



## Gift and Commodity

### On the Nature of Muduga Transaction

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**Abstract.** – This essay focuses on the nature of transaction among the Muduga, a tribal community in South India, and tries to explore the idea of the correlation between kinship structure and exchange. Traditional anthropological views of exchange characterize gift and commodity as oppositional and mutually exclusive. I argue that Muduga transactions, though predominantly of the gift exchange type, share also certain characteristics with the commodity type. Considering both types as coexisting but varying in their relative importance, depending on the social relations and the context of specific transactions, we arrive at a deeper understanding of Muduga transaction. [*South India, Muduga, gift, commodity, marriage, transaction, inalienability*]

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... everything – food, women, children, property, talismans, land, labour services, priestly functions, and ranks – is there for passing on, and for balancing accounts. Everything passes to and fro as if there were a constant exchange of a spiritual matter, including things and men between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes, and the generations (Marcel Mauss 1990 [1925]: 14).

... if exchange events are described within a single dimension, that is, transactions of gift and counter-gift, the processes of social interaction then appear to be determined by principles of cause and effect. The mistake here is to reduce exchange to an act seen within the limitations of the present rather than to analyze exchange events as comprising a system of regeneration in which

the temporal context of generational continuity carries as much weight as economic and political factors (Annette Weiner 1976: 219f.).

The concept of exchange – giving and receiving in return for something else – is closely linked to reciprocity that establishes and maintains relationships between persons or groups. Reciprocity as “gift” is the dominant form in simple societies which involves embeddedness in relationship, the other being the market or commodity exchange dominant in class societies depicting a disembedded economy (Mauss 1990; Gregory 1982).

Though Marx’s notion of commodity as “an alienable object exchanged between two transactors in a state of mutual independence” (1976 [1867]: 178) is the starting point and “indispensable background” for any discussion of gifts and commodities, the theory of gifts, which owes most to Mauss (1990) and Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]), is the major focus of debate in the anthropology of exchange (cf. Morris 1986: 2).<sup>1</sup> The problem of

1 Marcel Mauss’s “Essai sur le Don” (1925 [The Gift, 1990]) has drawn a wide range of scholars to studies in gift exchanges. Recently, a number of scholars have made considerable elaboration on Mauss’s theory of gift focusing on the social and moral aspects of gift exchange (e.g., Aragon 1996; Bourdieu 1977; Carrier 1990, 1991; Cheal 1988; Cliggett 2003; Durham 1995; Godelier 1977; Gregory 1980, 1982; Herrmann 1997; Howell 1989; Hyde 1983; Komter 1996; Laidlaw 2000; Morris 1986; Parry 1986; Sahlin 1972; Strathern 1985; Thomas 1991; Valeri 1994; Weiner 1992; etc.).

“alienability of things” in capitalist societies, which Mauss had inherited from Marx 1976 [1867] led him to investigate how in a gift economy things were “inalienable,” rooted in the concept of Maori *hau* as the source of reciprocity, borrowed from Malinowski (1922). For Mauss gifts are “total social phenomena” characterized by obligations to give, receive, and return. In “Gifts and Commodities,” Gregory (1982) looks for a logical opposition to commodity in a gift: an alienable thing or person exchanged between two mutually dependent transactors.<sup>2</sup> However, Parry (1986) and Laidlaw (2000) objected to the ideology of reciprocity and the idea of alienation between things and persons suggesting that a truly nonreciprocal gift, i.e., a “pure gift,” may be possible.

Though gift exchange and commodity exchange are often considered characteristic of different types of societies, it is also important to regard them as two kinds of relations coexisting in the same society.<sup>3</sup> “The operation of each is shaped by, and can be understood only in terms of, its relationship with the other” (Carrier 1992a: 189). Gift transactions contain an element of self-interest and alienation, just as many commodity transactions contain an element of mutual obligation.<sup>4</sup> As Bell opines (1991: 157):

Since both gift and commodity exchange are manifestations of reciprocal allocations between two parties, ... elements of gift-exchange relations [may] display functional relationships of the form common in commodity relations.

According to Carrier (1992a, 1992b) traditional views of exchange compel essentialism – occidentalization of the West as a commodity system and orientalizing of the archaic society as a gift system. A meaningful understanding of the West and archaic societies is lost in these essentializations since it is “hard to see similarities among different types of society” and “hard to see differences within a single type” (Carrier 1995: 205).

Also, the nature and kind of reciprocal exchange is often correlated with social distance such that it characterizes interaction between close kin or within intimate social group where there is a sharing of resources without strict measurement or obligation to return. At the same time it also describes the form of exchange between structural equals where the return is expected immediately and in the same quantity. “It is through these diverse transactional modes that the ... [people] express, create, relate to, and think about the people around them, as well as about themselves” (McDowell 1980: 63). However, among the Muduga, these modes of exchange do not always sharply distinguish people as representing exclusive categories. Different kind of people become parts of similar modes of transaction and similar kind of people may transact differently. Norms of exchange will not be always congruent with their everyday interactions and cannot be observed in all cases of transactions. The nature of Muduga kinship organization and their bilateral tendencies explain this disparity between rule and behavior in every aspect of their social system. Exchange, like kinship, appears as all pervasive in Muduga society and culture and if we are to understand the nature of Muduga society, we must recognize that both exchange and kinship function as the central organizing principle (see also Strathern 1985: 195, 203).

Drawing on ethnographic work with the Muduga of Attappady, South India, from 1995 to 1997, this article describes the nature of affinal transactions and other exchanges in Muduga society and addresses the manner in which they resemble gift or commodity exchanges. My argument is that, though Muduga transactions are predominantly of a gift exchange type, people may exchange things in ways that resemble commodity exchange, depending on the social relations of specific transactions. Considering both elements as coexisting but varying in their relative importance, we arrive at a deeper understanding of Muduga transaction, which, in fact, is a complex combination of kinship and economic relations.

