

# Rhythm as Form of Individuation Process (part 2)

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[Previous chapter](#)

## Rhythms of Archaic Individuation: The Kwakiutl (Mauss - 1924)

Mauss' essay *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1924), which is often read separately from the rest of his work, was in fact strictly in line with his pre-WW1 study on *Seasonal Variations...* It was clearly an extension of his reflection on social rhythms.

The relay was taken from the very first pages where Mauss outlined the concept of "system of total prestations [*système de prestations totales*]" through the example of the Indian *Potlatch* in the American North-West [1]. As already pointed out in *Seasonal Variations...*, a fair number of Indian tribes of this region, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian and Kwakiutl, who provided a great deal of the material for *The Gift*, experienced a double seasonal morphology. Dispersed during summer, these populations concentrated during winter.

Their winter life, even with the southern tribes, is very different from their summer life. The tribes have a two-fold structure [*double morphologie*]: at the end of spring they disperse and go hunting, collect berries from the hillsides and fish the rivers for salmon; while in winter they concentrate in what are known as "towns." (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 32, trans. Ian Cunnison)

In winter, after one or two seasons spent accumulating goods, these tribes attended large and long gatherings called *potlatches*.

During this period of concentration they are in a perpetual state of effervescence. The social life becomes intense in the extreme, even more so than in the concentrations of tribes that manage to form in the summer. This life consists of continual movement. There are constant visits of whole tribes to others, of clans to clans and families to families. There is feast upon feast, some of long duration. On the occasion of a marriage, on various ritual occasions, and on social advancement, there is reckless consumption of everything which has been amassed with great industry from some of the richest coasts of the world during the course of summer and autumn. (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 32-33, trans. Ian Cunnison)

The *potlatch* was a "total social phenomenon [*fait social total*]" which was inserted—this is

unfortunately often forgotten in favor of considering only the circulation of gifts and counter-gifts—into the annual morphological alternation and which marked the peak of the social gathering period. It was therefore a rhythmic phenomenon.

After having been dispersed and enjoyed subdued social relations during the whole summer, the social life in these tribes dramatically intensified during winter.

The Tlingit and Haida inhabit the islands, the coast, and the land between the coast and the Rockies; they are very rich, and pass their winters in continuous festival, in banquets, fairs and markets which at the same time are solemn tribal gatherings. The tribes place themselves hierarchically in their fraternities and secret societies. On these occasions are practiced marriages, initiations, shamanistic seances, and the cults of the great gods, totems, and group or individual ancestors. [These are all accompanied by a complex network of rituals, jural and economic prestations, political rankings within sub-groups, tribes, tribal confederations and nations.] (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 32-33, trans. Ian Cunnison, my mod.)

These exchanges, even when only individuals faced each other, always concerned whole groups. Mauss distinguished four major types.

First, *potlatch* where the phratries and chiefs' families alone take part (Tlingit); second, *potlatches* in which phratries, clans, families and chiefs take more or less similar roles (Haida); third, *potlatch* with chiefs and their clans confronting each other (Tsimshian); and fourth, *potlatch* of chiefs and fraternities (Kwakiutl). (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 37, trans. Ian Cunnison)

Strikingly, in many of those archaic societies, the "total prestations" that took place during these rhythmic peaks of social life were accompanied by a surge of conflictuality. Trading meant also fighting. Exchanges constituted "agonistic prestations."

But the remarkable thing about these tribes is the spirit of rivalry and antagonism which dominates all their activities. [A man is not afraid to challenge an opposing chief or nobleman [and to kill him]. Nor does one stop at the purely sumptuous destruction of accumulated wealth in order to eclipse a rival [although associated] chief [who may be a close relative, grandfather, father-in-law or son-in-law]. (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 4, trans. Ian Cunnison, my mod.)

Just as he had noted the almost universal extension of the rhythmic variations of sociality, Mauss underlined the very wide diffusion of the agonistic prestations, even in our own societies.

So far [we] had found few examples of this institution outside North-West America [he cited in a footnote Alaska Eskimo], Melanesia, and Papua. Everywhere else—in Africa, Polynesia, and Malaya, in South America and the rest of North America—the basis of exchange seemed to us to be a simpler type of total prestation. However, further research brings to light a number of forms

intermediate between exchanges marked by exaggerated rivalry like those of the American northwest and Melanesia, and others more moderate where the contracting parties rival each other with gifts: for instance, the French compete with each other in their ceremonial gifts, parties, weddings, and invitations, and feel bound, as the Germans say, to *revanchieren* themselves. We find some of these intermediate forms in the Indo-European world, notably in Thrace. (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 5, trans. Ian Cunnison, my mod.)

Throughout the essay, Mauss sought to highlight, in the archaic societies he studied, some constants that were still valid today.

We contend that the same morality and economy are at work, albeit less noticeably, in our own societies, and we believe that in them we have discovered one of [the human rocky bases] [*un des rocs humains*] of social life; and thus we may draw conclusions of a moral nature about some of the problems confronting us in our present economic crisis. (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 2, trans. Ian Cunnison, my mod.)

