

Gift is not only the Present, but also the Future: The Food Offering Practice of Turkish Women

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Abstract: The literature on the transformation of modes of exchange tacitly asserts a linear history where the mode of exchange transforms from being a pure gift into being a form of debt. Yet, the transformation of a gift exchange practice by Turkish women where they offer food to their neighbors provides a counter-argument to this linear history, by asserting an alternative cyclical history. In other words, after transforming into a form of latent indebtedness, Turkish women's food offerings to their neighbors during the course of their daily routines has transformed into a pseudo-gift within a financialized world. Based on the data derived from in-depth interviews, this study first aims at describing in detail how this food and the resulting plate traffic transpires in the daily lives of Turkish women. Secondly, this study seeks to illustrate how this practice has transformed into something of a pseudo-gift that undermines solidarity among neighbors by loosening the social ties among them (this being the reason why it is called pseudo) while still having the potential to maintain solidarity since it is very close to a pure gift. All in all, this study is willing to point out alternative forms of exchange in daily life within a world dominated by debt-oriented market capitalism.

Keywords: food offerings • mode of exchange • gift • indebtedness • pseudo-gift

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The sociological literature on the transformation of modes of exchange (from Malinowski [1922] and Mauss [1924/2002] to Sahlins [1972] and Karatani [2014]) tacitly asserts a linear history. According to that linear history, modes of exchange tend to transform from being a pure gift to a commodity exchange, a tendency considered to be both a cause and an effect of changing social solidarities. On the other hand, the transformation of a small gift practice of Turkish women (i.e., offering food to one's neighbors paves the way for a counter-argument) points to an alternative history that is more cyclical than linear. In other words, after transforming into latent indebtedness, food offerings by Turkish women to their neighbors during the course of daily routines tend to take the form of a *pseudo*-gift within a modernized, individualized, and financialized world.

Traditionally, Turkish women would often, perhaps as an outcome of a tradition of sharing the food with those around, offer their neighbors a symbolic portion of the food cooked for that night's dinner on a plate that they would either deliver or have a family member deliver to them. This share is called the "share of the eye." Employed to establish social ties between neighbors, certain features of this offering, including what is offered, on which kind of plate it is handed to the neighbor, who delivers it to the neighbor, and how it is presented to the neighbor, are all have some decisive effect on the future of those social ties. On the other hand, this gift practice also exposes the neighbor to the problem of needing to return the ceramic plate. Since the common understanding puts that returning an empty plate to the food offering neighbor is an improper and a rude response, a *good* neighbor must reciprocate with a counter offering and fill the original ceramic plate with a counter-gift determined by certain features, such as the size and shape of the plate, the nature of the food offered, the degree of the first offering's ornateness. This potential counter-offering proposes that the first food offering also implies a latent indebtedness for the neighbor receiving it. Recently, Turkish women have opted to present the offering within a plastic, paper, or aluminum plate so as to prevent the debt implication of the first offering. By not providing a concrete reason, namely a ceramic plate needing to be returned, for reciprocation and therefore by obviating a debt relation, the neighbor offering food can control the frequency and intimacy of the relationship with her neighbor. Thus, the transformation of food offerings has transitioned into a *pseudo*-gift form. For whereas a gift often has the idea to maintain and strengthen social ties among peoples, this so-called *pseudo*-gift sustains a loose social tie. Hence, the daily practice of offering a gift has transformed into something to a latent indebtedness as well as to a pseudo-gift form.

In this extent, the study starts with a critique of the *opera magnum* of the literature on the gift practice and its linear history followed by a description of the food offering practice of Turkish women. Based on the critique of the *opera magnum* of the gift literature and the food offering description then comes an account of cyclical

history of food offering practice. The study is concluded with the assertion how this cyclical history of a gift practice (dys)functions in Turkish society. In this respect, data derived from in-depth interviews with 12 Turkish women selected using the sequential sampling method will be analyzed².