The Muduga, a small tribal community with a population of around 3,000 people inhabiting mainly the Attappady area of Palakkad district (erstwhile Palghat) in North Kerala, are distributed in about 21 hamlets called *ooru*. A hamlet, although considered as the traditional land of a particular patrilineage (*koottam*), is not always composed of a particular descent group alone. Affines and non-agnates from other lineages become established co-residents, build huts, clear land, cultivate, and participate in the life of the agnates of the hamlet.

2 There are studies which also emphasize the existence of gift giving within Western societies (Carrier 1992a, 1992b; Cheal 1988; Cliggett 2003; Corrigan 1989; Davis 1972, 1992; Herrmann 1997).

3 Carrier (1991, 1992a); Godelier (1977); Gregory (1980, 1982); Parry and Bloch (1989); Parry (1986).

4 Dore (1983); Granovetter (1985); Carrier (1991). Gregory's (1980, 1982) contention that the value of a thing exchanged is created by inalienable relations between people is treated as a “tendency to excessively sociologize transaction in things” by Appadurai (1986: 3–5) arguing that “exchange creates value” rather than people.

In some cases, daughters use their father's land throughout their lifetime. Small groups of bilaterally related kinsmen (kindred) form corporate units performing various economic activities necessary for organized social life. However, a deeply rooted patrilineal ideology forms the underlying structural principle of Muduga social system. Affines may be recruited as coresidents but they remain as affines and will never be assimilated or incorporated into the agnatic fold during their lifetime.

### Marriage and Marriage Transactions

The Muduga have a bilateral cross-cousin marriage rule. A man is prescribed to marry a woman of the category *attiai* and a woman to marry a man of the category *machan* – the categories that include bilateral cross-cousins. They hardly employ a term for marriage, and the often used term *pennu edukkirathu* (to take a girl) refers to the union and the usage *kondum koduthum* (give and take) refers to marital exchange. Thus, when a man and a woman come together cooperating and assisting each other in agricultural and domestic activities they are said to be “united.” This sharing of labor and food and mutual assistance in domestic affairs forms the basic feature of Muduga married life. The forager-horticulturalist Muduga share egalitarian features associated with hunter-gatherers where “producers are also owners” (Strathern 1985: 195), and men and women have similar relation to the means of production (see also Sacks 1979: 118; Dean 1995).

Traditionally marriages were by means of rendering bride service (*pennu-bela*) to the bride's parents which provides a man with the right in his wife's labor and sexual services (Bossen 1988: 129f.; also see Collier 1988). This usually involves a period of uxori-local residence. When the boy reaches maturity and is capable of doing labor, he goes to the bride's parents (usually his MB or FZ) and resides along with them to work in their farmland and to assist them in other economic activities. During this period he stays along with the bride's parents in their hut and his prospective mother-in-law cooks food for him. In due course, he erects a new hut and the couple starts living together as an independent unit. However, he continues to assist his wife's parents and share food with them. After a period of three to four years he returns with his wife (and children) to his natal hamlet to live along with his agnates. It is the privilege of a father-in-law or a MB to get any amount of service from his son-in-law/sister's son throughout his life, and he expects the son-in-law to reside in the hamlet

and assist his family in economic activities for a few years. Similarly, the obligation of a ZS/son-in-law towards his MB/father-in-law endures through his life even though he returns to his natal land. The case of Mandi's son Kali of Thaze-Abbanoor hamlet clearly illustrates this long-term obligation. Mandi of Thaze-Abbanoor had married Chellan's sister from Boodar hamlet. After Mandi's death, his elder son Ooshi was proposed to marry his MBD. Since Chellan had plenty of cattle and vast farmland, he wanted his prospective son-in-law to stay along with him after marriage and take care of it. Chellan also assured Ooshi of giving him some cattle and also land for cultivation. But Ooshi could not agree to this demand since he had to look after his younger siblings and aged mother. Though both families agreed for the marriage, Ooshi did not go and reside along with his MB. However, after a few years when his younger brother Kali became matured, Ooshi forced him to marry Chellan's daughter. As instructed by his elder brother, Kali married Chellan's daughter and stayed uxori-locally along with his MB assisting him in agricultural and other economic activities for the rest of his life.

If for any reason the boy is not accepted by the girl or her parents as a prospective groom, he has to return to his natal hamlet without any return for the services he has rendered. However, his right over his mother's brother's possessions remains, which he often claims during the funeral of his MB. The sister's son will obstruct the funeral procession by “holding back the bier” (*kattakal pidikkal*) on which the corpse is laid, and will retreat only if he is assured a cow or a female goat by his MB's kin. If not satisfied by this assurance, he may even fall into the grave (*adikatta vizhal*) and obstruct the burial. Or otherwise, his labor and service will be reciprocated in the next generation as sister's children's obligation towards mother's brother if his sister is married to her MBS. Similar rights and obligations also exist between a FZ and a BS.

At Anakkal hamlet during Kalamoopan's funeral, when the corpse was to be taken to the graveyard, his ZS Mallan, goaded by his mother, obstructed the procession by sitting on the edge of the bier and holding it back. Mallan retreated only when a symbolic offering of a small metal pot was made to him by his MBS on assurance that a cow would be given in future. However, receiving the pot Mallan walked away crying aloud inconsolably which shows a person's strong bond towards his MB and the emotion when this debt is paid off.

