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THE GIFT AS MATERIAL CULTURE

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with Cynthia Adams Hoover

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--- Preface. Pp. 1-3 of above.

--- Introduction: Perspectives on the Gift in Indonesia and Beyond. Pp. 3-14 of above.

The Gift as Material Culture

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*Report of a Yale-Smithsonian Seminar
held at the Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C.,
April 28–30, 1991*

*Edited by Patricia Thatcher and Paul Michael Taylor
with Cynthia Adams Hoover*

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Cover illustration: Ceremonial cloth (*tampan* or “ship cloth”),
Lampung, southern Sumatra.
See Figure 6, page 13.

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The 1991 Yale-Smithsonian Seminar on Material Culture, held in Washington, D.C., April 28–30, examined gifts as objects of material culture. The meeting was held in conjunction with the Smithsonian exhibition at the National Museum of Natural History, *Beyond the Java Sea: Art of Indonesia's Outer Islands*, an exhibition whose objects stimulated much discussion and new thinking about material culture.

The seminar participants represented a broad range of disciplines and included historians, materials scientists, anthropologists and archaeologists, literary scholars, and art historians. As discussed in the introductory paper, many of Indonesia's finest artworks were created originally as gifts, as a kind of currency in systems of gift exchange. Consequently, the exhibition and its accompanying catalog (Taylor and Aragon 1991) examined indigenous concepts of reciprocity, as materially represented in gifts, for maintaining (or indeed manipulating) the social order in outer-island Indonesia. The Indonesian examples and the anthropological and art-historical methods used to explore them illuminated the seminar discussions of the gift from elsewhere, as examined by other methods, which, in turn, suggested new interpretations of the objects exhibited.

The seminar began Sunday evening (April 28, 1991) with an introductory slide presentation, "Perspectives on the Gift in Indonesia and Beyond," followed by a viewing and discussion of the exhibition. The lecture, exhibition, and discussion all made reference to feasting upon the occasion of gift exchanges, an appropriate introduction to the festive dinner that followed in the Museum of Natural History's Associates Court.

The next two days of stimulating papers, discussions, and meals were organized into three panels:

- Wedding Gifts and Marital Alliances
- Gifts in Economic Perspective
- Power and Propitiation: Political and Religious Aspects of Gift Giving.

As the Indonesian exhibition provided a point of comparison for the entire topic, so the panels began with one or more Indonesian case studies, each presented by an Indonesianist (anthropologists Hamilton, Aragon, and Pospišil and art historian Jessup). Consequently, each group of essays in this seminar report begins with an Indonesian case study, and then broadens the discussion to include examples from other parts of the world, as examined by scholars from American studies, history, art history, anthropology, literature, and other fields.

Wedding Gifts and Marital Alliances

The discussion of Wedding Gifts and Marital Alliances opens with Roy Hamilton's vivid account of a Lio marriage ceremony from Flores Island in the Lesser Sundas. Hamilton's account illustrates that, even where the rules of gift exchange at traditional weddings seem precise and ritualized, lively negotiations and individual manipulation of those same detailed rules do prevail "on the ground." Maria Montoya describes the multiple stages of, and exchanges that take place in, a folk Catholic ceremony (called *Las Entriegas de Novios*) that served to sanction marriage in Hispanic New Mexico. She presents this ceremony, which persists today in modern urban contexts, as a form of "cultural resistance" to outsiders.

Candace Waid examines wedding-related gifts in Southern U.S. novels, such as those by Katherine Anne Porter, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty. Mary Jo Arnoldi describes a woman's exchange ceremony called *woloma* among the Bamana of Mali. Wedding goods are exchanged in the *woloma*, on the day of the wedding. Arnoldi's description of the *woloma* ceremony is a refreshing alternative to male-dominated discussions about "brideprice" exchange, since the *woloma* is organized by women, and women use the ceremony to exchange goods among themselves.

Gifts in Economic Perspective

Leopold Pospišil opens the second panel on Gifts in Economic Perspective with his essay on the role of gifts and gift-like transactions among the Kapauku of western New Guinea (now Indonesia's easternmost province, Irian Jaya). Pospišil shows that this exchange behavior is associated with both legal and moral expectations, but that the two must carefully be distinguished.

George Miles's essay on "Real Gifts: Treaties, Grants, and Land Transfers in America" also considers various forms of property transfer in terms of the bundles of rights, duties, and even moral expectations being transferred, as, for example, in homestead grants and grants to railroads. He also examines exchanges taking place between peoples with entire but different systems of defining property rights, as, for example, when rights in land were transferred from American Indians to Euro-Americans who had very different concepts of what that transfer entailed.

