that gift-exchange brings abundance of wealth. Nelson and Porter have given us good descriptions of these ceremonies and the effect they have on the dead, on the game, the fish and shell-fish of the Eskimo. They are expressively called, in the language of British trappers, the 'Asking Festival' or the 'Inviting-in Festival'.⁴⁴ Ordinarily they are not confined within the limits of winter settlements. The effect upon nature has been well shown in a recent work on the Eskimo.⁴⁵

The Yuit have a mechanism, a wheel decorated with all manner of provisions, carried on a greasy pole surmounted with the head of a walrus. The top of the pole protrudes above the tent of which it forms the centre. Inside the tent it is

manoeuvred by means of another wheel and is made to turn clockwise like the sun. It would be hard to find a better expression of this mode of thought.⁴⁶

The theme is also to be found with the Koryak and Chukchee of the extreme north-west of Siberia.⁴⁷ Both have the potlatch. But it is the maritime Chukchee who, like their Yuit neighbours, practise most the obligatory-voluntary gift-exchanges in the course of protracted thanksgiving ceremonies which follow one after the other in every house throughout the winter. The remains of the festival sacrifice are thrown into the sea or cast to the winds; they return to their original home, taking with them all the game killed that year, ready to return again in the next. Jochelsen mentions festivals of the same kind among the Koryak, although he was present only at the whale festival. The system of sacrifice seems there to be very highly developed.⁴⁸

Bogoras rightly compares these with the Russian *koliada* customs in which masked children go from house to house begging eggs and flour and none dare refuse them. This is a European custom.⁴⁹

The connection of exchange contracts among men with those between men and gods explains a whole aspect of the theory of sacrifice. It is best seen in those societies where contractual and economic ritual is practised between men. Where the men are masked incarnations, often shamanistic, being possessed by the spirit whose name they bear, they act as representatives of the spirits.⁵⁰ In that case the exchanges and contracts concern not only men and things but also the sacred beings that are associated with them.⁵¹ This is very evident in Eskimo, Tlingit, and one of the two kinds of Haida potlatch.

There has been a natural evolution. Among the first groups of beings with whom men must have made contracts were the spirits of the dead and the gods. They in fact are the real owners of the world's wealth.⁵² With them it was particularly necessary to exchange and particularly dangerous not to; but, on the other hand, with them exchange was easiest and safest.

Sacrificial destruction implies giving something that is to be repaid. All forms of North-West American and North-East Asian potlatch contain this element of destruction.⁵³ It is not simply to show power and wealth and unselfishness that a man puts his slaves to death, burns his precious oil, throws coppers into the sea, and sets his house on fire. In doing this he is also sacrificing to the gods and spirits, who appear incarnate in the men who are at once their namesakes and ritual allies.

But another theme appears which does not require this human support, and which may be as old as the potlatch itself: the belief that one has to buy from the gods and that the gods know how to repay the price. This is expressed typically by the Toradja of the Celebes. Kruyt tells us that the 'owner' can 'buy' from the spirits the right to do certain things with his or rather 'their' property. Before he cuts his wood or digs his garden or stakes out his house he must make a payment to the gods. Thus although the notion of purchase seems to be little developed in the personal economic life of the Toradja, nevertheless, the idea of purchase from gods and spirits is universally understood.⁵⁴

With regard to certain forms of exchange which we describe later Malinowski remarks on facts of the same order from the Trobriands. A malignant spirit is evoked—a *tauvau* whose body has been found in a snake or a land crab—by means of giving it *vaygu'a* (a precious object used in *kula* exchanges, at once ornament, charm and valuable). This gift has a direct effect on the spirit of the *tauvau*.⁵⁵ Again at the *mila-mila* festival,⁵⁶ a potlatch in honour of the dead, the two kinds of *vaygu'a*—the *kula* ones and those which Malinowski now describes for the first time as 'permanent' *vaygu'a*⁵⁷—are exposed and offered up to the spirits, who take the shades of them away to the country of the dead;⁵⁸ there the spirits rival each other in wealth as men do on their return from a solemn *kula*.⁵⁹

Van Ossenbruggen, who is both a theorist and a distinguished observer, and who lives on the spot, has noted another point about these institutions.⁶⁰ Gifts to men and to gods have the further aim of buying peace. In this way evil influences are

kept at bay, even when not personified; for a human curse will allow these jealous spirits to enter and kill you and permit evil influences to act, and if you commit a fault towards another man you become powerless against them. Van Ossenbruggen interprets in this way not only the throwing of money over the wedding procession in China, but even bridewealth itself. This is an interesting suggestion which raises a series of points.⁶¹

We see how it might be possible to embark upon a theory and history of contractual sacrifice. Now this sacrifice presupposes institutions of the type we are describing, and conversely it realizes them to the full, for the gods who give and repay are there to give something great in exchange for something small. Perhaps then it is not the result of pure chance that the two solemn formulas of contract, the Latin *do ut des* and the Sanskrit *dadami se, dehi me* have come down to us through religious texts.⁶²

A further note: on Alms

Later in legal and religious evolution man appears once more as representative of the gods and the dead, if indeed he had ever ceased to be so. For instance among the Hausa there is often a fever epidemic when the guinea-corn is ripe, and the only way to prevent it is to give presents of wheat to the poor.⁶³ Again, among the Hausa of Tripolitania, at the time of the great prayer (*Baban Salla*), the children go round the huts saying: 'Shall I enter?' The reply is: 'Oh prick-eared hare, for a bone one gets service' (the poor man is happy to work for the rich). These gifts to children and poor people are pleasing to the dead.⁶⁴ These customs may be Islamic in origin,⁶⁵ or Islamic, Negro, European and Berber at the same time.

Here at any rate is the beginning of a theory of alms. Alms are the result on the one hand of a moral idea about gifts and wealth⁶⁶ and on the other of an idea about sacrifice. 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. It is the old gift morality raised to the position of a principle of justice; the gods and spirits

consent that the portion reserved for them and destroyed in useless sacrifice should go to the poor and the children. Originally the Arabic *sadaka* meant, like the Hebrew *zedaka*, exclusively justice, and it later came to mean alms. We can say that the Mishnic era, the time of the victory of the Paupers at Jerusalem, begot the doctrine of charity and alms which later went round the world with Christianity and Islam. It was at this time that the word *zedaka* changed its meaning, since it does not mean alms in *The Bible*.⁶⁷

The value of the documents and commentaries we have quoted in this chapter is not merely local. Comparison takes us farther afield. For we can say that the basic elements of the potlatch are found in Polynesia even if the complete institution is not found there;⁶⁸ in any event gift-exchange is the rule. But to emphasize this theme would simply be a show of erudition if it did not extend beyond Polynesia. Let us now shift the subject and demonstrate that at least the *obligation to give* has a much wider distribution. Then we shall show the distribution of the other types of obligation and demonstrate that our interpretation is valid for several other groups of societies.