## Giving or Buying: Elements in Bride-Price

Exchange of bride-price (*pennu-panam*) nowadays forms a major aspect of Muduga marriage.<sup>5</sup> However, there is no strict rule as to the payment of bride-price immediately at the time of union and the payments are often delayed. Marital exchange among the Muduga does not operate on a *quid pro quo* basis. Instead of an immediate reciprocity, often there is a delayed reciprocity. The counterobligation is not stipulated by time and as Sahlin says, “the expectation of reciprocity is indefinite” (1965: 147). If not at the time of the union, the bride-price can be paid later at the marriage of any close kin or at the death of either of the spouses, or even at a still later stage during dry-funeral (*barasavu*). Failing to do so results in the husband’s group being denied the right to the children and in the wife not being assimilated into her husband’s group. These mortuary gifts often finalize the series of exchange between wife-givers and wife-takers and thus complete the payments.

The movement of a woman from her natal group to her husband’s group at the time of marriage initiates a series of exchanges. The perpetual flow of women across the clan is reciprocated by the flow of bride-price and service in the opposite direction. Once the bride-price payment is made, at a subsequent stage, the bride’s relatives are obliged to give a cow or a goat as counterprestation known as *seedhanam* to the husband’s family. Only a cow or a female goat is presented as *seedhanam* representing the nucleus of a future herd. Thus, this prestation is not only a store of value, but constitutes a means of production. Sometimes, after years, it is the bride’s brother’s responsibility to make this counterprestation, and the woman’s son will have the right to receive it, and it remains as a person’s claim over his mother’s brother throughout his life. It needs to be emphasized here that the female goat which a ZS receives from his MB should be counterreciprocated by a male goat during his mother’s brother’s dry-funeral ceremony. When the gift of a female goat from MB to ZS represents the nucleus of the future herd, the gift from a ZS to his MB represents a sacrifice to his soul. There is an “indissoluble

bond” between the object and the giver, which “has ongoing significance” for the relation between the giver and the receiver (Gregory 1997: 77f.). Thus, this exchange of gifts is not limited to marriage and is only one of the events, an important one, which initiates a series of exchanges between two affinal groups. The obligation to return extends throughout a life cycle and may be reciprocated at some point of time, even during mortuary ritual after both the giver and the receiver have died, making the system remain reproductive and regenerative through time (Weiner 1976, 1980). Death, rather than marriage, functions as the regulatory force in transactional events, and “cycles of exchange are regulated by cycles of death” (Weiner 1980: 82).

In the past, when marriage by bride service was gradually getting replaced by the practice of bride-price payment, the amount paid was very negligible and had over a period increased slowly from a sum of Rs. 2¼ (5¼ → 7¼ → 51¼ → 101¼ to Rs. 251¼ as a result of the increasing contact with the outside money economy.<sup>6</sup> Responsibility for paying bride-price lies not with a particular person or family but with the clan as a whole. A man may look for assistance even to relatives more distant than his immediate agnates, and the range of contributors is characteristically not narrow and cuts across the unit of production and consumption. The bride-price will be collected through a *panchayat*, the council of elders representing both groups, headed by their respective *jati* (mediator). Negotiation regarding the amount of bride-price along with arguments and counterarguments will carry on between the two parties, often symbolizing the bride as a cow. While coming to an agreement on the amount, the bride’s party bargains for a high price and the groom’s side for a low price, and as Mayer writes about the Gusii, “both donor and recipient approach *akoma* (negotiation) in a business-like spirit of hard bargaining” (1950: 7). Thus, people do symbolically speak about the “rate of exchange” distinguishing “commodities” such as women’s labor and sexual services and also speak about their right over “body and bone.”<sup>7</sup> The nature

5 According to Bossen, bridewealth is generally associated with societies practicing horticulture rather than those engaged in foraging, and “these societies often have low levels of economic specialization ... and sexual divisions of labor that assign the major part of agriculture production to women” (1988: 132). Brideservice and bridewealth occur in societies characterized by less exclusive kin groups (Bossen 1988) and more bilateral features, than a strict patrilineal system.

6 Due to the increasing social contact with the caste Hindus, new elements of changes are gradually diffusing into the Muduga society especially in marriage practices. Nowadays, there is a tendency to associate marriages with elaborate ceremonies including feasting and the initial payment of bride-price. Nevertheless, they never consider the payment as complete and the exchange as ended, but wife-takers are obliged to make future payments whenever claimed by the wife-givers.

7 In Jasper, according to Bennett (1968), people use metaphors of market exchange like “buy,” “sell,” etc. to refer to their

of dialogues which occur in a *panchayat* deliberating on bride-price becomes clearer from a case from Mele-Abbanoor hamlet:

- groom's *jati* : *nimma eenku enthuku bantheru?*  
(Why have you all assembled here?)
- bride's party : *emma ee oorukku maadu kooti bantheru.*  
(We have come with a cow for your hamlet.)
- grooms's *jati* : *maadukku enna bela?*  
(What is the price of the cow?)
- bride's party : *munooru!*  
(Three hundred!)
- groom's *jati* : *ithu banthu enna kanakku!?*  
(On what basis does it cost so much!?)
- bride's party : *thadikundil nalla pullirukku, athu thinthu madu nalla kolithirukithu.*  
(At Thadikundu [bride's hamlet] there are vast pastures, feeding on that grass-land, the cow is stout and it costs a lot.)
- groom's *jati* : *maadukku nalla palirukkutha?*  
(Does the cow give sufficient milk?)
- bride's party : *nalamayi nodi mescha nalla pal kedak-kum.*  
(If you care for it and feed well, it will give good amount of milk.)