Although he focuses on gifts of much tinier scale, historian John Fleckner's discussion, "Greetings Cards and American Consumer Culture," provoked the most heated discussion. Fleckner traces the history of this relatively new and seemingly inconsequential form of material culture that is now ubiquitous. While some seminar participants compared this phenomenon to Indonesian textiles (some of which are also created only to be given away, or to say things that the wearer cannot say), others depicted the greeting card as a cheap token that subtly implies that the recipient deserves no better.

The panel's concluding paper, "The Gift of Giving: Philanthropy in America" by Jean-Christophe Agnew, questions the pure philanthropy of even the most stupendous gifts. Agnew closely examines the antagonism within our culture between commodities and gifts, finding the two "incommensurable although not incompatible," since the intricate calculations accompanying private philanthropic gifts are of a different order from those accompanying commodity exchange.

Power and Propitiation: Political and Religious Aspects of Gift Giving

The final panel, Power and Propitiation: Political and Religious Aspects of Gift Giving, begins with two very different Indonesian case studies. Anthropologist Lorraine V. Aragon's paper on tributes and offerings in Central Sulawesi Island examines the manner in which that region's political and religious gifts to deities, highland aristocrats, and lowland kingdom rulers were used to construct political and social relationships. She emphasizes that nonmaterial valuables such as access to trade markets, religious blessing, or the status acquired in gift giving must be recognized as important in gift exchange. Art historian Helen Jessup's parallel essay on "Indonesian Court Arts" gives an overview of courtly traditions of gift exchange as they were used in defining hierarchy or equality among rulers or between rulers and subjects in Indonesian history.

Turning to American history, Alan Fern's discussion of "Presidential Gifts in America" favorably compares the simple and deeply meaningful gifts of the earliest presidents to the "extraordinary escalation" of recent presidential gift giving. This trend recalls the escalating Cult of Magnificence in Indonesian courts, as described by Jessup. Unlike some Indonesian court societies, however, Americans have not yet come to believe that the expensive heirlooms acquired as our rulers take office are actually the source of our president's authority.

Gretchen Townsend's essay, "Colonial Boston Church Silver: Gifts of Community, Commitment, and Continuity," provides the conference's parting thought, examining the colonial New England pattern of collecting money or leaving money upon one's death for the purchase of church silver. She leaves us with a well-developed example of a meaningful type of gift, prominent in colonial popular culture, which cannot easily be interpreted in terms of the implied reciprocity and exchange that dominate most thinking about gifts. The donor who bequeathed money for an inscribed silver vessel was, after all, already dead when the transfer took place. And each Puritan donor knew that his future status, as someone who would or would not eternally be saved, was already predetermined before he made the bequest. Drawing her evidence from contemporary writings and from her examination of the silver vessels, Townsend presents a moving account of the many meanings these objects of a lifetime conveyed.

AS REQUIRED by Indonesian custom, the Smithsonian representatives at the seminar's opening and closing meals elaborately apologized for the poverty and simplicity of the surroundings, the food, and the preparations, while stressing the honor bestowed upon the hosts by the guests' presence. The Yale visitors generously responded by inviting all present to New Haven for the following year's annual Seminar on Material Culture, as spontaneous reciprocity has become the custom of this annual rite. In parting, I emphasized once again how honored and pleased I was that the Yale-Smithsonian Executive Committee shared my enthusiasm for "the gift" as a seminar topic and the exhibition as a focus of attention for this year's magnificent gathering.

**Introduction:
Perspectives on the Gift in Indonesia
and Beyond**

Paul Michael Taylor

The Yale-Smithsonian Seminar on Material Culture, held this year at the Smithsonian in conjunction with the exhibition *Beyond the Java Sea: Art of Indonesia's Outer Islands*, is an annual gathering of scholars interested in material culture. The Yale-Smithsonian Executive Committee ventured into rather unfamiliar terrain this year, using this exhibition of objects from the other side of the globe to provide the "springboard" into new thinking about material culture. This conference and its resulting publication should help scholars think in new ways about the gift *as material culture*, by applying their concepts to Indonesian examples, and by broadening their thinking through exposure to the work of Indonesianists.

Gift and Reciprocity in Indonesian Societies

"The gift" is central to this exhibition partly because anthropological interpretations of Indonesian societies have so often considered reciprocity as a central component of traditional Indonesian social organization. This is especially true of literature concerning the more than three hundred ethnic groups in-



Figure 1. Map of Indonesia. Java and Bali constitute Indonesia's "inner islands"; the others are "outer islands." (Map by Marcia Bakry.)

habiting Indonesia's so-called "outer islands," that is, all of Indonesia's islands *except* the densely populated, more developed "inner islands" of Java and Bali (figure 1).

