

# The Social Aspects of Gift Exchange in Japan

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## Cultural Role of Gift Exchange

In Japanese society gifts are given with far greater frequency than in most Western societies. The occasions for giving gifts are numerous and most of them are determined by strict custom. As in the ancient Greek world of the Iliad and the Odyssey, gifts play an important part in social relationships and communicate basic social positions and attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

As in the ancient Greek society, gift-giving, although not on the huge scale depicted in the Iliad, has significance in terms of status of the giver and recipient. For the Greeks depicted in the Iliad, gift giving had at least as much significance in bestowing status as the *potlatch* of the native Americans of northwest North America. Gift-exchange is a matter of social significance and is one of the major sources of prestige and status in the Greek society as it is portrayed in the Iliad and the Odyssey. The gift and counter gift were a pair and no gift existed without creating the obligation of a reciprocal or counter gift.

In Japanese society as well, the debt incurred by the acceptance of a gift, whether the gift be of a type dictated by social custom or of a more free type wherein gift giving is customary but not mandatory, is emphasized and even demanded.

In the simplest terms, the message communicated by a gift is that the giver considers the receiver to have some fashion of special relationship to the giver. By its nature, the concept of

"gift" involves the identity of the giver and a personal human relationship is involved. Without the identity of the giver, a gift would take on the nature of currency exchange. The position of giver is perhaps based on the system of the earliest human societies in which the provider of food, especially that taken by hunting, had the right of distribution of whatever he had gathered to others according to the relationship perceived.<sup>2</sup>

This would, of course begin with family and extend beyond that according to the feeling of social proximity. It is thought that one of the reasons that the human male is in a position of dominance in most social grouping derives from the male's position of hunter in primitive societies. Hunting itself was a male function because of his greater strength, but the importance to the community was in the male's position as distributor of whatever was taken in the hunt. Whatever the standard for distribution, be it proximity of relationship, protection of the weaker or younger, or simply to the physically stronger, the position of the one who distributes the spoils identified him as the leader of the community. The English word "Lord" derives from an Old English word meaning the "loaf keeper"<sup>3</sup> and indicates position by the function of being in charge of the foodstuffs of the community, indicating that any subject of a "lord" would be in a position to participate in the largesse of the lord according to his own position within the community.

It is thus a very important function of gift-giving to indicate the relationship between the giver and the recipient. This relationship may indeed be different for different types of societies. In societies in which gift-giving is a major factor in distributing the wealth of the group, this relationship can indeed be vital to the livelihood of any member of the group.

Even in societies in which gift giving is not a major source of economic distribution, gifts still have the function of indicating the relationship between the giver and the recipient. This, in fact, is the main reason that gift exchange is surrounded by so many customary rules in most cultures, in order to communicate the proper nuance of relationship.

### Japanese Gifts

Japanese gifts are divided into *okurimono* (贈物) and *shinmotsu* (進物), the former a gift given to an equal or inferior, the latter a gift given to a superior. This division is thus according to the relationship of the giver to the recipient and is an indication of the differences in motivation for gifts given to superiors and those given to inferiors. The motivation for a gift given to an equal or inferior would include love, kinship, including the duty of support, a desire to receive obedience or obeisance; while gifts to a superior would include respect and desire to receive protection or support in exchange. Religions always have some manner of gift-giving to a Deity, considering the gift able to get a response of some hoped-for blessing. In the history of religions there have been many types of gifts to the gods, starting with human life and blood. In many religions these are votive offerings given as a part of or on completion of a vow. In the Christian religion these offerings or gifts to God are often called sacrifices, that it to "make the thing holy" and their worth is considered to be in the proportion to how much the thing given to God is valued by the giver. In Japan, gifts offered to the gods are a type of *shinmotsu* called *sonaemono* (供え物, things offered up) and while, in the distant past there were indeed human sacrifices, the tradition is now that most offerings

are of food, especially rice and rice wine, *sake*.

Customary gift-giving in Japan includes; *senbetsu* (餞別, going-away gift), *oseibo* (お歳暮, year-end gift), *otoshidama* (お年玉, New Years gift), *chugen* (中元, middle-of-the-year gift), *omimai* (お見舞, gifts to one sick or having had some other misfortune), *kekkon* (結婚, wedding) and other *iwai* (祝い, congratulatory gift), *kouden* (香典, gift of condolence for bereavement).

### Japanese Gift Reciprocity

Though no gift-giving is totally free of obligation of return, in most societies the obligation is informal and not specifically designated as to time or quality. In Japan, however, not only do all the gifts mentioned above have another gift given in return by the receiver called, in general, *okaeshi* (お返し, return gift), but in most cases the timing of the return gift is specified by custom. The most important form of return gift is the *orei* (お礼, literally a "righteous action") which is a gift given in return for some favor or work done for some reason other than economic gain such as friendship or some other social relationship.

