The gift of disaster: the commodification of good intentions in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. — Source link ⧉

Benedikt Korf, Shahul Habullah, Pia Hollenbach, Bart Klem

Institutions: University of Zurich, University of Peradeniya

Topics: Commodification, Politics, Poison control and Social conflict

Related papers:

- Competitive humanitarianism: Relief and the tsunami in Sri Lanka

- Antinomies of generosity: moral geographies and post-tsunami aid in Southeast Asia

- The Securitization of Fear in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka

- Muslim geographies and the politics of purification in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami

- The Development Gift: The Problem of Reciprocity in the NGO World

Year: 2010

The gift of disaster: the commodification of good intentions in post-tsunami Sri Lanka

Korf, B; Habullah, S; Hollenbach, P; Klem, B

The gift of disaster: the commodification of good intentions in post-tsunami Sri Lanka

Benedikt Korf, Shahul Habullah, Pia Hollenbach and Bart Klem[1]

This paper analyses the commodification of post-tsunami aid in Sri Lanka, a process that 'contaminated' the 'purity' of good intentions with the politics of patronage and international aid. It argues that gifts are not just material transfers of 'aid', but also embodiments of cultural symbolism, social power, and political affiliations. The tsunami gift re-enforced and reconfigured exchange relationships among different patrons and clients in Sri Lankan communities, perpetuating the political economy that has driven social conflict and discontent in the post-independence years. Beyond dominant rationales of ethnic or political party patronage, the paper finds that gifts by disingenuous patrons not only became patrimonial, but that the patrimonial rationale emerged as much from above as from below—a dynamic that became nearly inescapable and self-reinforcing. Through three case studies, we explore the intricate chain of relations, obligations, and expectations pertinent in the co-evolving, but often contradictory, gift rationales that permeate the practices, performances, and discourses of tsunami aid.

Keywords: aid, faith-based development, gift, patrimonialism, Sri Lanka, tsunami

Introduction

In her foreword to Marcel Mauss's seminal work entitled *The Gift,* Mary Douglas (1990, p. vii) writes that 'though we laud charity as a Christian virtue we know how much it wounds'. 'Pure gifts', note Stirrat and Henkel (1997, p. 73), 'are good for the giver but . . . bad for the receiver'. In fact, the aid in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004 could be seen as a paradigmatic case of gift—of charity, Christian *caritas,* a global form of compassion that transformed into a large and unprecedented level of donations from people living in Europe and North

---

[1] Benedikt Korf is Associate Professor of Political Geography at the University of Zurich, Switzerland; Shahul Habullah is Senior Lecturer at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka; Pia Hollenbach and Bart Klem are PhD students at the University of Zurich, Switzerland.

1

America to people affected by the tsunami in Asia and East Africa. In many cases, these gifts were given with the 'pure' intention of helping the victims. Yet several reports concluded that many recipients of such charity were not so happy with the process and outcomes of aid, or even felt humiliated and reduced to being passive 'victims' (Cosgrave, 2006; De Mel and Ruwanpura, 2006; De Silva and Yamao, 2007; Fernando and Hilhorst, 2006; Hyndman, 2007; Keys, Masterman-Smith and Cottle, 2006; Korf, 2005, 2007; Ruwanpura, 2008a, 2008b; Sarvananthan and Sanjeewanie, 2008; Stirrat, 2006; Telford, Cosgrave and Houghton, 2006; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007).

The humanitarian imperative—'the desire to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found . . . to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being' (ICRC, 1994; see also Hilhorst, 2005; Walker, 2005; Weiss, 1999)—is still considered as the leading guideline. This paper, though, contends that the altruistic gift implied by the humanitarian discourse—which materialised in the form of post-tsunami aid—inevitably collides with divergent discourses, practices, and expectations associated with 'gift' when it enters a local domain. Aid becomes a culturally charged, political commodity. In other words, post-tsunami gifts— seemingly altruistic acts of generosity—became entangled in the economy of charity and reciprocal obligations in the political economy of aid (Bastian, 2005; Korf, 2007). Or, as Stirrat and Henkel (1997, p. 74) put it with regard to charity in development aid more broadly, '[w]hat starts off as a counterpoint to the logic of the real world (gifts versus markets) ends up as part of that real world. The pure gifts become, in the end, the currency of systems of patronage'.

In Sri Lanka, this entanglement of gifts in chains of reciprocal obligations and expectations has been quite pronounced. The country is a well-known holiday destination and was easily accessible for the media, foreign aid agencies, and volunteers that came in large numbers in the days, weeks, and months after the event. The incredible inflow of aid moneys, charities, professionals, and volunteers and the prolonged attention given to post-tsunami relief and reconstruction projects in Sri Lanka in the international media created what Jock Stirrat (2006, p. 11) has branded 'competitive humanitarianism': competition was less about getting donations, but spending them by finding 'marketable clients': aid beneficiaries and photogenic projects. Aid agencies had to demonstrate to their private donors that their gifts were making a difference, that they were having a *visible* impact. 'From the beginning, the

pressure was on the agencies not only to be effective, but *to be seen* to be effective'
(Stirrat, 2006, p. 13) (emphasis added).

This paper explores and analyses the intricate chain of relations, obligations,
and expectations that developed in the economy of private gifts supplied for the
purpose of humanitarian assistance after the tsunami. Three small case studies trace
the 'biography' of the gift in the situation of post-tsunami aid delivery and the
intricate entanglement of various forms of gift in co-evolving, yet often contradictory,
gift rationales. Our exploration is located in the perspective of an ethnography of aid
(Gould and Marcussen, 2004; Korf, 2006; Long, 2001; Mosse, 2004; Olivier de
Sardan, 2005; Rossi, 2004), which provides critical analyses of aid relationships and
their matrices of rhetoric, ritual, power, and material transactions (Gould, 2004, p. 1).
Indeed, we argue that gifts are not just material transfers of 'aid', but also
embodiments of cultural symbolism, social power, and political affiliations. The
tsunami gift re-enforced and reconfigured exchange relationships among different
patrons and clients in Sri Lankan communities, perpetuating the political economy
that has continued to drive social conflict and discontent in the post-independence
years (Brow, 1996; Moore, 1985; Spencer, 1990). Our material, however, also
pinpoints multiple patronage relationships beyond the realm of politics.