After the arbitration, the amount is fixed and the bride-price collection begins. Once the groom's father places the initial or opening money (*pakkala panam*), the *jati* will call out all the relatives gathered there to contribute their share towards the bride-price. The money will be collected separately as *anna-thampi panam* (agnate's money), *machamaman panam* (affine's money), and *petta-pillai panam* (female children's money). However, only the agnate's contribution will be given as bride-price and the other portions are distributed equally among the elders who participated in the *panchayat*.

In the process of evolution from bride service system to a bridewealth system, reciprocity in labor service and persons was slowly substituted by reciprocity in things.<sup>8</sup> However, the widespread appearance of exchange of objects (money) for la-

bor and persons in the form of bride-price does not make persons like objects in commodity exchange. Rather, things and persons behave as gift and relationships are defined by the exchange of gifts (Strathern 1984, 1985). Among the Muduga, women are equated with the field and it is mainly their responsibility to manage various aspects of cultivation. This close association of women and field is clearly expressed in their saying: "If you marry, you should also clear a field." Here, producers are also owners and there is gender equality in relations of production. The ownership right is maintained and reinforced and the producer is not alienated from his/her labor and hence the product of their labor also remains inalienated. Thus labor may be conceptualized as an element separate from the person and as detachable from the person, but not alienable in a commodity sense and this aspect of inalienability gives a clear understanding of the aspect of control over one's labor (Gregory 1982; Strathern 1985).

## The Inalienable Persons

### Inalienable Agnates

Though the Muduga exhibit bilateral tendencies in their actual behaviour, a deeply rooted patrilineal ideology forms the underlying structural principle of their social system. The norms and ideology will not always be congruent with practice and cannot be observed in their daily life. Patrilineal principle operates when the notion of agnation becomes crucial where descent members are clearly differentiated and separated out. Affines from other hamlets may stay as coresidents using the clan land and participating in the hamlet's social activities throughout their life. However, they remain as affines and will never be assimilated or incorporated into the agnatic group of the hamlet. Even after generations, the ties of coresidence will not be converted into ties of descent, thus treating identity through locality and identity through descent as independent of each other. Even if persons are distributed in other hamlets, they are never lost permanently for their clan. They are the "inalienable property" of the clan and will be brought back to their natal land in course of time at different stages: a) a person along with his wife and children usually returns to his natal land to live along with his agnates after a period of three to five years of bride service in his affine's land; b) if not, he may spend his entire life in his affine's land and in his old age return to his natal land so as to die and get buried there;

intracommunity transactions which is different from a monetized system. However, according to Sansom (1976), among the Pedi the use of a metaphor of domestic animals like cattle in reference to money to be paid as bride-price is to keep bridewealth payment out of market exchange (cf. Befu 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Lévi-Strauss observes that women, as "supreme gifts," are exchanged for women and not for goods. Hence, in bride-price systems, the prestations are not objects of exchange but are "tokens" which ensure that a woman may be obtained elsewhere when direct exchange is not possible (1969: 65, 238).

c) or else, after death, his body is brought back to the natal land and buried; d) sometimes, he may die and even get buried in his affine's land, but finally during "dry-funeral" (*bara-savu*) his bone, i.e., the collarbone, will be brought back to his clan land for the "second burial" along with the bones of other agnates. This clearly shows how the agnates, even though dispersed in other clan lands, are abstracted from and finally incorporated into the "world" of ancestors, emphasizing their inalienable relation and deep-rooted agnatic notion. Persons are the inalienable property of the clan that produced them.

### **Muduga Women: The Inalienable Wife and Daughter**

The Muduga are permitted to marry more than once and it is not uncommon for them to have a succession of two or more spouses one after the other in their lifetime. Both men and women are equally permitted for a subsequent union. Nevertheless, they do not maintain more than one spouse at a time. If a woman after separating gets married to a man from another kin group and begets children, the right to those children belongs to that particular husband (the second husband) and his descent group. Both husbands will have to pay the bride-price to the woman's group to retain the right of their respective children. However, the husband who is the genitor of the first child borne by the woman has the ultimate right in her "body and bone" after her death, and "she" will be assimilated into his descent group posthumously. Analogy given by the people themselves clearly explains this aspect of their marriage. Due to the practice of shifting cultivation, Muduga rarely keep a land permanently under cultivation and they shift from one land to another when necessary. The notion that the genetic essence of the plant depends on the genetic essence of the seed (equated with man) sown is very much compatible with their patrilineal ideology. Thus a woman, who is identified with land, is not restricted to a single person, and others have subsequent access to her in case of death of or separation of her first husband, and every subsequent "cultivator" has right in the "crops" produced by them. However, the eventual right of the land rests with the one who had cleared it, sown seeds, and harvested the yield first. Similarly, the right over a woman vests with the husband who is the genitor of her first child. This explains that children are the real proof and evidence of marital union, and the genitor of the first child borne by the woman has ultimate right in her "body and bone."

Among Muduga, bridewealth payment typically serves not to annul the wife's membership in her natal group but to transfer certain rights – sexual, domestic, and reproductive – in the women to her husband's group. After marriage, though her duties and obligations are transferred from her natal home to her husband's household, a woman's ties with her natal family are not expected to be attenuated.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the bilateral cross-cousin marriage practice among the Muduga maintains the unity and obligations between siblings and a woman's bond to her natal group. Thus, as Firth remarks, "on the one hand for formal privileges she remains a member of her clan, but on the other for economic and social cooperation she is included in the group of relatives of her husband" (1965: 317).