I cannot here dwell on Mauss' analysis of the causes of these phenomena. He saw in them mainly effects of a couple of magico-religious beliefs: the magical force attached to given objects (*hau*) and the necessity to sacrifice to the spirits of nature and ancestors. Mauss' interpretation, which at first sight does not seem absurd, has been subject to a harsh criticism by Levi-Strauss who saw in it a remnant of substantialist way of thinking [2]. In this section, I will limit myself to its consequences which seem sufficient to ensure the rhythmological interest of the essay on *The Gift*. While Mauss still remained, in his study on the Eskimo, deeply influenced by the somewhat simplistic psychological concepts drawn from Durkheim and the crowd psychology (effervescence, influence, disappearance of self-consciousness and invasion of the latter by collective consciousness), the study of the *potlatch* provided him with the opportunity to establish an innovative interpretation of the singular and collective phenomena related to periods of social concentration. The peculiar agonistic prestations performed during these periods had consequences on the individuation both of the whole groups involved and of the nobles and chiefs who directed them.

Concerning the groups, the *potlatches* provided occasions to reshuffle the status and identity of each group within the tribal system. They offered the framework where the subgroups of these segmented and archaic-type societies could overlap and become ever-more interwoven, through a series of prestations and counter-prestations, in constantly changing configurations and hierarchies.

We are here confronted with total prestation in the sense that the whole clan, through the intermediacy of its chiefs, makes contracts involving all its members and everything it possesses. But the agonistic character of the prestation is pronounced. Essentially usurious and extravagant, it is above all a struggle among nobles to determine their position in the hierarchy to the ultimate benefit, if they are successful, of their own clan. (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 4-5, trans. Ian Cunnison)

Simultaneously, the *potlatches* and similar phases of intensification of social life were periods of regeneration of the groups and of their internal order and institutions. Mauss insisted on this point

in two important theoretical texts written in the 1930s.

It is now indisputable that new institutions emerge [*naissent*] in periods of collective life, that they spring up [*se forment*] more particularly in states of crisis, and that they function [*fonctionnent*] in tradition, routine, regular gatherings. (M. Mauss, “La cohésion sociale dans les sociétés polysegmentaires” (1931), *Œuvres*, t. III, 1969, p. 14, my trans.)

Total phenomena assemble, as a matter of fact, all men of a society and even [all] things of the society in every respect and for ever [...]. During these events, societies, groups and subgroups, together and separately, come back to life, regain form and strength; they provide the occasion to start afresh; some institutions are rejuvenated, others purified, others replaced or forgotten. It is during this particular time that all traditions—even the literary ones, even those which will be as temporary as fashion for us—are established and transmitted: the great Australian international assemblies are held mainly to transmit dramatic art works and a few objects. (M. Mauss, “Fragment d’un plan de sociologie générale descriptive” (1934), *Œuvres*, t. III, 1969, p. 329, my trans.)

Concerning the individuals, the *potlatches* had similar and simultaneous consequences. They operated a redistribution of the “persons” between the dominant individuals of the tribal or clan group. The term “person” here referred to the legal status (in the clan, brotherhoods, age groups and sexes) as well as the religious status (as reincarnation of the person of an ancestor). [3]

Nowhere else is the prestige of an individual as closely bound up with expenditure, and with the duty of returning with interest gifts received in such a way that the creditor becomes the debtor. [...] Political and individual status in associations and clans, and rank of every kind, are determined by the “war of property,” as well as by armed hostilities, by chance, inheritance, alliance or marriage. But everything is conceived as if it were a war of wealth. Marriage of one’s children and one’s position at gatherings are determined solely in the course of the *potlatch* given and returned. Position is also lost as in war, gambling, hunting and wrestling. [...] Progress up the social ladder is made in this way not only for oneself but also for one’s family. [...] A chief must give a potlatch for himself, his son, his son-in-law or daughter and for the dead. He can keep his authority in his tribe, village and family, and maintain his position with the chiefs inside and outside his nation, only if he can prove that he is favorably regarded by the spirits, that he possesses fortune and that he is possessed by it. [...] It is said of one of the great mythical chiefs who gave no feast that he had a “rotten face.” The expression is more apt than it is even in China; for to lose one’s face is to lose one’s spirit, which is truly the “face,” the dancing mask, the right to incarnate a spirit and wear an emblem or totem. It is the veritable *persona* which is at stake, and it can be lost in the potlatch just as it can be lost in the game of gift-giving, in war, or through some error in ritual. [...] The *potlatch*—the distribution of goods—is the fundamental act of public recognition in all spheres, military, legal, economic and religious. The chief or his son is recognized and acknowledged by the people. (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 35-39, trans. Ian Cunnison)

Since this double aspect was present almost everywhere—in the American North-West but also in the Eskimo, in Samoa and Trobriand, and we understand in societies that operated on egalitarian basis as well—Mauss was driven to the following conclusion: *singular and collective individuation*