In most Western societies, the *orei* would not be considered a gift so much as a stipend for services rendered. In Japan, the *orei*, however, is considered a type of gift since the motive for performing whatever service is involved is a non-economic social relationship. If a person is asked to address a study group, for example, whatever is given to the speaker is called an *orei* and though there is no formal scale of payment, the amount of such a gift would be determined by the people requesting the talk (unless the person is a professional speaker with a manager or the like) according to a certain customary rate. Being stingy with an *orei* is highly disgraceful since it shows a disre-

gard for the social relationship within which the "favor" was done, (as opposed to a business contract in which the terms are delineated and the amount settled upon on an economic basis by the parties involved.) There is a certain hypocrisy in considering the *orei* a gift, since their amount is indeed often determined by the person receiving it under that guise such as the Buddhist monk for chanting the sutras, etc.

Among the return gifts can be included *omiyage* (お土産), the souvenir given by a returning traveler, especially to anyone having given a going-away gift, soon after the return from a trip, and the *zenkaiwai* (全快祝い, gift celebrating recovery) to those who have given a person a gift of condolences for being sick, soon after returning home from the hospital, for example. St. Valentine's Day has been given a very Japanese-style twist, perhaps distantly related to Sadie Hawkins Day in Dogpatch on the 29th of February, when the women are supposedly allowed to chase the men. In Japan, February 14 is celebrated by women, usually girls, giving chocolate to boyfriends and sometimes teachers or male colleagues at work. There is, however, in the Japanese fashion, a return gift made on March 14 which is called "White Day." Thus it can be said that even gifts not traditionally found in Japanese customs give rise to a specific obligation of return. Birthday presents given by children to their peers at a birthday party given by the parents require that some kind of return gift which might be called "favors" in America be received as a return for the gift given.

### Types of Japanese Gifts

As gift-exchange apparently began as a system of food distribution, food has always been an important part of gift-

exchange systems, especially in such systems where gifts to the gods (sacrifices) are a source of livelihood for the priesthood, as with the votive offerings of ancient Greece, or even today in many societies of Asia.<sup>4</sup> The types of gifts in Japanese society are also many and varied. Except for gifts such as *omimai* which are intended for the aid of the recipient, most Japanese gifts are traditionally items of food, rice cakes which are often a symbol of the soul, *sake*, etc. In many cases of *omimai* as well, the sharing of food together is also thought to lend strength to the person in need. In visiting the sick, gifts were customarily food which was eaten by the giver together with the recipient. Even in cases where the recipient was gravely ill, food was left by the visitor at the pillow-side of the patient. There are types of *omimai* which are communal dinners. The sharing of food symbolizing the sharing of the strength of the community with one in need. Those unable to attend these dinners are sent portions specially wrapped for them at the end of the dinner.

### Frequency and Value of Gifts

The frequency of gift exchange in Japan is indicated by a 1969-70 study made of the amount of expenses that were involved in giving gifts rural areas of Japan.<sup>5</sup> It was found that the average household gave an average of 8.1 gifts per month which cost an average of 7.5 percent of the household's monthly income. All these gifts signify some relationship, but the type of relationship varies with the type of gift, and the proximity of the relationship is often described by the quality or the price of the gift. This is especially true in gifts of condolence at funerals or at weddings where the proximity of relationship will dictate the amount of the gift and main purpose of the gift is some kind

of financial aid. On the other hand, the status of either the recipient or the giver may determine the proper level of gift. For any gift there is a current norm for each status and for each level of proximity. For example, at a funeral in Hokkaido at present, (1998) the minimum norm for a gift at a funeral would be around three thousand yen. If, for example, you never knew the deceased but work for relative, this would be a sufficient sum to offer. On the other hand, if you are the president of a company that had dealings with the deceased, or are a professor at a university where the deceased or his children attended, your norm might jump to 10,000 yen or more. It is estimated by a person who works for a certain undertaker in Hokkaido that the average is around seven thousand yen.<sup>6</sup> The gift of condolence (香典) is considered help to defray the costs of the funeral and, in fact, depending on the size of the funeral and number of mourners, the costs might well be fully met and even a net profit result.

In the case of weddings, however, although there are many gifts exchanged among the members of the wedding and the guests, the expenses in gifts for the average wedding far outstrip any return income. This is perhaps due to the underlying perception of weddings in Japan as establishing a relationship not just between the bride and groom, but between the families involved; with different roles, obligations and duties assigned to each participant according to their role in the relationship. There is, for example, what would be considered in some societies the "bride price" (結納) or *yuino*, literally the money "received for tying together" and is supposed to amount to about three month's wages of the groom.