Following the payment of bride-price there is a set of rights that is transferred from the bride's group to the groom's group: 1) right in women's labor and reproductive services; 2) right in the children; 3) right in the "body and bone" of the women. Out of these three sets of rights, the first one may be established without any formal payment of marriage transaction. That is, right in women's labor and reproductive services is considered as a sort of "postpaid" right. But right in the children (legitimizing the children's patrification) and right in the women's "body and bone" (assimilating women into her husband's clan) will be established only once the bride-price is completely exchanged. Therefore, the husband's kin group is more particular about paying this debt and acquiring the rights, since marriage transactions have structural significance effecting the affiliation of wife and children and their membership in descent group. Except for the right in women's "body and bone," which strictly goes to the first husband, her natal group can claim her labor and reproductive services in all subsequent unions till her death. Thus a woman's labor services are clearly the inalienable property of her agnates or the clan who produced her, and the owner retains that right throughout her life. Unlike in a commodity economy, here, "there is no wage-labour/capital relation and the labourer's product is not, in general, so alienated" (Gregory 1980: 641). Similarly the right in a woman's "body and bone" is considered as the inalienable right of her first husband even if she enters a series of subsequent

<sup>9</sup> This aspect has been emphasized by Meillassoux (1975: 100), Valeri (1994: 3), and also outlined by Lévi-Strauss (1969), though it is contradictory to his theory of exchange. Goody (1990: 3) clearly stressed that, even after marriage, a woman remains daughter to her group. See also Tharakan (2006).

unions and is operationally incorporated into those groups.

The case of Lacchi's bride-price payment clearly explains this. Lacchi of Veettiyoore hamlet first married Kakki's daughter Neeli from the same hamlet and had two children in that union. Later Lacchi and Neeli separated and Neeli got married to Kakki of Thaze-Abbanoor hamlet. After that Lacchi married Malli, a widow from Kallamala hamlet, who had a son in her first union. When Lacchi died, the issue regarding the right over his first wife was a matter of serious discussion since Neeli, staying along with her second husband and children at Thaze-Abbanoor, was not willing to accept the bride-price and to transfer the right of her "body and bone" to Lacchi's group mainly because of the rift she had with Lacchi. However, Lacchi's kin group did not want to give up and was very particular about buying the right in her bone and in her children. When the issue continued unresolved, Lacchi's group decided not to proceed with the bride-price of Neeli at that time but to settle the bride-price of Lacchi's second wife Malli. However, Gande (Neeli's son's father-in-law) and a few other elders convinced Neeli and made her agree to receive the bride-price. Later the *panchayat* (the council of elders) met for the payment of bride-price (*pennu-panam*) and Gande himself took the role of *jati*. Rs. 201 $\frac{1}{4}$  was agreed upon the bride-price towards Neeli and Gande gave the money to Neeli, who then handed it over to her father's brother Iyyas. After receiving the money, Iyyas held the hands of Neeli and Lacchi's children to Lacchi's brother symbolizing the transfer of their rights to Lacchi's group. This act of transferring of right in a woman and her children from her natal group to her husband's group is an event of great emotion and feeling for the Muduga and all those who have gathered there will burst into tears. After this, the matter regarding the bride-price of Lacchi's second wife was taken up and the *panchayat* decided to pay Rs. 101 $\frac{1}{4}$  as bride-price towards Malli's group. The *jati* then invited Malli's brother to the *panchayat*: "Your sister came and lived here, she cared for our man ... she fetched water for him ... made *rai* cake for him ... hence, it is our obligation to pay its price." He then handed over the amount to Malli saying: *ithu ninnu panam...* ("Here is your price") *nee eenk banthu bele seithathuku...* ("For you came here and worked for our man") *ithu banki ninnu nattanuku kodu...* ("Take this and give it to your brother"). However the right to her "bone" and her son was not claimed by Lacchi's kin group since this right goes to her first husband. Though Lac-

chi had separated from his wife, his clan did not lose right in her and her children, and by making the bride-price payment the right is retained. Thus separation means the disruption of personal relation between a man and his wife, and does not deprive the husband's kin of residual right in a wife and her children; it is only a detachment and not an alienation of right.

### Economic Exchange

Though much of the corporate economic activities occur within the functional level of the household, among the Muduga, a wider network of kinship bonds tend to organize economic activities outside this basic unit. Thus, within a Muduga hamlet, there are various levels or units constituted by a very close as well as a wide circle of distant relatives who cooperate in economic and other domestic activities. The primary or basic unit of economic cooperation and sharing is the nuclear family consisting of husband, wife, and children who reside together, cook, and eat together and manage a common farmland. The next level of cooperation is the unit consisting of nuclear families of primary kinsmen, functioning as a commensal unit (equivalent to a joint family household) cooking and eating together, and cooperating in domestic and agricultural activities, however, managing their independent fields. In these levels of cooperation there is no strict rule of reciprocity and people assist each other without the expectation of an equal return.

The next sphere of economic cooperation is composed of independent but closely related households of primary kinsmen, consisting of both agnates and close affines, with whom there is reciprocal exchange of food and labor. They often reside nearby and maintain a regular food sharing relation with the people with whom the main meal, prepared in the evening, is exchanged. This practice of regular exchange of food is known as *beethevidrathu* and the linked households are called *beethekarar*. The food shares exchanged between two households depend on the number of primary relationships existing between these households. The exchange of food is not of a generalized type but is of a balanced reciprocity type, and the *beethekarar* are obliged to send their share of food to their respective *beethe* partners in the same quantity every evening without fail. There is strict account of the flow of food between households and the same amount of food will be reciprocated. Lack of any reciprocation over time from any linked household leads to resentment and breaking up of

this exchange relation. A quarrel or dispute between households also disturbs the *beethe* relation. Women take special care to send the *beethe* share to their respective *beethekarar* immediately after the cooking is over. Usually children are engaged in giving the bowl of food and receiving the same number of bowls in return. However, the exchange of food between old parents who stay alone is not of a balanced reciprocity type and children rarely expect a share in return. A Muduga proverb, for example, expresses the very notion behind their food sharing: "If you share while you eat, your hunger will subside."