Ethnographies of the gift
Gifts given to humanitarian agencies are normally channelled through a chain of
relations in the sphere of humanitarian aid. Donor and receiver are not directly
interacting, but are different types of aid brokers (Bierschenk, Chauveau and Olivier
de Sardan, 2002; Mosse and Lewis, 2006; Sørenson, 2008) that mediate the multiple
interfaces (Long, 2001, p. 89) among donors, humanitarian organisations, and aid
receivers. These brokers enter at various nodes in the aid chain and are both internal
to the humanitarian agencies (as consultants, experts, project managers and
volunteers, for example) and external to it (as local bureaucrats who channel the
distribution of aid, as local politicians who cater for their electoral clientele, or as
other agents of a local or national elite that attempt to tap into the resources). Gift
relations and their economy of obligations and reciprocity are not confined therefore
to the relationship between Northern donors and Southern receivers, but are
constituted by a far more complex chain of relations, rituals, and practices that equally
play into domestic patterns of patronage and victimisation.

We conceptualise the 'biography' of the gift (Stirrat and Henkel, 1997, p. 68) as a process of increasing commodification whereby the ideal of the gift as an ethical, disinterested act of generosity becomes polluted by the worldly practices of the mundane and interested world. Indeed, Marcel Mauss (1990) denounced the modern separation of interested and disinterested exchange into 'economy' and 'gift'. Mauss's point was that in the 'primitive societies' he studied, exchange was both interested and disinterested—gift giving was located in systems of exchange that involve obligations to give, to receive, and to return, thereby emphasising the *relation* between giver and receiver. He argued in particular that it is a modern conception to consider the gift as an interruption of 'economy'.

There has been considerable debate, though, on the universal applicability and the logical validity of Mauss's concept of the gift (see, for instance, Derrida, 1992; Jenkins, 1998; Laidlaw, 2000; Levi-Strauss, 1987; Parry, 1986; Testart, 1998). In *Given Time,* Jacques Derrida (1992, p. 24) maintains that Mauss's *Essai sur le don* talks of everything except the gift (cf. Jenkins, 1998, pp. 85, 87)—or the 'pure' gift, the gift as an interruption of 'economy'. The pure gift denies reciprocity. But then, a pure gift becomes an impossibility as any act of giving is already entangled in reciprocal relations of obligations, return, and recognition. The problem with the pure gift, according to Derrida (1992), is that 'as soon as a gift is knowingly given as a gift, the subject of generosity is already anticipating a return, taking credit of some sort' (Barnett and Land, 2007, p. 1072)—a pure gift could not be recognised as a gift by another party (and thus, not even by the receiver). Indeed, Derrida (1992) asserts that there is no such thing as a 'pure' gift: it is not possible to give without immediately entering into a circle of exchange that turns the gift into a debt to return, an obligation to reciprocate.

Arguably, the 'biography' of the gift traces the multiple chains of obligations in the system of aid delivery—from donor through brokers to receivers. However, while looking into the gift's 'economy', we found discourses on gift giving as an ethical practice, as 'pure' giving—as separate from 'economy'. These discourses uphold the notion of a pure gift. They are moralising discourses that lend legitimacy to the relationship forged between giver and receiver—at times with the help of humanitarian agencies or other actors, such as local bureaucrats, serving as brokers.

Biographies of the tsunami gift in Sri Lanka

The tsunami occurred at a time when Sri Lanka's peace process, which started in 2002 after the conclusion of a ceasefire agreement between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was in stalemate. In spring 2003, the LTTE had withdrawn from the negotiations. In 2004, the eastern LTTE commander, Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, alias Colonel Karuna, had split from the movement, resulting in infighting within the LTTE and increasing levels of political violence. Tsunami aid became enmeshed in the politics of ethnic conflict and violence. Most notably, controversies arose about the appropriate ways of allocating aid to the three main ethnic communities (74 per cent Sinhalese, 13 per cent Tamils, and 7 per cent Muslims[2]; Department of Census and Statistics, 2006) and about channelling aid to rebel-controlled territories in the north and east. These discourses created a dominant dichotomy between the 'south' (Sinhalese) and the 'north' (Tamil) and focused on the administrative mechanisms needed to direct aid to areas under LTTE control (Bastian, 2005; Frerks and Klem, 2009; Hyndmann, 2007; Uyangoda, 2005). As a result, they sidelined the concerns of the second minority group, Muslims, who already felt marginalised in the peace talks (Hasbullah, 2001; Lewer and Ismail, 2009; Uyangoda, 2005, p. 343).

In the patronage system of Sri Lankan society, so well explained by Brow (1996), Moore (1985) and Spencer (1990), aid becomes incorporated into the exchange relation forged between patrons (politicians) and clients (voters). Tsunami aid provided a rich resource for patronage and consequently, the gift was re-appropriated. The patrimonial rationale with its mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion is a driving force of social conflict, political violence, and ethnic antagonism in Sri Lanka. While many observers hoped that the tsunami would create an opportunity for peacebuilding (as all three ethnic communities suffered), the tsunami aid that came to Sri Lanka in fact increased the gulf among the different communities and exacerbated the patronage rationale along ethnic lines (Frerks and Klem, 2009; Hyndman, 2007).

While the dynamics of the peace process and the 'ethnic conflict' have dominated national debates on tsunami aid, at the local level, multiple patronage

---

[2] These are the figures from the 1981 census; the 2001 census does not provide a comprehensive picture as it excluded some of the war-affected districts in the northeast. For reasons of brevity, the figure for the Tamils refers to the Sri Lankan Tamils only and thus excludes the 'Indian' Tamils, who constitute another 6 per cent. The figure for the Muslims concerns the 'Moors', thus excluding the 'Malay' who comprise another 0.3 per cent.

relations have had an impact on the gift economy. The tsunami gifts reinforced and reshuffled loyalties, group boundaries, and connections. In political patronage relations, gifts are supplied in return for votes (Case 1). But the patronage rationale is not confined to the realm of politics and to the local scale. Patronage rationales also permeate faith-based exchange relations between churches and believers (Case 3) and a multi-local chain of relations linking donors from Europe and Sri Lankan receivers (Case 2). The three case studies presented below demonstrate the convoluted processes through which a gift, local or foreign, considered as 'pure' ethical practice, ends up 'in the real world' (Stirrat and Henkel, 1997) of 'dirty' systems of reciprocal obligations.

