

# Ritual Exchange and its Economic Aspects in Traditional Culture

Ivashchenko Y.S.

Department of History and Politology  
Novosibirsk State Technical University  
Department of Education Management  
Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University  
Novosibirsk, Russia  
iva\_ya@mail.ru

Ivanov A.A.

Department of Philosophy and History  
Siberian University of Consumer Cooperation  
Novosibirsk, Russia  
larsandr@mail.ru

**Abstract**—The article discusses the economic aspects of ritual exchange in cultures with an appropriating type of economy. Traditional culture is considered as a system in which economic exchange is subject to symbolic exchange, this is expressed in the ritualization of the economy and economic relations. We study the structural elements of rituals in their relationship with economic practices. The historical evolution of the ritual communication is associated with the dynamics of economic relations with other cultures.

**Keywords**—ritual, economy, exchange, gift, symbol, ritual feeding

## I. INTRODUCTION

Economic and ritual behavior of man has historically been looked upon as a dichotomy. It has been held that an economic agent relies upon *ratio* whereas ritual agent's doings are irrational. Preponderance of ritualized activities in archaic and traditional societies rules out the power of economic exchange that is based mainly on an abstraction from all and any good/money relationships. Domination of the latter is what deritualizes social relationships reducing them all down to the act of selling/purchase. Nonetheless, economy and ritual cannot be possibly taken apart if we are to deal with cultural and historic material. Ritual acts need to be economically sustained, while economic acts often include ritualized forms of behavior.

Studies of economic aspects of ritual and ritual aspects of economic operations are done within the limits of the so-called ritual economy [1, 2] which analyzes the materialization of a worldview through the study of the contexts in which objects are assigned meaning and worth [3]. Normally, research in this area deals with traditional agricultural societies boasting enough surplus product [4] or with modern cultures at the stage of partial modern-ization [5, 6].

In this paper we present our findings in the field of analysis of economic aspects of ritual exchange in the traditional culture of indigenous tribes of the Amur River region, with the appropriating economy type.

## II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

Ritual economy is substantially a conception according to which economy per se, political power, belief systems and

human activity are intertwined intimately. This thesis is also characteristic of the institutional theory, according to which market interactions are based on certain social institutions, cultural principles and legal strategies.

The basis of this approach is the ideas of K. Polanyi, M. Moss, M. Weber: "The emphasis in this approach is on the embeddedness of economy in social institutions. Here, it analyses provisioning and consumption not based on the common standards and norms of price and income, but by the informal requirements of culture and society. These thinkers postulate that the analysis of provisioning based on feelings, meanings, habits, heritage, traditions, attitudes, social, and economic consciousness precede the formal and normative assumptions held by economists" [6].

The problem of the relationship between economics and ritual can be approached from two perspectives: study of rituals of economy – ritual forms accompanying economic acts and their functions from the point of view of economic goals; study of economics of ritual – economic aspects of ritual activity or, in other words, the economy, "embedded" in the ritual.

In the current study we use the second approach, based on the idea that ritual in traditional cultures is what regulates human interaction, including economic exchange, on the basis of values and norms that are different from those reigning in the goods/money exchange economy [2]. Ritual contributes to economic process standardization, making it subject to the "cultural template" of social exchange: it forms the idea of an economic agent as donator or benefactor and emphasizes the social significance of goods being exchanged: "the willingness of someone to trade with a stranger ultimately requires that people respond in-kind and deliver on their responsibilities and agreements. Within this context, to the extent that rituals play a role in communicating trust and reciprocity, they can have a positive effect on economic outcomes" [7]. In lieu of quantitative assessment of exchanged goods' value/price, comes qualitative evaluation of ritual requirements and composition/arrangement of ritual objects.

Thus, ritual exchange is a type of symbolic exchange, in which the consumer value of a thing as a commodity is replaced by the symbolic significance of a thing as a gift. The

ritualization of economic processes in traditional culture should be manifested in the translation of economic values into the language of ritual signs and symbols. Finding out how ritual reflects and includes economic processes, means viewing it as a symbolic communication whose elements in their interaction implicate economic relations and interactions present in this or that particular society.

The materials of the analysis were ethnographic studies of the indigenous peoples of the Amur region and the results of the authors' field studies in the villages of the Khabarovsk Krai.