Though the *beethekarar* are mainly related through the mutual exchange of food, they also engage in the reciprocal exchange of labor and participate together in other economic activities whenever in need, forming a closely cooperating unit. This kind of reciprocal exchanges, especially of a personal nature like food, service, etc., is one way of "coping with the uncertainty" and "unpredictability of the economy" (Cliggett 2003: 544). But, whenever a particular household cannot manage their economic activities with their *beethekarar*, they seek the assistance of other members in the hamlet with whom there is no close interaction and obligation but whose help and cooperation should be strictly reciprocated in cash or in kind.

Also, the Muduga exchange labor for daily wage with outsiders, particularly during rainy season when there is little economic activity in their swidden. However, unlike the exchange of services between close kin or *beethekarar*, this is a nonobligatory transfer of alienable labor determined mainly by money which features commodity exchange. Similarly they also trade items like meat, bamboo, minor forest products like honey, medicinal plants, and certain agricultural produce from their farm with cooperative stores and strangers for immediate return of money (see also Tharakan 2003).

## Sharing and Exchange of Meat

Sharing and exchange of meat is highly institutionalized and it is necessary that those who got the meat shared with those who did not. A sizeable game will be shared among all those who participated in the hunt. The person who had shot the animal will get the inner flesh and a thigh apart from the normal share. The remaining portion will be equally distributed to all the households in the hamlet. This is like generalized exchange without expecting anything in return, and it is a rule that every member of the hamlet should get a share of

their common resource to which they have a right; a claim in the general share of meat which represents their right to their ancestral territory and its resources. The idea at the base of this sharing is that "even if it is a small bird, it should be shared among all the families in the hamlet, otherwise the 'hunger' remains unquenched." However, those who participated in the hunt give an additional share of meat from their portion to their *beethekarar*, apart from the above-mentioned common share. This is of a balanced reciprocity type and an equal amount of meat is expected in return later if not immediately. However, the recipient makes a symbolic return by reciprocating a share of the cooked meat to their *beethe* partner. If all the meat a hunter gives to others is reciprocated to him after considerable time, such transactions can be characterized as "reciprocal exchange based on equal, but delayed, 'reciprocity'" (Kishigami 2004: 344). If there is a surplus, the owner (one who shot the animal) has the right to sell the remaining meat either within the hamlet or to outsiders. Nowadays some people have resorted to hunting game for commercial purposes. They hunt mainly wild boar using crude bombs (*panti-padakkam*), and except the small amount which they share with their close kin, a large part of the game is sold either within the hamlet or to strangers outside. There is no hard and fast rule regarding buying and selling of meat within the hamlet. They are not particular about the immediate payment of money; "when you have money and feel like paying you may do so" they say. Very rarely do they reciprocate and thus they are always in a "state of debt." But with strangers the price is fixed and the payment should be immediate. In such exchanges across the borders of communities, usually an overbalanced reciprocity occurs. These are exchanges "of purely individual contract, of the market where money circulates, of sale proper, and above all of the notion of price reckoned in coinage" with "strict distinction" between "things and persons" (Mauss 1990: 46f.).

## Elements of Gift and Commodity in Marital Transaction

Among the Muduga the patrilineally related consanguines, the agnates (*anna-tampi* in a more restricted sense), are considered as "one's own" and affines (*macha-maman*) as "others." Among these close agnates there often occurs the *sharing* of things, i.e., sharing of land, sharing of food, sharing of service, and above all the sharing of same blood. Between affines there is the *exchange* of things, i.e.,



exchange of food, exchange of goods and services, and above all the exchange of women and thereby the exchange of blood (e.g., see Schneider 1980; Barnett and Silverman 1979).<sup>10</sup> Within the agnatic circle whatever “give and take” occurs, will be of the type of generalized reciprocity (assistance without calculation of return), i.e., as a sort of “pure gift,”<sup>11</sup> and between the affines, it will be of balanced reciprocity (with the expectation of an equal return).

People who are “others” (including distant kin) often do not “know” each other and are like strangers, and the most extreme manifestation of reciprocity and the principle of exchange with strangers is “buying and selling” (Valeri 1994). Hence, marriage exchange between affines may be characterized by elements of “buying and selling,” i.e., an equivalent for the woman given to the groom’s group is expected back by the wife-giver, and it should be strictly exchanged. The important question here, as pointed out by Gray, is “whether women . . . are transferred as wives in a manner that has a basic resemblance to the manner in which other economic commodities are transferred” (1960: 35). He adds that, “if economic terms are applied to dealings in other commodities . . . it is legitimate to apply them to dealings in wives as well” (1960: 35). Hence, as proposed by Gray, if economic terms used in the sale and purchase of cows are applied to the exchange of women also (as among the Muduga), they can be considered as “bought” and “sold” or purchased. Certain rights in the wife are transferred among the Muduga in a similar manner as certain other forms of property are. Moreover, among the Muduga, the term *pennu-panam* equivalent to bride-price, literally means “bride’s money.” Since the term money is synonymous with “purchase,” the people consider “that wives are bought and sold . . . in much the same manner as commodities are bought and sold” (Evans-Pritchard 1931: 36), and considered to be an exchange unit of economic wealth. However, these terms also carry a neutral sense removing those implications relating to a purely money economy:

... *purchase* ... mean[s] the acquisition of property by giving goods in exchange for it. *Selling* is the action of the person who delivers the property in exchange for other goods. *Price* is the amount of goods asked or given for the property. Property may be termed a *commodity* when considered as goods which are bought and sold for a price (Gray 1960: 35).