Table 1 Three gift biographies

	Case 1: Maruthamunai	Case 2: Baden-Württemberg Village	Case 3: Akkaraipattu
Location	Ampara District (southeast)	Galle District (south)	Ampara District (southeast)
Dominant ethnic group	Muslim	Sinhalese	Tamil
Politics	Mosque federation versus Muslim party politics	Multi-local patronage and Sinhalese politics	Church politics and humanitarian principles
Methods and material	Participant observation (ongoing); interviews, group discussions (mainly with key informants and mosque leaders, but also with beneficiaries). January 2005– December 2006	Participant ethnography: researcher was consultant for *Diakonie*—responsible for organising livelihood projects and the inauguration ceremony. May 2005–December 2007	Interviews; group discussions (with beneficiaries, aid personnel, key informants, and church members). July 2007– October 2008
Lead researcher	Shahul Hasbullah	Pia Hollenbach	Bart Klem

This is illustrated by the political geography of our three case studies: two are in the southeast and one is in the south. Civil war affected Maruthamunai (Case 1) and Akkaraipattu (Case 3), both in the form of Tamil–Muslim antagonisms and violence, and in bloody fighting between government forces and the LTTE. Baden-

Württemberg Village (Case 2) is in Galle District on the Sinhalese-dominated southern coast and is a major tourist destination. While these locations were not at the centre of combat, national debates on tsunami aid, of course, affected the discourses, practices, and rituals of the gift economy in all three settings. However, this was only one of a number of equally important discussions. Controversies concerning Tamil–Muslim antagonisms, political favouritism by Sinhalese politicians, and alleged Christian conversion played a part as well.

The three case studies are indicative rather than comprehensive. Each illustrates a particular biography of the gift and the inherent patronage relations. They draw on empirical material collected in different contexts as well as on interviews, group discussions, participant observation, and participant ethnography[3] (see Table 1).

Case 1: from local generosity to competitive humanitarianism
When the tsunami hit Sri Lanka's coastline, Maruthamunai, a Muslim town on the war-affected southeast coast, suffered major devastation. Approximately one-tenth of its population died because of the tsunami. As the Muslim community received less attention in national debates on aid delivery, foreign aid agencies reached the Muslim- and Tamil-inhabited southeast coast only after some delays.

Relief and rescue efforts immediately after the event involved many acts of local solidarity and pure kindness, often transcending ethnic boundaries (Harris, 2005). In Maruthamunai and its neighbouring settlements, Tamils and Muslims shared relief items and assisted each other with rescue and cleaning activities. They received local donations from people throughout Sri Lanka—from Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims. On several occasions, people told us stories like the following:

> the Tamil village of Kalaru, situated north of Periyaneelavanai and Maruthamunai, was cut off from the land route. Consequently, Muslims from Maruthamunai shared their own relief items with Tamils in Kalaru, transporting them by boat.

---

[3] Participant ethnography builds on the material of developmental practitioners who reflect on their own involvement in developmental or humanitarian work and their observance of practices, rituals, and discourses while engaged in developmental work, including as a consultant or as a project manager. For information on the potential and limitations of this method, see Korf, 2006; Mosse, 2004; Rossi, 2004; Sørensen, 2008.

Such narratives of kindness and solidarity indicate a 'kind of give without take, generosity without expectation of any return' (Clark, 2005, p. 385), borne out of the magnitude of the event, the scope of suffering—a type of pure gift. Indeed, the kindness appeared as a significant rupture with the widespread patronage and ethnic antagonism in the district's politics—a disjuncture of 'politics'.

The mosque became a natural place of refuge for many displaced people who sought material and spiritual support. The mosque federation (*palibail samasam*)—a coalition of leaders from various mosques in Maruthamunai—organised the distribution of relief items, the burial of corpses, and the provision of temporary shelter (in mosques, schools, and other public buildings). It received food gifts from local donors within the community and from neighbouring communities, and it implemented a system of relief distribution that distinguished three categories of affectedness and defined the specific entitlements of each group. These strict rules were designed to institute transparency and accountability to the distribution of scarce relief items. The mosque leaders explained to us that they wanted to avoid falling into the trap of politics, favouritism, and patronage—practices common within the trappings of Sri Lanka's welfare state and developmental aid. Gift giving was seen as a religious act of generosity that needed to be kept clean, 'purified', left free of the 'dirty', mundane procedures of politics. And the mosque was the place to guarantee this purification.

Immediately following the tsunami, relief items were in short supply. A few weeks later, Sri Lankan and foreign aid agencies and volunteers brought more relief items and aid money. As a result, the nature of gift giving and its handling changed: giving became competitive as the different aid agencies had to find the most viable and marketable (photogenic) projects on which they could spend their funds *visibly* (Korf, 2007; Stirrat, 2006).

The change in the gift economy did not happen suddenly, but was rather a gradual process. In the beginning, the state authorities and the few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) already present in the area continued to coordinate their work through the mosque federation. However, a rising number of new, foreign, and often inexperienced agencies largely bypassed the federation and distributed their relief directly to 'suffering people'—frequently in conjunction with the media, which reported these gifts back to the public in the donor countries. These agencies operated in an increasingly competitive aid market and felt pressure to offer an attractive

package to beneficiaries in order to gain 'clients'. This competitive humanitarianism aggravated a lot of social tension, discontent, and jealousy among the recipients of the gifts.

