paler, and narrower, spectrum'. He likens the present historical conjuncture to a 'cultural collage' and contrasts it with the old 'still life' (1994:464). Spiro (1992) makes the same distinction in a rather different way and defends the latter.

25 Compare Das (1994a:164): 'the victims of these disasters continue to bear the burdens of modern Indian society and as their scribe I struggle with the hopeless inadequacy of my conceptual tools to give them voice.'

26 See Harcourt (1982) and Swedberg (1991).

27 'The relationship between a hierarchical order of castes, with its focus on the superior position of the Brahman, on the one hand, and a conception of sovereignty which focuses on the Hindu king or the royal functions of the dominant caste at the level of the village, on the other, has been a central reverberating issue in the anthropological and historical study of South Asian society, so much so that it has been called "the central conundrum of Indian social ideology". Virtually all the major contributions to the anthropological, Indological, and historical study of Hindu South Asia have been concerned in some fashion with this relationship, and have seen it to be constitutive of fundamental aspects of social life, polity, and religion' (Raheja, 1988b).

28 In a recent article on value theory she extends my analysis (Gregory, 1982) to an area that I hesitated 'to apply the word, namely the "equation" set up between things and persons, such as bride and bridewealth' (Strathern, 1992:177). My analysis here continues our long running dialogue on the value question. I accept her extension of the term value to this domain and try, in turn, to extend her analysis beyond Melanesia.

29 This was made clear to me at an annual fair I attended in Bastar. For the merchants (many of whom are also farmers) these fairs are money making opportunities and the values of profit and loss predominate. For other farmers, the fair is a religious event and the values of purity, sacredness and auspiciousness predominate. In both cases these values are switched on and off at different periods of time. For example, clan gods are carried to the market on wooden constructions called *anga*. During this time the construction is deemed to be highly sacred and must not be touched by anyone except the four people carrying it who themselves become possessed by the spirit temporally resident in it. The guardians of the *anga* get very angry if anyone touches it, as I found when I naively touched one. A ritual is performed at the village temple on the morning of the fair to transfer the spirit of the ancestral god to the *anga* and the reverse ritual is performed at the end of the day. Having just witnessed the latter, I was observing the 'undressing' of the *anga* and gingerly approached to assist. 'Don't worry *sahib*', one of the men called out laughing, 'it is just wood now. You can touch it.' This 'just wood' value was reciprocally recognised by other people around just as its previous sacred value was so recognised. My lack of understanding of these values evoked anger on one occasion and mirth on the other.

CHAPTER II

Beyond Gifts and Commodities

GIFTS AND COMMODITIES: A DEFENCE

The analysis of value in an era of savage money presents the anthropologist with a theoretical dilemma. On the one hand, the object of study is full of contradictions and fuzzy boundaries; on the other, one's instruments of analysis must be free of contradiction and one's concepts clearly distinguished. This dilemma is difficult to negotiate. I struggled with it in *Gifts and Commodities* (Gregory, 1982), a book that has attracted a measure of critical comment. In this chapter I respond to some of this criticism by examining how two of my critics have coped with the dilemma. My aim is to set the theoretical and ethnographic agenda for the subsequent chapters. In this chapter, then, I move from a consideration of gifts and commodities in Papua New Guinea to the problems of analysing commodities and goods in central India. I defend the use of a binary logic as an indispensable instrument of anthropological thought and re-affirm the importance of fieldwork, and of an historically informed comparative method, as the material grounds for the development of anthropological knowledge.

Gifts and Commodities was my attempt to make sense of the world that I lived in for three years from 1973 to 1975 as a lecturer in economics at the University of Papua New Guinea (PNG). From an expatriate academic's perspective this academic world was made up of three rival paradigms: first there were the neoclassical economists who apprehended the world in terms of a theory of *goods* that led them to focus on marginal utilities of consumption; next came the neomarxist political economists who saw everything in terms of a theory of *commodities* and class relations of production; and finally, there were the anthropologists whose theory of *gifts* led them to

focus on the big-men and their prestige in the sphere of exchange. My response to this was to forge a theoretical alliance between the political economists and anthropologists against the neoclassical economists. Thus my book was intended as a constructive critique of the theory of *commodities* and *gifts* and a destructive critique of the marginal utility theory of *goods*. The result was, of course, yet another outsider's view but one that struggled to adopt a critical stance towards Australian economic and political imperialism in the country.

Responses to my book fall into the three classes: some, mainly anthropologists,[1] have critically accepted the basic distinction and have sought to develop the theory in their own way; others, again mainly anthropologists, have rejected it outright; and the rest, which includes the economists and political economists to whom it was addressed, have simply ignored the book altogether. While there is much in *Gifts and Commodities* that I would change today, the basic distinction at the heart of the book is not one of them. It is this distinction that I want to defend here. As such, I will restrict the following discussion to those critics whose reject binary thought in favour of a 'cultural perspective' that stresses conceptual continuity over conceptual discreteness. From this culturalist perspective my book is yet another exercise in binary thinking with all the problems that this approach is supposed to entail. I find some aspects of this critique challenging and thought-provoking but in many other aspects I find it muddled in the sense that the distinction between the object of study and the instruments of study is sometimes muddled. I consider the approach of two prominent theorist—Appadurai and Parry—to highlight the strength and weakness of this critique.

Appadurai's culturalist approach to the analysis of commodities has been celebrated by Marcus (1990) as the way ahead for an anthropology concerned to confront the challenge of the post modern world of disorganised capitalism. Appadurai's long essay, now recognised as a turning point in the theory of commodities (Miller, 1995), has been modified and developed by the Comaroffs (1990) and many others. I concentrate here on Appadurai's work because the problems in his theory are reproduced by his followers.

According to Appadurai (1986: 11, 54) I am among those who 'overstate' the contrast between gifts and commodities. Appadurai

does not elaborate this claim and nor is he concerned with the many theoretical differences that differentiate the work of 'overstaters' such as Taussig, Sahlins, and myself. Instead, he gets on with the task of presenting his new 'cultural perspective'. But what does this perspective entail? In Appadurai's case it is, first of all, a position that denies the problem that I am trying to cope with, namely, the paradox of the efflorescence of gift exchange in a commodity world economy. For example, he describes the *kula* as 'the best-documented example of a non-Western, preindustrial, nonmonetised, translocal exchange system' (1986: 18). This proposition, which anthropologists repeat *ad nauseam* in the literature, is a classic example in the 'denial of coevality' tradition of anthropology. The fact is that the Milne Bay area of PNG was one of the first regions colonised at the end of the last century. Gold miners, planters and missionaries poured into the area and, over the years, thousands of migrant labourers and students have flowed in and out. *Kula* is to a large extent an artefact of this history; like many other indigenous exchange systems in PNG it flourished when the colonial state suppressed clan warfare. Not only is *kula* 'Western', and 'monetised', it is also 'national' in the sense that *kula* paths now wend their way through Port Moresby via the houses of top Trobriand Island public servants.[2] Here Mercedes Benz cars and their horns substitute for the boats and conch shells of the Islands.

The second defining feature of Appadurai's 'cultural perspective' is that it denies the logical principle of specific difference by affirming the universality of the commodity form. '[I]n trying to make sense of what is distinctive about commodity exchange,' he argues (1986: 13), 'it does not make sense to distinguish it sharply either from barter on the one hand, or from the exchange of gifts on the other.' According to him we must look for 'the *commodity potential of all things* rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things' (emphasis added).