This is given to the parents of the bride and averages about

800,000 yen today, but this also gives rise to the obligation of reciprocity and the return gift averages somewhat over 100,000 yen.<sup>7</sup> There are also gifts given to the person who acts as match-maker or go-between for the wedding. This role today is mostly ceremonial and usually performed by the head of the department or company president, etc. in the workplace of the groom, but still has some obligation in terms of giving advice or otherwise trying to see the newlyweds through any major problems after the wedding. Called *nakoudo* (仲人, the person between), the customary gift or *orei* is usually 20 - 30 percent of the amount of the *yuino*, though somewhat less if the *nakoudo* had no function in the actual matchmaking, as is most frequent today. The *nakoudo* will often give a gift to the newlyweds but the price of such a gift must be added to the value of the above *orei* gift given to the *nakoudo*.

### Obligation of Gift Giving

In other words, any particular relationship dictates a certain duty in gift-giving. And any gift, in turn, dictates a duty of reciprocity in some form or other. In this sense, souvenirs which, in the West, designate tokens to remember places visited on a trip, in Japan, under the guise of *omiyage* (お土産), which literally means "an object made in that place," are *de rigueur* gifts that are a part of the expenses of any extended trip. (There are companies that will do the shopping for those who feel it a burden to shop abroad for the various people they must give *omiyage* to on returning from the trip. The company delivers them to the designated person shortly after the projected date of the return of the person so contracting.) *Omiyage* are not given only to those from whom a *senbetsu* has been received,

but also to members of the family, close kin and friends, as well as the boss in the workplace or others to whom indebtedness is felt. The price or quality of the *omiyage* is mainly determined by the status of the receiver rather than the giver, people having higher status receiving higher quality souvenirs, although the size of any *senbetsu* received on departure also figures into the selection of an *omiyage*.

### Gifts for Future Favors

Of particular interest are year-end gifts. Year-end gifts are found in most parts of the world. Even Christmas gifts have their origin in the desire to settle all accounts before the New Year begins. In Japanese society, the year-end gift is not actually a repayment for some specific favor done, but it does make the statement that there is a desire to finish up any debts and start the new year in an economically pristine state. In Japan this has taken the form of "*oseibo*" (お歳暮, year-ending gift) in which those who feel indebted to someone for previous favors send gifts to those people. There is, however, a tendency not only to give gifts to those to whom one might have been indebted in the past, but to give them to people who are in a position to do favors for one in the future. Today, for example, the head of a company or a department within a company, or anyone in charge of making assignments of staff, especially in the public sector such as in education, will usually receive large amounts of year-end gifts and, somewhat less but still plentiful mid-year gifts. For this reason, *oseibo* and *chugen* are frowned upon officially as being a form of bribery by most companies and by the civil service area as a whole, but ignoring such official disapproval is universal, the perceived need to curry favor

overcoming any token disapproval that may be incurred.

In contrast to *oseibo*, *otoshidama* is a gift given after the New Year begins, usually from superior to inferior rather than to the superior by an inferior. Today it usually takes the form of money given to children by parents, aunts, uncles, etc. In the past it had a wider range and took the form of rice cakes or other food.

### Gift Exchange in Japanese Economics and Politics

Gift-giving is not simply a random result of cultural selection of means of communicating social roles, but rather a system dictated by the social philosophy of Japan. As such, it is not a system which may fall easily out of custom. Culturally, the Japanese are extremely aware of the society within which they find themselves, and for the adult Japanese, an action entirely independent of consideration of social repercussion is impossible, or nearly so. This one social aspect is largely responsible for the gift-giving which goes on in the economic sphere in Japan. Japanese companies spend formidable sums on entertainment of clients, prospective clients, even those who may possibly be in the market for the company's wares in the future, people in the public sector related to the companies' interests. For the most part, this entertainment, or sometimes outright gifts, are considered an advertising expense by most businesses in Japan. In recent months this has received much publicity in cases where banks have lavishly entertained people who belong to the bank examining sector of the government. There has also been an outcry recently against entertainment practices of sections of public bodies entertaining the employees of other related public bodies, a practice which would seem to be a waste

of public funds, or else a form of bribery in which one public body is in a subsidiary relationship to another.

The total elimination of such practices has hardly been a viable alternative in Japan. When the gift giving and receiving practices of businesses and public bodies come into question, as it does more and more often because of the increased international economic activities of Japan, the rules governing entertainment of clients, etc. in Western nations such as the United States are mentioned, but following the laws in effect in America, for example, of limiting a tax deductible entertainment at lunch to five dollars or so is simply scoffed at as not being possible within the social context of Japanese society. Indeed, the imperatives in Japanese society of demonstrating relationships by gift-giving of various types, including entertainment, is probably unavoidable, international ethics notwithstanding.