Aid dynamics were further complicated by the government's buffer zone policy, announced in January 2005, which required the relocation of all inhabitants who had formerly lived within a specified area along the coastline.[4] All families that had had their houses in this buffer zone were eligible for a new house in a relocation site (see, for example, Hyndman, 2007). Because of this policy, large-scale relocation and house reconstruction activities commenced, including in Maruthamunai. With the start of these programmes, the gift became part of the system of patronage and mutual obligations in the fragmented Muslim polity of the area, as these relocation schemes provided ample resources for the patronage system of exchange relations between politicians and voters.

The electorate expected their members of parliament (MPs) 'to deliver'. The pressure on Ferial Ashraff, a local MP and the national Minister for Housing, was particularly high. Locals believed that as 'the minister' she should ensure that funding and land were available to her home electorate. Ashraff, though, was not alone in tapping into the gift market. Another local Muslim MP offered land in his native town of Sammanthurai to relocate displaced families from Maruthamunai—Sammanthurai had hosted these families immediately after the tsunami. This proposal created concern and resentment among local politicians in Maruthamunai who belonged to another political party. The latter thought that the MP from Sammanthurai had offered this land to expand his electoral bloc as voting for different Muslim political parties is largely place-based. Politicians from Maruthamunai did not want to lose votes and thus discouraged the families to accept the MP's offer. Ashraff made paddy land available to end the stalemate, but this land had to be filled and elevated to be suitable for housing—a very expensive option, but one that allowed the families to be located near Maruthamunai (Hasbullah and Korf, 2009).

The case of Maruthamunai indicates three realms of the biography of the tsunami gift: its religious, economic and political dimensions. Immediately after the

---

[4] The buffer zone policy specified a 'no building' zone 100 metres from the sea in the south and west, and 200 metres in the north and east. The larger distance in the north and east was justified by the generally more extensive intrusion of the sea along this coast and the higher risk of cyclones. A new policy was launched in 2006 under the name of 'Coastal Zone Regulation', which introduced new zones. The minimum distance was now set at 35 metres from the sea and the maximum distance at 125 metres, depending on the location, the physical environment, and damage caused by the tsunami.

event, the mosque attempted to create a space of anti-politics—the gift was considered as a religious practice, and it was to be kept pure, free from 'economy' and 'politics'. The inflow of foreign money and agencies changed dynamics and incentives in the gift economy and replaced practices and discourses of pure kindness and local solidarity. The gift became competitive in the evolving aid market. This commodification of the gift also saw the entrance of new kinds of brokers: consultants, foreign volunteers, and project managers with their own rationales and procedures that were largely shaped by actors from outside of Sri Lanka—private donors in the North expected to be shown the effect of their gift. When the housing relocation programmes started, the foreign gift was appropriated as a patronage resource within Muslim politics.

Case 2: a 'German village' gifted to tsunami-affected families
The post-tsunami gift economy developed a particular dynamic because new types of collective private donors in Europe—private companies and public and semi-public administrative units—collected gifts from among their staff or allocated organisational funds as gifts (Fernando and Hilhorst, 2006). These donors then sought to find partners who could implement their project ideas in Sri Lanka.

In the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg, senior officials of four semi-public organisations pooled donations and formed a donor group called the Tsunami Relief Cooperation. The donor group wanted to implement a housing relocation project. Its four representatives all had long-lasting personal ties or organisational and political linkages with Sri Lanka. For example, the regional Ministry for Environment, one of the four donors, had been collaborating with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Development and Water Supply. The donor group utilised its relations with top-level Sri Lankan bureaucrats and politicians and signed a memorandum of understanding with the Sri Lankan government, thereby formalising the 'German gift' of Baden-Württemberg through a bilateral agreement. This memorandum allowed the donor group to sideline the bureaucratic and legal procedures implemented by the Sri Lankan governmental Task Force for the Reconstruction of the Nation (TAFREN), later the Tsunami Housing Reconstruction Unit (THRU). Local politicians helped to acquire 'beautiful sites' in the Galle region, which served the purpose of the project idea of building eco-friendly houses in a liveable environment.

The German donors soon realised that they did not have adequate capacities to implement the housing programme. Consequently, they drew on personal relations in their home country, Baden-Württemberg, to identify a professional broker, an aid agency, to implement the housing project. Some ministry officials and the representative of the Rotary Club had strong personal ties with the German Protestant aid organisation, *Diakonie*. *Diakonie* (whose headquarters is in the capital of Baden-Württemberg) was reluctant at first to accept the mandate, but it finally agreed. A leading *Diakonie* official told us that because of the high profile of the people involved, 'there was no way to disclaim the project any longer'. *Diakonie* depended on the goodwill of influential people within the donor group for future funding and cooperation.

Diakonie started implementing the 'Baden-Württemberg Village' in early 2006, when Galle District, where the relocation site was located, was experiencing increased competition among different aid agencies for access to relocation sites and beneficiary lists. This competition created a number of tensions among different agencies, as well as among foreign aid professionals and Sri Lankan bureaucrats (who were considered to be slowing down the pace of implementation) and the large numbers of potential beneficiaries who became increasingly frustrated with slow progress in house construction. Sri Lankan friends felt obliged to support their German counterparts. Several political party officials wrote recommendation letters and made their influence felt with local governmental authorities to speed up certain decisions, such as on the allocation of sites, on the recognition of land titles, and on obtaining an exemption for value-added tax (VAT). *Diakonie* formally followed official procedures, but the 'recommendations' and 'persuasions' helped it to resolve its concerns much faster than a number of other aid agencies that did not have such political networks.

In the donors' home constituency in Baden-Württemberg, the 'Sri Lanka project' received mounting criticism. The Ministry of Environment was challenged in the regional parliament. The donor group urged *Diakonie* to bring the project to completion and to conduct an inauguration ceremony to demonstrate visibly its success. The donor group decided that the opening ceremony should be held in July 2007, during the German vacation season, so that the donor representatives and their families could travel to Sri Lanka easily. The donor group insisted on the erection of street name signs such as *Stuttgart* Para (street), *Rotary* Road, *Speidel* Pedesa (small

street), and *Neckar* Padipela (stairs)—all related to Baden-Württemberg or to the donor representatives' organisation.