Although ethnographers' interest in gift exchange remains strong, today's writers recognize that the prominent place of gift giving in some models of Indonesian social organization is outdated, because those models are dependent on the generally discarded notion that "archaic" systems of exchange are fundamentally different from exchange systems at "higher" levels of sociopolitical organization. Notions of archaic, gift-based economies may still be part of popular notions of the "primitive," but they have generally been no more useful within anthropology than the search for "archaic" forms of grammar ever was in linguistics.

One major reason that notions of reciprocity and gift exchange have been so important in the interpretations of Indonesian life is that Indonesian people themselves, as we shall see below, often emphasize exchange-based motives for their activities. In fact, it might be possible to trace the importance of reciprocity and marital alliance theory as key concepts in twentieth-century structuralism to the early twentieth-century Dutch accounts of Indonesian societies, such as that of van Wouden (1968 [orig. Dutch 1938]), now widely recognized as a precursor of Levi-Strauss (see Levi-Strauss 1950, de Josselin de Jong 1970). So, Indonesianists, including myself, have preserved these tropes in their work not (or not only) because we inhabit some kind of intellectual backwater, but because the people we study encourage us to do so. Those same people may be partly responsible for the centrality of these concepts in models of social organization that are now applied to many other peoples.

Interpreting the Gift

Any history of the importance of "the gift" in interpretations of social organization must return to Mauss's *Essai sur le don . . .*, published in 1925, sixty-six years ago (English trans. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* [Mauss 1967]). Mauss's work was influential in the development of both Dutch and French schools of structuralism (via J.B. de Josselin de Jong and F.A.E. van Wouden in Holland and Levi-Strauss in France), and therefore influential in the predominant interpretations of Indonesian societies. I have alluded above to the fact that Mauss's seminal and inspirational ideas of reciprocity as the basis of social organization are dependent on several generally discarded notions, including the idea of "archaic" or so-called "primitive" systems of exchange. For our purposes, also, Mauss is decidedly quiet on the "material" component of the gift as "material culture." But before adding other criticisms, let me hasten to add that any of us here would be more than happy to have our work the subject of some future conference, and there to have our books called "seminal" and "inspirational," while also hearing them criticized for their outmoded aspects—sixty-six years after *our* books were published!

One of the ways Mauss's thought is reflected in structuralist anthropology generally, including its studies of Indonesian societies, is that societies are studied as unitary wholes, in which a limited range of social phenomena are seen as "total social facts," considered as part of a total system like Mauss's "prestations" or systems of exchange. A prestation refers to any thing (service, entertainment, object, etc.) given as a gift or in exchange. Mauss hypothesized that, even though the systems of transactions transferring objects (or services) pur-

port to be and appear to be voluntary, disinterested, and spontaneous, they are, in fact, obligatory and interested within archaic societies.

Mauss's central hypothesis is that in the "archaic form of exchange," which continues in modified form in all societies, there are three obligations: giving, receiving, and repaying. The obligations involved in gift exchange are symbolically expressed in myth and imagery and, of course, concretely represented by the objects exchanged. For Mauss, the permanent significance or lasting influence of the objects exchanged is due to the fact that they express the continual indebtedness that subgroups within segmentary societies of an archaic type have toward each other.

Mauss's assumptions and hypotheses have had numerous repercussions in studies of Indonesian societies. Our seminar considers "weddings and marital alliances" as its starting point, followed by an examination of some "economic aspects of the gift." In other words, we consider marital alliances as a category separate from economic exchange. Yet in the interpretation of some of Mauss's followers, marital exchanges constitute a subclass of the economic exchange within "archaic" societies. The notion of "archaic" communities, in which every member is intricately in debt to others along socially prescribed lines, rings partly true to anyone who works in Indonesian villages—as it probably does to those working anywhere in the global village. But increasingly today, interpretations of social organization emphasize individual initiative, choice, and the creative manipulation of a society's cultural and symbolic systems, in which models of exchange merely form some of a society's ideal or abstract expressions. This is even the case for such highly ritualized and rule-laden exchanges as those accompanying customary Indonesian weddings, as shown by Roy Hamilton's paper (below) on wedding gifts among the Lio of Flores (Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia).

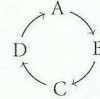
In Indonesian societies, the guardians of esoteric knowledge are the leaders of traditional communities, upholders of tradition, of *adat* or custom. At the heart of people's respect for tradition and custom lies a deep belief in traditional ideas regarding marriage, ancestors, and the spirit world. In each of these three realms—marriage, ancestors, and the supernatural—lie reciprocal relationships: with family relations, with ancestors, and with the spirit world. Traditional respect for ancestors and ancestral ways is closely linked to respect for reciprocity and mutual support in an individual's relationships with other people and with other inhabitants of the natural and supernatural worlds. "Gifts," broadly defined, are the currency and the expression of that reciprocity and mutual support. Hence, gift giving and reciprocity can be examined with regard to each of these three realms.