The Linear History of the Gift

In the introduction, it is claimed that the literature on modes of exchange tacitly presumes a linear history for this practice starting from a pure gift and transforming into a debt relationship. On the other hand, a brief look through the literature reveals that the origin of this practice being a pure gift is merely an abstract categorical assertion lacking concrete evidence left by those who practice it³. Hence, in order to criticize this linear history it is a must to survey the *opera magnum* of this literature in brief. In his pioneering anthropological study on Western Argonauts of the Pacific, Bronislaw Malinowski provides a detailed account of a practice called *Kula* in which gifts are exchanged across a ring of islands (Malinowski, 1922). As a mode of exchange between tribes, the *Kula* is practiced by inhabitants residing on a large ring of islands that form a geographically “closed circuit” (Malinowski, 1922, p. 62). In this ring of islands, according to Malinowski, “in the direction of the hands of a clock, moves constantly...long necklaces of red shell...[and in] the opposite direction moves...bracelets of white shell...” (Malinowski, 1922, p. 62). As Malinowski puts it, there is also an ordinary trade within the *Kula* ring alongside the exchange of arm-shells and necklaces (Malinowski, 1922, p. 63). The constant exchanges of such specific goods in certain directions constitute a delayed and an anonymous reciprocal relation for each two hoops of the ring. To Malinowski, this reciprocal relation seems as if “[a]t any point in the *Kula* ring, if we imagine him [one hoop of the ring, MFK] turned towards the centre of the circle, he receives the arm-shells with his left hand, and the necklaces with his right, and then hands them both on. In other words, he constantly passes the arm-shells from left to right, and the necklaces from right to left” (Malinowski, 1922, p. 71). Another scholar, Karl Polanyi uses this detailed account of the *Kula* ring in his book *The Great Transformation* to supply relevant samples in asserting alternative modes of exchange to commodity exchange, one being reciprocity:

Little is known of the origin of “duality”; but each coastal village on the Trobriand Islands appears to have its counterpart in an inland village, so that the important exchange of breadfruits and fish, though disguised as a reciprocal distribution of gifts, and actually disjoint in time, can be organized smoothly. In the *Kula* trade, too, each individual has his partner on another isle, thus personalizing to a remarkable extent the relationship of reciprocity. But

2 All names used for Interviewees are pseudonyms.

3 That is why from among scholars, one can see Jacques Derrida (1992), Mary Douglas (in Mauss 2002) asserting there is no such a thing as a pure gift.

for the frequency of the symmetrical pattern in the subdivisions of the tribe, in the location of settlements, as well as in intertribal relations, a broad reciprocity relying on the long-run working of separated acts of give-and-take would be impracticable. (Polanyi, 2001, p. 51)

Besides this detailed account for the *Kula* ring, a Maori myth provides Marcel Mauss a relevant case in theorizing the gift practice in his well-known essay. Mauss, basing his theory on this Maori myth of gift giving asserts that the reason for a counter gift to the first gift giver is the hidden spirit of the thing given as a gift, namely a *hau*. Thus, due to this spirit of the first gift that suffers to turn back to the first gift giver an obligation to offer a counter-gift imposes itself to the receiver of the first gift (Mauss, 2002, p. 13 ff.). In his book *The Enigma of the Gift*, another French anthropologist Maurice Godelier asserts, while evaluating Mauss' work, that gift giving seems to create a twofold relationship between gift giver and receiver, that of solidarity as a result of sharing and that of superiority as a result of the debt, until he repays it (Godelier, 1999, p. 12).

In his paradigm-shifting work on the economical life of primitive peoples, Marshall Sahlins, while providing some hybrid forms converging to free-gift also postulates that gift relation constitutes a so-called "between" relation. This "between" relation initiated by the first gift tends to complete itself with a repayment. This repayment can be more or less equal to the initial gift (Sahlins, 1972, p. 127). As Sahlins cited from Raymond Firth "...delayed repayments among Maori are customarily larger than the initial gift" and it is some kind of a general rule that, 'the payment must, if possible, be somewhat in excess of what the principle of equivalence demanded'" (Firth, 1959, p. 423 as cited in Sahlins, 1972, p. 160). According to Sahlins gift practice, in addition to initiating a relation between peoples, it also "engenders continuity in the relation, solidarity – at least until the obligation to reciprocate is discharged. Secondly, falling under "the shadow of indebtedness," the recipient is constrained in his relations to the giver of things" (Sahlins, 1972, p. 208).