The ceremonial set-up was a great concern for the donor group, too. It insisted on the hoisting of the German, Sri Lankan, and Baden Württemberg flags, accompanied by each country's national anthem. Each donor wanted to deliver a speech, which generated tensions regarding who was to speak when. One donor claimed: 'as we donated more money we should have the right to speak first and longer'. Several artistic performances were to take place, such as by a choir or a dancing group—'something from the local culture'. *Diakonie* headquarters' officials wanted to use the ceremony to demonstrate peaceful harmony in the village and among ethnic communities in the region, instructing the local *Diakonie* office to invite and ensure the presence of religious leaders of all ethnic groups at the ceremony.

State officials, including the Government Agent (GA) from Galle District, and local politicians, while exerting their influence and power to speed up project implementation, used the 'Baden-Württemberg Village' as a model case to make evident their political effectiveness. The GA publicly announced that 'this is the best housing project in the Galle region'. The 'German gift' thereby entered into Galle's dynamics of political appropriation and patronage. When, in early July, the GA noticed delays in road construction, he personally ordered the Road Development Authority (RDA) to prepare the roads for a high profile visit by Germany and Colombo. The inauguration ceremony and the noticeable political interference in its implementation demonstrated that the housing scheme had gained strong political backing. In the eyes of the recipients of one house, this scheme was 'special'—some said that they had the best housing scheme in the area.

Case 2 shows two inter-related discourses and practices at work. On the one hand, the German donors wanted to invigorate a 'German' gift—with German credentials (eco-friendly, for instance). They visibly inaugurated the gift and communicated the generosity back to audiences at home in Baden-Württemberg. *Diakonie,* the aid broker, attempted to rescue the inauguration of the gift from worldly and mundane elements—the inauguration should become a celebration of peace, of the common good, an interruption to Sri Lanka's messy politics of conflict and antagonism. It was designed as a celebration of a 'pure' gift, but by commemorating the gift, presumed 'purity' became impossible. On the other hand, local politicians

and bureaucrats transformed the gift into a political resource, embedding it in the reciprocal networks of obligations. Thereby, the 'German gift' became re-appropriated as a patronage resource in local politics. Both elements of the gift, however, were co-evolving: the 'German gift' and the patronage gift each had their own rationale, ritual(s), and recipients.

Case 3: religious patrimonialism in Akkaraipattu
This third case involved the neighbourhood of Akkaraipattu, a coastal town in Ampara District in the east with some 60,000 inhabitants. Traditional caste, *kudi* (matriclans), and dowry systems are still an everyday reality in Akkaraipattu (McGilvray, 2008). The study explored the relocation programme for the inhabitants of Sinna Muhattuvaram, a small settlement (1,100 people) just south of Akkaraipattu. It lies on a narrow coastal strip between the lagoon and the sea and thus the tsunami almost completely washed it away. Its inhabitants are mostly low-caste Tamils (and some Burghers) who are either Hindu or belong to the Catholic or Methodist Church. They could not resume life in Sinna Muhattuvaram after the tsunami, because most of the village lies inside the buffer zone. The Divisional Secretary (DS) took vital decisions about planning and coordination of the relocation scheme. He selected three organisations to implement the relocation and allocated beneficiaries to each of them: the Smyrna Fellowship; the Eastern Human and Economic Development (EHED); and the Methodist Church.

All three organisations are explicitly Christian. Smyrna Fellowship is the aid channel of a US-based evangelical church and relies on private funding from a Swedish family.[5] EHED is the well-established local developmental agency of the Catholic Diocese in Batticaloa, which has been working in the east of Sri Lanka for a long time and has a dense network of offices throughout the region. EHED is still embedded in the Church's hierarchy, but operates as a professional developmental NGO with offices and cars. It receives funding through the Catholic Caritas network as well as from secular donors and governments. Compared to EHED, the developmental wing of the Methodist Church is more firmly connected to the clergy and congregation. The housing scheme discussed was operated through the Methodist

---

[5] At the time of our research (2007–08), the Smyrna Fellowship was no longer present on the sites. Given its non-institutionalised nature, it was not possible to interview a representative and it was difficult to get more details on its views and activities through other channels.

circuit in Thirukkovil (south of Akkaraipattu) and was supervised directly by the priest.

The Methodist Church and EHED were eager to represent themselves as non-partisan. They explained that they assist Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, because need is their only valid criterion—they provide aid regardless of the recipient's religious or ethnic affiliation. Both churches have a long history of offering help, education, and consolation to marginalised segments of society. Methodist informants were vividly aware of the views of their founder, John Wesley, who created the church to reach out to the underclass and underlined that 'there is no holiness without social holiness'. Catholic priests emphasised that non-partisanship could be directly related to Jesus Christ's and the Catholic Church's teaching on *caritas*. Gift giving as a religious practice is deeply embedded in the Church's networks—Caritas, for example, is a global organisation that channels gifts from donors in far away countries to Sri Lanka. Christian aid agencies were therefore quite accustomed to the dual nature of the gift as a religious practice and as a developmental resource, including the reciprocal relations between donor and receiver attached to it.

Although connected to the church and its religious and ethical teachings, the developmental wings of the two mainline churches also operate within the *modus operandi*—networks, practices, and discourse—of the humanitarian sector. In their proclamations, Christian NGOs, such as EHED or the Methodist developmental wing, describe themselves as professional aid agencies, but working with the inspiration of Christian values, making them even more committed to charity and development than secular NGOs. However, the massive influx of funds after the tsunami created concern among Christian NGOs that the pressure to deliver could compromise their Christian values. The Office Manager of a Dutch Christian NGO in Akkaraipattu said that: 'To the extent it was there previously, the tsunami and the subsequent aid rush destroyed all the Christian ethos . . . All organisations go through that boom and they are confronted with competition, spending pressure, audits and so on. It evens out the difference'.

