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# GIVING A GIFT TO THE HAMLET: RANK, SOLIDARITY, AND PRODUCTIVE EXCHANGE IN RURAL JAPAN

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Thomas Smith (1977:114-15) identifies a major source of the complexity of rural Japanese social relations in a key passage:

Historians and anthropologists have emphasized the solidarity of the traditional Japanese farming village, and unquestionably solidarity was one of its major characteristics. . . . But there was an equally important competitive side to village life that has been largely ignored: a competition between families rather than individuals, covert rather than open. . . . The immediate goal was the improvement of family well-being and village status.

This paper examines the strategic pursuit of family well-being and village status under conditions of overt co-operation and covert competition at the buraku level of social organization through the analysis of a pattern of customary gift-giving that developed after World War II in several neighboring farm hamlets in Aichi Prefecture.<sup>1</sup> The custom described here consists of the regular and systematic giving of gifts directly to the hamlet itself by all member families on a limited number of sharply defined occasions. By means of their gifts, member families overtly demonstrate solidarity with the hamlet as a whole while simultaneously giving covert expression to competition for relative position in the hamlet social hierarchy. The significance of this custom lies in the transparency with which it opens to view the complex inter-relationship of the three fundamental components of hamlet social relations—rank, solidarity, and productive exchange—and the social dislocations strategic manipulation of these elements entails.

The profound sensitivity to ranking pervading Japanese society is well documented (Rohlen 1974:175). In Nakane's (1970:31) words, "Rank is the social norm on which Japanese life is based." Equally important is the intensity of member loyalty to the group to which he belongs (Lebra 1976:22-37). Productive exchange, the basic economic relation of members in corporate groups, has not been explicitly discussed in the context of Japanese society, however. Most discussion of exchange relations in Japan has focused on simple dyadic exchanges between such structurally equivalent units as individuals and households (Lebra 1976:90-109; Befu 1968:445-456, 1966-67:161-177). Befu elegantly conveys the attitude of participants in such relations: "most gift-giving in Japan is actually gift-returning" (quoted in Lebra 1976:100). Of equal importance is that form of exchange involving collective, corporate production found in such sociologically

diverse groups as the firm and the hamlet. Emerson (1976) has given the term “productive exchange” to this form of exchange to distinguish it from simple exchange. “Unlike the direct transfer of valued items in simple exchange, [in productive exchange] items of value are produced through a value-adding process” (Emerson 1976:357).

In hamlet society, dependence on the benefits of productive exchange relations engenders solidarity, while the desire to differentially influence the allocation of corporate resources generates internal competition. Rank emerges through recognition of differential contributions to the success of the productive exchange relation while effectively limiting the spread of competition by confining it to occupants of adjacent ranks (Popkin 1979:120; Rohlen 1974:137). In centralized organizations, ranking is functionally related to the achievement of explicit organizational goals (Cole 1979:253), but in noncentralized organizations such as villages, the more diffuse goal of “the good of the group” emerges as the dominant criterion.

Only the spontaneous, public show of largesse by individual members satisfies the requirements for the simultaneous pursuit of both solidarity and distinction. Acquiescence in collective undertakings reduces control, while recalcitrance reduces participation. In the short run, gifts to the hamlet must be regarded as consumption, but over the long run they operate as an investment in corporate resources. Douglas’s (1979:89) view is, “Ultimately, consumption is about power, but power is held and exercised in many different ways,” and is based on her (Douglas 1979:78) observation that “The risk for [the consumer] comes from an alien view that is more comprehensive in scope than his own. Thus seen, his concerns are a direct reflection of the division of labor in the productive side of the economy.” The sponsorship of consumption events such as a gift to the hamlet thus expresses not only the donor’s intention to provide for the good of the group but also a definition of what that good is.

Gifts given to the group as a whole focus public attention on the collective member-group relation, the locus of solidarity and productive exchange, and away from the individualized member-member relation, the locus of competition. A major effect of directing public attention in this way, however, is the dislocation of discourse into public and private modes with regard to the motives of donors. While private objectives cannot be admitted into public discussion of the direction of the productive exchange relation, neither can the vigorous pursuit of influence over that direction be publicly interpreted as fostering a deleterious competition within the group. What is of particular interest in the present study is the strategic use of this tacit understanding in the competition for relative social standing, influence over collective undertakings, and, when this strategy is employed on a widespread basis, the unintended consequences its use entails.

This study describes the development of this pattern of customary gift-giving in Nohara-gumi, an agricultural hamlet of some 35 households. In closed corporate communities where productive resources are circumscribed and productive exchange important, signs of local status can become ossified. As Smith (1977:115) points out, positions of influence in village society in Japan were not yielded willingly, nor were they “automatically readjusted as economic status changed, and bitter quarrels sometimes erupted over the resulting discrepancies.” In Nohara-gumi, postwar changes in hamlet socioeconomic relations—primarily the effects of agricultural land reform and the later shift from dependence on local agricultural production to regular wage labor in a booming national economy—have resulted in the ascendancy of “egalitarianism” (*byōdōshugi*) as the dominant public ideology, and in the development of the custom of systematic “gift-giving for status” (Dore 1978:205) reported here. As Bailey (1971:20) suggests, however, “Equality, in face-to-face communities, is in fact the product of everyone’s belief that everyone else is striving to be more than equal. Equality comes about

through the mutual cancellation of supposed efforts to be unequal." The resultant discontinuity of will and wherewithall with regard to social standing in Nohara hamlet finds its clearest expression in the act and symbolism of "giving a gift to the hamlet" (*kumi ni gosbūgi o dasu*). Because of hamlet members' inability to publicly identify this implicit element of competition inherent in the hamlet productive exchange relation, in addition to assisting the rise of *byōdōshugi*, two further unintended consequences of this custom in Nohara hamlet have been the systematic hypertrophy of gift values on some occasions and not others, and the community-wide loss of knowledge of the postwar origins and development of the custom itself.