Thus for him everything is a commodity and only with this proposition uppermost in mind can one navigate the contradictions that riddle his account. Consider the following:

> Though an interesting range of *goods* is discussed in these essays, the list of *commodities* not discussed would be quite long, and there

> is a tilt towards specialised or luxury *goods* rather than 'primary' or 'bulk' *commodities* (Appadurai, 1986: 6, emphasis added).

Note the implicit equation of *commodities* with *goods* here and the use of equivocal adjectives ('specialised or luxury', 'primary or bulk') to distinguish the different types of 'commodity potential'. *Gifts* are equated with commodities and goods by means of the following argument:

> Of course there are many differences between the kula and commodity futures in scale, instrumentalities, context, and goals. But the similarities are real... The trade in relics, the market in commodity futures, the kula, the potlatch are all examples of 'tournaments of value' (Appadurai, 1986: 50).

Thus for Appadurai the equation *commodity* = *gift* = *good* is 'real', the differences exist but are apparent. The result is a contradictory theory of commodity-as-everything and commodity-as-something: the *commodity* is both *genus* and *species*. The only way he is able to differentiate his concepts is by employing a diverse group of adjectives in a totally *ad hoc* way: 'primary' commodity, 'specialised' commodity, 'bulk' commodity, 'enclaved' commodity, etc. Wherein lies the difference between these categories? My argument is that if exchange is taken as the genus then a conceptual distinction can be made between gifts and commodities; furthermore, I argue that the distinction must be made if the ethnographic reality is to be grasped.

The third defining characteristic of Appadurai's approach is the most curious of all for it is tantamount to the denial that anthropology is, first and foremost, the study of people. He argues (1986: 3) that 'exchange creates value' rather than people, and that 'commodities, like persons, have social lives'. This is a quite conscious attempt to elevate 'commodity fetishism'—the process by which relations between people assume the fantastic form of a relation between things (Marx, 1867: Ch. 1.4)—to a methodological principle. From this reified 'cultural perspective' what becomes important is the 'commodity potential' of a thing. This universalisation and reification of the commodity form bewilders me. For a humanist, the commodity is an historically specific form whose value is created by relations between people. If this position is an example of the 'tendency to excessively sociologize transactions in things' that Appadurai (1986:5) seeks to correct, then I refuse to be corrected.

Appadurai would no doubt protest that this is not what he 'really' meant. If the 'cultural biography of thing' approach he endorses does not mean this then it means nothing at all except the totally uncontroversial proposition that the objects of exchange, be they people or things, have a history that can be charted. This history would show that, say, some of the gold at Fort Knox was once ore in the ground in South Africa, that it was then smelted, formed into jewellery and sold as a commodity, kept as an heirloom for many years, sold as a commodity to a mint, circulated as a gold coin, and, finally, taken out of circulation and remoulded into a bar of gold along with other old coins. So what is new? Who has ever denied that objects have many different social forms depending on the context? Certainly not me. But the various species of value must be sharply distinguished when writing histories of this type. This is just what Appadurai does not do: as I have argued above, he elevates a specific value, the commodity form, to the status of a genus and makes no clear distinction between this form of value and others such as gifts and goods.

Appadurai's claim that the politics of value 'has its source in the fact that not all parties share the same *interests* in any specific regime of value' (1986: 57) is one that I can identify with. However, I am unable to see how he reconciles this proposition with his advocacy of fetishism as a methodological principle. In short, I find his thinking muddled. On the one hand he advocates a cultural theory based on the logic of diversity, on the other he seems to be advocating a value theory based on the logic of commonplace contradiction. The former tendency is the dominant one. Milton ([1672]1982: 223) comments on the logical status of the argument from *diversity* are relevant here:

> Arguments of disagreement which are diverse are those which disagree only in relation to something. This name seems most suitable for designating this very slight sort of disagreement, for by this expression are signified those things which, though they have a certain agreement among themselves and can by themselves and by their nature belong simultaneously to the same subject, are nevertheless not identical nor do they belong to the subject in relations to which they are said to disagree.

In other words, *diversity,* as a logical construct, is midway between *unity* (agreement) and *difference* (disagreement). Thus the cultural constructionists find their sameness and opposition within diversity. Spiro (1992: 126ff) calls this position 'epistemological relativism' and notes that the magnitude of cultural diversity it leads to is limitless. He argues that this unsatisfactory position comes about because relativists reject the notion of the psychic unity of mankind and hold that any notion of the unity of humanity can only be vacuous if true. One does not have to accept Spiro's defence of the principle of 'psychic unity' to see the merits of his critique. Anthropology must begin with unity and my argument is that the historical unity created by the dominance of free market anarchist values is a real one.

Parry's critique of *Gifts and Commodities* is from the point of view of what I call 'continuum theory'. From a logical point of view it shares all the problems of Appadurai's approach. Like Appadurai, Parry too finds my distinction 'greatly over-drawn':

> It might, I recognize, be objected that by emphasising the continuity between incremental exchange systems of the moka variety and Marx's general formula of capital accumulation, I am ignoring a fundamental contrast which emerges from Gregory's (1982) synthetic view of Melanesian exchange systems: the contrast between gift exchange systems of this kind in which the objective is to maximise net outgoings (to out-give), and commodity exchange in which the objective is to maximise net receipts or profit (to out-take). This contrast, however, is greatly over-drawn for if — as Gell (1992: 146) points out — it were literally true the Big Man would tend to seek out 'rubbish men' as exchange partners, and ply them with gifts in the confident expectation that they would never be repaid... Moreover, in many traditional Melanesian societies commodity exchange in the form of barter relations with trade partners on the periphery of one's social universe does not seem to possess a radically different character from many gift exchange relations firmly within that universe. In both cases (and again I am indebted to Gell) an enduring bond is established, and in both the objects exchanged seem to be definitively alienated. Gregory's neat opposition... does scant justice to these very real continuities (Parry 1989: 86-87, emphasis added).

My first reply is to note, yet again, that this critique denies the problem I was trying to explain, the coevality of different value systems in colonial Melanesia. The systems of exchange in so-called 'old' Melanesia are, I believe, best left to the archaeologist. Could it be that the 'denial of coevality' thesis has such a pervasive hold over anthropological thought that it influences the way people read texts as well as write them?

Secondly, Parry's suggestion that the logical implication of my theory is that the big man would seek out rubbish men to ply them with gifts is a complete distortion of my actual argument. I state, for example, that the 'aim of an inter-clan gift transactor is not simply to maximise the number of gifts of a given rank he gives away, but to give away a gift of the highest rank'. I add that 'these usually circulate amongst a small group of big-men' (Gregory, 1982: 52). I then give ethnographic evidence from Rossel Island and the Highlands. I also qualify my argument by noting that in those areas where 'leadership is in the hands of elders rather than big-men, balanced rather than incremental giving is practiced'. I quote evidence from the Sepik where exchange partners 'receive exactly the same in return'. In other words, the logical implications Parry (and Gell) draw from my analysis are false.

Thirdly, Parry's counter-argument conflates *ethnographic classification* with *logical conceptualisation.* This conflation is found in most 'continuity theorists' and it is based on a very simple confusion. When Lévi-Strauss divides the world into 'hot' societies and 'cold' societies, for example, he is *classifying* societies by means of the *concepts* 'hot' and 'cold'. Thus it is one thing to criticise him for the adequacy of his classification but quite another to criticise him for using the concepts 'hot' and 'cold'. I reject his classification but am quite happy to accept the idea that 'hot' is the opposite of 'cold'. In other words, it is one thing to make a conceptual distinction but quite another to use this distinction to classify societies. The problematic deployment of concepts does not mean that the concepts themselves are problematic.

