VALUES AND VALUABLES: FROM THE SACRED TO THE SYMBOLIC

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From the earliest days of the field, economic anthropologists have observed that material objects often are imbued with sacred qualities whose values can never be reduced to material necessity or monetary equivalent. In 2002, the Society for Economic Anthropology hosted a conference to reconsider these ideas in the world today. We invited Professor Maurice Godelier of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris, known for his path breaking work in anthropological theory and his ethnographic work among the Baruya of New Guinea, to give the keynote address (Chapter 1). Eighteen anthropologists from five different countries also presented the results of new research on the questions of value, the sacred, exchange, and money. Together, this collection presents of wide-ranging overview of the state of this field of study today.

Godelier’s latest book, *The Enigma of the Gift*, was a source of inspiration for a number of participants, especially his concern with things not given, but kept – a phenomenon that Godelier has provocatively associated with the sacred. A number of conference participants interrogated the sacred it is appears in various cultures and examined the general category of symbolic things that are kept, not given. As we shall define it herein, the sacred resides within the imagination and hence is not available for transactions of any kind; but material things that are symbolic of the sacred are also removed from the domain of exchange. Indeed, the powers of the sacred are often inspired by those things that symbolize them, potentially blurring the boundary between the symbolic and the sacred. But the symbolic, as a general category, most often refers to non-sacred things; and we find that these things are also commonly considered to be outside of the domain of exchange.
THE SACRED

Our operative conception of the sacred is well expressed by Rudolf Otto (1958 [1923]: 12):

Let us consider the deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion. Faith unto salvation, trust, love – all these are there. But over and above these is an element which may also on occasion, quite apart from them, profoundly affect us and occupy the mind with a wellnigh bewildering strength. … we shall find that we are dealing with something for which there is only one appropriate expression, ‘mysterium tremendum.’

It is with the above words that Rudolf Otto describes the Holy (Das Heilige) in his foundational discussion of the subject. The Holy or Godly (“numinous”) is the Sacred from the perspective of Christian theology. And given the awesome, fearsome, fascinating and majestic quality of this “wholly other” (ganz andere) phenomenon, it is not surprising that it arises in anthropological discourse.

For Levi-Strauss (1965[1915]:57) the sacred have a “wholly different essence,” different from the profane. Yet, paradoxically, he asserts that “there are sacred things in every degree (Levi-Strauss 1965[1915]:53).” The notion that the sacred may have degrees should not be interpreted as meaning that it is not invariably “wholly other” in nature. Nor does it mean that a particular sacred thing can be without (magical) powers. Indeed, something is sacred only when it possesses powers over some element(s) of the world, with capabilities far beyond those of human beings. It may often happen, however, that there is no single source of this ‘mysterium’; there may not be an all powerful god or spirit who dominates the realm of the sacred. Levi-Strauss suggests that “primitive man” has no need for overwhelmingly majestic sacred entities. The sacred things of importance to Levi-Strauss’ discussion are often intimately connected with
daily life and have a history that can be recalled relative to immediate and more distant ancestors.

Indeed, a singular source of the ‘mysterium’ is arguably a reflection of cosmologies spawned by the domination and exploitation of state-level elites. It was as subjects of dominating and awesome states that people accept the sacredness of formidable and distant gods; and it is likely that dominating elites required that their subjects worship gods that are emblematic of Earthly overlords. In a comparable manner, members of tribal societies often experience an apotheosis of ancestors whose roles mimic those of socially controlling elders. In each case there is the ‘mysterium’ or “wholly other” quality to the sacred that enters the world as a source of power.

Mircea Eliade (1959) associates the sacred with the cosmologies of the primitive and by presupposing a more rational and profane worldview for the contemporary. He writes from the perspective of a scientific mind that struggles to understand and reach inside of the mind of the *homo religiosus*. Of particular interest is his argument that strong commitment to a celestial and dominating god is induced by efforts to survive as a culture and as a people, efforts that may reach extremes in exploitative state regimes. In simpler social domains more proximate gods and symbols will suffice, such as gods of fertility, rain, safety. Unfortunately, Eliade does not discuss “sacred objects,” as such. It might be presumed that for the primitive *homo religiosus* such objects are among the proximate aspects of daily life – a rock, a mountain, a totemic animal. However, a retreat to the proximate also may be said to be a central factor in contemporary religiosity.