In Sinna Muhattuvaram, this tension emerged quite clearly. The three organisations accepted the division of labour decreed by the DS, which allocated houses irrespective of the religious identities of the future inhabitants. However, the recipients attached significant importance to religious identity and had clear expectations about their religious leaders and the way they handled gifts. While the

churches had long abandoned the idea of using gifts for conversion or as a patronage resource for their followers, their constituencies appeared to expect them to do exactly that. Christian respondents wanted their religious patrons to provide assistance to them. Informants living in the Smyrna section of the tsunami housing project complained that their own churches (Catholic and Methodist) had not helped them much, and what they had given came from foreign gifts. Smyrna, though, had done well. The receivers considered the church that had delivered gifts to be one that cared for them. Therefore, this church deserved their loyalty. One informant said: 'The priest [from their original congregation] was worried people might join Smyrna, but no church came . . . If Smyrna builds a church, certainly we will go there. They built all the houses and the playground. Certainly, we will join'. Apparently, the villagers did not know that state officials had allocated the beneficiaries to the three agencies. Aid workers and priests of the Catholic and Methodist Church acknowledged the tension. The EHED Information Officer explained: 'The Catholics expected us to help them, but actually we are not the ones to decide who helps whom. The DS does that'. The Methodist priests protested: 'we did so much for these people, but they are complaining'.

Inside the Methodist congregation in Akkaraipattu, faithful people were concerned that the priests were so involved in aid work that they were neglecting their religious services for their home congregation. As the congregation in Akkaraipattu town itself did not suffer much in the tsunami, priests were mainly helping other people. Prominent Methodist Church members said: 'The people are busy earning money. They don't think about Jesus. Christians have started a lot of NGOs. The fathers don't have time for preaching anymore. They are busy doing NGO business and neglect visiting the houses and praying with the people'. These criticisms fit into a wider religious discourse of anti-politics that surfaced in the Maruthamunai case as well: worldly affairs are seen as temporary and inferior to the religious. Money and politics are key symbolic manifestations of the world and are viewed as dirty or sinful. From this perspective, the churches had transformed their religious service of *caritas* and gift giving into an NGO business, thereby becoming similar to secular NGOs.

This case presents the story of the re-appropriation of the developmental gift in religious terms. Although inspired by religious faith and practices of *caritas,*

mainline Christian aid agencies nowadays largely operate using the discourse, practices, and principles of the developmental world. Paradoxically, however, religious followers expected their churches to use the developmental gift as a patrimonial resource for their own flock. This divergence of expectations created tension at a time when gifts were abundant. While the 'pure' gift as *caritas*—as religious service—has been an important Christian value, the expectations attached to the relational and symbolic meaning of the developmental gift differed among the Christian aid workers, who were often from the clergy and the Christian laity. Many tsunami victims from Sinna Muhattuvaram wanted their church to care for them first—to provide them with tsunami gifts. It was unreasonable to them that their church offered gifts to people other than those in their congregation.

Their view suggests a sense of religious patrimonialism *from below,* where the gift becomes a relational object that binds the laity to the church. This mirrors the rationale of political patronage relations that bind politicians to voters through gifts. The mainline churches have been insisting that their gifts should go to all who are in need, regardless of their affiliation. While they can find justification in the Christian teaching on *caritas,* based on the notion of 'pure' religious service, these principles also adhere to the frameworks and guidelines of humanitarianism. But engagement with this kind of developmental gift brought the priests criticism, first because some of their own people felt that they engaged too much with the mundane and worldly affairs of the NGO business, and second, because other followers felt that the church did not do enough for them.

The entanglement of the gift

In post-tsunami Sri Lanka, the narrative of the gift has been permeated by development discourse, jargon, and rituals: all kinds of coordination meetings, terminology, minimum standards and principles, different project phases, beneficiary categories, the latest fashion of cross-cutting themes, and a continuous 'stock trade' of projects, target groups, aid commodities, budgets, contacts, and so on. These rituals and practices of humanitarianism blended with different gift rationales. What started as an otherworldly practice in the global North—as a 'pure' gift—ended in a chain of relations, obligations, and reciprocal expectations and the dirty world of politics and patronage. Table 2 summarises and compares the logic of the gift in its state of co-existence as humanitarian gift and as patrimonial gift. These two spheres are, of

course, not separate, but entwined. The contradiction lies in divergent gift rationales. Different actors employ different strategies to negotiate, bend, or circumvent the contradictions between these gift rationales.

Table 2 Humanitarian and patrimonial gift

	Case 1	**Case 2**	**Case 3**
Place	Maruthamunai, Amparai District ('east')	Baden-Württemberg Village, Galle District ('south')	Sinna Muhattuvaram, Akkaraipattu, Amparai District ('east')
Donor	First local, then foreign	German donor group	Foreign
Broker	First mosque federation, then international aid agencies, then politicians	*Diakonie* and local politicians	Churches, Christian aid agencies
Recipient	Muslim	Sinhalese plus a few Tamils and Muslims	Tamils (Christian and Hindu) plus a few Burghers
'Humanitarian' gift	*From non-political kindness to competitive humanitarianism* The inflow of foreign money and agents disturbs the 'non-political' space of kindness and fosters competitive humanitarianism	*The 'German' (eco) gift as symbolic domination* Special relations between German donors and Sri Lankan patrons provide the ground for a very special 'German gift', which needs an adequate gratification ceremony	*The church's engagement in the developmental gift* Christian charities are inspired by religious values to care, but also demonstrate that they follow universal (secular) principles of humanitarianism (such as non-partisanship)
'Patrimonial' gift	*Political contestation* 'The minister' needs to deliver the gift to her local electorate, but other politicians contest the move, wanting to use the gift to expand the realm of their patrimonial system	*The re-appropriation of the German gift as a Sri Lankan patrimonial gift* Local and national politicians and state officials re-appropriate the meaning and symbols of the 'German gift' as an expression of their caring patronage	*The laity's expectation of a patrimonial gift* Some believers expect their clergy to provide *caritas* primarily to church members and others argue that priests have sacrificed their religious work for worldly NGO business

The three case studies indicate how gifts given in situations of asymmetric relations create what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) calls symbolic domination: in extending a gift, a donor transforms his or her status in the relationship from dominant to generous. In accepting a gift, particularly one that cannot be reciprocated equally, the receiver

implicitly acknowledges the social order that made this gift possible—he or she becomes grateful (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 98–110; Hattori, 2001). The recipients of tsunami gifts could express gratefulness, demonstrated in various ways common in the realm of humanitarian aid, including donation 'hand-over' ceremonies and the performance of dances, songs, and theatre plays as part of donor celebrations.