I have never used the distinction between gifts and commodities to classify societies and nor have I ever suggested that 'we' are to commodities as 'they' are to gifts. Such an approach is anathema to me. My problem in *Gifts and Commodities* was to explain the paradox, brought about by colonisation, of the efflorescence of gift exchange

in a world dominated by commodity production and exchange. I characterised Papua New Guinea as 'an "ambiguous" economy where things are now gifts, now commodities, depending on the social context' (1982: 117). Thus I developed the logical opposition between gifts and commodities in order to try to understand the ambiguity of the historically specific situation of colonial Papua New Guinea.

Just as the bricklayer needs raw materials, proper instruments, and an imaginative plan to build a house, so too does the writer. For the anthropological artisan the skill lies in collecting data by means of the fieldwork method and the analysis of it using an historically-informed comparative method. A key instrument in this process is a logically coherent conceptual framework. The end may be an ethnographic classification of a Lévi-Straussian hot and cold kind; but to confuse *concepts* with *classification* is to confuse instrument with end, the tools with the product. It follows, then, that one can reject the product without rejecting the tools. Consider the analogy of the painter. The logic of the colour cube, which every good artist understands very well, is based firstly on the opposition of black to white and, secondly, on the opposition of the primaries (red, yellow and blue) to the secondaries (green, violet and orange). This is sufficient to generate an infinite variety of discrete hues and artists use this logic to create works of art of great complexity. Guha (1983a) uses this analogy, unconsciously it seems, to organise his thoughts. The primary opposition that informs his notion of power is one between domination and subordination. This can be likened to that between black and white. A secondary opposition is drawn between insurgency and peace. Insurgency, in turn, opposes coercion to resistance as green is to red. Peace opposes persuasion to collaboration as blue is to yellow. The qualitative logic of these oppositions defines many other hues and contrasts such as the greeny blues within the relations of dominance and the shades of orange within the contingent relations of subordination. This logic is used to paint an overall picture of peasant insurgency in colonial India of great clarity. Consider the following extract from the conclusion of his work.

> We had set out to describe the *figure* of insurgency in its common form and in terms of its general ideas. These, the reader will have noticed, have been made to emerge out of a welter of individual instances not all of them of the same *hue* or arranged in quite the same way. *Visualized as a pattern*, that form may indeed to said to be made up not only of elements and tendencies which are in *agreement but also those which clash and contrast*. Altogether, it stands for a generality in which ideas, mentalities, notions, beliefs, attitudes, etc., of many different kinds come together to constitute a whole. However, it is not a generality which is 'something external to, or something in addition to' other features or abstract qualities of insurgency discovered by reflection. On the contrary, 'it is what permeates and includes in it everything particular'—a pervasive theoretical consciousness which gives insurgency its categorical unity and helps to sort out its specific and separate moments (Guha, 1982: 333-34, my emphasis).

Marx, as I have already mentioned, is another example of someone who manages to great a theoretical work of great complexity from a basic dichotomy. The list goes on. I do not claim for one minute that *Gifts and Commodities* is in the same category as these classic works but I have no qualms about appealing to the authority of these writers as exemplars in rejecting the claims of those thinkers who believe that we can dispense with logical distinctions of a dichotomous kind. The fact is that conceptual distinctions are tools of thought that we cannot do without.

Ethnographic classification, then, is quite distinct from conceptual division by the logical principle of dichotomy. The latter is an instrument of intellectual labour, the former, ethnographic classification, one possible product of it. These divisions have no life of their own but can be useful when working on the raw material—which, for the anthropologist, consists of data collected during fieldwork, archival data, library materials, and so on—to produce an argument, the end cause of the intellectual's labour. Of course, the adequacy of a conceptual opposition can be questioned on logical and empirical grounds. While I can now see the need to revise some aspects of my analysis of PNG history, I have read nothing that convinces me that the logic of my fundamental conceptual opposition between gifts and commodities is in need of revision.

This brings me to the second confusion I see in the writings of my opponents: the meaning of 'binary' opposition. I have used the word 'dichotomy' or 'conceptual division by the logical principle of

dichotomy' rather than 'binary' in the preceding discussion. This is because a distinction must be made between binary logic of the axiomatic type associated with George Boole (1854) and the logic of the 'commonplace' or 'topical' type. The latter flourished in Europe from the time of Aristotle to that of Milton in the seventeenth century but thereafter fell into desuetude. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the axiomatic opposite of a *snake* is a *not-snake;* the commonplace opposite is, to use an example from Indian logic, a *mongoose*. A mongoose is a 'not-snake' but the two concepts are not identical. My critics do not recognise this. Instead, the word 'binary' is used to cover both types of opposition.

Lévi-Strauss's binary logic is in the Aristotle-Milton tradition, although he shows no awareness of this fact. Guha's logic, I would argue, is also in this tradition. This can be seen if we pursue the sense in which a mongoose can be said to be the opposite of a snake. The opposition is one of killer to killed. The Indian logicians used this image because the animals, which live in India, are natural enemies. The mongoose normally wins when the battle is against a cobra, a fact that has inspired the imagination of story tellers in India from time immemorial. This commonplace opposition is obviously of great generality and it appears in different societies in different forms. Commonplace opposition is either antagonistic or non-antagonistic. Anthropological thought has tended towards the former type of opposition. Take Lévi-Strauss for example. He finds order in the chaos of the ethnographic record by means of a cultural geography that establishes equivalence between, say, the drought-affected mythical thought of this tribe with the flood-affected thought of that. This theoretical operation, perfectly legitimate in its own terms, is premised on the denial of the chaos brought about by imperialism. This structuralist form of opposition is very close to Radcliffe-Brown's (1958: 123) 'union of opposites' which operates within societies to ensure their smooth functioning. Another variation can be found in Dumont's (1980a: 222) notion of 'hierarchical opposition', the idea that purity encompasses impurity in much the same way the human body encompasses its parts. Dumont's theory denies the antagonistic coexistence of rival cognitions. Countless other examples of this type of denial can be found in the history of anthropology as Fabian's thought provoking *Time and the Other* (1983) illustrates. Fabian draws attention to a fundamental contradiction in anthropological practice:

> On the one hand we dogmatically insist that anthropology rests on ethnographic research involving personal, prolonged interaction with the Other. But then we pronounce upon the knowledge gained from such research a discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance, spatial and temporal (1983: xi).

With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see that it was precisely this that I was reacting to when struggling to come to terms with the ethnographic record on PNG. While I greatly admired the work of the Melanesian ethnographers, it was as if colonisation never happened for most of them. There were some significant exceptions of course, and things have changed much over the past twenty years. However, books in the allochronic mode continue to be produced.

Gifts and Commodities was an attempt to grapple with the commonplace contradiction brought about by colonisation: the power struggles between the powerful mongoose, represented by the unholy trinity of the Australian colonial state, capital (both mining and plantation), and the missionary, and the snake in the form of the bewildering complexity that is the economy, society and culture of village PNG. The affirmation of the existence of commonplace contradiction is, of course, an affirmation of the coevalness because a common-time contradiction (coevalness) is also a common-place contradiction.

As an attempt to come to terms with the specific contradictions of colonial PNG, the second part of *Gifts and Commodities* is already dated both because time has moved on and because new studies, such as the Carriers (1989), have emerged which highlight weaknesses in my account. What survives, though, is the general thrust of the conceptual argument presented in the first part of my book, although this, I can now see in the light of my fieldwork in India and the reading I have done since 1982, is in need of some modification.