Wedding Gifts and Marital Alliances

Since the time of the early Dutch structuralist tradition of F.A.E. van Wouden, marital alliances have been considered the key to understanding the underlying structures of Indonesian social organization. Indonesia is, in fact, a hearthland of structuralism within anthropology. Structuralism is a metatheory about societies that attempts to analyze social relations, or symbols, or other components of a society and its culture into structural elements and to predict how the diversity of social customs can be derived from these underlying structures.

In *Types of Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia*, van Wouden (1968 [orig. Dutch 1938]) posited an original Eastern Indonesian social organization based

upon descent groups whose members intermarried in prescribed ways. Considering the example of a society consisting of patrilineal clans A, B, C, and D, the women of clan A would be expected to marry the men of clan B, the women of B to marry the men of C, the women of C to marry into clan D, and the women of clan D to marry into clan A. This circular pattern of marriage prescriptions can be considered a continuing marital alliance among the clans A through D, each of which was founded by a different ancestor. Just as ancestors define families (as groups of people descended from those ancestors), marriage unites them. Diagrammatically:



Following van Wouden, Dutch anthropologists of the Leiden school gave this system of expected marriages between clans the delightful name “circulating connubium,” and described some of the most striking and pervasive features of asymmetric alliance within Eastern Indonesian society as resulting from it. From the perspective of a man or woman in clan “A,” for example, one immediately sees from the diagram above the opposition between a clan from which people in A take their wives (D) and one into which they give their women as wives (B). Throughout Indonesia, the wife-giver family is ritually superior to the wife-taker family, but that kind of ritual superiority in circular connubium is not the basis for social classes or ranks. A is superior to B, B to C, and C to D, but D is also ritually superior to A.

Such alliances between families are asymmetric, because there must be at least three families exchanging women—the simple (or symmetric) exchange between two families or clans is excluded. Furthermore, the relations between individuals in different clans are unequal because of the ritual superiority of the wife givers. This “asymmetry” has even sometimes been invoked as a means of explaining the Indonesian preference for asymmetry in art and architecture. Some Indonesian groups themselves consciously make the association between their marital alliance pattern and their architecture—for instance, representatives of the wife-giving group may sit on the right (larger) side in the host’s traditional house during ceremonies. Others have theorized that no single component of the society (such as marital alliance or economic exchange) is “primary” or should be called upon to explain all the others. For them, the underlying principles themselves are primary, and marriage patterns are but one way in which those principles are realized in any particular society. And many scholars deny that the simple explanatory models derived today were models of any original Indonesian society that actually existed in the past. Instead, such models are idealized pictures of how marital alliance works; these ideal models differ from practice today and probably always have.

One pervasive interpretation of the gift as material culture, frequently noted in objects in this exhibition, is the commonly reported identification of some objects as male goods and other objects as female goods, particularly those objects used in gift exchanges associated with marital alliance in Indonesia and also in Melanesia (Niessen 1984, MacCormack and Strathern 1980, Strathern 1988). In asymmetric alliance systems especially, there is a universal distinction between male and female goods, often based on which gender manufactures the good (thus females weave and textiles are female, and so on). A man in an asymmetric alliance system who is in need of something frequently goes to his in-laws for help—and the kind of thing he needs determines to whom he di-

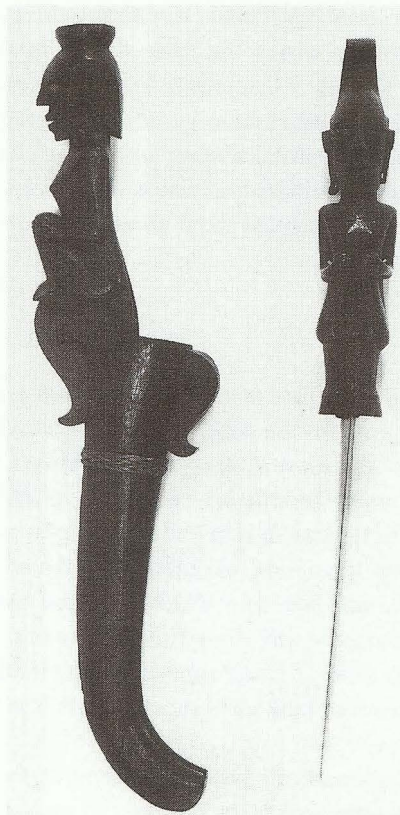


Figure 2. The “male” gift: a knife and scabbard (*piso*) of the Toba Batak, North Sumatra. Wood, metal, rattan, 32.5 x 9.5 x 3.2 cm. One pervasive interpretation of the gift as material culture, frequently noted in objects in the subject exhibition, is the commonly reported identification of some objects as male goods and other objects as female goods, particularly those objects used in gift exchanges associated with marital alliance in Indonesia and also in Melanesia. (Museum Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta, 26866. Photograph by Diane Nordeck, Smithsonian Institution.)

rects his request. He obtains male goods from the husbands of his sisters or daughters (“wife takers”) and female goods from his sons’ wives or from the brothers or father of his own wife (his “wife givers”).