### THE CUSTOM AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

All 35 hamlet households currently give gifts to the hamlet on seven occasions: (1) the 42nd birthdays of male family members; (2) the 61st birthdays of male household members; (3) the 77th birthdays of male household members; (4) the marriages of male family members and female family members when her husband will become the household's successor; (5) the birth of the household head or successor couple's first child; (6) the 50th wedding anniversary of a household couple; and (7) the construction of a new house by a member household in the hamlet.

Throughout Japan, as in Nohara, these and many other occasions are celebrated privately with gift-exchanges and feasting within the household-centered network. In addition to this celebration, Nohara members also sponsor a feast (*kaishoku, gochisō*) to which each hamlet household is entitled to send one representative. This public meal, the basic component of the gift and custom, was formerly held in the hamlet head's home, but it has been held in the hamlet meeting hall since 1960.

About a month before the meal is scheduled, the donor household notifies the hamlet head of its intentions and places with him the cash portion of its gift, from which provisions for the meal will be purchased. The hamlet head arranges for the meal and orders the food and drink. If any of the cash is left over, a rare event, it is added to the hamlet's general fund. The donor family and hamlet head agree on a suitable date and time for the meal, usually a Sunday afternoon as a prelude to a general meeting of the hamlet as council for the discussion of hamlet affairs. The hamlet head then informs the rest of the hamlet of the gift and date of the meal.

Until the mid-1960s, rice, without which no Japanese meal would be complete, and occasionally some of the other provisions were provided directly by the donor household from its own stores. At present the entire meal is catered at a cost of ¥1500-2000 (1\$U.S. = ¥220) per person. The meal itself is served by one of the hamlet's five neighborhood groups (*gonin-gumi*). These groups serve in rotation at all hamlet functions at which food is taken, but the group to which the donor household belongs never serves at these events, switching with the group next in order.

When the hamlet members are all seated in the hamlet hall and the meal has been placed before them, but before the festivities commence, the hamlet head holds up the decorated envelope in which he received the cash gift and reads from it the donor household's name, the amount of the gift, and the nature of the occasion. During the meal the envelope is circulated from hand to hand around the tables and examined without comment as it travels around the hall.

Since the mid-1960s, it has also become customary to give some durable, utilitarian item in addition to a meal. The first such gift was given by the founder of the hamlet's age-group for younger household heads, a set of fluorescent light fixtures for the hamlet hall (which lacked any permanent electric lighting at the time). Since then, such items as folding dining tables, kerosene space heaters,

electric fans, china cupboards (*mizuya*), and vacuum cleaners have been given and have gradually come to make up the furnishings of the hamlet hall. When an article of this sort is included in a gift, it too is presented for inspection at the meal. If the item has a suitable exposed surface, the donor paints his name, the date, and the nature of the occasion on it beforehand.

The atmosphere at these meals is most convivial and attendance is high. If a general hamlet meeting is to be held afterward, attendance averages about 32 persons. When there is no hamlet meeting afterward, attendance is slightly lower, about 28-29 persons. No member of the donor household attends the meal or meeting afterward. In the days following the meal, members of the donor household are not thanked for their gift, nor greeted in the street by those who attended with the standard expressions of gratitude and appreciation normal courtesy enjoins.

Public and privately maintained documents relevant to this custom reveal systematic development only from 1947, when the first gift was recorded, to 1970, when the last new category of donor was added. Prior to World War II, hamlet landlords and other well-to-do hamlet members occasionally provided meals or funds on a variety of public and private occasions, but sponsorship of public meals did not acquire regularity of form or participation within the hamlet until the 1950s. As is said, "In the old days, the rich bought wine (*sake*) and snacks, and the poor ate and drank."

Records show eleven categories of occasion and donor serially coalescing into a regular practice over the 23-year period 1947-1970. The most remarkable feature of this sequence is that after the introduction of an occasion or class of donor through a first gift, virtually every household with a like opportunity at a later date marked the occasion with a gift of its own to the hamlet. Before the first gifts in any occasion and donor classes were given, there were 27 opportunities in the hamlet not marked with gifts. After a first gift was given for each occasion or donor class, however, there were 158 opportunities marked by 154 gifts.

All but the first occasion (42nd birthday) were clearly identified as suitable occasions for a gift to the hamlet only after 1947. Within the total set of occasions there have also been three or four expansions of donor class and recipient; marriage of later sons,<sup>2</sup> 42nd birthday of later sons, and second marriage/gift to Women's Club (*fujinkai*).<sup>3</sup> Of this total of ten (or eleven) expansions of opportunities to give a gift to the hamlet, one household alone was responsible for five, or one-half the total, and no other household for more than one.

Between 1947 and 1949, gift values have also increased for all occasions over the course of the development of this custom. Within the general tendency of gift values to increase over time, there are also dramatic increases of magnitude between adjacent gifts in the same categories, primarily for 42nd birthday and marriage. In order to isolate these instances of dramatic increase, I have arbitrarily set the measure of a significant increase at double the value of the previous gift in the same category.<sup>4</sup> Of the twelve significant increases this method yields, less than 10 per cent of the total number of gifts given, the household responsible for repeatedly expanding the occasions for giving was responsible for four. While this figure is not as obviously impressive as that household's contributions to the expansion of the set of suitable occasions and donors, these four significant increases represent all of the opportunities available to this household to "up the ante;" on every occasion this household had to give a gift to the hamlet on an occasion already marked by a previous gift, it increased the cost of the previous gift in that category by at least a factor of two. No other family has attempted this more than once, even in the period when the gift sizes were comparatively small. The particular situation of this household thus requires more detailed discussion.