Concept construction involves abstraction from specific historical, geographical, and anthropological situations and the formulation of logically coherent schema. On the logical side there is a need,

as Fabian (1983: 117) reminds us, for greater understanding of the commonplace logical tradition that informs anthropological discourse in so many unconscious ways. Unlike Fabian who uncritically accepts Ong's negative representation of this tradition, I believe that its rehabilitation is essential if coevality is to be affirmed. Given the nature of this book all I can do here is to make the assertion and to demonstrate it implicitly under the cover of more substantive issues.

GIFTS AND COMMODITIES: A RESTATEMENT

Let me begin by restating the logic of the fundamental opposition that informs *Gifts and Commodities* in terms of the following tree diagram:

This schema is a synthesis of the work of Marx, Lévi-Strauss and Sahlins (among others). A logical opposition between gifts

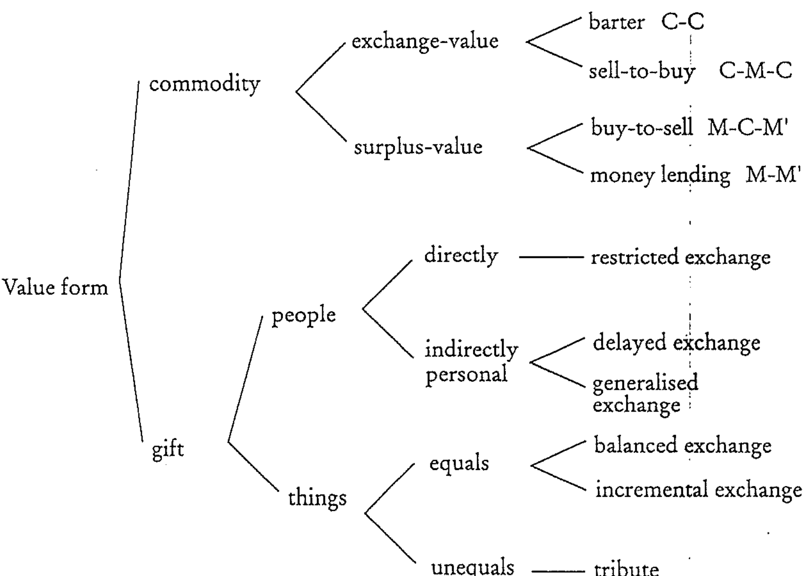

FIGURE II.1 *The conceptual opposition between gifts and commodities*

(relations between non-aliens by means of inalienable things) and commodities (relations between aliens by means of alienable things) is the primary distinction. Continuous application of this principle of dichotomous opposition yields a finely graded set of ten categories. These do not form a continuum, the favoured linear image of those who prefer fuzziness to dichotomies, but rather a multi-dimensional semantic space analogous to that used by Roget in his original thesaurus.[3]

It is one thing to construct a conceptual apparatus but quite another to use it to reveal the commonplace contradictions found in concrete situations, especially in comparative work when one's raw material is the allochronic ethnography of others. Ethnographic film offers one way around this because the immediacy of this medium allows the commonplace contradictions of daily life to peep through even in the most tightly edited film concerned to establish the contrary. In what follows I offer a brief analysis of how villagers draw the boundaries between gifts and commodities in contemporary PNG using the film *The Trobriand Islanders*. I then contrast this with the situation I found in India in order to introduce the themes that I want to develop in this book. To anticipate, I will argue that the framework above needs to be extended to include an anthropological conception of *goods*, a theoretical notion that is invariably confused with *commodities* in the work of my critics.[4] I will also argue that Marx's formulas of commodity exchange acquire new meaning when located concretely in the context of relations of consanguinity, affinity, and contiguity.

GIFTS AND COMMODITIES: 'TRIBAL' INDIA AND 'TRIBAL' PNG COMPARED

In the film *The Trobriand Islanders*, which lasts for 51 minutes, one sees an astonishing number of exchanges involving a large variety of things including yams, cooked taro, uncooked taro, tobacco, money, specially prepared banana leaves (hereafter bundles), grass skirts, manufactured cloth, betel nut, pigs, and many other things besides. The images flash by at a rate that makes it impossible for the

commentary, when supplied, to do little more than give a one sentence description of a complex situation. For example, a voice-over during a 35 second sequence showing people sitting around a boiling cauldron at night says: 'Men work into the night, boiling taro pudding for their sisters'. This verbal description is clearly inadequate in itself but the nature of the film medium is such that it matters little. For the anthropologically informed viewer the sequence is strangely familiar. It brings to life what one has read about in the ethnographic literature and one cannot help but locate the event comparatively from one's own field experience. Thus the 35 second sequence, which delivers 875 frames of visual information, evokes many other images in the mind of the viewer and sets one thinking but not always in the way that the anthropologist and film-maker want you to. Ethnographic film, then, can be treated in much the same way as the historian's archive and, as such, even the worst film can teach us something and be used for something other than that intended. I am not, then, concerned with the merits or demerits of *The Trobriand Islanders* as a film but, rather, as evidence to prove that Appadurai's image of the Trobriands as a 'a non-Western, preindustrial, nonmonetised, translocal exchange system' is wide of the mark and also to show that my distinction between gifts and commodities is not overstated. The film is a visual representation of the paradox that I was concerned with in *Gifts and Commodities*: the efflorescence of gift exchange in a world dominated by the values of the commodity. The film reveals how the Trobriand Islanders cope with the paradox both in their actions and in their verbalised thoughts.

First of all, the film re-affirms the general configuration of exchanges that the ethnographies have described. Every kinship relationship in Trobriand society seems to be marked by its own product. For example, cooked taro marks the relationship between brother and sister, uncooked small yams the relationship between wife's brother and sister's husband, and banana leaves and skirts the relationship between women of different matrilines. The status of chiefs is marked by the familiar storehouses full of yams. But what about the exchanges involving money and commodities? How do the Trobriand Islanders handle the commonplace contradiction of gifts and commodities? On this question the film is very revealing.

As one might expect, the chiefs have appropriated the symbols of commodity status and wealth. The traditional yam house remains a symbol of his authority but also of importance today are the things that money can buy such as Benson and Hedges cigarettes, watches, cement for the graves of deceased chiefs, Toyota four-wheel drive vehicles, and so on. The borrowing and lending of money among chiefs has introduced a new element into their power game. As the commentator informs us at the film's 34th minute:

> In Omarakana village Paramount Chief Puliasi has a problem. As a new chief he had to spend most of his wealth mourning his predecessor. Now he had to find cement to put on the grave. And cement costs money. Another chief, richer and older than Puliasi, has offered cash to get the job done. It is an act that undermines the Paramount Chief's power.

Commoditisation has also affected relations between women but they have developed an ingenious means of overcoming the contradictions. In one sequence, which begins at 22 minutes and 45 seconds into the film (hereafter 22:45) a woman called Bomapota is filmed bartering stick tobacco, which she bought in the trade store for cash, for bundles of banana leaves she needs to give away in a *sagali* because of the death of her 'aunt'. We are informed later (42:10) that her husband, like many other men in the Trobriands, supports his wife's need for bundles by selling his carvings to tourists for cash. The trade store, one of the few in the Trobriands, is owned by Sarah Kalubaku, a University graduate and relative of Chief Nalibutau.