Perhaps intermarriage, and particularly the confusion or misinterpretation that might result if gifts associated with marital exchanges were too different from one place to another, has contributed to the standardization of genders of objects. That standardization is also undoubtedly related to the fact that smiths and jewelry makers are generally male while weavers are almost universally female. Consequently, textiles are generally considered female, metal objects such as weapons are generally male, and so on.

Nevertheless, it is an oversimplification to refer to an object in its entirety as “female” or “male,” even those objects called male and female and used in marital exchanges. Male goods—especially the most important ones used in the marriage ceremonies—often contain a female component, while female goods contain a part that is clearly considered (even called) male. See, for example, an archetypal pair of objects that could be used in marital exchanges among the Batak: the *piso* or knife (figure 2), which is a male good given from the family of the groom to the family of the bride, and the *ulos* or sacred cloth given from the family of the bride to the family of the groom (figure 3). Note that the knife, though a male good, contains both a male and a female figure. Similarly, each *ulos* textile, though as a whole the object constitutes a female good, contains one edge that is considered the “male” component (Niessen 1985).

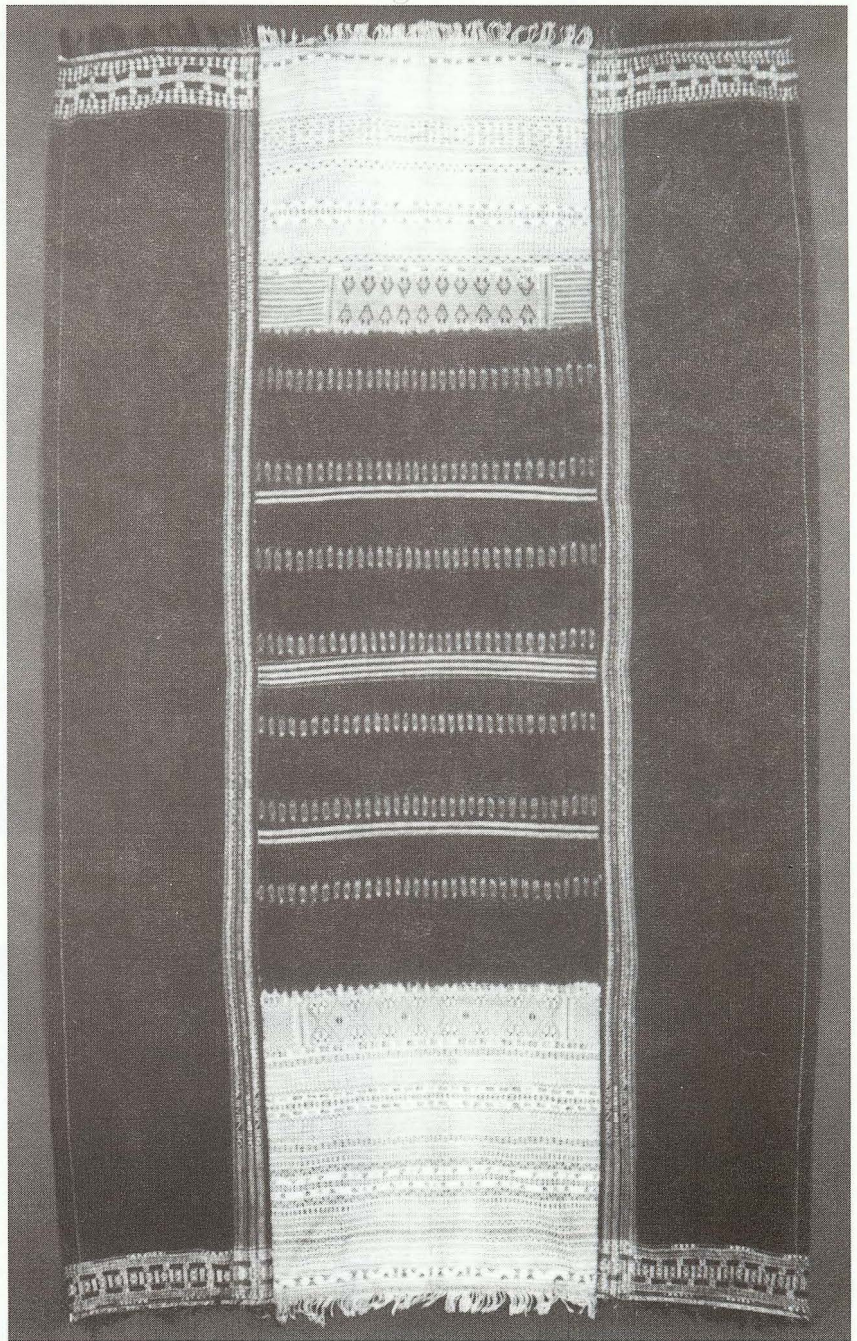
If marital alliance gifts are representations of the families being united by the marriage, then it not surprising that male and female components occur both in goods designated as so-called male and in those designated female. A family that gives its daughter or sister in marriage to another family is giving away its most valuable “female good.” But, just as the “female” family includes many male members (the bride’s father, brothers, and so on), so the “female” goods that represent it contain male elements.