Despite the fact that at the end of his world history, there exists hope for a supersession to a communistic mode of exchange over global capitalism, Kojin Karatani also follows a linear history in mode of exchanges. According to Karatani's mode of exchange matrix, a primitive-communistic era dominated by free sharing transformed into gift dominated reciprocity that gave way to state-dominated plunder and redistribution, which in turn paved the way to a capital dominated commodity exchange system (Karatani, 2014, p. 9). Similar to Malinowski, Mauss, Godelier, Sahlins, and others, Karatani also asserts that this practice of exchanging gifts, with its non-written and latent reciprocity principle, constitutes a peace term between peoples and tribes. As being a primitive version of a social contract, this peace term leads to another, albeit this time non-reciprocal, mode of exchange system, namely plunder. Karatani describes the leap from gift to reciprocity and then to plunder as follows:

Clan society creates a state of peace by establishing a higher-level community through the reciprocity of the gift. A confederation of tribes overcomes the state of war existing between communities by means of the reciprocity of the gift. This is one kind of social contract. If this expands, it takes on the form of a chieftom. The chieftom has its own spatial capital, which hosts meetings of the council of chiefs and also becomes the site of trade between communities. For these reasons, we can call this the primary form of the state and city. To move from this to the state proper—to move from chieftom to monarchy—requires a great leap. This is because the state is based on a nonreciprocal principle of exchange. (Karatani, 2014, p. 65)

As can be seen in this brief survey of the *opera magnum* of the literature on the modes of exchange, the latent history postulates a linear strike, which is skewed by the cyclical history of food offering practices of Turkish women as described in the following section.

The Plate Traffic between Neighbors

He is not a believer whose stomach is full while his neighbor is hungry.
Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)

Women are the centrifugal agents of Turkish urban households by being the authority in determining the course of neighborly relations. In this extent, despite the fact that they do not have direct authority in shaping the relations with their husbands' and their own relatives, they are the persons who start, maintain, develop, and conclude relations with their neighbors. A traditional practice, food offerings are the key ritual in starting and developing relations between neighbors. In Turkish culture when one eats or cooks dishes, he believes that those around have a certain share in, or right to, the dish being eaten or cooked, called "the share of the eye." Especially before the appearance of kitchen exhaust fans, the smell of dishes being cooked would inevitably diffuse starting from the closest neighbor to a certain distance. As an outcome of this tradition, people now tend to offer a symbolic portion of the food eaten or cooked. Thus, according one's neighbors their due share may be evaluated within the social-anthropological literature on gift exchange practices.

When a woman cooks a dish for dinner, she tends to offer a share of it to one or more of her neighbors. Betül⁴ revealed that she tends to offer a share of food to her neighbors mostly when she feels comfortable with the dish she cooks. According to this account of Betül, the time to decide to offer a share is the time a woman feels that she will exhibit her skills among her neighbors. Several factors impact her decision as to whom she will offer a share. Zehra⁵, for instance, expressed that she tends to offer a share of a certain

4 27 years old, housewife, residing in a gated community.

5 48 years old, teacher, residing in an apartment building.

dish to one of her neighbors who likes that specific dish considerably more than rest of her neighbors. Another woman, Ayşe⁶, stated that she offered a share of a dish that had cooked to a neighbor who had recently moved into her family's apartment building but whom she had been unable to welcome previously. According to Ayşe, offering food provides a valid pretext to knock on the door of newly integrated neighbor, to declare that the new neighbors were welcome and to seek the possibility of starting a relationship with her. The practice described thus far is not dissimilar to a simple exchange of gifts in its motives and functions. A woman may initiate an offering of food or, to put it more simply, a gift giving practice based on the nature of the food prepared (i.e., Betül), on the status of the neighbor to whom the share of food is offered (i.e., Ayşe), or on both factors (i.e., Zehra). However, what makes the food offering practice interesting is what is used to convey or transport the food being offered. Offering food as a gift differs from similar gift exchanging practices because of the type of plate on which the food is placed and how the plate is presented.

Based on the answers provided by all of the interviewees, Turkish women tend to offer the food on an adorned ceramic plate so as to enhance her self-esteem with the offering. Hence, in addition to feeling confident that the taste and appearance of the food is acceptable, women also seek a means to transport it in such a manner that fits the expectations of a kind offering. Although the object used to transport the food, is a ceramic plate, it is not an individual piece from a full set. Since a woman has several such adorned ceramic plates that are not part of a matching set in her kitchen, the one she chooses to transport the food is an important decision in and of itself. In this extent, the very nature of good offered is the structuring factor. The natural characteristics of the food offered, such as whether it is a dry food or a stew, whether it looks better in an oval platter or in a bowl, whether the share offered is a large amount or rather a symbolic amount all impact the decision process. All the interviewees revealed that they tend to beautify the food and plate with small touches instead of haphazardly pouring the food onto a plate and delivering it to the neighbor. Aslı⁷ also asserted that she cares about the person assigned to delivering the offering of food. The offering delivered by a little child is different from an in-person delivery. The food offering practice tends to take on a form resembling a gift giving ritual.