Years ago, and perhaps even today, one might hear a minister in a rural Southern church ask rhetorically of the parishioners, “What is thunder”? To which a chorus of responses would exclaim: “God’s voice!” Rain, lightning, thunder and the rays of the sun become imbued with the
sacred. Every element of the environment is suffused with wonder, with ‘mysterium tremendum’ and with a good measure of danger. But such a world has been lost to most of us. Scientific explanation has leveled and de-mystified most things, leaving us with a frantic search for the exaltation and that arrives in the presence of the sacred. Given the lack of personal recognition of the powers of the “wholly other,” there is likely to be a re-conceptualization of what it means for something to be sacred.

The papers in Part One of this volume deal with things that Maurice Godelier (1986) has shown to be imbued with sacred qualities and imaginary powers. Godelier has been a leader in the field of economic anthropology since the 1966 publication of *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*. His fieldwork among the Baruya of New Guinea has profoundly influenced his theories in economic anthropology. Characterized as a classless, stateless hunting-horticultural society with extreme gender inequality, the Baruya were “discovered” by the West in 1951, and they were quickly transformed by market relations, Western colonialism, and Christian missions.

In *The Enigma of the Gift*, Godelier returns to many of the issues posed by Marcel Mauss (1990[1925]), and he directs attention to “things that must be neither sold nor given, but must be transmitted.” Among the Baruya, the things that must be kept are often “sacred objects” (p. 108), such as *kwaimatnie*, which are displayed during initiation ceremonies. In Chapter One of this volume, Godelier asserts that

a sacred object is a material object which represents the non-representable, which refers men back to the origin of things and attests to the legitimacy of the cosmic and social order that replaced the primal time and its events. ... For those who handle and exhibit them, sacred objects are not symbols. They are experienced and thought as the real presence of forces which are the source of the powers that
reside in them. The sacred object, then, is a “material” synthesis of the imaginary and symbolic components present in the relations which organize real societies.

Here, Godelier tells us, first, that sacred objects are symbolic of a ‘mysterium tremendum.’ But that is not all. Godelier raises another point of enormous significance. He suggests a direct correspondence between the sacred object and “the relations which organize real societies.” This argument echoes that of Eliade (1959), who associated powerful gods with social relations of domination. For example, among the Baruya, the kwaimatnie are bundles of seemingly unspectacular objects upon which enormous significance is placed. The kwaimatnie are the possession of men and are important to maintaining the powers and rights that male ancestors have transmitted to men of the moment. Hence, they are not simply symbolic, they enter the imaginary as the sacred, as a source of power.

How, then, are we to conceive the sacred in this volume? First, a sacred entity must have autonomous powers in the world. It is because of such powers that the sacred can be characterized as the ‘mysterium tremendum.’ For example, ancestors are to be worshiped, not because they were adorable individuals when they lived, but because terrible things will happen in the absence of appropriate ceremonies of appreciation. Perhaps, the rains will not arrive, crops will fail. Perhaps, the spirits of the ancestors will become troublesome and cause sickness and confusion. It is the power to affect contemporary life that justifies the association of a person or thing with the sacred. Secondly, it is clear that historically the sacred has been socially constructed by the socially powerful for important reasons. Sacred objects or beings become factors that rationalize the domination of men over women, of elders over juniors and of kings over subjects. Peculiar, then, is the transformation of the fearsome and unpredictable Christian God of the slave and feudal periods into the contemporary entity with whom one might have
intimate conversation. It is a peculiarity that corresponds to the non-hierarchical structure of capitalist societies, allowing individuals to experience personal relationships with the sacred.