Gifts in Economic Perspective

The more detailed discussions of gift giving within the context of marital alliances, or within the context of power and propitiation, always include an “economic” component but are not limited to “purely” economic transactions. A few economists may still refer, with Karl Polanyi (1944, *The Great Transformation*), to a prior time in which exchange existed as purely “reciprocal exchange,” later to be replaced (or rather supplemented) by “redistributive exchange” (exchange that is politically enforced through an allocative center), followed by “market exchange” (characterized by purchase and sale at a money price determined by the impersonal forces of supply and demand). Yet there is no thoroughly “reciprocal exchange”-based society, in which transactions requiring reciprocity purely follow the lines and groupings of the social structure.

Under such circumstances, Leopold Pospíšil’s intensive fieldwork studying the economy of the Kapauku of Irian Jaya (Indonesia’s easternmost province) is particularly valuable (see Pospíšil 1963, 1978). It is helpful that his paper introduces this conference’s comparative papers on the economic aspects of the gift. He stresses the importance of individual initiative in economic transactions, and he carefully explores the differences between “loan” and “gift,” in economic, legal, and locally perceived “moral” terms.

Figure 3. The “female” gift: a ceremonial ulos cloth (ulos simpar) of the Toba Batak, North Sumatra. Cotton, 230 x 125 cm. The ulos or sacred cloth given from the family of the bride to the family of the groom is the archetypal “female” counter-gift to the “male” piso or knife given from the family of the groom to that of the bride. Yet it is an oversimplification to refer to an object in its entirety as “female” or “male.” The “male” knife-and-scabbard set contains both a male and a female figure. Similarly, each ulos textile, which as a whole constitutes a female good, contains one edge that is considered the “male” component (shown at top here, as such textiles are usually hung) and the opposite edge that is considered “female.” (Collection of Thomas Murray. Photograph by Dennis Anderson, courtesy of Thomas Murray.)



Power, Propitiation, and the Role of Ancestors

Another important area of artworks created for purposes of exchange, or to elicit exchanges, consists of objects that express the inequalities of power relationships, relationships requiring propitiation. Both Lorraine V. Aragon and Helen Ibbitson Jessup present useful papers in this area. Aragon offers a compelling interpretation of the multiple and changing meanings of gifts between the highland and lowland societies of Central Sulawesi. Moving generally (though not exclusively) “downriver” to Indonesia’s court societies (or across the seas to Java, where they flourish), Helen Jessup examines the ways in which gift giving is used by people in Indonesian court societies to establish, maintain, and confer status.

Figure 3a. Detail of figure 3 showing the “male” section of the textile.



Figure 3b. Detail of figure 3 showing the “female” section of the textile.



There is, however, another area of regular prestations in which outer-island Indonesian ideas of reciprocity, expressed through gift giving, embody relationships of power. This area is strongly represented by gifts (or altars for gift giving) in the exhibition, and involves artworks that relate to the spirit world, particularly works created to keep up reciprocal relations between the world of the living and the world of ancestors.

Departed ancestors are the foci of the family, and ancestors are sometimes founders of entire ethnic groups. They are integrated into everyday life through many magnificent art forms, including carved stone ancestral altars, wooden freestanding sculptures, demonic ancestor imagery on carved polychrome shields and incised bamboo utensils, and (especially in Borneo and Irian Jaya) artistic and ritual treatment of the corpses or skulls of the deceased. Ancestors define the clans and other groups descended from them. Ancestors join other spirits and continue to interact with the living. Yet every person's path through life brings him eventually to death, the point at which he joins the ancestors, a passage in which he is aided by the living who survive him. The continuous interaction between the living and the dead begins with the funeral ceremonies.