The gift is also embedded in local systems of patronage, as local patrons re-appropriate the foreign (humanitarian) gift, making it 'their' patrimonial gift to be given to their clients. Here, the receiver acknowledges the social order by accepting this kind of gift—and provides a return in the form of political support, electoral votes or, in the case of religious leaders, faithful following. However, several tensions emerged at the intersection of humanitarian and patrimonial rationales of the gift. Catholic and Methodist aid workers attracted criticism because they failed to deliver a gift to their faithful. Many believers expected the churches to transform a humanitarian gift into a patrimonial one (Case 3). Muslim politicians felt pressure to find appropriate land and housing for their voters, otherwise they could have been lost to competing patrons (Case 1). Gifts became patrimonial not simply through disingenuous patrons, but also via the penetration of patrimonial rationale dynamics from above and from below—the dynamic became nearly inescapable and self-reinforcing.

Conclusion

The tremendous, destructive force of the Indian Ocean tsunami seemed to have created a moment of rupture, a break with the mundane world of politics. The global wave of solidarity and local acts of kindness in war-affected areas were often seen as opportunities to reconcile the divided society of Sri Lanka and to promote the peace process. However, this 'gift of disaster' vanished into the air. National contestations regarding aid distribution hardened the frontlines of the different political camps and ethnic communities and triggered the disintegration of the peace process (Frerks and Klem, 2009). The international NGO community became subject to vociferous attacks by the Sri Lankan media for failing to deliver the tsunami gift. The 'purity' of good intentions became contaminated in the local politics of patronage and the international gift economy. Indeed, Jacques Derrida (1992) has argued that the notion of a 'pure' gift is unfeasible: it is not possible to give without immediately entering into a circle of exchange that turns the gift into a debt, an obligation to reciprocate.

The humanitarian or developmental 'gift' is loaded with ethical ideals of otherworldly generosity, as an expression of religious practice, of global solidarity—it is a manifestation of the separation of 'gift' and 'economy'—drawing a boundary between disinterested and interested exchange. In his study of the gift in 'primitive societies', Marcel Mauss (1990) suggested that gift giving has to be located *within* systems of exchange that involve obligations to give, to receive, and to return. The kinds of gift giving that Mauss described were embedded in social systems of *prestations*. Indeed, the French term *prestation* is closer to the idea of social welfare or insurance than disinterested generosity.

Prestation is possibly a good term to describe the nature of what we have depicted as patrimonial gift: reciprocal obligations are articulated in patrimonial relations where both giver and receiver have specific expectations. The gift economy is not simply created by disingenuous patrons. Its patrimonial rationale permeates social reasoning from above and from below—it is almost inescapable. For instance, Muslim politicians provide gifts to ensure votes—potential voters expect their 'minister' to deliver according to the very same logic of the patrimonial gift. Disjuncture occurs when giver and receiver follow different gift rationales. Faith-based charities, for example, failed to respond adequately to the expectations of their laity who wanted the humanitarian gift to be transformed into a patrimonial gift.

The idea of the 'pure' tsunami gift—to enclose aid in a space of 'anti-politics'—was surely naive in a society shaped by patronage rationale. The national debates on mechanisms to allocate tsunami aid to different communities and on political favouritism brought out the political patronage rationale quite clearly. These antagonising discourses and the seeming inescapability of patrimonial rationales penetrated and reinforced social divisions along political and ethnic lines and as a result, they contributed also to the social conflict and political discontent that undermined the peace process (Goodhand, Korf and Spencer, 2009).

Our material, however, also suggests that in addition to these dominant discourses of patronage and ethnic communalism, several other patronage rationales pervaded the practices, performances, and local, often more silent, discourses associated with the gift, exacerbating social conflict and discontent. In the words of Mary Douglas (1990): charity wounds.

Correspondence

Professor Benedikt Korf, Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Winterthurerstrasse 190, CH-8057 Zürich, Switzerland. Telephone: +41 44 6355240; fax: +41 44 635 68 48; e-mail: Benedikt.korf@geo.uzh.ch.

References

Bastian, S. (2005) 'Limits of Aid'. *Polity*. 2(3). pp. 21–23.

Barnett, C. and D. Land (2007) 'Geographies of generosity: Beyond the "moral turn"'. *Geoforum*. 38. pp. 1065–1075.

Bierschenk, T., J.P. Chauveau and J.-P. Olivier de Sardan (2002) 'Local Development Brokers in Africa: The Rise of a New Social Category'. Working Paper 13. Department of Anthropology and African Studies, University of Mainz, Mainz.

Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Brow, J. (1996) *Demons and Development: The struggle for community in a Sri Lankan village*. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ.

Clark, N. (2005) 'Disaster and Generosity'. *Geographical Journal*. 171(4). pp. 384–386.

Cosgrave, J. (2006) *Tsunami Evaluation Coalition: Initial Findings*. Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, London.

De Mel, N. and K. Ruwanpura (2006) *Gendering the Tsunami: Women's Experiences from Sri Lanka*. International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Colombo.

De Silva, D.A.M. and M. Yamao (2007) 'Effects of the tsunami on fisheries and coastal livelihood: A case study of tsunami-ravaged southern Sri Lanka'. *Disasters*. 31(4). pp. 386–404.

Department of Census and Statistics (2006) 'Statistical Abstract'. http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Abstract_2006/abstract2006/table%202007/CHAP%202/AB2-10.pdf.

Derrida, J. (1992) *Given Time*. Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL.

Douglas, M. (1990) 'Foreword: No free gifts'. In M. Mauss (1990) *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Routledge, London. pp. vii–xxviii.

Fernando, U. and D. Hilhorst (2006) 'Everyday practices of humanitarian aid: Tsunami response in Sri Lanka'. *Development in Practice*. 16(3–4). pp. 292–302.

Frerks, G. and B. Klem (2009) 'Muddling the peace process: The political dynamics of the tsunami, aid and conflict'. In J. Goodhand et al. (eds.) *Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka*. Routledge, London. (Forthcoming.)