It is clear from this sequence that the Trobrianders make a number of important distinctions between different forms of exchange. The following figure, which shows the path of the transactions, helps us to see the general point behind the specifics.

carvings (C) → cash (M) → tobacco (C) → bundles (C) → bundles (G)

The four products assume three social forms—commodities (C), money (M), and gifts (G)—and describe three distinct circuits. The first is C-M-C, selling in order to buy, which converts carvings into tobacco. The second is C-C, barter, which converts the purchased tobacco into bundles. The third is the transformation of the bundles into a gift (C-G). At each stage the social form of a product under-

goes a transformation but the crucial transformation is the final one of bundles into gift. This particular strategy of gift creation is akin to what Andrew Strathern (1969) has called the 'finance' as opposed to the 'production' strategy. This roundabout way of acquiring a gift keeps the alien world of commodities at bay, not by erecting a *cordon sanitaire* around the island, but by providing a means by which commodities can become domesticated and transformed into gifts. From the point of view of human relations this ideology is really a means to prevent Trobrianders from becoming strangers in their own island. The film in effect argues this point. It finishes (48:45) with the following revealing sequence where Bomapota and her son give verbal expression to the values that inform the actions previously shown.

> *Bomapota*: I want my son, Joseph, if he works for money to return here. And when he comes back and people come to see him, he has to help them with money. Not just a little bit. I want a large amount because if he gives people a little bit of money, people will say: 'His father and mother stopped him from giving a lot of money'. So when Joseph goes to school and goes to work, I will advise him that when people go to him he must give them big presents.
>
> *Joseph:* Only some of us go to school. Some parents hold their children back in the village. I'm going to do training in whatever I can, and then I'm going to help my parents in the village. Yes, when I earn cash I will bank the money so that when I come back I can help my parents. We are all one group.

This 'one group' ideology finds its social expression in the four clan division of Trobriand society that functions to relate one to all by means of a complicated set of rules relating to sub-clans, land tenure, residential patterns and so on. We see the force of this ideology today in a sequence (40:30) involving Rose Acaripa. She owns a supermarket on the mainland and has returned to pay people at a *sagali*. In this sequence village women place the traditional banana leaf bundles and grass skirts in a pile on the ground. When it comes to Rose's turn she places generous amounts of cloth and paper money on the pile instead of the traditional bundles. (The money is quickly appropriated by some men and the viewer is left wondering who they are and by what right they take the money.) Rose explains her actions in the following way:

> *Rose:* I have a name on the island now I have a big business. I have to show that I am a woman and I can do it. So I had to do it on my own and I just have to spend how much I could spend... What I did was because I worked in the town. I have to put money in material, or clothes or whatever.

The forgoing is far from being an adequate analysis of the film but it illustrates my general point that the commonplace contradiction between gifts and commodities is a very real concern for the people on the Trobriand Islands. The six categories of gift exchange I have distinguished above in Figure II.1 are adequate for general comparative analysis but if one is concerned with the specificities of the situation in different parts of the Trobriand Islands then further distinctions are needed. But the problem I want to address in this book leads me in the opposite direction because my fieldwork in India has highlighted, for me a least, a more general problem with this conceptual framework.

In 1982 I carried out fieldwork on a rural marketing system in Bastar District, India, and have been back a couple of times since. Bastar District is to India what the Trobriands is to PNG in that it lies in a remote out of the way place, albeit in the centre of India. The region is one of the last economic frontiers in India in that it is still relatively heavily forested and one of the few areas of India without rail. A prominent anthropologist (von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1982: 201) once described it, rather inaccurately I was to find out, as an 'unblemished tribal haven'. Fresh from my work on gifts and commodities in PNG, I set off to the field expecting to find many similarities with PNG, but how wrong I was.

Before I arrived in the field I paid an obligatory visit to the Commissioner of Tribal Welfare in Bhopal to inform him of my work. It was then that I heard the first of many versions of what I call the 'Tribal exploitation hypothesis'. 'The Tribal people of Bastar know nothing of modern ways,' he told me, 'and are ruthlessly exploited by shrewd merchants from Rajasthan.' There is, of course, an element of truth in this. Who can deny that merchants try to buy at the cheapest price and sell at the dearest? Nevertheless, the idea that the village people are innocent, passive victims of the commercial world is a stereotype image of the kind that I found was wide of the mark. What

struck me was how thoroughly commercial the people of Bastar were in their dealings with each other. It was as if commodity exchanges structured the lives of villagers in Bastar in the way that gift exchanges did in PNG. Not only did a commercial morality pervade everyday relations between people, I also found it in their rituals and myths.

Bastar District is thoroughly integrated into the national economy through a flourishing system of periodic markets. This means that any one village in the district is no more than a few hours walk away from some market or other every day of the week. Women specialise in the marketing of village produce and many go to the market every day taking with them a few kilos of rice or home-grown vegetables to sell in order to buy the imported commodities they need like kerosene, cooking oil, clothes, jewellery, and so on. Itinerant traders are forever wandering around the villages with things to sell; small stores can be found everywhere. Relations between households within a village are highly commercialised too. Take Mr. P. Gardener of Minipur village for example. I could never understand how he managed to survive because he and his sons had insufficient rice land to support their big family. However, Mr Gardener spent most of the day sitting around playing his flute and looking relatively prosperous. The riddle was solved one day when I saw a neighbour climb his palm tree, extract the wine, and pay him for it in both cash and kind. Mr Gardener, it transpired, had one of the few palm trees in the village and he extracted a monopoly rent from it. His caste, it should be noted, smoke marijuana but do not drink and the wine is sold to a caste that drink but do not smoke.

These observations led me to pose some questions. Where are the boundaries of commodity exchange in Bastar? Is there no domain that is free from the alienating influences of commodity exchange? One can understand why Trobriand ethnographers have concentrated on the gift to the exclusion of the commodity but why are there almost no studies of commodities and markets in India? Market studies abound in Indonesia, in Mexico and in other places but why not in India? Why have Indianist anthropologists been so fixated on purity and pollution and caste? It seemed to me that mercantile profit and loss, rather than purity and pollution, was the central opposition in the Indian society I was observing.

As I delved into the myths and rituals of the people I found more evidence for the ideological significance of a commercial morality. The boundary of the world of commodities is marked by a ritual called *haat nikarani,* literally the 'coming-out market'. This ritual is performed ten days after the death of a relative to lift the taboos that follow death. The family members concerned set up a symbolic market at cross-roads in their village where they pretend to buy and sell. They are free to attend the weekly market when the ritual is over. This ritual has been around for at least fifty years and possibly much longer. Elwin (1947: 157) describes a 'mock bazaar' that is held some distance from the market. In these rituals old clothes, bits of wood, seeds and beans are laid out for sale on the ground as if in a real market. For money broken pieces of an earthen pot are used. He also describes a situation where the villagers go to the nearest market to buy parched rice, gram and liquor. They walk around the shops scattering rice and gram; they then visit the grave of the dead man, offer him a drink, and ask him to return home with them.

The following myth told by Mr. Jaidev Baghel, an aboriginal artisan from Kondagaon, provides further insights into attitudes towards markets in India.

