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GIFT GIVING I. INTRODUCTION

The subject of gift giving is often treated in the humanities and the social sciences under the general rubric of exchange. Gift giving and charity, barter and commerce, taxation and tribute, bribe and extortion, constitute major kinds of exchange. In many instances, these apparently distinct modes of exchange overlap with each other, as in the case of pre-modern Persia, where gift exchange often merged with tribute and taxation and functioned as a primary mechanism of redistribution in the society. Gift exchange, along with other kinds of exchange, is considered a basic and universal part of social life in all societies, from the primitive and archaic to the modern. It is in the course of exchange that various goods are circulated among members of the community and human beings construct and maintain social organization. Furthermore, the mode and manner of exchange are always regulated by religion, law, customs, and convention, and depictions of exchange usually carry a symbolic load and connotation. Finally, gift exchange in modern society takes place, with the exception of charity, primarily in the private domain (in its widest sense, ranging from individual donations to worthy causes to corporate hospitality as an implicit form of advertising), whereas in primitive and archaic societies it occurred in the social and political domain, where kinship, religion, and the administrative body were primarily involved in the exchange of goods and gifts. Furthermore, the role of religion and secular thought, of winning divine approval and gaining royal rewards, in formulating the shifting concepts of gifts and the vocabulary associated with it, exemplified in words like *ṣadaqa* and *ṣela*, needs to be examined in a historical framework, using all available evidence, from religious and legal

dissertations to panegyric poetry.

The subject of gift giving has been central to anthropology since Marcel Mauss' pioneering monograph, *Essai sur le don, forme archaïque de l'échange* (Paris, 1925), which first appeared as an article in the journal *L'Année sociologique* (n.s. 1, 1923-24, pp. 30-186), and Branislaw Malinowski's contributions of the same period, which were then followed by Claude Lévi-Straus' work in the 1940s-50s. Mauss pointed to the existence of an elementary morality of reciprocity in primitive societies based on three obligations: to give, to receive, and to return. This theme was further developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss who suggested the idea that the universal structure of reciprocity is the foundation for all social life from primitive to modern (Lévy-Strauss, 1949, pp. 66-86; idem, 1996, pp. 52-68).

The role of reciprocity and the respective share of self-interest and altruism in gift exchange are the main theoretical questions that have been addressed by dozens of anthropologists, sociologists, and economists. Marshall Sahlins (1965, pp. 147-48), reviewing the works of social scientists, advanced a continuum of motives for gift giving from "generalized reciprocity" or pure gift (referring to transactions that are putatively altruistic and the terms of reciprocity, if any, are not defined), to "balanced reciprocity," referring to direct and equivalent exchange, to "negative reciprocity," referring to the attempt to get something for nothing where the participants are oriented to maximizing their own interests at the other's expense.

Although these conceptual contributions are useful guidelines for studying various aspects of gift giving in primitive and modern societies, they are not directly applicable to ancient empires and pre-modern kingdoms such as Persia. One illuminating and useful analysis of the distinctive properties of exchange in pre-modern societies in contrast to modern market economies is presented by Karl Polanyi. The principle modes of exchange have been taken by Polanyi to identify different types of economic systems: Those that are based principally on reciprocity, those based on redistributive activities of tribal chiefs and governments, and those based on markets. He maintains that while "market exchange" is the dominant mode of transaction in modern society, "reciprocity" is the dominant mode of transaction in primitive society. "Redistribution" of wealth and products by the central and local administration, he believes, is the dominant mode of transaction in ancient empires and pre-modern kingdoms. Furthermore, he suggests that in pre-modern societies (both primitive and archaic) the economy functioned as a by-

product of kinship, and political and religious obligations. Where local and inter-regional markets and foreign trade existed in pre-modern societies they were often confined to limited items and nowhere created an economy-wide system. Finally he notes that while market exchange integrates the modern capitalist society, reciprocity and redistribution integrated primitive and archaic societies. According to Polanyi, the process of redistribution constituted part of the prevailing political regime in all archaic kingdoms and ancient empires, whether it be the tribe, city-state, or in despotic, or feudal regimes. He believes that mixed individual motives accounts for gift giving in pre-modern societies where economic gain is not the primary motive. These motives include custom and law, magic and religion (Polanyi, pp. 48-55).