As cited above, if not naturally in and of itself, due to the fact that it is a threefold process (i.e., the obligation to give a gift, the obligation to receive the gift, and the obligation to reciprocate), the gift practice tends to take the form of a debt to be repaid to the original conferrer as soon as it is given. Likewise in Mauss' account, the *hau* of the gift is the reason for a reciprocated gift. In the case of food offering, a material/concrete *hau* seems to be the reason that necessitates a gift to be reciprocated. This

6 42 years old, shop keeper, residing in a gated community.

7 56 years old, retired teacher, residing in an apartment building.

material/concrete *hau*, in this case a ceramic plate, is what is used to deliver the first offering. To put it simply, when a woman offers a portion of the food she has cooked to a neighbor in a ceramic plate, that neighbor faces a problem: returning the ceramic plate. A traditional principle implies that returning the plate in which the first food offering was made empty to its owner is improper and rude conduct. To avoid being stigmatized as an unmannerly neighbor, the receiver of the first offering seeks an opportunity to fill the ceramic plate with food and to offer it as a reciprocated gift to the first neighbor. Due both to the principle that condemns returning an empty ceramic plate and to the neighbor's concern of not wanted to be stigmatized as an unmannerly neighbor, this gift exchange practice immediately transforms into a debt relation between neighbors. In this debt relation, two factors are important for the future of the neighborliness, namely the time period between the two offerings and ensuring that the two offerings are of a similar nature.

According to the interviewees, while enjoying a nicely cooked dish offered by a neighbor, the problem of returning the plate used to deliver it within a reasonable time with an equivalent offering is a troublesome issue. As Sherry put it in his essay on gifts, "giving too much, too little, or too late can strain a relationship to the point of dissolution" (Sherry, 1983, p. 158). Esra⁸ revealed that she sometimes even waited an excess of two months in order to be satisfied with the counter-offering that filled the plate. Apart from the timing of the counter-offering, the nature, shape, and size of the original gift of food also constituted concrete pressure on the original recipient. It is understood that specific dishes require far more labor and expense than others. Such an expensive and labor-intensive offering puts recipient under a pressure to fill the plate with a dish of at least equal quality. However, the original recipient is not free to reciprocate with a dish of lesser or greater proportion since the shape and the size of the original plate restricts her options. Although during the original offering, the type of food offered decided which plate was to be used to transport the food, now the roles are switched, as during the counter-offering, it is the plate that decides which dish to prepare. It is obvious here that there is a very real and burdensome debt relation in neighbors' exchanging of food, and it is interesting that in addition to the food offered, the plate in which it is transported constitutes the concrete *hau*, or bond, of this indebtedness since food is already offered to one's neighbor to be enjoyed as the *share of the eye*. Yet, although it is in the possession of the recipient, the plate used to transport the food is not itself a part of the portion offered. How might this dilemma be solved?

The Cyclical History of Food Offering

Nothing remains unchanged in social life. Everything, no matter how durable it may be, will eventually fade away. So, too, is this the case with the practice of food

8 33 years old, bank employee, residing in an apartment building.

offering. Following dramatic changes in neighborly relations, types of residential arrangements, and women's employment, the practice of offering food to one's neighbors has also changed. In this transformation process, women themselves have taken on an active role outside the house and have repositioned their relationship with the very object that caused indebtedness, the ceramic plate. For a woman, as easily anticipated, it is not an issue to decide not to make an initial offer of food to her neighbor. On the other hand, when a neighbor knocks on her door with a full plate, it is not easy to reject it. All of the interviewees assured that they had never refused a neighbor in such a situation. They also assure that they would hesitate to refuse such an offer. Additionally, there has emerged an interesting innovation to this practice, namely changing the means used to transport food.