Since its existence resides in the imagination, not in this world, and since the sacred enters as a validation of the social position of individuals, it cannot be “given” in exchange. It can move among individuals only as it devolves within the group for which it provides ethical legitimation. However, the sacred does not monopolize the domain of things not subject to alienation. This point is made most emphatically by Colin Danby (in Chapter Nine), who cites Godelier’s ethnography as evidence. Danby points out that trading relationships between the Baruya (Godelier 1971:61-62) and its neighbors can often be established only with high risk of injury and death. Those who have risked death to provide the tribe with such trading relations are honored in memory and may transmit to their progeny various prerogatives in the continued trading relation. In this case, we find a connection between the domain of exchange (a domain referred to by Sahlins (1972) as “negative reciprocity,” and the holding of rights that are kept or shared within a family. Danby argues that even in the trading of salt “keeping, giving, and trading salt must be considered as a whole.” The social ranks of persons and things may be raised significantly without gaining the attributes of the sacred.

In Chapter Two, the power of the sacred is brought into sharp relief by James A. Egan’s discussion of land in Yap, one of the island nations within the Federated States of Micronesia. This is a matrilineal society, where the fertility of women is the unifying corporate resource. However, in order for the product of that fertility to gain social location in relation to land, a woman must move onto the land of her husband (actually, land to which he is attached). Having been provided the resources of this land, she must demonstrate that she belongs to that long and honored sequence of women whose efforts in ascending generations have provided power to the land. Land in Yap is hierarchically differentiated, such that a man has power, “voice,” to the
extent that the land that he represents has “voice.” This power, in turn, is the fantastic consequence of the intersection of production and reproduction by women on land that is under the control of their husbands’ sisters.

The value of land – and its imaginary power to encode hierarchy while concealing the many social exclusions of the here and now – rests upon the inability of anyone to make such claims. Land transcends individuals. Land transcends generation, linking the living and the dead. Land encodes history. It is this power of land that inspires awe – that makes it numismatic – that makes land sacred with or without the Gods.

But if land is sacred, it should be kept. And it is, but it is also given. Egan expresses the paradox as, “keeping-for-giving” and (simultaneously) “giving-for-keeping.” This set of twin contradictions arises from the fact that rights to the use of land (and rights to attach children to land) are yielded to in-marrying women by the sisters of their husbands, who have themselves moved onto other lands for which they attempt to qualify. One of the occasions for the demonstration of merit by a wife has been the mitmit, once a ceremony of marriage and now a ceremony of death, to which the female relatives of in-marrying women bring the product of their land. They must give (product of land) in order to keep (use-rights to land). Those women who yield rights to social positions in land are able to assess the contributions of their brothers’ wives to the mitmit and, hence, determine their right to remain on the land. In this way the women who have departed from the land have given it to others while maintaining a status within it – “giving while keeping.” And if this yielding of access proves to be useful in maintaining the voice of the land, then that which is to be kept is actually strengthened by the giving – “giving for keeping.” In this very competitive society, it is the task of women to gain rights to land whose voice they are obliged to maintain through constant effort. Yet, this voice is
to be expressed by men – to be manifested as a ‘mysterium tremendum’ that rationalizes hierarchy in social relations.

These same issues are advanced in a very different context by Françoise Dussart (Chapter Three), where she considers the distribution and exchange of “Dreaming stories” among the Warlpiri of the central Australian desert. In this case the “sacred object” takes the form of a ritual recitation of stories related to a dream or it takes the form of designs or “graphics.” We can say these things are “sacred” because their recitation or depiction can be essential to sustaining the productivity of land and people. Dreams convey magic, and it may happen that several individuals must contribute to a story in order to assure its effectiveness. Although most dreams are communicated to, and shared with, family members, there are Dreamings that enter into formal ritual and become subject of appropriation by other households. In this case it would appear that sacred knowledge is subject to exchange – but is it really?