> It is said that in the olden days there was a market under a banyan tree. A cyclone came as it was being held. A pregnant woman had come to the market to sell vegetables. When the cyclone hit people ran for cover in all directions but the pregnant lady was unable to move due to the onset of labour pains. The woman gave birth to a baby girl under the banyan tree but, because of the unbearable pain of childbirth, she died. After the death of her mother the baby started to cry out in hunger. Having heard her cries, the banyan tree took pity on her. One of the hanging fibrous roots of the banyan tree then came into the mouth of the baby. The baby, thinking that it was her mother's nipple, started sucking. As she sucked, juice from the tree flowed into her mouth. Many days passed in this way with the baby obtaining her sustenance from the juice of the tree. One day a woman saw the girl. It is said that the woman was barren. Upon seeing the girl the woman thought, 'O Bhagwan, how kind you have been to me.' Having thought this she felt very happy and, having lifted the girl up, took her home. Her husband was also very pleased to see the baby. But they thought that if they told people how

> they got the baby then the mother would come and take her back. The woman then made a bundle of cloth, placed it on her stomach, and started to tell people she was pregnant. After four to six months she said that she had given birth and showed the baby to the villagers. The girl grew day by day. Right from childhood, the girl liked to eat good food, to wear fine clothes, ornaments and make-up. The village children used to play with her too. She loved everybody and used to teach them about religious and moral matters. Even though only young, she used to talk like a mature experienced person. News of her teachings spread throughout the region. People came to see her. They used to listen to her teachings and follow them. In this way she was able to form an army from her followers and began to punish amoral people. She was very helpful to moral people. The king of that region was very amoral. The king, on hearing of this woman's boldness, started a war with her. The woman's army had insufficient weapons. The king defeated them and took them prisoner. After some days he released them. After their release, they again prepared for war with the king. Another war then started. The king was defeated in this war. To celebrate their win, they organised a burnt offering under a big banyan tree. At that very moment the king and soldiers suddenly appeared and started to beat them. Then they told the girl to surrender or they would kill everybody. The people were unarmed at this time. The girl said, 'Kill me but let the children go.' 'No! No!' shouted her comrades, 'You have helped us like a mother.' 'Even though you are younger than us you have loved us like a mother,' they added. 'We will never let you surrender to the king.' 'I am one person and if my death saves the lives of many others then I will be very happy,' she said. 'But,' she added, 'be careful and don't forget my teachings.' On saying this, she jumped into the fire pit and died. Then they said, 'Look, see how much she has loved us throughout her life and today she has sacrificed herself to save us.' From this day people began to call her 'Maybali'. From this word 'Maybali' (Lit. mother-sacrifice) the name 'Mabali' and then 'Mavli' was derived. And from this day Mavli Mata worship began in the Bastar region. A special fair called Mavli Fair was started in her memory and is still going.

It would take some time to unpack the messages of this myth but it suffices to note here that a banyan tree is found in almost every large market. The market, symbolised by the banyan tree, does not have negative associations; indeed, it seems to have a positive maternal association. Negative feelings are reserved for the divine king whose family has been ruling Bastar for many centuries. The people of Bastar, then, are not one big family as in the Trobriands. For someone like Jaidev who identifies himself as an Aborigine, the King is an alien, a Hindu outsider whose family colonised the region some 20 generations ago; but for many natives of Bastar whose origin myths identify them as Hindus, the king is looked upon as a father.

For Jaidev 'family' means, first and foremost, his immediate family. The terms used are *ghar, kutumb, bus, thok,* and *jat*; these may be glossed as household, family, clan, lineage, and endogamous group respectively. These groups serve to define the Other as a non-*jat* and because artisans are landless these groups cannot be mapped onto a piece of territory as they can in the Trobriands. But territoriality remains an important concept: it exists as a form of *consciousness* that binds people together around the notion of a homeland. Temples in various locations mark the religious centres of the *ghar, kutumb, bus,* etc.; the distribution of the *jat* members throughout the district creates a sense that Bastar District as a whole is their aboriginal homeland.

For Jaidev 'family' also means the various *jat* that make up the *Paramparik Bastar Shilpi Pariwar,* the Traditional Artisan Families of Bastar. This group has official institutional status today and Jaidev is its Chairman. Its aim is to fight for the right of artisans to land, education and the general well being of the community against the many foreigners who have colonised the District such as government officials, land-seeking migrants from neighbouring districts, and the wealthy merchants from Rajasthan. For people like Jaidev, all these people are foreigners. But the latter do not see things in this way.

Take the government officials. They say that the Rajasthani merchant is the 'real' foreigner because they exploit the Tribal people whereas the government is there to help them. As always, there is some truth in this claim but this must be seen in the light of the distinctions merchants draw between themselves and the government officials. The merchants say that the officials use them as scapegoats to divert attention from the fact that many civil servants engage in invisible transactions of dubious propriety with timber dealers and other transactors of commodity wealth. Of course, not all civil servants are corrupt but one thing is clear: the relations that bind civil

servant and timber dealer have little in common with the kinship relations that bind market traders together.

Mercantile capitalists observe a simple principle: they must buy cheap and sell dear. However, it is not the percentage difference between buying and selling price that is important but the *absolute value* of commodities sold. It is one thing to buy something for Rs 1 and to sell it for Rs 6 to make a 500% profit of Rs 5 but quite another to buy something for Rs 10,000 and to sell it for Rs 10,200 to make a 2% profit of Rs 200. Anti-merchant stories are full of figures of dazzling profit rates but these stories miss the crucial point that it is the amount of trading capital that is all important. One way to acquire the trading capital is by means of credit, but who is going to advance it? The Rajasthani merchants have solved this problem. They have a long history of migration and they operate in markets all over India. However, they maintain their kinship links with each other and with their homeland. Hereditary Bards record these connections in books that trace genealogies back over hundreds of years. Life-cycle rituals performed in the birthplace of ancestors serve to renew the living relationship between widely scattered kinsmen. These links create a consciousness of territoriality which extends over the whole of India and the patrilineal and patriarchal groups so defined are reproduced by the endogamous exchange of three crucial prestige items: language, women, and credit:

> Language: Marwari is the mother tongue and the basis of the coded commercial script used in ledgers.
> Women: marriages are carefully planned and alliances are only made with those families recorded in the books of the genealogist.
> Credit: herein lies the secret of the wealthy merchants' success for mercantile credit is the supreme gift in a mercantile family.

Mercantile kinship, then, gives the landless Marwaris the sense that all-India is their aboriginal homeland and the currency of mercantile credit defines Brothers and Others. The former are those to whom trading credit is given, the latter those to whom consumer credit is advanced. For consumers like Jaidev, consumer credit is the bitter-sweet milk of the banyan tree; it is the basis of the ambivalent relationship that makes the customer dependent upon the merchant.

Consumer credit therefore enables the merchant to travel to places in Bastar today where many a corrupt forest guard fears to tread. The recent history of violence in Bastar suggests that they have good grounds for these fears. It also suggests that villagers make a clear distinction between clan brothers, mercantile traders, and the hated Others who plunder their forests for profit.

Poor aboriginal artisans like Jaidev and rich immigrant merchants like the Marwaris are landless. However the bulk of the population in Bastar consists of small landed families who produce commodities for sale on the weekly markets. Families own small holdings of land that consist of scattered plots that have tended to get smaller and smaller as population has increased and land has become scarce. Here is what I believe to be the crucial difference between the political economy of PNG and that of central India. Land tenure in PNG is, for the most part, in the hands of the clan and assumes a variety of local forms throughout the country. Perhaps the only generalisation possible is that land boundaries are extremely fluid and subject to endless dispute, especially in those areas where the population density is high. In India, by way of contrast, the land tenure system is a variation on a general pattern found in many parts of Asia, Europe and America. In the language of Marx (1894: xlvii, v) the farmers of Bastar are 'peasant proprietors of land parcels' but this term, and the theory that informs it, needs to be revised as we shall see in the next chapter.