This household was the hamlet's wealthiest, independent land-owning farm household (*jisakunō*) immediately before and during the war. At present it farms

the largest areas of both wet rice and mulberry trees (the leaves of which remain important to the sericulture industry) in the hamlet. This household was the most eligible to fill the vacuum left in the hamlet social hierarchy following the agrarian land reform and the repudiation of the pre-eminent position of the hamlet's two landlord households in the postwar period.

That this household was ultimately unsuccessful in its bid for recognition is due to the relocation and untimely deaths of key household members and, ironically, its very success in agriculture which led to its remaining members seeking employment outside agriculture. During the 1950s, this household had three vigorous males and two adult females, all able and in the prime of life, working its lands. No hamlet family was in a position to challenge this household's claim to hamlet leadership then. The death of the household head in the late 1950s was followed by that of his aged father a few years later and the relocation of the household's second son in the mid-1960s. By the late 1960s this household was reduced to one aged and one middle-aged widow and the latter's unmarried teenaged son.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, hamlet socioeconomic relations remained fluid and hamlet leadership was fragmented and unstable. It is now readily admitted that "Back then, nobody listened to anybody and nothing got done. Those old guys were a stiff-necked lot and didn't have much feeling for the hamlet. All they did was argue. Things are a lot better now." If in fact things are better now, it is in part because hamlet leadership has stabilized around differences in generation and occupation, two closely related variables in rural Japan.

The current household head of the family that had been the hamlet's third or fourth largest independent farming enterprise in the prewar period has emerged as the *de facto* leader of the older household heads still engaged in agriculture. This man is now in his early sixties and his reputation extends beyond the hamlet; in 1978 he was appointed by the city mayor to the municipal zoning/development board. In 1977 he led the resistance among local agriculturalists to the location of a refuse recycling facility in the area. This household contributed one expansion of occasion (birth) to the custom and one significant increase in gift size.

The younger household heads, especially those who are not more than marginally engaged in agriculture, follow the lead of the man who is the hamlet's major success story. This man is no longer connected with agriculture, although his household was the hamlet's second largest independent farming family in the prewar period. He is now a highly successful entrepreneur whose business, based in Nagoya, is international in scope. He served as an advisor to the mayor's election campaign and as ward secretary-treasurer at age 40. When he turned 42 years old in 1975, he formed an age-grade association of hamlet household heads his own age or younger which has the publicized purpose of furthering "the prosperity and development of Nohara hamlet." This household also contributed one expansion (new house) and one significant increase in gift value.

These two men are the ones now most consulted by the ward head or the ward's representative on city council when an understanding of public opinion in Nohara is required. The leadership role of the hamlet's two former landlord families is now entirely eclipsed. The current head of one is an adopted son-in-law (*mukoyōshi*) who entered the hamlet in his mid-twenties. The head of the other family, now in his late seventies, is still active in hamlet affairs because his children, the recipients of university educations, are all pursuing successful careers in Nagoya and Tokyo and have not resided in Nohara since childhood.<sup>5</sup>

It is not the case that the household giving more gifts or the largest gift on any occasion automatically succeeds to a position of hamlet leadership. Many factors are brought together and weighed closely over time in the recognition of public prominence, not the least of which is a willingness to assume an active and leading

role in community affairs. Gift-giving to the hamlet does not in itself assign rank or is it the cause of rank. A household's gifts do, however, project the image it wishes the hamlet at large to hold of its position in the hamlet. A gift is the component in its overall image that a household can most closely, directly, and immediately control, and which is thus most directly open to unilateral strategic manipulation.

As such, the giving of a gift requires a grammar. It is not the gift itself that is interpreted, but the position of the gift in the stream of other gifts; not just the gift itself, but who gives it. This is a simple language, and spoken correctly, yields two fundamental statements. First, "This family is a member in good standing." Second, "We are moving up in the world." The flexibility of this language does not derive from the large number of messages it can encode, but from its ambiguity. That is, an appropriate gift will always send the first message. The second message remains implicit in some "inappropriate" gifts and these can be interpreted variously as well as ignored.

Hamlet members, of course, recognize that some gifts are significantly, and conspicuously, greater than others. The quantum nature of gift values further enforces this perception. If a doubling of cost over the previous gift in a category of occasion by donor class accurately captures the effective dimensions of this perception, then a fairly precise rule governing gift value can be induced from the data without doing violence to the implicit and explicit intentions of donors.

There are two sorts of hamlet households, new and old. To this extent the hamlet society hierarchy remains in part ascriptive. An old household is one in which the current household head has succeeded to his position. A new household has either been founded by the current head as a branch household of an old hamlet household or has relocated from outside the hamlet under its current household head. It now, apparently, takes only a single generation for a new household to become an old one. New households do not compete directly with old households for status in the hamlet. That prospect remains for the successor. There are at present 21 old and 14 new households. Seven of the latter are branch households. The remaining seven have settled in Nohara from elsewhere since the end of the war.

For an old household, a gift that matches the previous gift given by another old household reaffirms its claim to the status it believes itself to be occupying. A significant increase in gift value proclaims that the family is moving up in the world and desires to have that view shared throughout the hamlet. The same obtains among new households, but at half the level of old household gifts.

