

AFRICAIN PEASANTS AND MORAL ECONOMY

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Despite the continuous assistance to African countries that various international organizations and donor countries have so far given, the stagnation of rural Africa still stands out even among developing countries. In rural Africa, although commodity economies are spreading, modernization of agricultural production is not progressing. This stagnation of rural Africa must be closely related to some unique mechanisms pertaining to the African peasant economy. It is an urgent task to uncover its mechanisms. We shall pay attention to internal rather than external factors of the dynamics of African rural areas and focus on the moral economy of African peasants as a customary economy based on the right to subsistence and the norm of reciprocity.

Moral economy is a complicated phenomenon that needs to be approached by different disciplines, including economics, agricultural economics, rural sociology, history, cultural anthropology, economic anthropology, ecological anthropology and so on.

1 -Universality and Particularity in the Moral Economy of Peasantry.

Involvement in the capitalist world does not immediately change a peasant into a *homo economicus* who seeks for the maximum profit through market transactions. It has been argued by a number of scholars that the peasant mode of livelihood is generally marked by its subsistence-oriented nature, in contrast to the profit-minded modern western farmers. A. V. Chayanov (1976), for example, asserted that peasant families in pre-revolutionary Russia did not utilize their labour fully, if the needs for family subsistence were met. In other words, exposure to the market economy does not necessarily cause an immediate change in the peasant mode of livelihood, in which family reproduction is given priority over profit maximization. Such a universal peasant image seems to be the starting point of Goran Hyden's argument. In what he called "Economy of Affection", he acknowledged that the economy of the African peasantry has its own uniqueness, which may be broadly defined as socio-economic networks based on reciprocal relationships. By focusing on this particular type of economy, Hyden showed the relative autonomy of African peasants' livelihood from State and capitalism, while he also viewed it as the central cause of underdevelopment of the continent.

However, as Williams (1987) has pointed out, "Moral economy", itself is not unique to Africa, and does not necessarily become an obstacle to economic development either. For instance, it is widely known that Japan's traditional *ie* system (ie, literally "household" or "family", is the elementary social unit in Japan.) is also an important principle in forming any type of social organization, ranging from peasant families to, most notably, modern corporate giants.

So, the moral economy of Africa has obstructed the development of capitalism, while the moral economy of Japan has taken the lead in promoting it? This suggests that there is some crucial difference in the form of moral economy between the two regions. It is necessary, therefore, to examine carefully what the cultural particularity of the African peasant economy is and how it is functioning in daily life. (editor's note: we let aside the Japanese case, for the time being).

Intra-regional comparisons within Africa show that rural residents on this continent have many variations in their modes of livelihood, including hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, and peasants. Although the last forms the bulk of the population, their system of living, in many cases, contains elements of pastoralists or hunter-gatherers to some extent.

It is this diversity and multiplicity of livelihoods that make African peasant societies very unique. Yet this does not mean that, in African peasant societies, agriculture is the primary mode of livelihood and other modes like hunter-gathering or pastoralism are substitutive, or just added to agriculture. Instead, as Kakeya (1998) has pointed out, the peasant mode of livelihood in Africa is marked by its strong tendency to avoid specialization of their livelihood in agriculture, by using nature in various ways. Thus, when dealing with today's economic stagnation in rural Africa, we must view it not as the stagnation of agriculture itself, but as that of the peasants' total livelihood including agriculture as its part.

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2 - African Peasant Economy from the viewpoint of Reciprocity.

To make cross-cultural studies on moral economy effective, I would like to offer two analytical frameworks. The first is Marshall Sahlins' famous typology of different types of reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972), and that of H. Nakamura, which will be used in the next section.

Adopting Karl Polanyi's (1977) substantive approach on economy, Sahlins tried to build up a model of the sociology of primitive exchange based on the two concepts of reciprocity and redistribution, representing 'horizontal' and 'vertical' exchange patterns, respectively. Reciprocal transactions are graded from "generalized reciprocity" or pure gift, through "balanced reciprocity" in which each party reciprocates equivalents within a narrow period, to "negative reciprocity" in which each one tries to maximize his own advantage (Figure 1). The position of an exchange on this scale is conditioned by social distance between those who exchange, such as the degree of closeness of kinship or neighbourhood.