In most outer-island societies, funerary rituals are extensive. Pre-Christian or pre-Islamic Batak funerary ceremonies, for example, served to pacify the deceased and to elevate his or her rank among the ancestors in the upper world. The expected reciprocity in relationships among the living continued in a modified form after death. The funerary ceremonies particularly served to mollify the deceased, to satisfy his or her needs, and therefore to encourage the deceased to aid living relatives.

People of all social strata throughout the outer islands traditionally turned to ancestors as protectors, but often the most lavish monuments to ancestors were erected by the aristocracy, partly because of their greater control of wealth and partly because the founding ancestors gave them the charter for their superiority. People of all classes still stress the importance of the interaction between the living and the ancestors by displaying and invoking ancestor images. The Nias wooden ancestor sculptures (*adu*), which are attached to posts or wall altars inside the houses of commoners as well as chiefs, function as intermediaries for contact with spirits. Through the medium of these figures, new births and marriages are reported to the ancestors. Offerings of food on the altars serve to request the ancestors' help in times of illness or misfortune. From Nias in the west to Sumba and the Moluccas in the east, large megalithic stones serve as altars or monuments to the ancestors. Their central position in the villages' public spaces reflects the centrality of ancestors in everyday life.

In addition to providing protection, the deceased ancestors serve as sources of advice, inspiration, and information about magical or other esoteric knowledge. Images and motifs used in art can either be passed down from ancestors to an individual through the line of descendants or communicated directly by ancestor spirits—for example, in dreams. Among the Iban of Borneo, dreams are the vehicle by which spirits, including ancestral spirits, communicate with the living. Iban weavers who are old enough and strong enough to weave the most sacred Iban textile, known as the *pua* (see figure 4), have a dream in which Kumang, a deity who taught the Iban how to weave and dye, teaches them a new design and even an individual honorific or "praise name" uniquely given to that design. One of the functions of the *pua* cloth is to induce communication with ancestors—through dreams—in those who sleep wrapped in

Figure 4. Ceremonial textile (pua), Iban ("Dayak"), northern Borneo. Cotton, 247 x 108.3 cm. Among the Iban, dreams are the vehicle by which spirits communicate with the living. In dreams, spirits communicate the designs for the pua cloth to weavers. After it is woven, one of the cloth's functions is to induce communication with ancestors—through dreams—in those who sleep wrapped in it. In such cases, objects are not themselves exchanged, but the "exchange" is necessary for the object's production, and the object is necessary for continuing the exchange. (The University Museum, P-603a. Photograph courtesy of The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania [neg. no. T4-124].)



it (Heppel 1994). In such cases, objects are not themselves exchanged, but the "exchange" is necessary for the object's production, and the object is necessary for continuing the exchange.

The Spirit World: Reciprocity and Rites of Passage

Another pervasive theme of Indonesian art is the relationship of persons to spirits, each having reciprocal duties toward each other. The contact between persons and ancestral or other spirits often takes place through the medium of art. Similarly, visual and other arts are used to contact deities and to express fundamental beliefs about the cosmos and man's place in it relative to spirits, deities, plants, and animals.

Spirits and deities are not necessarily the same as ancestors (individual humans who have died), although there is overlap because some of the deceased—especially important ancestors—can become deified spirits. Those who die suddenly or violently, those who do not receive proper funeral ceremonies, and women who die in childbirth can all become harmful spirits. Sometimes an image that looks very much like an ancestor image is used as intermediary to a deity or spirit that was never a living human. For example, the *adu horö* figures of central Nias Island (figure 5) are images of a generalized ancestor, not any particular known individual. Because moral norms were collectively set down by ancestors in the distant past, offerings to atone for violations are made to the *adu horö* image, perhaps as a representation of the collective ancestors whose wrath enforces social norms and whose benevolence protects society.

Indonesians call on the power of art at transitional times in the human life cycle, during rites of passage such as birth, circumcision, marriage, various stages of adulthood or accession to offices, and death. The power of objects rit-



Figure 5. Figure for atonement (adu horö), Central Nias. Wood, 249 x 38.5 x 27.9 cm. Because moral norms were collectively set down by ancestors in the distant past, offerings to atone for violations are made to the adu horö image, perhaps as a representation of the collective ancestors whose wrath enforces social norms and whose benevolence protects society. (Museum Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta, 23696. Photograph by Diane Nordeck, Smithsonian Institution.)

ually given during these critical transitions can be called upon and even increased later. Many artworks functioned as gifts presented at times of transition, including the ceremonial *tampan* “ship cloths” (figure 6) used as wrappers for gifts exchanged among families, or the large *palepai* cloths displayed by noble families of Lampung (southern Sumatra) as banners hung at ceremonies. Such cloths were used for births, tooth-filing ceremonies, engagements, marriages, house-building feasts, and funerals.