One of the fascinating sections of Dussart’s discussion deals with a particular woman’s need for a form of ritual knowledge that is enacted only by men. So, the woman sought the assistance of her brother, who could provide her a modified male shield design. She copied this design and had it painted onto her body while she sang songs. She later rewarded her brother handsomely for use of the graphic. Since her brother resides in a different household, this compensated transfer of sacred materials appears to be an example of “giving” (exchange). However, it is instead an example of Annette Weiner’s (1992) “keeping while giving.” This is so because the sacred thing was only modified, but not actually transferred. It was only the transformed and modified version of the “graphic” that entered into exchange, allowing men to continue to “keep” their own special form of magic. Furthermore, if the use of men’s dreams in women’s ritual has the potential of helping to sustain the power of those dreams, then Godelier’s notion of “giving for keeping” would apply.
The Yapese and Warlpiri cases are exciting examples of the sacred because they would initially appear to challenge Godelier’s basic postulate that sacred objects are not given in exchange. It is only when we recognize the relevant meanings of “giving” and “keeping” that we discover their complex simultaneity.

FROM THE SACRED TO THE SYMBOLIC

In a world that possesses a decreasing need for a fearsome God, the hugely popular “Antiques Road Show” on public television often reflects a modern search for proximate and personal sacred objects. With the presentation and (commercial) valorization of heirlooms, individuals seek to infuse daily life more powerfully with elements of the sacred. The selected experts in this program are likely to ascertain the authenticity of the items (proving, for example, that its maker was indeed a highly regarded craftsman in Manchester during the early 1800s). But the crowning moment of the process is the expert’s estimate of the item’s “auction value.” Having made this pronouncement to its brightly beaming possessor, the expert will often suggest that the sentimental (totemic) value of the item might preclude its devolution into commercial exchange. It should be kept!

In their study of heirlooms in the United States Eric J. Arnould, Carolyn Folkman and Linda L. Price (Chapter Four) present their research on “inalienable objects,” namely family heirlooms, in middle-class North American households. The authors focus on how certain family possessions are transformed into “objects that should not be given or sold, but kept within the confines of a kinship structure.” In this way those items may become emblems of family identity into future generations.

In many societies such transmissions are associated with matrilineal or patrilineal transmissions of wealth in the forms of land and/or animals, much like inheritance of the family farm in American society. In such cases the history of a herd or the history of the land carries
images of generations past whose efforts have been important to the present prosperity of the group. In the current period few Americans are able to connect themselves to ancestors and progeny by means of transmissible wealth-assets of this kind. Unable to root their identities to the past and future, they may seek, often in desperation, to locate something emblematic of self that is subject to intergenerational transmission—an emblem that has the potential of achieving the totemic. When found, these objects are sometimes said to be sacred. However, household items and jewelry are not sacred unless they are invested with the power of the “wholly other.” Heirlooms do not possess a “voice,” like that of Yapese land, nor do they possess the power of Warlpiri graphics.

The heirlooms discussed by Arnould et al. are concrete items of human manufacture, not animals of the forest or sky, like the totems found among aboriginals. Since people of the modern West dominate and often despoil most of the more noble animal species, an identification of a family with such beings is unlikely. Much more likely is identification with artifacts of capitalist production. It is to these kinds of things that people recognize as “sacred,” even though they are only symbolic.

Similarly, elegant pre-Columbian ceramics are national treasures not subject to commodification. However, they are not sacred because they are handicrafts which were originally produced identically in great quantity. Nor do they possess ‘mysterium tremendum’. What, then, can we say about replicas of pre-Columbian ceramics? The photographs provided by Jim Weil (Chapter Seven) in his discussion of the topic illustrate a tradition of handicraft of exceptional quality. The same people produce them, six hundred years removed, using similar techniques and designs. They are in many ways “the real thing.” But the ancestors did not pass them down; they lack heirloom quality. Indeed, they are produced for an international market for “ethnic arts.” Weil argues that these replicas are authentic. Certainly, they are not fake –
pretending to be what they are not. And to the extent that they are authentic, they have the potential to evoke some of the sentiments of the ancestral works, becoming symbols of the symbolic. This, however, is not an acceptable circumstance for contemporary Costa Rican artisans. If their work is symbolic of the symbolic, then the artisans, themselves, are reduced to being only surrogates of the dead. That is, they are not to be recognized in their own right. Indeed, they are subject to criticism if they introduce more modern methods into their work. They are obliged to remain as images, or symbols, of the dead, when their desire is to be independently a source of the authentic.