Recently, women have opted to choose cheap and easily disposable plastic, paper, or aluminum plates to transport food to their neighbors. By changing the material nature of the conveyer of the offering and by eliminating the problem of returning the plate, a woman can preclude the possible relation of indebtedness to be incurred by her neighbor. There seem to be several reasons for such a change. Firstly, as a result of improvements in technology easily disposable plates are both ubiquitous and inexpensive. Secondly, the transformation of residential areas from traditional neighborhoods to gated communities has atomized inter-neighbor relations. Thirdly, women are now employed outside the house, reducing the amount of time women have to make an initial offer or the headache of having to wait for an empty plate to be returned. Fourthly, due to the second and third reasons, women tend to consider presenting an offering of food on a ceramic plate instead of a plastic, paper, or aluminum one to be tactlessness. According to Fatma⁹, her neighbors tend to bring her offerings of food in plastic, paper, or aluminum plates because they consider her too old to be put into a debt relation by an empty ceramic plate. Hence, there may be other contextual reasons behind the change in conveyer in this practice. For instance, Pakize¹⁰ revealed that once a neighbor knocked on her door returning the ceramic plate that she had employed, using it instead as a tray on which a disposable plate containing food was offered to her. Pakize stated that she understood her neighbor's message as meaning not to offer food on a ceramic plate so as not to put anyone in a debt relation. On the other hand, Esra expressed that she employs such disposable plates to be able to maintain relations with her neighbors within a defined limit by precluding a pretext to knock on her door to return the original ceramic plate. All in all, in this specific practice, "the medium is again the message's itself" as once Marshall McLuhan asserted within a different context.

Thus, a gift giving practice stemming from a religious, cultural, and traditional principle of sharing a symbolic portion of the dish cooked for dinner with one's

9 73 years old, housewife, residing in an apartment building.

10 51 years old, housewife, residing in an apartment building.

closest neighbors has transformed into a debt relation as a result of the need to return the empty ceramic plate to its owner. Yet as a consequence of changing inter-neighbor relations and technology have opted to offer food in a disposable plate, thereby precluding any debt relation by eliminating the bond of indebtedness, namely the ceramic plate and its needing to be returned to its owner. This is the circular history of Turkish women's practice of food offering to their neighbors: from a pure gift to an action causing indebtedness and then to a *pseudo*-gift. A gift maintains and/or strengthens a relation between two individuals. Although a debt relation may facilitate solidarity, it may also be a cause for conflict. Nevertheless, placing a limit on inter-neighbor relations by offering a share of the food one has cooked on a disposable plate follows a completely different agenda. Thus, the final form of the practice is a *pseudo*-gift because it undermines the solidarity among neighbors by loosening the social ties among them (hence the reason for calling it *pseudo*) while still having the potential to maintain solidarity among neighbors due to its being near to a pure gift.

Conclusion: Gift is not only the Present, but also the Future

As a conclusion it can be claimed that within a financialized and atomized world where inter-neighbor relations have experienced dramatic changes, the practice of exchanging gifts may take on the form of a *pseudo*-gift as well as the form of a debt relation. What pushes a pure gift closer to a debt relation is the principle of reciprocity. In the case of Turkish women's practice of food offering, a material *hau*, to put it in Mauss' terms, in the form of a ceramic necessitates such reciprocity. However, in an atomized world where neighbors reside in previously unseen residential arrangements, the reciprocity may not find a link to realize itself. In this specific case, particular tactics and strategies (i.e., using disposable plates as the conveyer) employed by social agents (i.e., women) erode the bonds and ties of possible ways to reciprocate. It can be seen that how Turkish women's practices of offering food have changed together with this erosion have paved the way to present an alternative circular history of evolving modes of exchange to the linear histories described by *opera magnum* in the sociological literature. For as a consequence of changing relations among neighbors over time and of technology, women have opted to offer their neighbor's portion using disposable plates. This act has started to preclude neighbors' being put into debt by eliminating the object that causes indebtedness, namely the ceramic plate. This is the circular history of Turkish women's practice of food offering: transforming from being a pure gift into a form of indebtedness and then into a *pseudo*-gift.

A gift maintains and/or strengthens a relation between two individuals. Even a debt relation may facilitate solidarity between people while also being a cause for conflict between them. Nevertheless, placing a limit on inter-neighbor relations by offering a share of the food one has cooked on a disposable plate follows a completely different

agenda. Thus, the final form of the practice is a *pseudo*-gift because it undermines the solidarity among neighbors by loosening the social ties among them (hence the reason for calling it *pseudo*) while still having the potential to maintain solidarity among neighbors due to its being near to a pure gift.

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