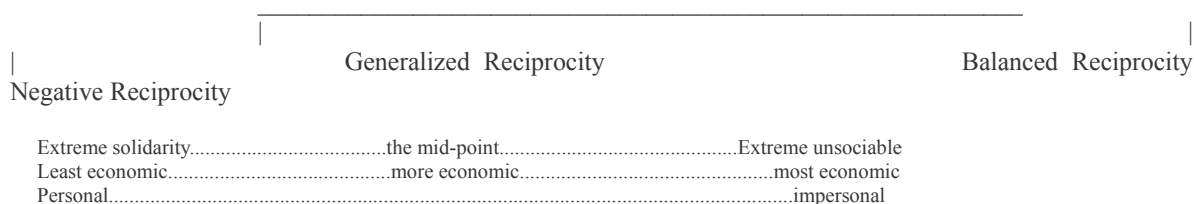


Fig. 1: Sahlins Typology of Reciprocity.

James Scott (1976), a political scientist renowned for his pioneering book on the moral economy of Southeast Asian peasants, also stressed that the norm of reciprocity, along with the right to subsistence, should be set at the core of arguments on moral economy.

"We can begin, I believe, with two moral principles that seem firmly embedded in both the social pattern and injunctions of peasant life: the *norm of reciprocity* and the *right to subsistence*... Reciprocity serves as a central moral formula for interpersonal conduct. The right to subsistence, in effect, defines the minimal needs that must be met for members of the community within the context of reciprocity. Both principles correspond to vital human needs within the peasant economy; both are embodied in many concrete social patterns that owe their strength and longevity to the force of moral approval or disapproval that villagers can bring to bear (p. 167).

Scott's concept of reciprocity was constructed on his observations of patron-client relations prevalent in rural communities of Southeast Asia, and these patron-client relations were based on balanced reciprocity. He then considered such social relations as universal. Yet, social relations of this type are rarely seen in more egalitarian African societies, where the development of social classes remains very limited. As a lot of anthropological works on "primitive" societies of hunter-gatherers, of pastoralists, and of slash-and-burn cultivators have shown, reciprocity in fact takes more varied forms than Scott assumed.

Scott explained the nature of balanced reciprocity by taking examples from the Philippines.

But, social relations in Japan too, are strongly ruled by similar norms called 'gimu' (literally, 'obligations') and 'on' (literally 'kindness or favours'). In Japan, particularly in the rural communities, if a gift or service is sent, its equivalent must be returned within a short period. If one fails to do this, he will be judged as a person lacking in morality and will be exposed to bitter reproaches such as 'gimu o kaku' (he ignored social obligations) or 'on shirazu' (he disregarded kindness of other persons). However in rural communities of Africa, which I have so far studied, social relations are governed primarily by the norm of "generalized reciprocity". In such communities, it is taken for granted that the richer offer more goods and services on the special occasions, such as funerals or weddings.

It is noteworthy that in African societies, 'generalized reciprocity' appears particularly in the domain of food. African hunter-gatherers are well-known for their practices of food sharing, and similar practices are also seen in societies of pastoralists and slash-and-burn cultivators. For example, Kumu society, a peasant society in former Zaire that I have studied, has a custom of commensality (inter-household group-eating) (Sugimura, 2004). This custom is practiced twice a day and is functioning as a means to foster strong social communality.