Polanyi's concept of redistributive transactions in ancient empires has been noted by scholars who have worked on ancient Persia, including those who contributed to a collection of essays presented in a conference on the tribute system in Persian Empire and particularly by Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg in her paper, "Gifts in the Persian Empire" (Briant and Herrenschmidt, pp. 129-46)

The available historical information on the Islamic period indicates the continuity of tributory and redistributive nature of gift exchange from pre-Islamic period. As in many other aspects of cultural and political life, including court ceremonies and festivities, the writers of the Islamic period looked back on the traditions of pre-Islamic Iran and its rulers for emulation and guidance and in the resulting anecdotal literature, stories about gifts and the generosity of Sasanian monarchs would appear side by side examples taken from the more immediate past. In fact, even a cursory look at the literature of medieval Persia would reveal an abundance of references, discussions, and allusions to gifts and gift giving, confirming Franz Rosenthal's observation that "literature (in the narrow sense of the term) tells us more about gifts than it does about commercial transactions" ("Hiba," in *EI2* III, p. 342). Thus Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* abounds in passages describing gifts and gift giving (see *hadye*, *rahāvard*, *xilʿat*, *baxšiš*, *baxšīdan* in Wolff, *Glossar*), including incidents where gifts are given to taunt rather than to please as well as passages giving an extensive list of presents from one ruler to another *(Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] 7, pp. 61-62). Similarly, most historical accounts and chronicles, including *Tārīḵ-e Sīstān*, Bayhaqī's *Tārīḵ-e masʿūdī*, Gardīzī's *Zayn al-aḵbār*, and Rāvandī's *Rāḥat al-ṣodūr*, not only cite and catalog incidents of gift giving, but use these accounts to hint at the ruler's wisdom and generosity or his avarice or profligacy and

the general well-being of the kingdom at the time, turning the vocabulary and discourse of gifts and gift giving into a gloss on the state of the land. These relationships are expanded on and even turned into specific chapters in the so-called mirrors for princes and books on statecraft and warfare such as *Adāb al-ḥarb wa'l-šajāʿa* (q.v.) by Faḵr-e Modabber (q.v.) and Yaḥyā b. Ṣāʿed b. Aḥmad's *Ḥadāʾeq al-sīar*. *Adāb al-ḥarb*, for example, begins with a chapter on the virtues of generosity and compassion regarding rulers and contains a series of stories in which gifts play a crucial part. Another chapter (6, pp. 142-60), entitled "On sending envoys with gifts and presents and on the related rules of decorum," expounds on the use of gifts as diplomatic weapons and relates anecdotes in which skilful and experienced envoys bearing ingenious gifts succeed in manipulating the recipient court into accepting their own patron's demands. The chapter also includes a long list of suggested gifts (pp. 147-48) including precious manuscripts, slaves of both gender, fine garments, horses, camels, various well crafted weapons of war, gems, ivory, fur and leather goods, textiles, spices, and exotic animals and hunting animals and birds including cheetahs, hounds, and falcons, an inventory which is more or less repeated in accounts of gifts throughout the medieval period.

In Yaḥyā b. Ṣāʿed b. Aḥmad's *Ḥadāʾeq al-sīar*, a short manual written for the Saljuqid ʿAlāʾ-al-Dīn Kayqobād (616-34/1220-37), a small section on gifts (p. 368), advises the offering of gifts to princes on important dates on the royal calendar including such public festivities as Nowrūz and Mehragān, as well as on more specifically personal occasions like the auspicious day marked for bloodletting (q.v.) or taking medicinal cures. It quotes a couple of aphorisms on the pragmatic benefits of bestowing gifts: "*Ṣadaqa* (alms) takes care of calamities in the next world and *hadīya* (gift) the misfortunes of this (world)," and "nothing is more effective in abating the wrath of kings and pleasing them than gifts." (p. 368).

Ann K. S. Lambton, who has produced one of the few studies on gift giving in Islamic Persia based on a close study of the available literature, traces the development of *pīškaš* from "a free gift to a tribute imposed on individuals and communities and a tax attached to the land and to certain offices." Lambton's thesis on voluntary aspects of *pīškaš* in the early Islamic period may signify a break in the tributary character of the practice in the early Islamic times and a return to the pre-Islamic practice from Mongol administration to the end of Qajar period. This view may be based on the institutionalization of a variety of gifts levied by the central administration

from the Mongol era to the Safavid period which culminated in the establishment of the office of registrar of public gifts in the latter period (see below).

Lambton also points to the all pervasive nature of *pīškaš* in an insecure environment: “In the absence of security□, it was generally recognized that, since power was personal and arbitrary, ‘protection’ must be sought on a personal basis. Further, it was generally understood that ‘protection’ and leadership□ could not be given without material support” (p. 158).

Finally, it must be noted that the political practice of gift exchange in pre-modern Persia included three main categories: (1) gift exchange between rulers(*hadīya*); (2) gifts given by notables and other social strata to the rulers and high ranking officials (*pīškaš*); and (3) gifts given by the caliphs and rulers to the governors, notables, and commoners of their realm (*aṭīya* and *baḵšeš*).

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