The most important thing in Japanese society, including the business world, are the human relationships. That is to say, for example, in any business contract in Japan, the price and quality of the product are conditioned by the social relationship between the contracting parties. Simply selling a product for less is not necessarily competitive in Japan, the history of the social relationships between the two forming the background against which any contract is made. These social relationships are produced and maintained by means of gift-exchange, usually in the form of entertaining by one or both parties. These relationships necessary to doing business in Japan also produce a form of price-fixing in any form of business contract that involves bidding. The relationships among those of any particular business sector bidding for a contract precludes simply competing by attempting to make the cheapest bid. Considering the relation-

ships among the businesses involved, there is most usually a general agreement upon which company should make the winning bid. The contract itself is a form of gift to the business to which it is awarded by default, the reciprocal obligation demanding the return in future bidding contracts. Even in Japan this is illegal, but since it is in conformity with the values of Japanese culture, it prevails in spite of occasional reprimands from the law.

Gifts which can be construed as bribery given to politicians are hardly limited to Japan and the forms of such gifts are generally similar to other societies. Most political gifts, when discovered, are labeled "contributions to the political party" which are much less restricted in Japan than elsewhere.

The problem for the Ministry of Justice is dividing party contributions from bribes. Since there is a Japanese saying that "the only thing that moves without payment is an earthquake," on the practical side, most Japanese politicians are thought to participate in this practice. There is the famous case of the then Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka who was arrested, tried and found guilty of receiving a 300-million-yen bribe (about \$2,300,000 today) for expediting the sale of Lockheed aircraft to All Japan Airways. Although Tanaka was forced to resign from the office of Prime Minister, he continued to serve in the Diet and was regularly re-elected from his district in Niigata Prefecture. The general reflection was that he had "just been caught" doing what all politicians do. Recently a representative to the Diet committed suicide after having been indicted for "letting" a brokerage house make money for him on the stock market in an illegal fashion. This particular Diet member had campaigned for clean government continuously and after he

died his father ranted at the press, "Why did you crucify him for doing what everyone else does?" It is suspected that in his "clean politics" campaign he had stepped on several toes and was set up to have the political gifts that he had been receiving exposed.

### Rejection of a Gift

The cultural rule of acting as a group in any situation in which people are forced into being part of a society, not acting in unison with the rest of the group is seen as rejection of the group, and the group then views the person so acting as a renegade. Gifts were used in medieval Europe to bind the people to the one governing. King Alfred was called the "Ring Giver" for giving such gifts to his retainers. The acceptance of such a gift binds the receiver to the giver in some way, recognizing a certain superiority and trust. The refusal of such a gift would mean the rejection of the giver and his trust. Today, even in elementary schools in Japan, the independently-acting pupil will be the object of much teasing, if not downright bullying. This is especially true of children who have started their school careers in America or Europe and return to Japan, entering elementary school here in the middle elementary school grades. This attitude of awareness of group relationships shows no tendency to diminish, even in the youngest Japanese. While the group relationships in kindergarten or elementary school may not be formed through gift-exchange, the customs of gift exchange and the role they play in forming and maintaining group relationships is learned very early. School children are certainly aware that giving a gift creates an obligation for the recipient, and understand very early that they have incurred an

obligation by accepting a gift.

### The Future of Gift Exchange in Japan

A culture transmits its values to its young people along with its mother's milk, so to speak, and to see the future of the gift-exchange system in Japan it should only be necessary to examine the way the youngest Japanese respond to the cultural customs concerning human relationships.

With the strict group awareness predominating in the Japanese society even in the earliest years, it is hard to conceive of a rapid change in this custom of gift exchange which forms such a substantial support for this social consciousness. To ask whether the custom of gift-exchange is falling out of fashion with the young people of Japan is the same as asking whether the young people of Japan are becoming less Japanese in the sense of awareness of the group.

The answer to such a question is most probably "no" for the foreseeable future. The underlying cultural imperative of using gifts to recognize the social relationships within one's own group as having significance does not seem to have changed significantly in recent years, and can be expected to continue since the opposite would be a rejection of very basic Japanese cultural values, for which there is no evidence.

Many of the gift-exchange customs have changed over the years. What is now a "middle-of-the-year" gift exchange, *chugen* (中元) used to occur on the first day of the eighth month called *hassaku* (八朔) which had to be prohibited by the Shogunate because the usage had become extreme among the *samurai* class in the same way *oseibo* and *chugen* are frowned upon today in the civil service. In spite of these year-end and mid-year

gift exchanges not being in favor in official circles, the custom is too much a part of the culture to prohibit officially. The institution of "White Day" can be taken as indicative of the adherence of the young people of Japan to the custom the Japanese style of gift-exchange, this "return-gift" celebration being almost entirely limited to young people, older people often sneering at this "new" custom.

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- 7) Figures taken from いざというときどうする大百科:主婦と生活社1995.

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