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3 - African Peasant Economy from the Viewpoint of Accumulation System

The second framework for reference is Nakamura's typology of accumulation systems in agrarian communities (Nakamura, 1976). Based on his study of the rural economy of Southern India, he divided the elements in agricultural production into three categories: instrument of labour (tools and machines); subject of labour (labour skill and labour arrangement); and object of labour (arable land and land improvement). Based on this division, he further formulated a framework for accumulation of productive resources. First, in a labour competence type of accumulation, experience, labour skill and efficient labour arrangement determine the result of labour. Here, labour arrangement is regarded as a social extension of labour ability beyond individual human body. Second, the arable land type of accumulation is built up through efforts to raise land productivity. Third, the machinery type of accumulation is a process defined by the efficiency of farming tools and machines. Each agrarian community takes a different combination of these three accumulation types, and this also has a great influence upon its social structure.

The subsistence economy in rural Africa, in which social relations are far more valuable productive resources than land and tools, seems to lay stress on the labour competence type of accumulation. This scheme is not immediately applicable to African peasantry, however, since wealth is not materially accumulated for productive purposes there. Instead, it is socially accumulated in interpersonal relations for reproductive purposes through consumptive activities. Through everyday food sharing or ceremonial feasts, for example in weddings, economic (or material) wealth is consumed in order to create strong social solidarity and harmonious communality, which are the very wealth for African peasants.

Through my research of Kumu society, I have got an impression that the value system of kumu peasants is greatly different from that of peasants in Japan. As to the value of land, for example, kumu peasants appear to have less attachment to land, compared with their Japanese counterparts who are tightly bound to small pieces of land. The value of livestock is also completely different between the two peasantries. Among the kumu, the most important value is given to goats. Although goat is very small in size and is not allotted any important roles in daily village life, it is viewed as a symbol of wealth and thus used as bride wealth. The number of goats possessed is viewed as the most critical criterion for judging a peasant's wealth. In short, goats are not economic but social wealth for the Kumu. Such a status of goats is widely seen in other peasant societies in Africa, such as societies of the Sagara, the Luguru, and the Matengo in Tanzania, to mention a few. This fact suggests that many African societies contain a remnant of pastoralist culture.

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In Asian societies, on the other end, livestock is generally considered as a means of agricultural production. As mentioned above, Africa and Southeast Asia appear to have developed the same type of societies, that is, open, loosely structured societies. Looked at from the viewpoint of relationship between man and land, however, the two regions appear to have developed each different type of societies. In Thailand, for example, land had become scarce resources and had been transformed in means of production by the beginning of the 20th century. This was caused by a large-scale development of new rice fields, their immediate commoditization, as well as the rapid population growth, all of which had already begun at the end of 19th century.

In Africa, where shifting cultivation is the dominant form of agriculture, the value of land goes decreasing year after year. Contrary to this, in Southeast Asia, where rice production on permanent farms is the dominant agriculture, the value of land keeps increasing year after year, since the value of labour yearly put on land raises the value of land every year. As a result, land is finally converted into capital. To be sure, rural societies in Southeast Asia are still less tightly structured, if compared with rice producing societies in Japan, where peasants

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are firmly bound to their land. Nevertheless, it is also true that many societies in Southeast Asia have undergone the process of social differentiation, which has caused in some areas, the formation of social classes, such as landlords, tenants, and wage labourers.

In rural Africa, accumulated wealth, although it is generally very small due to the peasant mode of production, is not used for further agricultural production, namely for expanding farmland or for purchasing agricultural machines or for hiring more labourers. Instead, it is invested in interpersonal relations for the purpose of reproducing human beings and their communities. In this sense, African societies should be viewed as "communities for consumption" rather than as "communities for production".

Koponen (1988) also pointed out this consumptive character of African societies in his argument on the forms of accumulation in pre-colonial Tanzanian societies:

"It was not that accumulation was missing but rather that what was accumulated was not used to lay a material basis for future economic and social activity. Instead it was used to create new social relations and new human beings and in this way to lay a social basis for that activity. This, I suggest, can be regarded as the 'innermost secret' of these societies (p. 389)".

This Koponen's remark brings out the exact point that I have been considering in reference to Kumu economy. One of the 'secrets' why African peasants can maintain the stability of their livelihood despite the low level of their agricultural production, I think, lies in the existence of an 'economy of sharing', which is represented most remarkably in their eating habits.