### III. ECONOMY TYPE VS RITUAL TYPE

Indigenous peoples of the Amur River region are: the Ulchis, the Udegei, the Gilyaks, the Negidals, the Evenkis, the Orochis and, the most populous of all, the Nanais. All these tribes, with the exception of the Gilyaks, belong to the Tungus-Manchu language group. We shall limit the scope of our study to the traditional culture of these genetically related ethnicities (Tungus-Manchu) as it was in the period from late XIX C till 1930ies, the threshold of the region's Sovietization. This stretch of cultural history of these peoples in the Amur River region is generally held to be traditional.

Economy of this region's tribes was holistically appropriating and included hunting, fishing and gathering/foraging with a special accent on fish. We don't find there any such surplus product that would have been sufficient for sustaining political and religious institutions, as is appropriate for agricultural civilizations; their society's structure was based on clan egalitarian interrelations. Yet, even here the volume of gathering, distribution and consumption of its produce can't be explained solely by the needs of individual households. Part of the economic results was used for establishing long-term social relations both within a clan and between clan-based households.

One of the examples of this is the practice called *nimat* that is common among all Tungus peoples. *Nimat* means "gift" and implies dividing a carcass of a large kill and allocating its parts to all of a village's residents. Normally the hunter himself retained only its head and heart, being the symbols of future successful hunting. In return, he got social respect and the right to go hunting in the territory of those clans whose members he endowed with the meat. This particular type of exchange is a ritual, first and foremost, in the sense that it is based not on the economic calculation of the volumes of exchanged goods, but on their symbolic value – the ability to represent its agent and boost social status: "Anything given, or in a wider sense, any object involved in the gift exchange, acts not simply as the material (in the understanding of economists) property of the person who gives it, and not just as the wealth accumulated by him (capital) - in some way this object is a continuation of the giver himself, of this thing, to a certain extent, to be a kind of analogue of the flesh and blood of a person who brings the gift" [8]. Ritualized gifting, at the same time, has a very conspicuous social and economic significance of long-term cooperation and establishment of inter-relations within an autarkic economy.

The appropriating nature of economy reflects itself in Tungus-Manchu practical religion. These peoples viewed the outside world as a constellation of heavenly gods, spirits

guarding land and water and some other ghosts (ancestors, familiar/household gods, evil spirits, unfriendly dead souls, etc.). Except for the former, interaction with these "quasi-subjects" [9] had the character of ritual feedings, offerings or co-feasting/eating (giving a share of food). All these would be reasonably labelled ritualistic sacrifice if we had to do here with the blessing of the offering and its investing with a special sacral status. Conversely, here we rather talk of a practically equal exchange without any trace of religious piety; before one gets something one has to give.

The symbolic nature of gift exchange with spirits makes itself felt also in that the volume of the offering is really small: a pinch of tobacco, a splash of vodka or a handful of cereals, etc. A gift here is essentially a symbol of it that is sufficient to persuade the other party to exchange gifts/benefits. The value, with which sacral objects are endowed, is preserved regardless of their quantity. The law of diminishing marginal utility is not dominant over it.

The practical expediency of such an economical approach to mythological gift-giving spirits representing natural factors and resources is obvious in the context of the natural conditions of Russia's Far East that can't be called too boon towards man. In other words, ritual economy within the appropriating economy doesn't imply "materialization of ideology" [10], but "ideologization" of material activity, i.e. symbolic shaping of the use of natural resources in the situation when information on possible outcomes is rather asymmetrical: "Where buyers face asymmetric information and indiscernible quality, low-quality sellers have an incentive to offer their goods as if they were high-quality. This leads to a pooling equilibrium, undermining the ability of true high-quality sellers to distinguish... This logic can be extended beyond purely economic interactions and can be applied to social and political interactions as well... Many rituals can be understood as a signal to overcome the problem of asymmetric information" [7]. The rituals of feeding and co-feasting/eating are signs of "mutual joint intent", including the guarding spirit in a symbolic exchange. Since there can be no reliable indicators of reciprocal donation, the gift is minimal from an economic point of view and is a "pure" symbol of "voluntary coercion".

At the same time, we can't call Tungus-Manchu economy in the Amur River region utterly autarkical. Over many centuries, trade relations with other countries had formed themselves: with the Eastern Asia, mostly China, later with the Russian Empire. Among most common export goods were furs, while imported were various comforts of agricultural civilization like tobacco, strong spirits, metals and metal instruments (household gear and utensils, weapons), jewelry, cereals, tea and a lot more. Imported commodities would often become exchange equivalent items within the region, also items for material accumulation, and finally get their proper place in the processes of cross-clan exchange.