The rule for gift giving carries the potential for intense inflation in gift values. Until the early 1970s, the tendency toward hypertrophy in gift value was only observable by inspection for the occasions 42nd birthday and marriage. Hamlet members are well aware of this overall tendency and recognize that in recent years gifts have become ostentatious (*hade*). In private discourse, gifts at the level of significant increase are discounted as examples of bad taste or bragging (*horo o fuku*). In public, hypertrophy of gift value is entirely and casually ascribed to the result of inflation in consumer prices in the national economy. These ingenuous explanations insufficiently account for the available data. Those who feel the pressure of a large gift on their own position most keenly will deprecate another's efforts, to be sure, but it is the hamlet's most prominent families who consistently raise the ante. As Douglas (1979:140) points out, one way to maintain a social boundary is "to set the normal rate for settling of internal transactions so high that only the very rich can afford to join the game." It is scarcely conceivable that the hamlet's most elite members should also be its most gauche, however. That one man's generosity is his neighbor's vulgar display is merely to see the two sides of the one coin at the same time.



Inflation in the national economy is also an inadequate explanation. Inflation in the consumer price index has averaged slightly more than 5 per cent over the past 30 years (Shukan Toyo Keizai 1979:110), while the rate of increase in gift value by category is extremely uneven. Some categories show virtually no more increase than the national average in consumer prices until the 1970s, while other categories, namely 42nd birthday and marriage for successors, increased by a factor of 25 or more (2500 per cent plus) over the postwar period and at an even, geometric rate.

The major source of gift inflation is local and directly related to the traditional view of the specific occasions involved. The potential for such increase is due entirely to the phenomenal increases in real farm family income since the early mid-1960s, following greatly expanded rural participation in the rapid growth of the Japanese economy (Dore 1978:92-98).

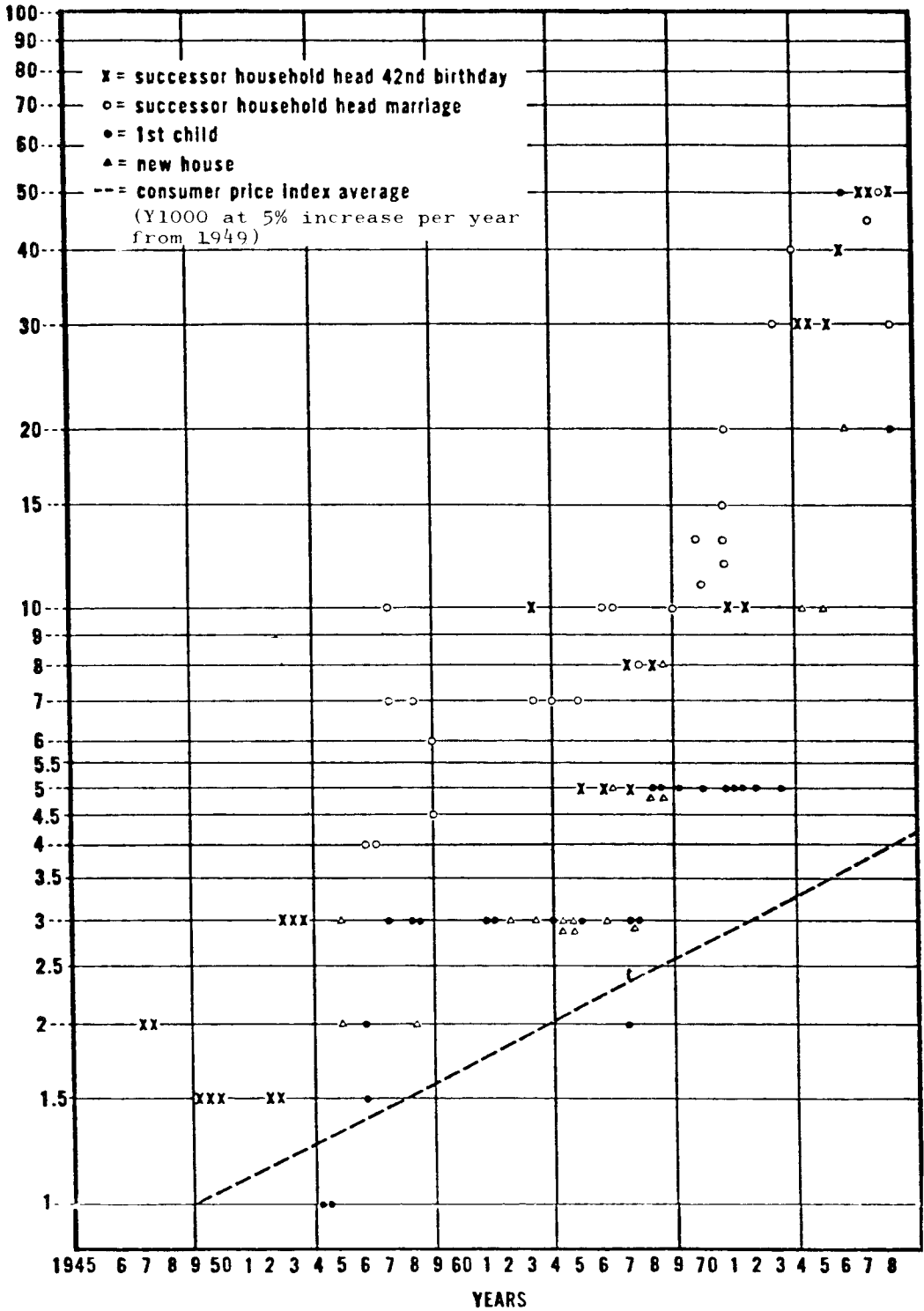
Increases in the relative cost and absolute magnitudes of gifts for 42nd birthday and marriage, the two occasions that show regular and steady rates of increase throughout the entire period, are particularly notable as these events reflect traditional concerns for family status. The most important occasion in a man's life (as distinct from his participation in the stem family cycle) in this series is his 42nd birthday. This year is the most inauspicious, the most dangerous, of the several "critical years" (*yakudosbi*) (Norbeck 1955:105-120), ostensibly because the pronunciation of 42 is homophonic with the word for death. It is this year that Japanese culture marks as the watershed year in a man's life. If he has not made it by age 42, it is most unlikely that he ever will. This birthday is set apart as the one on which a man can, and therefore must, show what he has made of himself. In Nohara, at least since the end of World War II, this has been done by giving increasingly larger gifts to the hamlet.