Goodhand, J., B. Korf and J. Spencer (2009) *Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka*. London, Routledge. (Forthcoming.)

Gould, J. (2004) 'Introducing Aidnography'. In J. Gould and H.S. Marcussen (eds.) *Ethnographies of Aid. Exploring Development Texts and Encounters*. Occasional Paper 24. International Development Studies, Roskilde. pp. 1–13.

Gould, J. and H.S. Marcussen (2004) *Ethnographies of Aid. Exploring Development Texts and Encounters*. Occasional Paper 24. International Development Studies, Roskilde.

Harris, S. (2005) 'The Role of Local Solidarity in Sri Lanka's Tsunami Disaster Response'. *Polity*. 2(3). pp. 19–20.

Hasbullah, S.H. (2001) 'Muslim Refugees: The Forgotten People in Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict'. Research and Action Forum for Social Development, Nuraicholai.

Hasbullah, S.H. and B. Korf (2009) 'Muslim Geographies and the Politics of Purification in Sri Lanka "after" the Tsunami'. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. (Forthcoming.)

Hattori. T. (2001) 'Reconceptualizing Foreign Aid'. *Review of International Political Economy*. 8(4). pp. 633–660.

Hilhorst, D. (2005) 'Dead letter or living document? Ten years of the Code of Conduct for disaster relief'. *Disasters*. 29(4). pp. 351–369

Hyndman, J. (2007) 'The Securitization of Fear in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka'. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 97(2). pp. 361–372.

ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) (1994) 'The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief'. http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/I259EN.pdf.

Jenkins, T. (1998) 'Derrida's Reading of Mauss'. In W. James and N.J. Allen (eds.) *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*. Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York, NY. pp. 83–94.

Keys A., H. Masterman-Smith and D. Cottle (2006) 'The Political Economy of a Natural Disaster: The Boxing Day Tsunami, 2004'. *Antipode*. 38(2). pp. 195–204.

Korf, B. (2005) 'Sri Lanka: The Tsunami after the Tsunami'. *International Development Planning Review*. 27(3). pp. i–vii.

Korf, B. (2006) 'Dining with Devils? An Ethnographic Enquiry into the Conflict-Development Nexus in Sri Lanka'. *Oxford Development Studies*. 44(1). pp. 47–64.

Korf, B. (2007) 'Antinomies of Generosity: Moral Geographies and post-Tsunami Aid in Southeast Asia'. *Geoforum.* 38(2). pp. 366–378.

Laidlaw, J. (2000) 'A Free Gift Makes no Friends'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute.* 6(4). pp. 617–634.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1987) *Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss*. Routledge, London.

Lewer, N. and M. Ismail (2009) 'A Voice in the Political Processes? Creating Political Space for a Muslim Contribution to Peace in Sri Lanka'. In J. Goodhand, B. Korf and J. Spencer (eds.) *Caught in the Peace Trap: Aid, Conflict and Development in Sri Lanka*. Routledge, London. (Forthcoming.)

Long, N. (2001) *Development Sociology*. Routledge, London.

Mauss, M. (1990) *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Routledge, London.

McGilvray (2008) *Crucible of Conflict: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Moore, M. (1985) *The State and Peasant Politics in Sri Lanka*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Mosse, D. (2004) 'Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice'. *Development and Change*. 35(4). pp. 639–671.

Mosse, D. and D. Lewis (2006) 'Theoretical Approaches to Brokerage and Translation in Development'. In D. Mosse and D. Lewis (eds.) *Development Brokers and Translaters: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies*. Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, CT. pp. 1–26.

Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. (2005) *Anthropology and Development. Understanding Contemporary Social Change*. Zed Books, London.

Parry, J. (1986) 'The Gift, the Indian gift and the "Indian gift"'. *Man, New Series*. 21(3). pp. 453–473.

Rossi, B. (2004) 'Revisiting Foucauldian Approaches: Power Dynamics in Development Projects'. *Journal of Development Studies*. 40(6). pp. 1–29.

Ruwanpura, K.N. (2008a) 'Putting houses in place: Rebuilding communities in post-tsunami Sri Lanka'. *Disasters*. 33(3). pp. 436–456.

Ruwanpura, K.N. (2008b) 'Temporality of Disasters: The Politics of Women's Livelihoods "After" the Tsunami in Sri Lanka'. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. 29(3), pp. 325–340.

Sarvananthan, M. and H.M.P. Sanjeewanie (2008) 'Recovering from the Tsunami: People's Experiences in Sri Lanka'. *Contemporary South Asia*. 16(3). pp. 339–351.

Sørenson, B.R. (2008) 'Humanitarian NGOs and Mediations of Political Order in Sri Lanka'. *Critical Asian Studies*. 40(1), pp. 89–112.

Spencer, J. (1990) *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Stirrat, J. (2006) 'Competitive humanitarianism: Relief and the Tsunami in Sri Lanka'. *Anthropology Today*. 22(5). pp. 11–16.

Stirrat, R.L. and H. Henkel (1997) 'The Development Gift: The Problem of Reciprocity in the NGO World'. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 554(1). pp. 66–80.

Telford, J., J. Cosgrave and R. Houghton (2006) *Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami: Synthesis Report.* Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, London.

Telford, J. and J. Cosgrave (2007) 'The international humanitarian system and the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunamis'. *Disasters*. 31(1). pp. 1–28.

Testart, A. (1998) 'Uncertainties of the "obligation to reciprocate": A critique of Mauss'. In W. James and N.J. Allen (eds.) *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*. Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York, NY. pp. 97–111.

Uyangoda, J. (2005) 'Ethnic Conflict, the State and the Tsunami Disaster in Sri Lanka'. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 6(3). pp. 341–352.

Walker, P. (2005) 'Cracking the code: The genesis, use and future of the Code of Conduct'. *Disasters*. 29(4). pp. 323–336.

Weiss, T.G. (1999) 'Principles, Politics and Humanitarian Action'. *Ethics and International Affairs*. 13(1). pp. 1–22.