The issues facing the Costa Rican artisans are not fundamentally different from those facing principal actors in the fashion industry, as discussed by Brian Moeran (Chapter Six). Fashionable clothing is produced by one set of actors, yet its characterization devolves upon others, especially those who produce fashion magazines. It raises the questions: “who is bestowing things with what kind of values, when, where and why.” Moeran argues that different categories of actors (photographers, art directors, editors, models, etc.) attribute different kinds of values (technical values, social values, appreciative values, utility values) to objects, and that these values as a whole “contribute towards the total symbolic and commodity exchange values of that object.” It must be the case, however, that the major fashion houses have a large measure of control over these fashion magazines. They possess a level of social dominance not held by artisans located on the periphery of the world system.

The dominance of social forces in the valuation of people and things is further illustrated by Melanie Rock’s (Chapter Seven) discussion of diabetes patients and the pharmaceutical industry in Canada. Human lives are among the things that are generally believed to be inalienable in the more advanced capitalist countries. Yet, we know of the implicit commodification implied by the lower life expectancies of poor people. It would seem, then, that
human lives are symbolically, or at least ideologically, constructed as inalienable, and perhaps “sacred,” while being always subject to the exploitation of economic interests. These observations suggest that signification, the symbolic significance, of people and things is often under the control of socially dominant categories within a social formation. This is, of course, the same observation that we made earlier with reference to the sacred.

MONEY, CREDIT AND CONSUMPTION

If, indeed, one of the characteristics of sacred things is their location in the imagination and their avoidance of the circuits of commercial exchange, then money would appear to be the quintessential antithesis of the sacred. Money is celebrated for its efficacy in facilitating exchange of other things, in addition to being a medium for storing wealth. Further, an important attribute of money is the predictability of its effect on the processes into which it enters, and this attribute would be seriously damaged were money to enter the realm of the ‘mysterium.’

Nevertheless, the textbook claim that money is simply a means of exchange and a store of wealth is hardly an apt characterization. The presentation of money as a neutral and instrumental device to facilitate economic activity is arguably a carefully constructed bourgeois illusion. Certainly, the centrality of money and its equivalence in gold was central to the efforts of European merchant states just prior to the birth of industrial capitalism. We are offered a glimpse into that period by the discussion of smoking pipes recently found under the bay at Port Royal, Jamaica, as discussed by Georgia Fox (Chapter Eight). Port Royal was a thriving Caribbean port city that was destroyed by an earthquake in 1692. Submerged for centuries, the recent excavation of this well-preserved site provides some insight into Caribbean colonial life in the seventeenth century. There were more than twenty thousand used and unused clay pipes; mass-produced and affordable products, that were smoked once and then thrown away. Hence, a community of smokers required thousands of such pipes. The quantity of pipes and the presence of luxury
goods at Port Royal, combined with the widespread cultivation of tobacco in Jamaica, provide a new perspective for understanding core-periphery relations in the seventeenth century. Rather than simply providing raw materials to the British Empire, the colonists at Port Royal were active as both producers and consumers.

The artifacts uncovered at Port Royal were the product of a pre-industrial system of domestic production, with its own unique class structure and dynamic. With the development of industry, however, there came a new relationship of people to the system of production and to money. Post-Keynesian economics, discussed by Colin Danby (Chapter Nine) challenges the view that money can properly be considered as a wholly instrumental feature of economic life. One should note that Keynes (1936) perceived an economy that was subject to the volatile sentiment of real people. The centerpiece of this model was the “marginal efficiency of capital,” a construct arising from the unstable expectations of investors and business firms. Danby says, “To put it a different way, the very coherence of a capitalist economy with active financial markets may depend on the willingness to share representations” (our emphasis).