10 For a discussion of the sharing/exchange dichotomy, see Clay (1975).

11 See Parry (1986); Laidlaw (2000); Malinowski (1922).

But, among the Muduga, affinal exchange does not always fall strictly in line with buying and selling or the commodity type of exchange, rather it often takes the nature of gift-giving (see Mauss 1990; Gregory 1980, 1982). According to the traditional practice, when a woman is given to the groom’s family, nothing is reciprocated nor is expected immediately by the wife-givers, and it may be returned at some unspecified time. It is difficult, in practice, for marriage exchanges to maintain a reciprocal equivalence in each transaction (see Sahlins 1965; Comaroff 1980). The essence of commodity exchange inherent in the affinal transaction is negated by this prolonged delay.

Nevertheless the quality of a commodity exchange is retained at a later stage when the bride-price is paid by the wife-takers, expecting the right in the children and wife’s “bone” to be exchanged immediately. But, when the wife-givers make a counterprestation again to the wife-takers for the bride-price they have received, by offering a cow (the cost of which usually exceeds the amount of bride-price), once again the essence of purchase is negated. However, this is not usually reciprocated immediately, but only at a later stage, sometimes even in the next generation; hence it regains the nature of commodity exchange. Thus, as Valeri (1994) observes for the Huauilu, the opposition of gift and commodity exchange has been internalized as a constructive process in Muduga marriage transaction also. But, once the movement of women is reciprocated in cash, a counterprestation equivalent to that price from the wife-givers to the wife-takers is contrary to the commercial transaction, and hence, women are said to be neither bought nor sold, which is in defiance of Valeri’s (1994) argument. They are neither selling the women for a price nor gaining wealth with the price.

Since there is a long procrastination in Muduga bride-price payment, the nature of the transaction between wife-givers and wife-takers appears to be unilateral initially. However, the bride’s group gives the woman only on an assurance of future payment for her, and when reciprocated the transaction takes a bilateral nature. Finally, when the wife-givers reciprocate this with a counterprestation of a cow, “the transfer of the woman acquires, *a posteriori*, the status of a unilateral gift” (Valeri 1994: 13, emphasis original). Since this counterprestation is not made immediately and the debt is even passed on to the next generation, the exchange retains its bilateral nature. Thus, the shift from “gift-giving” to “buying” exists as the negation of one over the other and at the same time as synthesis of both aspects which coincides with a shift from “otherness” to

“relatedness” on which the constitution of affinity is predicted (Valeri 1994). However, the fundamental thing to be noted here is that, unlike among the Huaulu (Valeri 1994), here the transactions do acquire the nature of prestation and counterprestation as symmetrical sides of the same relationship which is deeply rooted in their *conceptual and practical symmetry*.

In an egalitarian system like the Muduga, an unequal exchange of different things only implies “temporary inequality.” Under conditions of a symmetrical type, “an assumed reversal in the flow of things eventually restores equality and balance to the exchange relationship” (Foster 1990: 54). Thus, this delayed reciprocal exchange is like the asymmetrical cross-cousin marriage of the patrilineal type, which, though unilateral, attains its symmetrical nature through generations (see also Barnard and Good 1984). A balance is not often struck between a pair of individuals, but it is maintained between groups through generations, and the “ideological conviction of reciprocity seems to serve as an effective cover ... for empirical imbalance, enabling the imbalance to continue” (Pryor and Graburn 1977; cf. Befu 1977: 270). Moreover, Weiner (see also Howell 1989: 421) recognizes the need to see exchange diachronically:

What appears to have greater meaning for the anthropologist (i.e., the reciprocity for the “gift” given) only has significance for the actors when the complex of giving and receiving is evaluated over many years (1980: 76).

Among the Muduga, affines cannot be always categorized as people “who do not know each other” or who are “strangers.” There are affines who are already allied through previous alliance relation and who know each other. These closely related affines or “allied affines” (see Tharakan 2006) are in a position between “one’s own” and “others” and exhibit dual qualities falling into a separate category of people who are neither strictly “one’s own” nor “others” (strangers), but are “not others” (i.e., not strangers). Hence, the “give-and-take” relation between “allied affines” who are not strangers can never be of the extreme type of exchange (buying and selling) nor pure gift giving, rather it will be a combination of both “gift” and “commodity.”

It is one’s choice to give to their “one’s own” and receive from their “one’s own.” A break in this voluntary “give and take” will never alter this enduring relationship. The “give and receive” relation between the most closely related “one’s own,” i.e., the parent-child relation (*auvai/appan-makka bantham*), appears conspicuously congruous to being a

free or pure gift which is “self-negating.”<sup>12</sup> “Like the pure commodity, the pure gift is characterized by the fact that it does not create personal connections and obligations between the parties” (Laidlaw 2000: 617; see also Derrida 1992: 14). Accordingly, pure gift which is nonreciprocal and nonrelation making is opposed to a reciprocal and relation-making gift (see Mauss 1990; Gregory 1980, 1982). Similarly, nonreciprocal and nonrelation making “buying and selling” is opposed to a reciprocal and relation-making “buying and selling.”

