Original Article (Special Theme)

Ethical Imagination of Humanitarian Gifts: Case Study of Humanitarian Activities under COVID-19 Related Curfew in Sri Lanka

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Background and Objective

We have witnessed an enthusiastic expansion of humanitarian activities around the world during the last couple of decades. However, it is also true that many have begun to see it with a sense of despair and cynicism. Anthropological inquiries into humanitarian projects have partly explained what lie behind the agony, by revealing a fundamental dilemma of humanitarianism. Western tradition of humanitarianism upholds the basic premise of human equality as its core; but its interventions occur in a context of highly asymmetrical relation between benefactor and receiver. The act of making “disinterested gift” provides one with a feeling of morality and solidarity with underprivileged others without making a serious political effort (Fassin 2012). Thus, the act of compassion for the
most unfortunate individuals ends up emphasizing “difference” over “solidarity,” ultimately reinforcing the structure of dominance which it aims to challenge. Such “tension between inequality and solidarity” (Fassin 2012: 3), Fassin argues, often leads to cynicism or compassion fatigue of the benefactor, as well as to the shame and resentment felt by the beneficiary of the aid.

Whereas critical anthropological studies on humanitarianism offer critiques, suggesting its unexpected consequences, unaddressed frustration of the staff and suffering of the victims (Ticktin 2011), interpretative approaches to humanitarianism have examined local, faith-based, or vernacular forms of giving around the globe (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009; Bornstein 2012). Careful attention to diverse forms of giving, values, and meanings attached to humanitarian practices and institutions have opened up diverse ways of imagining “humanity,” dislodging the notion of humanitarianism as a Western monopoly. Both approaches, namely critical theory which aims to reveal the structural violence, and interpretative approach which tries to overcome epistemological asymmetry, provide genuine, valid critiques. However, the two approaches stand in tension, not merely in academic debates but also in real social contexts. Even if an act of giving is experienced as “meaningful” by an actor, it may always be “revealed” that it in fact reinforces hierarchy, and thus renders ineffective and “meaningless,” when seen from a “critical” distance.

But as David Graeber (2001) points out, the project of critical theory would end up “sabotaging [its] own best intentions” if it makes “power and domination so fundamental to the very nature of society” (30). Exploring Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* (1990 (1925)) in tandem with his socialist political project in 1920s’ Europe, Graber (2001) postulates that what Mauss tried to do was to reveal how, even
in the organization of capitalist enterprises, people actually do not thoroughly conform to the moral basis of wage labor, but are, at times, inhabitants of “specter of communism” (227). And most importantly, by doing so, he “[encouraged] us to view practices and institutions in terms of their potentialities” (Graeber 2001: 227, emphasis mine).

Following Graeber, this article attempts to see humanitarianism as an on-going project, composed of actions with diverse ways of imagining and creating society, and seeks to posit a question that is yet to be explored. In particular, it asks: what new ways of imagining humanity and/or society can be delineated, if we take actions of the “recipient” seriously, as they influence the way the gift is rendered meaningful. In exploring the question, this article examines several cases of humanitarian gifts to the destitute rural elders during the curfew issued in Sri Lanka under covid-19 pandemic from March to May 2020. Although I was not present in the country at that time, data were gathered through communication with my former informants and their neighbors through online video calls and video-recorded events of donating humanitarian gifts, which were shared on SNS, Internet and local TV programs. It examines how some recipient elders exercised a kind of agency in the interaction and navigated the course of action and relationship, thereby providing ethical imagination amidst a sheer crisis and uncertainty which is distinct from liberal imagination of conventional humanitarianism.

Context of Study

The article begins by sketching out a rather debatable condition in which the activities were carried out. First, the government’s response to covid-19 in the early half of the year was evaluated positively by
some as rigorous and effective, but was lamented and criticized by others as being highly militarized and lacking proper legal basis. While more than 40,000 people being caught as offending the rule, those who could publicly engage in humanitarian gifts were limited to exclusive figures such as army (or “Presidential Task Force”), police, large private firms, and Buddhist monks who could cross the border without the fear of being caught (cf. Spencer et al. 2009). Secondly, the government provided monetary aid of SLR 5000 to the vulnerable population under curfew; however, the available monetary aid was reported to be limited and/or uneven, leaving many of the informal employees and laborers unprotected.

Despite the abound room for criticism, people’s discourse about humanitarian gifts were charged with emotion and enthusiasm. Rather than problematizing ad hoc-ness and unevenness of such a gift, their talk centered on the good deeds of the benefactor, and in some cases, as this article illustrates, the responses of the recipients in the gift interaction. I must admit that since I could only refer to limited experiences and evaluation of it by Sinhala speaking informants, my analysis misses an important point about breach and discontinuity with different ethno-linguistic populations. With such substantial limitations, though, I tried to understand the emotional appeal of the gift interaction, especially of the response of the recipient.

Bringing the Interactive Aspect of Gift to the Analysis of Altruistic Gift

One of the main concerns of the article is to bring in the interactive aspect of gift to the analysis of altruistic gift. Let me briefly explain why this is important. Gift exchange is generally analyzed as interaction or transaction between two or more parties. However, when it comes to describing altruistic gift such as
philanthropy, social welfare, and humanitarianism, interactive aspect of it is left out of the analysis. As is already mentioned, humanitarianism rests on an explicitly asymmetrical image, where the benefactor has the sole agency to intervene in the suffering of others, and attach meaning and/or realize the value of humanitarian projects. The beneficiaries, on the contrary, are treated as passive recipients or victims, who may at times “resent” or resist patriarchal intervention, but do not contribute to the creation of values. Some ethnographic studies on humanitarianism in South Asia have shown a parallel trend in this regard. Since classic texts on dān/dāna emphasizes “anonymity” of the giver/gift as an important ethical code, and because such code partly aligns with the institutional arrangement of humanitarianism (gift to unspecified m/any), the act of giving is described as a personal, private practice of the giver, while the absence of the actual recipient serves to multiply meanings (Copeman 2009).