Since money is so foundational to capitalist processes, we should expect that it would be the recipient of shared representations. But the existence of this cultural integument often seems hidden under cover of ideological assertions of money’s cultural neutrality. Hence, the efforts of the French to subdue the cowry in West Africa and replace it with French coins can be made to appear to be nothing more than the advancement of a “civilizing mission.” Cowries had been introduced to Africa by European mercantile traders in earlier centuries (a rather clever trick one might note). But, as Mahir Saul’s discussion (in Chapter Ten) makes clear, with the transition from mercantilism to capitalism and colonial exploitation, the cowry became a problem. The fact that this should be so is not obvious.
During an earlier period, the cowry had been traded on the European exchanges, it was readily accepted by local traders and could be used for all economic and fiscal purposes. And, most importantly, the cowry proved, eventually, to be the superior currency, maintaining its value over the course of time while the franc fluctuated in value and depreciated rather disastrously. However, the cowry was initially available in large quantities in the “hoards” of tribal elders. These African elders represented a power center different from the bourgeois state, the elders in Paris. The goal of the metropolis was to reduce African societies into servitude relative to the accumulation of French industrial capital. This role was inconsistent with the persistence of traditional African social structures, justifying the adoption of a “civilizing” mission. The use of monies that presented the faces of French people emblazoned on the front was important to this mission. The franc possessed a significance that went beyond its rational economic functions; it was symbolic of French culture in its domination of African culture. Indeed, it is readily conceivable that the franc has been revered as a sacred object.

While there has been a considerable literature on monetary competitions between colonists and colonized, less attention has been addressed to competition within a given national terrain. However, in Chapter Eleven, Beth Notar examines the politics of currency competition in China during the 1920s and 1930s. In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, thousands of different currencies, many issued by foreign colonial banks, provincial banks and “native banks,” were simultaneously in use. These notes were sometimes primarily advertising media, used to attract potential customers, and they carried symbolism of the colonial power, such as the notes of a New York bank that pictured “an eagle encompassing the entire world.”

The Republic of China entered the fray in order to bring order to the chaos and to establish the central government as a trustworthy entity. And during the 1930s, the Nationalist government tried to establish a currency monopoly, but their efforts failed as a multiplicity of
currencies persisted. Mao Zedong’s forces developed their own paper money as a way of gaining local resources without alienating the peasantry and as a mode of advertising. Initially, their currencies were strongly Soviet in appearance, featuring hammer and sickle and pictures of Karl Marx. In areas where Communist and Nationalist forces were in serious competition, the holding of one or the other form of currency could be dangerous and constituted a political act, a fact that strongly establishes money as an item of political symbolism.

As important as currencies may be as symbolic objects, most money in a modern economy is created electronically when banking institutions provide credit for productive or consumption purposes. The symbolism of national or revolutionary currencies does not apply here. When operating within their originating national domain, banks are often presumed to act as rational profit maximizing enterprises. And, indeed, it is an extremely sophisticated operation. Yet, there is an overarching value system that guides and constrains behavior. This is so, because loans to one sector of the market reduce funds available to other sectors; and the allocation of funds among sectors is sometimes affected by extrinsic social valuations. For example, the credit-worthiness of a entire class of applicants may not be assessable by conventional methods; and the social valuation of this class of applicant might affect the inclination of a lending institution to develop appropriate assessing tools. Consequently, in relation to a specific applicant, the lending agent may correctly claim that the costs of assessment are excessive relative to benefits. The disadvantaged sector is likely to be a sector that is economically and, perhaps, socially marginal -- less important to the central forces of capital accumulation.

On the other hand, when classes of applicants who are disadvantaged in the formal sector are able to develop “informal” mechanisms for receiving credit, the official agencies of monetary management may feel threatened. As we have observed in the previous discussion, ruling elites (be they the elders of a tribe or the elders of a metropolis) demand prerogatives to control the
circulation of money. An informal market for credit is not under their control. So, while official forces may not have a great interest in a disadvantaged sector, they are concerned to displace informal lenders whose actions appear to usurp the prerogatives of the formal sector. Such efforts have, in the past, been readily justified by the myth of the usurious moneylender whose existence is alleged to be damaging to his client and to the economy as a whole. Hence, a replacement of the informal by the formal is analogous to the civilizing mission of French colonists in their effort to replace the cowry with the franc.