The idea of the value of all those goods was shaped though their inclusion in the ritual exchange with ghosts. With the emergence of new items for trade exchange, new heavenly gods were included in the pantheon, interaction with whom had a more hierarchic nature of worship. This vertically oriented

hierarchy in the worship of a sky god reflected in itself the inequality of trade exchange with more developed civilizations.

#### IV. RITUAL AND ECONOMIC EXCHANGE: STRUCTURE

The structure of economic exchange can be reduced to interaction of two economic agents aimed at benefiting by both through this activity. Ritual communication is more complex and includes several intermediate links. First, ritual exchange is applied to a practical social act, second, involves invoking a quasi-subject (spirit, ghost, deity) as the source of the benefit, third, is per se a symbolic act linking the subject and the outcome through a proxy system of ritual objects, acts and their combinations/arrangements. Dealing with household matters or economic activity, the ritual fills them with cultural symbols and meanings.

Below we shall outline the structure of ritual communication as it is found in the culture of Tungus-Manchu peoples of the Amur River region; it is an interaction of a series of components: the addresser (a real person performing a ritual); the addressee (a quasi-subject receiving the message from whom some reciprocal action is expected); the ritual object; the goal of the ritual (i.e. expected outcome if the procedure is properly carried out).

1. *The addresser.* Analysis of addresser types (ritual subjects) demonstrates traditional economic differentiation based on age-sex division of labour. The ritual addresser, due to his/her sex, had to deal with certain types of economic/household activities, for the sake of which he/she clinched ritual 'deals' with very specific addressees, i.e. guardian spirits 'in charge' of a specific activity sphere. Activity types can be grouped together as follows: a) relations with the outer world, b) inter-group regulation. Men mostly had to do with external exchange, and their ritual offerings were aimed at gaining benefits from outside of their group; women were engaged in regulating internal relations chiefly dealing with reproduction.

If we juxtapose ritual object types and ritual communication means, it turns out that men disposed of a larger arsenal of such means, whereas what women had at their disposal was mainly derivatives of the reproduction process and their body wastes: umbilical cord, placenta and breast milk. Such a distribution of ritual communication instruments is symmetrical with the rights of ownership that in their turn reflected in themselves the norms regulating distribution of means of production.

2. *The addressee.* Addressees of ritual communication in the culture of the Amur River peoples can be grouped as follows: dead souls, guardian spirit and sky divinities.

Dead souls, in their turn, were subdivided into souls properly laid to rest and wayward ones (e.g. drowned or gone missing). For the former there was a ritual of co-feasting/eating that implied offering a share (of food).

In the Tungus-Manchu perception, dead souls that had not been properly transferred to the other world buni/buli through the kasa ritual remained here with the living people and can be a danger or hindrance to them putting off prey and obstructing hunt or craft. For this reason, such spirits were soothed via

peace-offering rites. In this case, what the rituals do is mark the difference between a dead as a friendly 'kin', co-participant, co-worker, although residing in the other world, and a dead as 'alien' and a competitor, the source of harm and hazard in this world.

Tutelary spirits were conceived of as owners of hunting and fishing areas needed by man; ritual communication with them was that of feeding procedures i.d. preliminary treating the ghosts with symbolic food as a symbolic 'payment' for the killed animal and caught fish. Among these quasi-subjects we find two large groups: guardian of land and animals and those of water basins and fish. The dominating diet component of these peoples was fish; its supplies were the basis of and prerequisite for survival throughout the year. This is not to say that ritually the spirits of land were inferior to those of water, still the ceremonies related to fishing were the key factor that shaped the Amur Region calendar cycle.

The conception of heavenly gods, as was duly noted above, emerged as the result of trade contacts with China and other regions. Unlike the tutelary spirits with their detailed 'specialization' in this or that type of 'benefits', people invoked the sky gods Boa Endoory or Khary Mana with requests of all sorts, and sometimes with no particular practical reason at all but out of sheer piety. A god of sky obtains the properties of a universal sacral ruler in charge of various spheres of life, to whom informants of ethnographic surveys applied such terms as 'worshipping' and 'praying'. In the notions of these deities, we can discern how the factors are embodied whose working does not fit into the traditional equal interaction with nature; first and foremost, these were trade relations with more developed civilizations.