Marriage traditionally reflects the social status of the family as a whole rather than simply that of its head. Through marriage alliances with families outside the hamlet and village, a family shows in what social spheres it moves. As marriage is an agreement between two stem families (not merely two individuals) before it is contracted, the potential partners are investigated thoroughly. Go-betweens are employed to insure that neither family misrepresents its position and that neither loses face if the other finds it too far beneath its station to make a successful match. The ability a family has to marry off its children well is the most important index of its social standing. Just as the 42nd birthday of the household head is both a test and validation for hamlet household heads, marriage indicates social standing of the stem family.

None of the other five occasions is as obviously tied to family status or the self-image of the household head, but now that most hamlet income derives from the wages of household heads, and is earned outside the hamlet, all seven occasions reflect on the ability of the household head to gain access to the resources of the wider national economy. All gifts given in the representative and contrasting categories of 42nd birthday (or successors), marriage and birth, new house, (or approximately 60 per cent of all gifts given in all donor categories) are arrayed in Table 1.

Informants strongly disagree with my interpretation of this custom, which they view as ancient and motivated primarily by a family's desire to share its good fortune with the entire hamlet<sup>6</sup> and not as a means to compete with one another. Far from there being an implicit or other rule for generating the value of a gift, all gifts are freely given according to what a family believes it can afford, largely without regard to the costs of other gifts. Indeed, even the decision to give or not is entirely a function of the donor's personality and his whim or feelings (*kimochi*). There is no expectation in the hamlet that everyone will give. With an opportunity, it is said, everyone does give because everyone in the hamlet is the right sort of person, and not the kind who would eat another's meal and not

Table 1. Gifts In Four Representative Categories of Occasion 1947-1978 (in 1000 yen)



reciprocate. Hamlet members insist that they gave gifts on occasions when in fact they did not. Only with the greatest ambivalence will they acknowledge those singular instances when their gifts were the first on an occasion or in a donor class. No one acknowledges that his gift was significantly larger than that which came before it. They insist that it was only large enough to keep up with inflation. Some hamlet members even suggest that this custom, like so many other traditional practices in the rural areas, is now declining.

There are three cogent and related factors that make clear why hamlet members so egregiously misrepresent this custom to themselves and to each other. First, the socioeconomic relations in the hamlet that gave rise to this custom are not those now sustaining it. Second, there have been relatively few bids to move up in rank, and none that were especially dramatic. Third, the symbolism of the gift itself is sufficiently ambiguous that it can easily be seen as evocative of a cultural continuity parallel to hamlet social continuity.

Where claims to rank were once made on the basis of overwhelmingly local competition for local resources, they are now submitted as a function of access to resources almost entirely external to the hamlet, namely education and jobs. Before the war, only five of the hamlet's then 25 families regularly participated in work outside the hamlet. Two of these families were the hamlet's landlord families. At present, all the families have at least one member employed on a full-time basis outside the hamlet, and many have two or more members so employed. No household receives more than one-third of its total income from agriculture at present.

While this custom of giving gifts to the hamlet began against a background of the redistribution of agricultural land after the war, it continued into the period of wage labor. The transition from local agricultural production to external wage labor, however, was never so sudden, obvious, or dramatic that it entailed a discontinuity in hamlet social relations greater than the upheaval generated by the postwar agricultural land reform. Agricultural land reform is public and fundamentally zero-sum. Finding a job is private and only indirectly competitive at the hamlet level. It is this escape from the zero-sum component of family-family competition more than anything else that has allowed a public ideology of egalitarianism to develop in Nohara.

The fact of social equality in hamlet social life is apparent in several different areas, particularly those explicitly involving signs of relative status that Smith (1977:115) refers to as "often formal and even constitutional, [such as] seating arrangements, offices, rank-titles, and privileges with respect to dress and domestic architecture."

(1) Hamlet offices, once held almost exclusively by the few households whose landholdings (and hence incomes) allowed them sufficient leisure and resources to meet the demands of the task, are now held in annual rotation by all household heads.

(2) Assessments for hamlet and village undertakings were formerly assigned on the basis of income differentials that were known and publicly discussed. Now income levels are maintained as household secrets and hamlet and ward assessments are levied as equal shares on all households.

(3) Seating arrangements, from the "top" to the "bottom" of the room no longer indicate relative standing. All seating is now on a first come, first served basis and, with characteristic show of modesty, all except the presiding officer compete for space at the "bottom" of the room.

(4) Deference language (*keigo*), formerly in daily use among the hamlet's adult males to indicate status differences, is now reserved by them for formal presentations and to separate content from social relations when disagreements arise in public discussions.

(5) The fire-proof storehouses (*kura*) in which the harvest, rents, and family treasures were once kept and which were the pre-eminent symbol of the well-to-do, have been allowed to fall into disrepair throughout the hamlet. The sole exception is the storehouse of the founder of the younger household heads' association.

Such changes in social form, all of which are found nation-wide in rural areas, reveal the difficulty of establishing social precedence when the domain of economic competition is not circumscribed, even within a single social framework. Despite constant and occasionally direct and overt shows of concern with rank order by hamlet members, no stable and unambiguous ranking of hamlet families can be constructed or discovered. With the exception of the top few families and their counterparts at the bottom of the social scale, no possible rank order would gain the agreement of any two families. The very fact that all families now can, and do, make appropriate gifts as occasions arise, militates against the permanence of any claim to rank.

