

ETHNOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANS OF THE GIFT

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The roots of the gifts as an institution are relatively deep. It belongs, as indicated by many of its feature, to the category of these phenomena that were formed at the very beginnings of the development of human societies, since it is still preserved, until the present time, as an economic, religious and social institution, among numerous traditional ethnic groups throughout the world. This is confirmed by the existence of abundant data in ethnological literature that was analysed, together with field research factography, by many investigators of the phenomenon, including theoreticians such as M. Mauss, B. Malinowski, C. Lévi Strauss and others who have contributed to its better understanding.

The problem of the gift was, until recently, studied only indirectly, often casually, in many parts of Europe. From 1980s however, more attention is beginning to be paid to research of the gift from the ethnological viewpoint, and A. Zambrzycka-Kunachowicz has to be credited with the initiative for such studies. Collaborators of the Cracaw Ethnological Centre have published a series of ethnological papers dedicated to the study of the gift as an ethnological problem. This has stimulated scientists working in other centres to also pay more attention to this significant ethnological problem.¹

In Yugoslavian ethnology, so far, the existence of gift institutions has been confirmed, further they have been described and generally accepted to be an inseparable component part of magical, religious and social life. However, judging from what has been done up to now, research has mostly been restricted to describing facts concerning the investigated phenomena. In Yugoslavian literature the gift is mentioned in folklore, archive materials and documents of all kinds. The collected and published data enable us, to some extent at least,

to perceive the significance of the gift as a component of life, from the ethnological point of view. The aim of this contribution is to draw attention to some of the problems concerning the gift and, perhaps, to stimulate more profound and thorough research.

II

Understanding the notion of the gift represents the problem of itself. What do the notion and the term really designate? This problem has not been dealt with in Yugoslavian literature so that it still remains open. In the Rječnik (Dictionary) of Vuk Karadžić', gift (dar) is designated as synonymous to present (poklon), ("poklonu se u oči ne gleda"² - don't look a gift horse in the mouth"). In addition to those two basic terms (dar, poklon - gift, present) other names are also used in speech and in written language: zaveštanje (bequest), peškeš (Turk. present) and prezent. These words: dar, poklon, peškeš, prezent, although with similar meanings, are not exactly synonymous. There are some differences, both in terminology and in essence. Besides, the term apple (jabuka), which also, otherwise, has a deeper symbolic meaning, is used to designate the gift, present, grace, in the figurative sense. Other terms are also used, sometimes logically derived from the word dar, such as darovnica (deed of donation), and similar.

It is difficult to define the word dar from the ethnological point of view. Under it a part of certain civilizing system, consisting of series of complex components, among which patterns of behaviour occupy a prominent place, is understood. The gift, in its essence, is free of reciprocal interests between the donor and the receiver. Nevertheless, there is also a folk expression uzdarje (counter gift) meaning that, apart from gratitude, a counter consideration, be it at least a symbolic one, from the recipient's parts, is required as well. Essential feature of the gift is that it is a voluntary act, expressing donor's free will to make a present. However, on certain occasions, especially those which, by means of custom and ritual, mark crucial moments in one's lifetime (birth, marriage, death), it is prescribed who should gift whom, with what kind of present and in what manner the act should be performed. The gift is irrevocable in principle. But, in exceptional cases (ungratefulness of the gifted, desecration of the gift, sudden loss of income or property, and like), gift can be counterdemanded and taken away. However, even though such beha-

viour is sanctioned at the level of proclaimed social norms, if revocation happens at all in reality, it is never met with the approval of the community, all the more so since the gift, always performed publicly, is considered to be the expression of one's voluntary decision to relinquish one's own real or personal property and pass it on to someone else.³

The gift contains, in its essence, elements of magical, religious and social conceptions which represent additional reasons why it is valued and respected as a comport important in establishing relations between individuals and the relevant, smaller and larger groups.

As pointed out by functionalists, the gift is rooted in social relations and structure, what is expressed in ceremonies with relevant material and spiritual content (magic, religious, mythological and others). Essential element of the gift, according to functionalist, is the equivalence, that is, symmetry of services exchanged, without which none of the archaic societies could function. Structuralists, on the other hand, see the gift as a part of the communication system, a cultural phenomenon which could be, like all others for that matter, understood only if analysed within its cultural context.⁴ A. Gurwich pointed out that the gift was, for example, an important element of medieval culture and therefore, by studying it in that context, it would be possible to understand the spirit and people of that time, in the most complete and clear way.⁵ According to Anna Zanbrzycki-Kunachowicz, the gift is a complex category, an element of the overall system, a symbol of social life, a basic expression of solidarity and the simplest way of support, which intimately binds together the ones who are gifted with the ones who gift. It is therefore, an important integrative element within the relevant society.⁶ Gift is prepared for special occasions, and so is the return gift.⁷

Other terms for gift, such as: poklon, zaveštanje, peškeš, prezent, designate gifts of different kind. They consist usually of material goods that are gifted to individuals and institutions out of various reasons, but primarily with an aim to serve as memorials of donors. Such donations, especially those presented to institutions, serve multiple functions: educational, edifying, ethic and humane. Donations to museums, for example, have often enabled their very founding and, later on, in spite of destructions, theft, illegal trade of cultural monuments and possessions, contributed to constant enrichment of museum funds, which, in turn, serve as basic material for studying ethnic and other cultural traits of particular ethnic groups.⁸

III

From the ethnological point of view, it is important to know when, where, how, for what reasons and to whom a gift was given, and also why the institution of the gift subsists at all. The problem becomes even more important if one takes into consideration the fact that various components are merged in it, especially in the ones presented on the occasion of celebrating crucial stages in man's life cycle. Such events and customs that accompany them, on the other hand, very clearly express complexity of the gift as a custom, institution and a system, in full.