It is noteworthy to mention here one of the explanations why Chinese mio icons were so popular in this region. These were originally images of ancestor spirits on fabric or paper; yet among the Nanais they were worshipped as guardian spirits and protective amulets. It might be possible that initially Chinese merchantmen provided the icons as a symbol of exclusive trading rights: naive Nanai hunters often produced them to substantiate their refusal to supply furs to other merchants. If this is plausible, it demonstrates how an icon can block the freedom of trade by virtue of gift-exchanging liabilities, so to say, through representation of an animistic substance of a trade partner, and giving the donor control over the beneficiary.

3. *The ritual object.* If trade exchange is what fixes abstract relations and tends to be a generalized form of any type of exchange, then what ritual exchange handles is an object representing specific social and natural substances. The ritual object has its value (not price) due to the fact that it embodies "flesh and blood" of the granting or benefiting party.

The Tungus-Manchu rites of feeding tutelary spirits show that food used for the procedure was not the sacrificial "flesh" of the addresser, but those natural substances that were out of control of the addressee. Assuming the role of intermediaries between the elements, hunters and fishermen of the Amur River region fed the forest spirits with sun-dried fish or berry juice, whereas water spirits got vegetable food like beans, cereals, berries, roots, tobacco, that means that forest ghosts were treated with fish or liquids and river deities – with plants

representing earth. Thus, it is clearly seen that the addressee of the rite was supplied with materials which he/she did not have and that came from the element different from his/her own.

A close analogy of this arrangement is economic exchange of material values between peoples when one needs something and gets it through trade procedures offering in substitution other goods that are in demand among the other party. In our case, instead of a commodity as a carrier of some consumer properties, we have to deal with a symbolic object representing the offered substance both by contiguity and origin, and by form, similarity and extrinsic properties.

A difference in ritual invocations between guardian spirits and heavenly deities is implemented in the opposition of 'raw' – 'cooked'. The former were treated with raw materials, the latter – with cooked food: hazel grouse, duck, wild boar, cooked cereals. At the same time, the amount of food offered to sky deities was larger – a whole bird or animal carcass. In this difference we see the working of C. Levy-Strauss' opposition that testifies to a division between nature and culture in archaic thought.

A symbolic exchange we do find in the so-called bear cult festivity of the Amur River region: the chieftain of a clan (the oldest and most respected man) was treated with a bear head (the best part of the carcass), and his reciprocal gift was a dog puppy (This piece of data we owe to Lidiya N. Samar living in Khalba village, Khabarovsk region). The juxtaposition of 'old' and 'young', 'wild' and 'domesticated' reflects the gist and essence of the rite: to sustain nature revival that is further projected onto the human society in the latter's reproduction, re-establishment/assertion of social order, gender- and age-related relations, and, finally, overcoming chaos, death for the sake of life. The personifications of 'old' and 'young' in the ritual are the alive puppy and the head of a dead bear, whose nicknames among the Amur River peoples were 'grandpa' or 'old man'. In Siberia and the Far East, the dog was quite often the object of rituals, including the role of a sacrifice [11], which speaks of its special status there. In a way, the dog is kin to man, much like as the bear: in the views of the Tungus-Manchu, after death each and every soul could be borne again as either of the animals.

Structurally, the analogue for the ritual object in the goods/money perspective is money. Money is a material symbol of the abstract 'substance' of the commodity exchange, due to which commodity loses its physical specificity. The ritual object, conversely, enters the exchange process because it never loses its specificity and its 'otherness' with regard to the addressee of the exchange. It is symbolic due to its corporeality which is opposed to the corporeal symbolism of the other object. "In archaic societies, reality appears in all its concreteness; it breaks up into countless fragments, each of which turns out to be its fetish. The very concreteness of the concrete, concentrated in Things, is the fetish generated by the symbolic exchange. This concreteness of the concrete is its substance. However, the substantiality of things is significant only to the extent that the gift-exchange itself is important for a society, in this or that historical epoch. The spread of symbolic exchange corresponds to the dominance of ritualized forms of action and thinking, which are characterized by easy transitions

from the mythical to the physical and physiological, and vice versa" [8].

Forest spirits eat the body of fish because it is the symbol of water; cooked game animals are offered to the sky deities as the symbol of 'cultivated nature'; a bear's head is identified with the chieftain because it is exchanged for a dog puppy identified with the new generations.