Over the custom as a whole, active competition has remained relatively muted. As Dore (1978:205-207) suggests for Shinohata, most families in Nohara are concerned to maintain their current positions. Only slightly less than 10 per cent of all gifts (other than first gifts) significantly up the ante. Only four gifts do not match, but fall significantly below, the previous gift in the same category and donor class. While few families push for additional recognition, even fewer fail to recognize and respond to the new standards. There is no tolerance build-up in either identity maintenance as a member in good standing or as a member of a particular standing. That one's gift is equalled or surpassed by the next does not diminish the quality of one's ties to the hamlet as a whole. Neither does the fact that such gifts are possible and highly probable reduce the desire for position or the fundamental principle of ranked hierarchy.

The gift itself, primarily a meal, also militates against an explicit recognition of the competition inherent in the custom. That all households provide a purchased meal rather than one grown locally, as was originally the case, does not repudiate its continuity with the hamlet's agricultural past. Where once such a meal made a direct reference to the household's capacity to produce the meal, and hence to its access to scarce local productive resources, it now only indicates a family's ability to provide the meal. It no longer refers to a competition for local resources. Thus the meal implicitly recognizes each family's ability to produce and appear successful, even though local economic competition is no longer important in hamlet socioeconomic relations. It makes plausible the public stance that says, in effect, "we are no longer in competition with each other." This is more or less the case with regard to household income, but it is by no means the case with regard to control of and influence over productive exchange transactions at the level of the hamlet.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The preceding section presents a description and analysis of the emergence and ritualization of a pattern of gift-giving in a semi-agricultural hamlet of 35 households in rural Aichi prefecture. The characteristic feature of this custom is the regular and systematic giving of gifts to the hamlet by hamlet members. Participation in this custom by all hamlet members is high and uniform and had been so even in the early, formative period. The data show extreme hypertrophy of gift values in two categories of occasion and virtually none in the other five. This difference among categories is due primarily to the local response to the traditional emphasis on these two occasions, 42nd birthday and marriage of the household head's likely successor.

In general, giving a gift to the hamlet emerges as a means of overtly demonstrating solidarity with the hamlet as a whole, and covertly as competing

for social recognition with other hamlet families. In specific, this custom developed in Nohara hamlet largely as an expression of one family's attempt to fill the vacuum left at the top of the hamlet social hierarchy after repudiation of the dominance of the local landlord families following the war. While this family ultimately failed to achieve its ambition, the custom it did so much to foster also served all hamlet households equally well (or poorly) in the same capacity. That this custom could prosper through the extension and replication of traditional forms is due at least in part to the inherent ambiguity of the symbolism of the gift itself. Between this connection with traditional cultural elements and the profound shifts in socioeconomic relations in the hamlet, the implicit nature of competition in this custom has remained obscure, while at the same time spurring continued giving at increasingly higher levels.

The history of this custom suggests that its point of departure was not a change in belief or value, nor the explicit establishment of an elaborate and detailed rule for the giving of gifts to the hamlet, but of two changes in socioeconomic relations within the hamlet; the first disorganized the former hierarchy and the second opened up opportunity. Against this background, this custom evolved on the basis of tacit and implicit social understandings shared broadly throughout the hamlet. Because these understandings remained tacit in a strategy designed to pursue both solidarity and recognition, hamlet members were, and remain, unable to publicly discuss the consequences of the tactical emphasis on giving a gift to the hamlet, and thus prevented from forming an explicit and historical understanding of this custom.

Discussion of gift-giving in Japanese society has largely been confined to simple dyadic exchange between structurally similar units. The regular and sustained giving of gifts from one structural level to another in a relation of productive exchange, however, has not been widely explored in the ethnographic literature on rural Japan. Dore's (1978:205-207) discussion of "gifting for status" is relevant here. Under the rubric of *tsukiai*, ad hoc gifts are given to the village in Shinohata, formerly in the form of lavish feasting and presently in the form of more durable donations such as a concrete fire pump shed and repairs to the village water filtration system. This sort of ad hoc giving is common throughout rural Japan, and occurs in Nohara hamlet as well. While clearly a related, antecedent form, this pattern of giving currently coexists in Nohara with the custom described in this paper, and remains separate from it.

Dore (1978:205) suggests that status striving in rural Japan is more muted today than in the past, both because in the prewar period "the status hierarchy was very much more overt: rich families gave *very* different weddings, gave different levels of gifts, from poor families" and because of the penetration of the more sophisticated values of the wider society "according to which lavish display in feasting is a somewhat vulgar form of competition" (Dore 1978:206). As has been shown, this perception of different levels of gifts is preserved in the practice of giving a gift in Nohara.

The prevailing explanation of why status striving in peasant villages takes the form of conspicuous feasting centers on the view of the village and its institutions as a moral economy: income surpluses are redistributed to provide a minimum welfare function for the village as a whole; the rich exchange their wealth for prestige. Popkin (1979:11-12) summarizes this argument precisely:

Community identity limits and controls differences in wealth among peasants by pressuring the wealthy to put any surplus into feasts or other village benefits—a redistributive mechanism that "levels differences of wealth" (Wold 1955:458), works "against the development of large differences in wealth" (Scott 1972:27), or "redistribute(s) or consume(s) the surplus wealth of the richest" (Migdal 1974:69). In other words, social pressures and the desire for prestige within the village lead to an expenditure of surplus income within the village that levels income differences. Thus, if there is a short-run accumulation of resources, it will be spent on fellow villagers.

Contrary to the views expressed by the members of Nohara hamlet that they have no expectations whatsoever that anyone will give at all and would by no means pressure anyone into giving a gift to the hamlet, this explanation suggests that "generosity and assistance are *imposed* by peasants on their better-off neighbors" (Popkin 1979:111).