This leads to a particular mode of accumulation of wealth in African rural communities, related to modes of interactions between nature and man and society, aiming at production and reproduction.

Material production is done through 'labour-production' process, i.e. **man-nature** interactions. It is this domain that conventional economics have paid special attention to. Some interpersonal ('man-man') relations are constructed through 'labour-production' process. For example, communal work organized by Japanese traditional villages for maintaining irrigation facilities produces interpersonal relations based on mutual trust. This intimate relationship, in turn, raises the work efficiency of the groups in many cases.

Yet, interpersonal relations are established not only through 'labour-production' process, but also through 'consumption-reproduction' process. There are some '**man-man**' interactions done for maintaining families and other social organizations, including co-eating groups or communities, where food and other goods are consumed for reproducing human beings as well as societies.

Man interacts with man by visiting each other, by eating together, or by exchanging gifts, in order to confirm and strengthen mutual trust that is indispensable for stable social reproduction. The uniqueness of African peasantry, I think, lies in the fact that they have often invented large-scale institutionalized systems of generating interpersonal relations, not in the sphere of labour-production, but in the sphere of consumption-reproduction. Marriage systems using livestock as bride wealth and customs of group-eating can be mentioned as examples of such inventions.

Of course, in every society, man interacts with man both in the sphere of production and in the sphere of reproduction. Even in Asian societies, where the people's mode of livelihood is strongly production-oriented, we can see social relations organized through 'consumption-production' process. Yet, it seems to me that all societies can be roughly categorized in two types: (1) societies where social relations are more strongly ruled by the logic of production than by that of reproduction; and (2) societies where social relations are more strongly ruled by the logic of reproduction than by that of production.

Generally speaking, African societies can be categorized in the second type. There, the extension of families (human reproduction) is valued far above material production. Supported by this reproduction-oriented form of accumulation, the "Moral economy" is still maintained and functioning in to-day's Africa.

4 - Tradition and Modernity.

In this closing section, I would like to explore the possibility that the 'moral economy', which has been viewed as an obstacle to progress, might lay a social and cultural base for future development of rural Africa by demonstrating several actual examples.

A - The nature of the problem.

Let me begin with an incident that occurred in a rural village in Tanzania. The village was provided with a development fund for introducing agricultural machines in order to enhance agricultural productivity. But this project ended in failure, since the villagers did not use the fund properly, spending it for various personal

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expenses. The village chief, for example, used the fund to purchase livestock, which he later used as bride wealth for his new wives.

Judged from the original purpose of the fund, the villagers' behaviour appears totally unacceptable. In practice, this incident was reported in the local newspapers and the village was severely criticized. Yet, the villagers' behaviour seems to turn understandable if we interpret it in the context of the "moral economy". When receiving the fund, the villagers probably considered that the fund was something to be used for their *happiness*. In other words, they received it as something like a gift that the rich were supposed to give to the poor. Therefore, in order to survive the severe living conditions of rural Tanzania, they did not hesitate to use the fund for immediate needs, such as medical needs or food expenses. Consequently, the fund soon became insufficient for buying a machine. Besides, from the outset of the project, the villagers were not so eager to buy agricultural machines. The villagers thus agreed with the chief when he proposed a plan to use the fund for buying livestock as the village's common property, which was later appropriated for the chief's personal purpose, as mentioned above.

This case, I think, arose from a great difference in the notion of 'happiness' between the project planners and the villagers. The former's notion of 'happiness' was contested by the latter's, and at last it was drastically transformed to meet the local logic which valued social reproduction far above agricultural production.

Similar problems are also observed in a lot of micro finance projects in developing countries. It has been often noted that as the amount of loans grows large, the project's sustainability becomes small. This is also the case with the famous Grameen Bank project, which started in Bangladesh in the late 1970s and has been viewed as the most successful project in the Third World (Muhammad Yunis, 2001).