4. *The rite outcomes.* Ritual exchange in the culture of the Tungus-Manchu peoples was aimed at solving a range of problems as follows: ensuring food supply as the result of reciprocal exchange of gifts; gaining protection from dead souls and other spirits and threats coming from them; gaining patronage of these spirits; keeping up or improving the health of the people in the tribe; ensuring reproduction of the tribe; getting various secret information as the prerequisite for normal psychological and everyday life spheres (fortunetelling and forecasting); regulating the social sphere, i.e. establishing group-based solidarity among members, ensuring intermarriages between clans; underpinning the existing hierarchy of social statuses.

The syncretic task concurrence of ritual exchange builds economic activities (hunting, fishing, gathering, trade exchanges) into the social structure of a tribe thus linking them to reproduction mechanisms and the value/myth system.

## V. EVOLUTION OF RITUAL EXCHANGE: FROM METAPHOR TO METONYMY

Trade relations with agricultural civilizations did not bring about much change to the life sustainment of the Amur River region tribes. Furs remained the key items of economy, although trade in this product cannot be called the leading type of life sustainment activities. Since the Tungus-Manchu tribes perceived trade exchange symbolically as a ritual, its influence may be found predominantly in the ritual sphere.

Most valuable exchange items like fur coats, robes and vests, things made of metal and animal skin became sui generis internal currency and objects of material accumulation. Such a wealth was called *jaka*, stored in a special hut (barn), was the symbol of the family head's power and, at the same time, constituted the major part of the dowry/bride money. Commercial exchange products, thus viewed, were incorporated into the system of social symbolism and brought about what is called "greed for gain" that is not limited by the needs of physical consumption. There is also a purely economic sense in the unlimited purchase, accumulation and storage of imported objects: "Such objects awaken in themselves the "greed for gain", incentives for such forms of behavior that are socially acceptable only outside the chronotope of home production" [12].

Imported articles of vegetable (tobacco, cereals, vodka) and animal origin (chicken, wild boar) were made part of the ritual 'feeding' of spirits. This said, from ethnographic sources of different time we can conclude that initially they became components of ritual compositions (arrangements). Tutelary spirits of forest, for instance, were offered food consisting of three components: tala, local version of ravioli and flour. A similar pattern of combining types of ritual food is found in

piece-offering rites of Manchu shamans. We can see that the composition of sacrificial offering had been borrowed, while the pragmatic dimension of this pattern can be properly understood only within the cultural semiotics of the Amur River region peoples. Tala is a dish made of raw fish caught by the Nanais, mush is cooked cereals that was like flour an imported food. Ravioli in this arrangement were a contamination of 'own' and 'borrowed', water and land; they 'reconciled' the two zones of nature and various social cultural worlds due to which they could act as a mediator.

At a later stage, however, practically all types of former ritual food were displaced by two imported items: tobacco and strong spirit (originally the Chinese hanshin, then Russian vodka), which became a universal sort of ritual offerings provided to all ritual addressees and regardless of the desired effect. Naturally, a not unimportant factor in this process is their ability to alter consciousness, which in the mythological and ritual culture of the Tungus-Manchu tribes reflects itself in their being vouchsafed with the role of a mediator between worlds. However, another contribution to this meaning is the imported status of tobacco and vodka and their high price.

In the original ritual feedings of guardian spirits, the ritual object indicated another element of nature or part of the world, whereas the addresser played the mediating role as having access to both and being rewarded for this. In contrast, in later times the object itself, having come from another social world, became a mediator between the human and the supernatural. In the former case, such a ritual is a metaphoric imitation of an exchange of goods, in the latter the ritual involves a product that is metonymically transferred from the economic to the sacral sphere.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The appropriating economy of the Tungus-Manchu tribes in the Amur River region reflected itself in the three prevailing types of ritual (feeding, offering and co-feasting/eating) that implied an exchange of items with the environment on equal basis.

The differentiation of ritual subjects mirrors the age-sex division of labour functions into intra-clan and clan-environment interactions.

Ritual communication is what fixes and standardizes economic processes by translating them to the language of symbolic gift exchange: rituals imitating social exchange accompanied hunting/fishing/etc.; trade relations were sedimentated in the culture sphere as a worship of sky deities;

commercial exchange products became universal ritual mediators.

With changes in social and economic relations did come about a change both in the components of ritual compositions and in the structure of ritual communication. Evolution of ritual forms linked to the development of trade relations and principles of commerce went in the direction of universalization of addressees and lowering of equality level, sophistication of ritual structure and, finally, domination of imported objects in the composition of ritual offerings.

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