THE 'INDIAN' GIFT AND THE NEED FOR A THEORY OF GOODS

My observations on commodity exchange in India are consistent with some of Parry's. He argues that commodity exchange in India is not only morally neutral but morally obligatory for certain castes. Parry, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork among some Brahman funeral priests of Benares, also reports that 'dire moral peril' attaches to certain kinds of gifts *(dan)*. Funeral priests receive gifts from the family of the deceased that transfer sin *(pap)* from the giver to the receiver. Raheja's (1988a) research, based on a village study in

north India, suggests that gifts of this kind, previously unnoticed by other ethnographers, may be of widespread distribution in India. Raheja shows that the dominant caste transfer inauspiciousness to Brahmans by means of *dan.* In one of her many case studies she describes the ritual the parents of a young boy had to perform to ensure his well being and to prevent his early death. The ritual was necessary because the eclipse demon, Rahu, occupied one of the houses of his horoscope and *dan* had to be given to a Brahman from a distant village to remove the faults *(dos)* and afflictions *(kast)* engendered by the presence of Rahu at his birth. A mediator, a local Brahman, transferred the inauspiciousness from the boy to the *dan*, which took the material form of black cloth, black shoes, a black clay model of a water buffalo, a small amount of gold, and other sundry items, using the principles of contagious magic. The recipient, an outside Brahman, picked up the *dan* and left. The moral neutrality of commercial transactions in India, then, contrasts sharply with the negative valuation placed on the giving of *dan* to Brahmans, an evaluation, Parry (1989) notes, which inverts the evaluations made by people in Melanesia and elsewhere.

This case, as Parry (1986: 463) argues, poses a number of difficulties for our general theory of exchange. It consciously repudiates Gouldner's (1960) universal 'moral norm of reciprocity'. *Dan*, Parry stresses (1986: 462), '*must* be alienated, should *never* return, and should endlessly be handed on.' In other words, *dan* is something for which there is no obligation to return. Given that reciprocity, inalienation and the obligation to return are the central defining characteristics of the gift, what is at stake here is the very notion of the gift itself. Parry's theoretical response is somewhat contradictory. In an early article (1980) he argued that *dan* only has the appearance of contradicting Mauss's theory that every gift creates an obligation to return. Nothing is returned, he says, because *dan* is '*its own counter-prestation*' (1980: 105, emphasis in the original). In a later article (1986) his response was to say that the contradiction is real, that there is no obligation to return *dan*-type gifts, and that *dan* is an example of a 'pure gift', by which he means an unreciprocated gift with Maussian 'spirit'. 'Where we have spirit,' he argues (1986: 463), 'reciprocity is denied; where there is reciprocity there is not much evidence of "spirit"'.

The notion of an 'unreciprocated' gift is a contradiction in terms because reciprocity, along with the inalienation and the obligation to return it implies, is the defining characteristic of a gift. If *dan* is unreciprocated then the very notion of the gift is at stake. Parry's opposing theories on the matter give him an each way bet; however his ethnographical description is a model of clarity and it allows for more than one interpretation.

From a humanist perspective, the 'norm of reciprocity' is a value that has *reciprocal recognition* between people as its basis and power as its means of reproduction. Sanctions, such as the threat of witchcraft, are behind the obligation to repay as Firth pointed out long ago. But what happens if there is no reciprocal recognition? There are two logical possibilities, asymmetrical recognition and indifference, and it is the former that provides the basis of a subalternate interpretation of *dan.*

Reciprocal recognition presupposes agreement as to the meaning of a transaction. This agreement is more likely to occur among *insiders* who, because of relations of contiguity, have been able to develop it over time and who are more likely to have a mutual interest in maintaining their relationship into the future. As Raheja (1988a) reports, transactions involving dangerous *dan* must be with *outsiders.* But what she does not note is that a relation between an insider and an outsider creates the possibility for disagreement as to the meaning of a transaction. In other words, asymmetrical recognition is possible when aliens are involved.

Consider Parry's data on the rituals of death in Benares. Two priests are employed to handle the soul of the deceased as it changes its form from ghost *(pret)* to ancestor *(pitr).* Mahabrahman funeral priests, who enjoy the anomalous status of impure and highly inauspicious Brahmans, perform the dangerous rituals involving *pret* that last for eleven days after death. A household priest, or hereditary pilgrimage priest if he is not available, perform the rituals involving *pitr*. The Mahabrahman accepts highly dangerous gifts in the name of the deceased person's ghost and the hereditary priest accepts much safer gifts in the name of the ancestor. The relationship of a lineage and their household priest is, by definition, an ongoing one; their relationship with the Mahabrahman, by contrast, is once off. The

givers of *dan*, for their part, have no desire to sustain a long-term relationship with the funeral priest who has accepted sin-infested gifts; the recipients, for their part, have a system for the allocation of funeral rights based on time of the year rather than a fixed clientele which 'helps to maintain the anonymity of the specialist' (1980: 96).

This alienated relationship between the priest and his client allows for asymmetrical recognition of the significance of the event. In other words, rival cognitions of the transaction become possible. The givers of *dan* identify the Mahabrahman with the ghost of the deceased; they give him *sajja dan* that should consist of the standard requirements of daily life such as a year's supply of grain, cooking utensils, bedding, clothes, and so on. 'The idea,' Parry notes (1980: 96), 'is that the offerings are received by the deceased in the next world.' In other words, the recipient, from the givers' point of view, is the deceased; the priest is a mere *mediator* and the material form of the *dan* the mere *vehicle* that the non-material sin attaches itself to. The Brahmans, for their part, have an ideology that reciprocally recognises this interpretation of the event. Thus, ideally, the receiver rids himself of any sins by giving away with increment the *dan* he has received to other Brahmans and/or by 'turning away' from them and assigning them to various deities (Parry, 1980: 103; Heesterman, 1985: 37); the correct and meticulous performance of daily rituals and the repeated recitation of various sacred formulae are also essential, and Hindu law forbids any commercial-like negotiation over the size and material form of the *dan*.

The family of the deceased have an obvious emotional investment in a religious interpretation of the event, an interpretation that derives its meaning from their bereavement, their religious beliefs about malevolent spirits, and their anxieties about their own future well-being among other things. The funeral priests, by way of contrast, have little emotional investment in a religious interpretation of the event. The limited tenure of their rights to cremation sites oblige them to view the matter in economic terms. This fact, combined with the poor family circumstances of many of the funeral priests and their ignorance of Sanskrit formulae and ritual, means that an economic interpretation of the transaction becomes an issue. As a result, the size and content of the *gift* offered by the bereaved to the deceased becomes, for the priest, a *commodity* with a negotiable price. The mourners, aware of the priest's reputation for avarice, may offer substantially less than custom demands; the priest protests and marketplace-type acrimony follows (Parry, 1980: 96).

Rival cognitions of this kind create contradictions: the transaction is now a gift, now a commodity according to the play of reciprocal and asymmetrical recognition. These vary as much between the transactors as they do within them over time. Priests, like all human beings, are not simple-minded economic men; they are complex human beings motivated by many conflicting passions and thoughts. As such, their avarice has its ideological costs. Many liken themselves to a sewer through which the moral filth of their patrons is passed, a sewer which becomes a cess-pit from which one may contact leprosy and die. As an *economic* occupation, then, the work is *religiously* very dangerous and concerns about the latter may outweigh the profits of the former and different employment sought.

The dilemma facing the *dan*-receiving Benares funeral priest arises because of a contradiction between Brahmanic values and the values of a coeval Indian mercantile world. These contradictions do not arise for all receivers of *dan*. The marginalised, poverty stricken, low status people thoughout India have developed a subalternate value system that reconciles the contradictions facing the receiver of *dan*. Their theological economy redefines the 'unreciprocated gift' as a 'partial repayment of commodity debt'. Guha (1985) develops this argument in his analysis of the myths of Rahu, a deity who appears as a demon in the Brahmanic value system and as a god in the subalternate value system of some Untouchables. The following is a very brief account of the essence of these subalternate values.