Artworks were also commissioned to commemorate the feasts (opportunities for the display of generosity) that accompanied the celebration of life transitions, such as the simple commoner’s ancestor figure from the Maenamölo region (South Nias) (figure 7), built to commemorate a community feast given by the sponsor whose ancestor is depicted, in order to fulfill the sponsor’s status as an adult citizen. In short, life’s critical transitions, or rites of passage, were met with ritual or celebration, times in which visual art objects and gift exchange have always played an important role.

Conclusion

The guardians of esoteric knowledge are the leaders of traditional Indonesian communities and the upholders of *adat*, or custom. The deep respect for traditional ideas about reciprocal relations with ancestors, about marriage and



Figure 6. Ceremonial cloth (*tampan* or “ship cloth”), Lampung, southern Sumatra. Cotton, 53 x 53.4 cm. Many artworks functioned as gifts presented at times of transition, including this ship cloth used as a wrapper for gifts exchanged among families in Lampung. (Museum Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta, 22241. Photograph by Diane Nordeck, Smithsonian Institution.)

Figure 7. Ancestor figure (*adu*), South Nias. Wood, 56 x 36 x 7 cm. Artworks were commissioned also to commemorate the feasts (opportunities for the display of generosity) that accompanied the celebration of life transitions, such as this simple commoner's ancestor figure from the Maenamölo region (South Nias). This was built to commemorate a community feast given by the sponsor whose ancestor is depicted, in order to fulfill the sponsor's status as an adult citizen. (Museum Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta, 21419. Photograph by Diane Nordeck, Smithsonian Institution.)



the reciprocities it entails, and about relationships with the spirit world are at the heart of respect for custom that members of every outer-island society proclaim. Even more than its English translation “custom,” *adat* (and its equivalents in other Indonesian languages) has an ethical and normative connotation. Traditional respect for ancestors and ancestral ways is therefore closely linked to a thoroughgoing respect for reciprocity and mutual support in an individual's relationships with other people and with other inhabitants of the natural and supernatural worlds. “Gifts,” broadly defined, are the currency and the expression of that reciprocity and mutual support. As exemplified in this exhibition, they include many of Indonesia's most important art forms.

Portions of this text describing objects in the exhibition, and all figures except figures 1 and 3, are taken from the book accompanying the exhibition, Taylor and Aragon 1991.

salary, tributes, tithing, alms, honorarium, sacrifice, and finally museum collection might all involve aspects of the gift. He called for studies that focus upon the performance aspect of exchange that might reveal the mental constructs that identify and separate gift from what superficially might seem to be gift behavior. Paul Taylor, building on Sturtevant's comments, called for research that would distinguish between types of gifts and systems of exchange. Noting that when we participate as gift givers we unify ourselves in artificially constructed groups, he called specifically for more studies that consider the role of women in exchange and as the creators of certain kinds of groups and social interactions. He suggested that research that stressed legal studies or the cataloging of normative behaviors might disentangle the gift from loan and from other categories of exchange.

Finally, sounding a humanistic note at the close of the session, Howard Lamar stated that no matter what the particulars of the research, gift and gift exchange were intimately tied to how we as humans relate to one another. No matter what we as participants discussed, we were all fundamentally discussing the production of ritual, survival, and power in an effort to understand how the human race works.

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The Gift as Material Culture

The essays in this report were prepared for the fourth annual Yale-Smithsonian Seminar on Material Culture, held in Washington, D.C., in April 1991. Representing a broad range of academic disciplines, seminar participants examined gifts as objects of material culture. Their presentations have been revised for publication here, along with summaries of the ensuing discussions and illustrations of some of the objects discussed. They are grouped into three major themes of the seminar: wedding gifts and marital alliances, gifts in economic perspective, and the use of gifts to negotiate political power or to seek religious propitiation.

The Yale-Smithsonian Seminar on Material Culture brings together scholars from both institutions who use multi-disciplinary approaches in the study of material culture. These reports are intended to stimulate thoughtful discussion and to raise further questions that might encourage future research. Reports of these seminars are available from the Yale Center for the Study of American Art and Material Culture. Those published include:

No. 1. Nineteenth-Century American Silver

No. 2. Crossroads of Continents: The Material Culture of Siberia and Alaska

No. 3. The Impact of New Netherlands upon the Colonial Long Island Basin

Reports in preparation are *No. 5. Weapons in American Culture*, *No. 6. Maps as Material Culture*, and *No. 7. Wood: Timber, Transformations, and Design*.