Thus, among the Muduga, we come across mainly four forms of transaction – firstly, between “one’s own” which is of “pure” gift giving; secondly, between “not others” or “allied affines” which is of delayed reciprocal gift exchange; thirdly the immediately balanced reciprocity which is similar to the relation-making commodity exchange; and lastly between strangers which is of pure commodity exchange type like “business transaction” (White 2000) or “trade” relation (van Baal 1975) characterized by “ultimate closure” and “recognition of a naked profit.” “Talking about or disputing money openly implies that the relationship has closure and is therefore business only, as between strangers” (White 2000: 133). The relationship between “not others” or allied affines is of the type of reciprocal relation depending on a “lack of closure” nevertheless depicting elements of purchase. Even though a return is expected, as Bourdieu (1977: 183) pointed out, it cannot be a conscious expectation. The Muduga are not particular about the time, and the payment is neither immediate nor within a specified time. Here, the relation of indebtedness involves relations of domination and is a source of power – a form of transformation of economic capital into symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977: 195; see also Aragon 1996). Thus, for the Muduga, “not everything that ... [they] buy and sell is a pure commodity” (Carrier 1995: 29), and “not all that ... [they] give and receive is a pure gift” (Laidlaw 2000: 632). If this is not like pure gift giving – where an expectation of return is completely absent – it is like delayed gift exchange where “gifts must be returned after an interval of time has elapsed, so as not to give the impression that one gift ‘buys’ the other” (White 2000: 133).

The major disparities between marital transaction and commercial transaction mentioned by Valeri (1994) are 1) a woman cannot be further alienated by the person or group that acquires her, 2) the equivalent given for a woman does not afford value

12 Laidlaw (2000); Parry (1986); Raheja (1988).

conversion and may not be exchanged for a thing of another kind, 3) marriage exchanges are often bilateral (an equivalent of the entire prestation is returned by its recipients), each side effecting the establishment of a bilateral relation through a bilateral transfer of valuables. The contrasts mentioned above, except the second, are compatible with and hold strong for the Muduga affinal transaction. Among the Muduga the wealth (money) given in exchange for a woman is rarely used to obtain another woman, rather it may be exchanged for other things and is converted into other objects. Among the Huauulu (practicing asymmetrical cross-cousin marriage), though the woman cannot be further alienated, the "blood" received from one's wife-givers is alienated to one's wife-taker. But among the Muduga, practicing a bilateral cross-cousin marriage, the wife-givers will themselves become wife-takers, and the "blood" is not alienated, rather the blood received from one's wife-givers is reciprocated to them in the same generation or in the next, causing an enduring system of affinal exchange. However, the bilateral nature of Muduga marital transaction, unlike the unilateral transfer of valuables characteristic of purchase, does not necessarily happen in the initial stage of transaction, but is rather "realized over time," owing to the long delay in reciprocation (Valeri 1994: 4).

## Conclusion

Sharing among close agnates as generalized reciprocity, i.e., assistance without calculation of return, and exchange between affines as balanced reciprocity, i.e., with the expectation of an equal return organizes Muduga society in both a corporate and an oppositional sense. However, these ideal rules are not always congruent with practice, and in their everyday life it is the bilaterally related group of relatives who often share and exchange getting organized in both a corporate and oppositional sense. While aspects of kinship and exchange systems can indeed be adjusted to practical needs, they conform to ideological representation of descent and nature of exchange. Systems exist as a constitutive order; that is, as a set of related principles which give form to the sociocultural universe. Also, it is a lived-in, everyday context which represents itself to individuals and groups in a repertoire of values and contradictions, rules and relationships, interests and ideologies (Comaroff 1980: 33). Compatible with this aspect of bilaterality is their nature of affinal and other transaction, which is a combi-

nation of gift and commodity exchange. A clear understanding of Muduga transaction can be reached only through a perspective which recognizes that a sphere of commodity exchange exists together with a sphere of gift exchange, rather than characterizing exchanges in terms of exclusive categories.<sup>13</sup>

Though elements of commodity and gift coexist, Muduga transactions cannot be seen in terms of self-interest or individual gain found in "the cold reasoning of the business man, bankers, or capitalist" (Mauss 1990: 73). It is not balanced reciprocity but reproduction of social relation that is sought in Muduga affinal exchange (see Bourdieu 1977; Weiner 1980). Exchange does not always establish a time-bound and measurable relation of equivalence between things exchanged, and the enduring debt created through this delayed exchange finds explanation in their descent system and the nature of kinship organization. Long-range set of obligations oscillates between giver and receiver through time resulting in long-range cycle of exchange (see Bourdieu 1977; Weiner 1976, 1980). Similarly, "pure gift," where things are given without expecting anything in return, links its members in an "open system of indebtedness" (Strenski 1983) that makes Muduga social life possible.

It is the social context that determines the kind of exchange; that the things used as gift may become commodity in another context. Commodities move in and out of the gift category; "they are both goods and non-goods, 'money' and gifts" (Godelier 1977: 128; see also Kopytoff 1986). Thus commodity transactions take place in social relationships just as much as do gift transactions. However, the nature of social relationships varies. Similarly, there is the relationship between different kinds of transactions and utility or function such that, in gift transactions people may transact gifts, but typically these are also utilities, and in that sense serve as an economic function (in a broader sense) as much as commodity transactions do. Hence, in both types of transactions utilities are moving between people and both serve as a function for the individual transactors or for the society as a whole. However, negating the difference between gifts and economic exchanges only leads us to consider both forms of exchanges as being guided by calculation, and the argument that commodities, like people, have

13 Criticizing Gregory's method of treating forms of exchanges as two exclusive and homogenous categories, Valeri (1994: 17) argues that, "what may legitimately be translated as 'gift' in different societies forms an area far too heterogeneous to figure as the mirror image of 'commodity exchange'."

social life (Appadurai 1986) only conceals the distinction between gift and commodity exchange. An understanding of the nature of Muduga transaction offers the old solution of gift exchange despite the existence of new elements of negotiations and dealings in the context of a modernizing world.

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