How those who are less affluent impose on those wealthier, and indeed, how norms for redistribution might arise and be enforced, are questions that suggest an alternative hypothesis. To return to Douglas's (1979) insight, consumption is about power. Conspicuous largesse is not a class competition between the rich and poor but a competition between occupants of adjacent ranks and with roughly equivalent means. In turn, prestige is not an end in itself but the key to political success. Private resources are redistributed throughout the village to convert short-run income surpluses into long-run control over the productive exchange process and corporate assets on which village social interaction is premised.

Fried's (1967) account of rank societies and their apparent stability is instructive here. The key to rank society is that "Accumulation of signs of prestige does not convey any privileged claim to the strategic resources on which society is based. Ranking can and does exist in the absence of stratification" (Fried 1967:110) because effective means of coercive control over those resources are lacking. Leadership is primarily by example, through the extension of social credit "leaders can lead, but followers may not follow" (Fried 1967:133). This is the only alternative available where forms of compulsion characteristic of stratified societies are absent. While Japan is a modern society, reliance on state legal apparatus, especially in village society, is weak and rates of litigation extremely low in contrast with other industrialized nations (Haley 1982:265; Holden 1980:752). In contrast with those tribal societies on which Fried bases his general observations, productive exchange relations and the corporate groups formed on these relations in Japan are rarely an aspect of an all-inclusive system of kinship relations that define the major boundaries and dimensions of social interaction (Nakane 1970:148).

For productive exchange relations to operate successfully in the absence of either an all-embracing kinship system or appeal to the coercive powers of a third party willing to actively enforce agreements, productive exchange transactions must be embedded in a series of exchanges with an indefinitely distant horizon. This is the means by which productive exchange transactions are generally enforced in rural Japan. Each transaction in such long-term exchange relations appears independent of each other transaction but is in fact integrally bound to future and past transactions. Future transactions are contingent on the success of each present transaction, and thus the integrity of each transaction is preserved (Axelrod 1981). The sole recourse available to defection from an agreement in such relations is the termination of the entire relation (Telser 1980:27).

The rate of exchange, or distribution rule, operating in contingent productive exchange relations is one of proportion. Transactions are integrated through a feedback loop from one transaction to the next in such a way that whoever benefits differentially from any collective undertaking will contribute proportionately more to the expenses of the next transaction (Marshall 1984:36-37). In rural Japanese society this feature of proportionate productive exchange is most clearly seen in the predominance of proportionate assessments by household for village and hamlet undertakings when relative wealth can be adequately measured (Fukutake 1972:127-128).

Rank emerges as a consequence of this feedback component in the distribution rule and its emphasis on income and wealth differentials. Fried (1967) states that the role of leadership in rank societies is precisely "to encourage maximum output . . . by his followers." Leaders do this through the organization of productive exchange transactions. While a high rank individual can only persuade

his followers to follow, the feedback component in the distribution rule materially encourages them to follow his lead.

The demonstrated ability to increase local production results in recognition and rank, the social credit necessary to organize wider spheres of resources in productive exchange transactions. Giving a gift to the hamlet, and peasant redistributive feasting in prestige competition generally, thus emerges as validation of a household's ability to direct its resources productively and, by extension, its ability to direct corporate resources productively through the organization of productive exchange transactions. At the same time, a gift to the productive exchange relation as a whole (1) focuses public attention on the solidarity of that relation, (2) demonstrates the donor's intention to pursue the welfare of the productive exchange relation as a whole, and (3) exhibits the donor's judgement and initiative in defining the content of that welfare.

Giving a gift to the hamlet must be seen as the active counterpart to assessments required by virtue of membership in the productive exchange relation, and a tactical maneuver in the attempt to control the direction of the productive exchange relation. As Dore (1978:267) suggests, "the 'harmony of the village' is a product of artifice. It is not maintained without a good deal of conscious self-restraint, the careful avoidance of possible sources of tension." But hamlet solidarity also involves the conscious and deliberate manipulation of the symbolism and social foundation of that harmony and solidarity. After all, the competition implicit in giving a gift to the hamlet is part of a strategy aimed at gaining influence over the allocation of collective and corporate resources, not in destroying the willingness of hamlet members to participate in collective undertakings. The tacit agreement within the hamlet to engage in such competition also maintains a separation of public and private understandings with regard to motive. These modes of interpretation can remain separate as long as the element of competition is confined to household-household competition within the social hierarchy at the level of private discourse and does not displace the member-group relation upon which all families depend for the benefits of productive exchange transactions.

With the dramatic decrease in dyadic forms of economic dependence and the subsequent opening of access to a variety of productive opportunities to rural Japanese society in the postwar period, hamlet households have acquired an increased ability and need to define their interests separately from those of other hamlet members. This does not imply, however, a reduced desire to participate in collective undertakings as a whole, but only a reduced incentive to participate in specific transactions such as, for example, expensive rituals related to increased agricultural production. In some contexts, this situation may be interpreted as a decline in hamlet solidarity. This is not necessarily the case, as it is not in Nohara hamlet.

In Nohara, gifting the hamlet increases in importance as the contrast between required and independent contributions to hamlet welfare grows, because it provides an idiom for statements of group loyalty and identification. This in turn provides at least a partial explanation for the regularity of gifting as it developed in and around Nohara and apparently not elsewhere in rural Japan.