Formal lenders often find that there are valuable aspects of the informal system that are beyond their imitation (Adams and Fitchett 1992). We have two examples before us of such informal systems. The paper by Lynne Milgram (Chapter Twelve) examines credit relations among producers, buyers and retailers of craft objects in the Philippines; and the paper by Kathleen Pickering and David Mushinski (Chapter Thirteen) considers a micro-banking operation on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. In both cases the importance of personal familiarity, knowledge of the credit-worthiness of specific applicants and willingness to deal with relatively small loans are distinguishing characteristics of the informal financial systems.

In the Philippines craft producers often develop a suki (patron-client) relation with traders within which credit may be extended with lower risk. Traders pay cash advances to producers thereby securing a commitment of delivery from the producer while allowing the producer to cover costs of production and (often overlooked) family consumption expenses as well. Particularly surprising is the degree to which traders must yield to the interests of producers, to the extent of forgiving default. Traders also may provide product to retailers on credit, so that they face losses from both sides of the transaction. Economic characteristics of the trader’s market position are deserving of additional scrutiny. However, it is difficult to imagine equally effective entrée by the formal sector into these financial arrangements.
The discussion by Pickering and Mushinski of informal banking systems at Pine Ridge suggests that the formal system of banking in the United States effectively excludes Indian reservations. The failure of these institutions to make loans to the people of Pine Ridge is the obverse of the efforts of the French to eliminate trading of cowry. In effect it is a refusal to integrate Pine Ridge into the American economy. In order for these reservations to be integrated into the financial system, it is necessary that bankers are able to assess the credit worthiness of individual borrowers and be able to apply social pressure on those who might otherwise default. However, the caste nature of the Indian’s social position leads to an inordinate suppression of social contact and knowledge about individual capabilities, this leads to a form of “profiling” that reduces the likelihood of loans to Indians from institutions outside of the reservation.

CONCLUSION

In a number of movie films the Christian cross -- held outward in the hands of the main character -- has been shown to vanquish forces under the control of the Devil. In this depiction of the matter, the Cross is no longer a symbol of a historically significant execution, it becomes sacred. It is an example of a ‘mysterium tremendumʼ entering the world through the medium of a particular object. Ordinarily, however, the cross atop the local church, or inside of it, is only symbolic of such power. It is simply an object constructed of ordinary materials by construction workers or artisans. Yet, one can imagine such a cross, seemingly ordinary in its every aspect, producing a powerful effect upon those who encounter it. The cripple drop their crutches, the blind open their eyes, so that objects that some people perceive to be ordinary can assume the powers of the ‘mysterium tremendum.’ My point here is that objects are sacred only by imputation on the part of “believers.” Hence, the kwaimatnie presented with such emotion to Godelier was not expected by his hosts to have a similar significance to an outsider. We can also see that the “voice” provided by land in Yap cannot be appropriated by those whose mothers
have not successfully attached them to the land. Some gods are accessible only by members of particular tribes and are expected to act only in the interests of particular tribes. These facts relate to the social construction of the sacred and of gods and of the role of the sacred within social structure.

A symbol can be sacred for those who provide the appropriate imputation, as indicated above. Hence, when we assert that an heirloom is only symbolic, we cannot be certain. We are making an assumption, potentially false, that there is no one whose imputations convey powers upon the object. On the other hand, by starting with the foundational conceptions of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade at the beginning of this introduction, we are provided with the tools necessary for distinguishing between the sacred and those things that are “only” symbolic to particular individuals or to particular cultures. We are also able to determine that a thing is not sacred even when someone claims it to be. That is, we have a tool that is useful in cross-cultural research, allowing us to inquire into the reasons for analytically unjustified claims about the sacred in ethnographic materials. This possibility is particularly important in examining the ideologies of the contemporary period, given the possibility that a futile search for the sacred might lead to false designation.

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