The situation of micro finance projects in Africa is much worse. Yet, looked at from the viewpoint of reciprocity, the problems in micro finance can be understood in a different way. Generally speaking, modern banking systems are based on the norm of 'balanced reciprocity', and this norm must be kept strictly regardless of the amount of money financed... African people have been accustomed to living in social relations based on the norm of 'generalized reciprocity', which is not suited for the logic of modern banking systems.

b - Successful examples.

I have deep sympathy with the new views of development, called "*another development*" in Sweden or "*endogenous development*" in Japan. In this final part, I would like to present the so-called Miombo project in Tanzania as an actual example of the projects designed from a new perspective on development. The Miombo project was a joint project by the Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania and the Japanese government (Japanese International Cooperation Agency, 1998). The purpose of the project was to conduct researches on indigenous farming systems in Tanzania, and then to explore an effective method for applying them to sustainable rural development of the country. While the research centre was set up in Morogoro, field researches were made in various parts of the country. I myself participated in the project at its initial stage, by doing field researches in Matengo highland in Southwestern Tanzania.

Matengo society is marked by its very intensive agriculture made up of two different components, namely the famous pit cultivation system called *ngolo* and coffee production. The basic social unit of the society is the patrilineal extended family called *musi*, composed of several households with a common ancestor in the past three or four generations. Each *musi* holds one mountain ridge called *ntambo* on which member households have their houses and farms. When the population of a *musi* reaches the capacity of *ntambo*, some members move to an uninhabited area and start forming a new *musi* there.

Before the 1940s, the solidarity of *musi* was maintained and strengthened by a traditional custom of group-eating called *sengu*. This was a custom whereby people descended from the same ancestor came to one place and ate together under the leadership of the head of *musi*, normally an elderly person. *Sengu* provided members of *musi* with good opportunities to exchange ideas on how they should manage the *ngolo* (pit) farming system in order to utilize their *ntambo* effectively.

However, with the introduction of money economy in general and coffee cultivation in particular, this custom of group-eating disappeared from Matengo society. Yet, despite that, the solidarity of *musi* remains undestroyed up to the present, having survived through various economic and political pressures for modernization of the society. Even today, matters concerning the land use of *ntambo* are determined not by individual households but by the whole *musi* community.

Soon after the start of the Miombo project in Matengo highland, I was deeply impressed by the fact that many villages under the project formed a group named *kamati ya sengu* (literally; *sengu* committee) respectively, in order to support the project. When the project introduced a hydro-milling machine into one village, it was this *kamati ya sengu* that acted eagerly as a core agent. Although the operating rate of the milling machine was still

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low at 20% of the designed capacity, the number of users in the village was rapidly growing at the time of our research. This was because of the arrangements made by *kamati ya sengu*. The machine was available to all members of the village. This means not only that every villager was able to use this machine for a very small fee, but also that poor villagers were allowed to defer the payment.

Such generous arrangements gave me the strong impression that the old world of group-eating once supported by *sengu* was reviving in modern Matengo society. Of course, *kamati ya sengu* is different from *sengu* structurally and functionally. In my eyes, however, between the two, there appears to be some kind of continuity... It may constitute a base for endogenous development.

5 - Conclusions.

"Moral economy" in Africa is characterized by networks of kinship, friendship and neighbourhood based on the norm of 'generalized reciprocity', in which counter-obligations are not always necessary. Another unique aspect is that accumulation of wealth is mainly done in spheres of consumption and social reproduction. It is on this internal logic that we have to contemplate the future development of rural Africa.

Considering current global problems, such as the widening gap between the north and the south and the deteriorating natural environment, it is obvious that conventional development theories have their limits. As new concepts such as "another development", "endogenous development", or "sustainable development" suggest, what is required for us now is to present a new perspective on development in which different economics based on different moral economies can coexist. I am convinced that the deeper understanding of the African moral economy is of great importance not only for the advancement of area studies, but also for a better future for African people.

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