Serbian folk tradition emphasizes that the gift is an obligation that should be fulfilled in accord with the traditional norms of behaviour. This is especially evident in Serbian folk poetry. From it we learn that it is considered to be extremely disgraceful and sinful if, on certain occasions, gifts and counter gifts are not exchanged.⁹ In the poem "The Virgin in Hell", man's head burns in flame because he failed to return gifts to his kuma (ritual relationship established through the institution of godfather/mother, and wedding witness):

"Onaj nije darovao kumu:
Kuma njemu svetoga Jovana,
A on njojzi pare ni dinara"¹⁰

In another poem kuma gifted her kum with a golden shirt, but he did not return the gift, and gave her nothing, not even a green apple, which is commented as a big sin, and also as disgraceful behaviour that deserves denouncement:

"Dobro kuma darivala kuma
Dala kumu od zlata košulju
A kum kumu nehte darivati
.Ni od ruke zelene jabuke
To od Boga velika sramota,
A od ljudi pokor i sramota".

Similar scene happens also at baptism, kuma's gifts were not returned which, again was contrary to the custom and God's will ("Ni to nije Bogu po zakonu")¹¹.

Such notions, no doubt, expressed folk world views of the past times. That is the reason why they are so deeply rooted in the system

of customs and beliefs still cherished today, and still retaining some of their former significance and meaning.

In ethnological literature in Yugoslavia, and Serbia especially, there can be found abundant data on folk customs performed at child's birth in the past times. In spite of many variable details in customs, recorded in different regions, some common features are easily perceived in all available descriptions. For instance, everywhere, visitors who come to see the mother and the newborn for the first time, bring presents with them. Among the Serbs in Kosovo, for example, although the same is true for customs in other regions as well, visitors bring "šarena pogača" (flat round bread decorated with simple scribbles on top), together with brandy, wine, salt, onion and honey, if available. The newborn is gifted with an undershirt, shirt, socks, cap and other items that serve as clothes, or for swaddling, as well as with money. These gifts are called "povojnica" and everything but money which is placed directly onto cradle, are given to baby's mother. Nothing black in colour is given to the baby, so that his days would not be miserable ("da detetu ne bude crn vek").¹²

Gifts exchanged at wedding ceremonies greatly vary in kind. They are presented at all crucial points of the ritual and they play a very important role there, because, as observed by M. Maj, they occur whenever social relations between an individual and a group (family, neighbourhood, village community), or between two circles (family-village community) are at stake; that is when the boundaries that exist between them are trespassed.¹³

In Serbia, each household that has been invited to participate at a wedding brings a gift. The usual gifts are food, drink and household accessories that the newly weds might need in their new home. At certain moments gifts are publicly displayed and commented with all kinds of jokes. The only exception from the rule is the kum's gift. It was forbidden to joke with his gift.¹⁴

Attention of the researches studying wedding gifts has been attracted by their great diversity. An interesting scientific problem represents, for instance, the meaning of gifts given to nakonjč (uskutnjače in Eastern Serbia). On bride's arrival to the yard of her husband's house, she is given a male child, about three years old, who she turns around three times, kisses and gifts with socks, a shirt, and sometimes with an apple (always red, so that she would bear healthy, rosy-cheeked children).¹⁵

The newly weds receive all kinds of gifts. Everyone brings what he considers appropriate and what has been prepared in advance, of his own choice. The bride is obliged to return gifts on spot.¹⁶ In the Pirot region (Eastern Serbia), "darovnica" (gifts), that is money, is collected at the wedding feast. The round flat bread (pogača), which kum brought with his other presents, circulates around the table, and each invitee places some money on top of it, as an additional present to the ones in food or goods. In the same region, it is also a custom to "give" money to the bride's shirt after the first marriage night.¹⁷

Marriage ceremonies continue, in a way, after the day of the wedding and the wedding feast. This continuation is evident in mutual visits paid by bride's parents and relatives to her new home ("u pohode"), on one side, and daughter's and son-in-law's return visit ("u prviće") to her maiden home, when she enters it as a married woman for the first time, on the other. In both cases gifts are presented. Bride's parents bring their presents in a basket: flat round bread, money or a garment to their daughter, some underwear or clothes to the son-in-law. Daughter takes a shirt to her mother.¹⁸