However, such rendering of altruistic gift as a private act with a clear division of giver/recipient inhibits us from grasping the dynamic and open-ended consequences of the act of giving. Koichiro Fukada’s (2013) beautifully written monograph on Isao Nitta, a Japanese activist and a person with systemic disorder, provides a good example. Fukada states that Nitta, being a recipient of welfare services (which is a kind of altruistic gift within the regime of nation state), viewed the state of being delivered services as an act of exposing his life and body to the care workers, and thereby “contributing” to the betterment of social welfare (Fukada 2013: 23). When caregivers were exposed to Nitta’s body-self, they were compelled to respond. In so doing, the caregivers and concerned parties were urged to reflect, adjust, and redefine their practices and understanding of welfare. As such, for Nitta and his caregivers, the welfare services evolved not in a one-way relationship, but in an interactive and heuristic process of
reflection and adjustment to realize a more benign, humane society. What we can observe is a shift from “giver/recipient” relationship to an open-ended conversation between various actors. Needless to say, in this case, Nitta or the initial “recipient” of welfare stands at the core of the process of meaning-making and ethical imagination.

Nitta has a strong character as a leading activist, but how do the elderly, destitute women who became the recipients of humanitarian gift exercise agency? In order to answer this question, this article turns to the performativity of dāna and other related concepts which mediated the gift interaction in various ways.

Performativity of Dāna and the Mutuality of the Gift

It has been already reported by various writers, that in South Asia, including Sri Lanka, novel forms of humanitarian practices and institutions proliferated through creatively re-interpreting and/or parasitizing (Copeman 2009: 11) religious concepts and practices of gift called dāna /dān (Simpson 2004, 2017; Bornstein 2012; Copeman 2009). One of its striking features, as already mentioned (Heim 2004), is that it is a socially coordinated activity which performatively turns the concerned actors into moral agents. “Ethic of esteem” as defined by Heim (2004), encourages the giver to behave in a certain way to show one’s admiration towards the recipient, and in turn, urges the recipient to behave as a “meritorious vessel.” Heim’s discussion on ethics of esteem is exclusively related to a gift to the religious figure. However, as I have mentioned elsewhere (Nakamura 2011; 2017), such performativity of dāna extends to different arena of social life such as charity and philanthropy that are not necessarily confined to Buddhist populace.

In the ethnographic description and analysis, I describe several instances of humanitarian gift which were shared with me either in
visual or narrated form. In some cases, the recipients are described and evaluated as being desperate and cunning. But in others, especially in cases which are shared on SNS and TV programs, the recipients “become” upāsaka amma (or pious laywoman, but the word “amma” also implies a figure with unconditional love and sacrifice for the younger ones) in the course of interaction. Somewhat perplexed by an unexpected visit, they respond by referring to habitual manners and aesthetics of dāna, by insisting on giving pin or merit to the unknown visitors, wishing for their well-being on their way home and from the infectious disease. When a Buddhist monk and dāyaka sabha (Buddhist laymen’s association) are the benefactor, they respond by refusing to take all the gifts and taking only a portion of it, and offer a small amount of money as a meritorious deed, saying that now they cannot physically come to the temple.

Interestingly, when shared with an audience who witness the interaction through online and mass media, the figure of those ammas gets evaluated as representing humanity (manussakama), or how we ought to behave when “sharing” is most required, despite the highly situational and performative nature of the interaction. It is here that we see a shift of the “humanitarian gift for the deserving poor” to a different imagination in which the recipients themselves begin to embody humanity. The interaction involves not only the gift giving and receiving, but also sharing of material goods and circulation of merit-cum-joy (pin) which renders the encounter meaningful. Borrowing Graeber’s expression, the “imagined totality” in which such sharing and circulation is realized, is a picture of people of different social statuses with different capacities, but nonetheless equally imperfect, united in a common task of sharing food and the merit to live through uncertain future.

In conclusion, I wrap up the content and discuss how the case
study deciphers different ethical imagination in contrast with the liberal imagination of humanitarianism. Humanitarian gift reinforces asymmetrical relations while maintaining an ideology of equality because it is an emotional response to the unbridgeable difference between us and others. In contrast, the case analyzed in this article shows that the mutuality of gift is achieved because both parties, in spite of their different status and circumstances, become imperfect beings who embrace giving and sharing as a supreme value, for neither of the two knows what will become of them.1

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1 Such a culturally mediated ethical imagination appears to be a fragile, ephemeral, or nationalistic utopia, especially when examined against the socio-political context of enhanced militarization in the wake of the pandemic. I take this article to be demonstrating a vision out of many, or “thousand totalities” as Graeber puts it, within the context of Sri Lanka, orienting us to see and do things differently.

Graeber, David


Heim, Maria


Mauss, Marcel


Nakamura Sae 中村沙絵


Simpson, Bob


Spencer, Jonathan, Jonathan Goodhand, Shahul Hasbullah, Bart Klem, Benedikt Korf, Kalinga Tudor Silva, Vered Amit, and Christina Garsten


Ticktin, Miriam