Historically there have been very few intervening forms of social relation in this area of Aichi Prefecture, such as are found elsewhere in Japan, between the household-household relation and the member-hamlet relation. (1) Nohara and its neighboring hamlets did not have extensive patron-client (*oyabun-kobun*) relations either dependent on, or independent of, landlord-tenant relations. (2) The holdings of local landlords in the prewar period were never extensive, and local landlords did not have many tenants entirely dependent on them for access to productive resources. There is some evidence that even in the prewar period, land was passing back to independent farmers from landlords in Nohara, if at a

very slow rate. There were no local tenant movements or unions. (3) Landlords did not dominate local politics or hamlet economics. The eight largest independent farming households, in the early 1800s, formed among themselves a revolving credit association (which still functions as a recreational group) to which the hamlet's two landlord families never belonged. (4) Extended kinship groups (*dōzoku*) were never prominent. The largest group that recognized kinship ties as the basis for collective undertakings consisted of the two landlord households and one branch family that was not involved in agriculture in the prewar period. Although there are hamlet families possessing stem family geneologies with depths of up to fourteen generations, and three family names predominate in the hamlet, collateral ties in the hamlet only extended to a depth of three generations. (5) There were no age-grade associations, such as the young men's groups (*seinendan*) so common in other areas of Japan. The young men of the hamlet and village were occasionally called upon to perform various services to the community but they were not formally organized. (6) The hamlet Buddhist temple was dissolved in the 1860s. Many hamlet members joined the temple of the adjoining hamlet but the memberships of the other hamlet members were scattered among three other village temples. This condition survives even today. (7) The separate hamlets of the village are not entirely isolated geographically. Each hamlet has a core area in which most of its members reside but at the edges of each hamlet there is some intermingling of residences and hamlet memberships; perhaps one-third of all hamlet members have at least one immediate neighbor who is a member of a different hamlet.

Thus, hamlet members were predisposed to focus attention on the hamlet itself as an exclusive corporate group and were at least partially accustomed to the type of egalitarian competition that now predominates. Two final points should be mentioned in this regard. First, while Nohara and its neighboring hamlets have shown a high degree of social continuity in the postwar period, and are still quite rural, this was never an especially isolated community by any means, being located only a few miles from an old castle town. Even in the prewar period, outside employment was fairly common and not especially difficult to obtain. Second, the region around Nagoya, of which this community is culturally a part, had and maintains a nation-wide traditional reputation for lavish display. These factors provide a perspective from which to view the local development of this custom. The independence of households within the hamlet and the direct relation of households to the hamlet provide a firm foundation on which gift-giving of this type might flourish once begun. This same interdependent and ambivalent relation of households within the hamlet provide both reason to occasionally demur from collective actions and the consequent need to reaffirm solidarity with the hamlet as a whole.

The custom of gifting the hamlet operates simultaneously at the level of both competition and solidarity by linking status to the productive exchange relation that defines the corporate group and by isolating that competition. As a direct consequence of this particular relationship and attempts to express status striving in the idiom of the gift and public altruism, social solidarity has been, as hamlet members express it, rekindled. The possibility of Nohara hamlet's renaissance is largely a matter of the increased resources that have become available to hamlet members, and not a change in public spirit. A further result of this increase in resource levels has been the systematic hypertrophy of gift costs, the reason why, in Japan, "Formal austerity rules have always in the end foundered on the rapids of status striving" (Dore 1978:205). The aim of local repression, at least, is to make more resources available to productive exchange through the reduction of individual consumption, but the desire to control the allocation of those resources cannot be eliminated, especially when it appears directed toward provision of the good of the group. This must always be the case when such



competition can only be expressed obliquely, but it seems a price the competitors are willing to pay.

It is true, as Bailey (1971:23) observes, that "If you make no exchanges, you do not belong." But in making an exchange, in giving a gift, one does not always secure the anticipated goal. Equality as well as hierarchy result from the same process; the failure to reciprocate will indicate which of the two will ultimately prevail. Until now, no Nohara household has failed to give the hamlet a gift on a suitable occasion.

#### NOTES

1. Competition between families centered on the acquisition of land. The commonest method of acquiring land has been to foreclose on other hamlet families in default on usually small loans (Smith 1959:158; 1977:107-110; Nakane 1967:48-51; Fukutake 1972:4).
2. Later sons are those born after the first son. This distinction is significant because the first son customarily succeeds to the position of household head and inherits the bulk of the family estate.
3. It is impossible to be certain whether a gift to the Fujinkai and a gift for a second marriage are one expansion or two because the first gift in both categories occurred on one occasion.
4. This increment over the entire period probably estimates donor intentions conservatively. It was easier to double a previous gift early on but became progressively more difficult later, and earlier there were both fewer categories on which to give and fewer classes of donors giving gifts.
5. This man's interest in his household's standing did not decline with his influence, however. In 1967, on the graduation of his son from an Ivy League university, he presented the hamlet with a very lavish gift. This occasion did not enter into the standard repertoire of occasions.
6. I suspected a recent origin for this custom, which contradicted what I had already been told by several informants, when examining the first set of privately maintained gift records. This set was kept by a woman who said it was entirely accurate, especially the earliest entries, which were made under the watchful eye of her husband's mother. These records, however, showed just the opposite; the most recent entries were complete and numerous and the early entries were almost entirely lacking.

When I brought this observation to her attention she expressed extreme surprise. After we went through the entire set of records entry by entry, she was at a complete loss to explain why so many events which she believed to have been recorded were not. Marriages were a prime and most disturbing example. No gifts marking the weddings of potential successors in the hamlet between the end of the war and 1956 had been recorded then. She remembered and accurately told me, in chronological order, of eight marriages that had been celebrated in the hamlet between 1946 and 1956. When I later was able to compare her records with other private and public sets of records, in all cases her records were more accurate than any other sets, including those maintained by each year's hamlet head as part of the hamlet's record of income and expenditure.

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182 ETHNOLOGY

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