The Serbian epic poem "The Marriage of Maksim Crnojević", describes in detail how important the gift was and that it could cause dispute (even bloodshed), if not performed in the proper way. According to the poem, Ivo Crnojević, bride-groom's father, begs Miloš Obrenbegović to act as a bridegroom at the wedding, instead of his son Maksim, whose face has turned ugly because of a skin disease he got infected with after betrothal. Therefore, Ivo gifts the acting bridegroom, Miloš (Maksim's substitute), with "two boots full of gold", as well as with a "golden goblet", a mare and a sabre. Ivo also agrees that Miloš could keep the gifts he will get from his son's in-laws when he goes to fetch the bride. The order in which gifts are presented, and which is equivalent to the one performed in the present day wedding customs, are also clearly described. One of the bride's brothers gives his brother-in-law a black horse, with the bride mounted on its back, and a falcon. The second brother-in-law gives him a sabre; mother-in-law has prepared a golden shirt, while the father-in-law presents him a calpac with feather ornaments. Bride's uncle (father's brother) wraps him with special kind of cloak with circular designs ("kolasta azdija"), worn only by distinguished warriors and aristocrats, with great pride. Servants, standing at the gate, ornate horses with embroidered handkerchiefs, and present shirts or similar garments, wrapped in kerchiefs, to each wedding guest. The order and the way of

presenting gifts described in this poem¹⁹, corresponds in detail to the contemporary wedding ceremony, the only difference being in kind of some gifts. This observation indicates that it would be worthwhile to study the continuity of the phenomenon.

The gift appears in funeral customs as well. Gifts are given to those who have helped during the funeral and posthumous rites. Woman who acted as a cook, for example, gets a kerchief, while grave diggers are given socks or shirts. The person who carried a cross at the head of the funeral procession, also receives a present on the day of the commemorative held one year after death.²⁰

IV

Objects, acts and customs discussed above, indicate that the gift had an inevitable role in folk life. This is evident even from this general review which had the aim to isolate several particular entities in which gift appears, containing both religious and social elements.

According to Christian belief, which have also absorbed various influences, the Lord is gifted with "sacred bread of eternal life" and a "glass of obligatory extolling". This represents the basic nourishment of human beings, and a part of it being sacrificed, expresses gratitude while at the same time it asks for God's blessing. In fact, the saying "I give thee from the gifts thou hath given me" repeats itself in different variants. Gift of this kind is offered indirectly, by means of consuming food by fire and by libation. This is a sacrifice, namely a gift which can neither be revoked nor taken back.

Blood offered to the Lord, the creator and donator of life, is certainly among those gifts which call for especially attentive consideration. Easter lamb is sacrificed to the temple, and this is most probably an element of pastoral culture, once performed without an altar and clergymen in the sense known today. Pastoral gift was not offered as a sacrifice, for it expressed a wish for righteousness and for life in the true sense of the word. Gift to them did not mean an act by which one could redeem a committed sin, but on the contrary a belief in life and future.²¹

Hence, judging from all collected material and opinions gathered, it can be stated that the gift is an institution based on magic, religious, social and cultic elements. These elements are conditioned by

the role a gift plays in individual's or group's life. Therefore, it is evident that the gift as an ethnological problem has to be considered in broader context, since its integrative and social function is far greater than what can be perceived at the first sight. Very often, the gift reflects familial life, social prestige of an individual or of a family, and, it is understood, economic status of the donor. In many cases the gift is a symbol that puts individuals and groups under manifold obligation, both as donors and receivers. That is why, due to its complexity, analysis of the gift roles, explains the entire complexity of life and development of the society. The most recent studies of the gift by the Gracow Ethnological Centre have already proved that this is possible, by using in research and analysis the extremely acceptable premises which facilitate the understanding of this highly complex phenomenon as a scientific problem.

Notes

- ¹Prace etnograficzne, 18, 1983; 20, 1985.
- ²KARADŽIĆ', 1918, s.v. poklon; Karadžić', 1898.
- ³Opća enciklopedija, 1977, s.v. dar.
- ⁴ZAMBRZYCKA-KUNACHOWICZ, A.: 1983, pp.9-10.
- ⁵Ibid., p.11.
- ⁶Ibid., pp.8-9.
- ⁷KARADŽIĆ', 1898, s.v. dar.
- ⁸Cf. Darovi Etnografskog muzeja (J.Bjeladinović', Lj.Certić') 1985.
- ⁹DJORDJEVIĆ', 1941, p.194.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p.195.
- ¹¹Ibid., pp.196-197; Djordjević', 1939, pp.187-189.
- ¹²Vukanović', 1986, pp. 223-224.
- ¹³Maj, 1983, p.61.
- ¹⁴Vukanović', 1986, p.292.
- ¹⁵Panajotović', 1986; Vukanović', 1986, p.280.
- ¹⁶Grđić'-Bjelokosić', 1986, pp.122-123.
- ¹⁷Panajotović', 1986.
- ¹⁸Cf. Vukanović', 1986, p.295.
- ¹⁹Ejurić' (ed.), 1983, pp.426-434.
- ²⁰Cf. Vukanović', 1986, pp.309-320.
- ²¹Peklać, 1986, p.13.

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