During an eclipse low caste people demand *dan* from members of the higher castes. In Gujarat, for example, as soon as the skies begin to darken the Untouchable Bhangis go about shouting *Garhandan, Vastradan, Rupadan*, 'gifts for the eclipse, gifts of clothes, gifts of silver' (quoted in Guha, 1985: 16). Brahmanic myths of Rahu, some of which have been reproduced by O'Flaherty (1973), suggest that, from the standpoint of the elite castes, 'these gifts can only be regarded as a price they have to pay for the return of peace in the heavens and purity on earth' (Guha, 1985: 16). These myths tell the tale of the battle between

the gods and demons over the Elixir, of how the gods stole it from the demons, and how Rahu, in his disguise as a god, was decapitated when he was discovered drinking the Elixir at their celebrations. But from the standpoint of the outcaste recipient a different interpretation of *dan* is construed as the following myth suggests:

> The sun and the moon were brothers. A hungry worshipper came to them, saying, 'I am poor and hungry. Give me something to eat.' The brothers went to a sweeper-woman and said, 'Give this man grain'. She had a bin in which were all kinds of grain. She agreed to give grain to the beggar for a year. She was directed by the brothers to take the grain out of the bin from below, and they agreed to fill it by putting grain in from the top. During the year the sun and moon were unable to fill the bin, and when the year was up, the woman said, 'Now pay me, for the bin is not full.' They were unable to pay her and hid themselves. Now, when eclipses occur, the worshippers of the sun and moon collect various kinds of grain, mix them, and distribute them to beggars, and thus deliver the sun and moon from shame (Briggs, 1953: 545; reproduced in Guha 1985: 18).

This myth, and its variants, have widespread currency among low status communities. Crooke (1926: 41), in his survey of 'popular' religion, noted that ideas like this 'may be at the root of the common belief about Rahu' and Guha's essay convincingly demonstrates that this is the case. The implication of this material is that the obligation to repay is conspicuously present[5] from the receivers' point of view: what the elite conceptualise as an obligation to give a *gift*, the subalterns see as unpaid *commodity* debt. As Guha (1985) notes, the myths and rituals of Rahu are an expression of an unresolved antagonism between the dominant and the subordinate. If one ritual action contains three actors of different rank then it is logically possible for the giver to have one interpretation of events, the receiver another, and the mediator a third. Logical possibilities of this kind are realised when there is no reciprocal recognition between the parties and this, I suggest, is precisely the situation that characterises the alienated relations between those who accept Brahmanic values and those who do not. Thus while the notion of an 'unreciprocated gift' is a contradiction in terms, the notion of 'unreciprocated *dan*' is not when *dan* is defined, from a disputatious subalternate standpoint, as a form of commodity exchange.

The fine grained ethnographic research of Parry and Raheja raises the general question of the transfer of *bads*, the generic word I will use to describe the transfer of impurities, inauspiciousness, sin, and the like. Bads inflict the rich as well as the poor, high status people as well as the low; gift exchange is but one means among many by which it is transferred.

In Bastar District, for example, bads are exorcised from a village by ritually dumping them, in the wet-season month of *bhadon* (August-September), on the northern-most border of a village at a *ponhcani* post. The northern recipients of these bads transfer them from the south of their village to the north and so it goes on, according to my informant (Mr. M.S. Mali), until all the accumulated bads reach Keshkal ghat, a mountain pass at the northern extremity of the district. Here they are ritually dumped over the edge of the cliff. The repository of this evil is the goddess Bhangaram whose main temple is at Keshkal and whose distinguishing sign is a black flag. Bastar District has very few Brahmans and this ritual, when placed in the comparative context of the material reported by Parry and Raheja from Brahman-intensive north India, can be seen as their means of coping with the problem of bads.

Of course, a *bad* presupposes a *good*, an opposition that takes on agreed meanings when there is reciprocal recognition, and discrepant meanings when there is not. Thus, from the standpoint of Brahmanic values, an eclipse is a bad whose evil influences must be transferred with *dan* while, from the standpoint of the worshippers of the Rahu, it brings goods, commodities or money.

This brief discussion raises the general question of the theory of goods. As seen in the last chapter, neoclassical economists have dominated thinking about this matter over the past century. Their marginal utility theory of value is from the perspective of the Market and individual cognition. The perspective of the House, based as it is on reciprocal and asymmetrical recognition, suggests that there is room for an alternative theory of goods. In *Gifts and Commodities* my opposition to neoclassical theory was such that I conflated a particular theory of goods with the notion in general. I can now see that neoclassical economists have no monopoly on the term, that the history of thinking about the subject goes back thousands of years,[6]

and that a new anthropologically informed theory of goods is needed. The basis of such a theory already exists, if in a somewhat embryonic form, in the anthropological literature. This issue will be addressed in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Strathern (1988), Werbner (1990), Thomas (1991), Taylor (1992), and Carrier (1995).
2. A top public servant I visited in 1978 had a large *mwali* (armshell) hanging on his wall that he received through a Port Moresby *kula* exchange.
3. Note that this involved 1000 lower level classes, grouped into six secondary philosophical categories and arrayed according to the principle of antithesis. The logic of Roget's system is like that of the colour cube but most modern-day versions use the alphabet as the sole logical principle of construction.
4. The very title of the Comaroffs' (1990) article 'Goodly beasts, beastly goods: cattle and commodities in a South African context' illustrates this. Here goods = cattle and bads = commodities which is much the same argument made by Taussig (1980), a person the Comaroffs accuse of employing 'facile dichotomies'. Appadurai's theory, as we have seen, makes similar equations. Taylor (1992: 9) has noted this contradiction in the thought of the Comaroffs and opts for the gift/commodity distinction because it 'approximates the indigenous discrimination'.
5. Raheja (1988) reproduces this conventional orthodoxy in her extraordinarily rich ethnographic analysis of gift exchange in a north Indian village. I questioned this orthodoxy in my review (Gregory, 1992) of her book. Judging from her response to my comments (see Raheja, 1993) it seems that she has misunderstood the issue I was trying to problematise. I hope that the foregoing analysis clarifies what I see to be the theoretical implications of Gull's work for anthropological theory.
6. See, for example, von Wright (1963).

CHAPTER III

Land as the Supreme Good

Of goods ill got
The third heir joyeth not
(Seventeenth century English proverb)

WHAT IS A GOOD?

There comes a time in the life of an anthropologist, often towards the end of their fieldwork, when informants reveal the existence of certain highly valued possessions. From an outsider's perspective these objects often have little intrinsic value; but, from the insider's perspective, they are very highly valued and this is manifested in the reverential way the objects are handled and the strong emotional reactions they evoke. I shall call these objects *goods* and introduce my discussion of this form of value by means of a few concrete examples in order to clarify the problem that I want to address.

On the 8th February 1990, Mr. M.S. Mali, a member of the Gardener caste and resident of Bastar whom I first met in 1983, was showing me the many gods that he worshipped. We spent over a week touring the village and its surroundings taking photographs of the various icons and talking about the stories behind them. When our work was over at the end of this long, tiring week, we were sitting in his house relaxing when he said that he still had some more icons to show me. We went into a small room of his house where two clay pots were strung above a small altar in the corner of the room. Before we touched anything he got some *ganga pani* (Ganges water) from a