*depended on the exchanges and conflicts that took place during periods of intensification of sociality.*

The processes that occurred during the periods of strong sociality could no longer be reduced to a mere psychic excitement or a dissolution of the ego within a collective and encompassing self. These processes were indissociably singular and collective individuation phenomena that operated through two closely interwoven movements. The agonistic exchanges of gifts and counter-gifts had the same double effect on social groups and on individuals. On the one hand, they increased entropy: accumulated wealth disappeared and the structure of power, as well as the organization of people, was shaken. Some chiefs, who had not been able to return gifts, lost their face and had to retire. Some warriors lost their “person” which consequently became available to others. Some groups regressed in the social hierarchy and had to submit to others. As Alain Testart pointed out, the *potlatch* periodically broke hierarchies and roles [4]. But, at the same time, the *internal tension* in the group and the individuals increased strongly under the action of these struggles of generosity. There were outbursts of symbolic violence that could go as far as real murder.

Consumption and destruction are virtually unlimited. In some *potlatch* systems one is constrained to expend everything one possesses and to keep nothing. The rich man who shows his wealth by spending recklessly is the man who wins prestige. The principles of rivalry and antagonism are basic. [...] But everything is conceived as if it were a “war of wealth.” [...] Sometimes there is no question of receiving return; one destroys simply in order to give the appearance that one has no desire to receive anything back. Whole cases of candlefish or whale oil, houses, and blankets by the thousand are burnt; the most valuable coppers are broken and thrown into the sea to level and crush a rival. [...] The only way to demonstrate his fortune is by expending it to the humiliation of others, by putting them “in the shadow of his name.” (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 35-38, trans. Ian Cunnison)

The *dedifferentiation* of the social group and the individual psyche was thus accompanied by their *repotentialization*. The concomitance of these two phenomena was indicated by Mauss through a series of oxymoronic figures that anticipated the logic that was highlighted a few years later by Evans-Pritchard among the Nuer.

The *potlatch* is also a phenomenon of social morphology; the reunion of tribes, clans, families and nations produces great excitement. People fraternize but at the same time remain strangers; community of interest and opposition are revealed constantly in a great whirl of business. (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 36-37, trans. Ian Cunnison)

Only when the social group and the individuals had reached, through a controlled exercise of violence, this very particular state of simultaneous dedifferentiation and tension, a singular and collective re-individuation occurred, which resulted either in the confirmation or the augmentation of existing positions, possibly in the emergence of other chiefs, other dominant warriors and groups. Once individual as well as collective identities were re-generated, a new, more relaxed, less confrontational period, in which these identities were no longer in danger, could begin.

Let us now sum up the main points of this second study on social rhythms. First, I must say that I have deliberately left out all evidence concerning the Trobriand Islands *Kula ring* collected by Malinowski and plainly taken into account by Mauss. Malinowski had carefully traced the network of exchanges of bracelets and necklaces across the Trobriand Islands, and established that they were part of a huge circular system of exchange. This new body of evidence introduced significant variations in the model, firstly because the *agôn* was somehow diluted in time by the expectation for the moment when gifts would be returned (with interest), and secondly because the gifts were sexed and travelled from island to island in reverse geographical directions, so that male bracelets and female necklaces— and therefore the two sexes in the groups that traded—would meet in the *Kula ring* “like dogs which come to sniff” or “attracted towards each other like male and the female” (p. 183). There was in the Trobriand *Kula ring* a sexual topic that was absent from the Kwakiutl *potlatch* and that was reminiscent of archaic dualistic organizations such as those of Australian or ancient Chinese described by Granet (see below). But this body of evidence did not add anything decisive to the Kwakiutl model. The *Kula ring* was also the occasion to reshuffle and re-rank chiefs and groups relatively to one another.

In his 1905 essay on *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo* Mauss had given a definition of the concept of social rhythm which had obvious shortcomings—it was still accounted for by reintroducing psychological motives—but which was essentially derived from anthropological field observation. Since it was possible to observe more or less important morphological variations in many societies living in different environments and with varying levels of technological development, it was clear that these variations were *sui generis*, i.e. relatively independent of the natural environment and subject to a dynamics of their own. By separating the concept of morphological alternation from that of bio-climatic cycle but also from that of technological progress, which by contrast was from Aftalion to Schumpeter at the center of economists’ attention, Mauss had cleared the ground for a historical-anthropological study of social rhythms, defined as forms of the process of singular and collective individuation.

This is, I believe, the main achievement of the essay on *The Gift* published in 1924. Rhythm was not any more synonymous of “oscillation” or “periodic variation” of independent functions. It was not thought of from a plain Platonic perspective any more. It designated the temporal form of the social flow by means of which both the groups and the individuals were generated, regenerated, unraveled, and sometimes replaced. *The succession and superposition of these qualitatively different times allowed social groups to regularly refurbish their organization, to invent, if necessary, the forms that ensured their internal cohesion, and to redraw their external limits by interweaving with each other through a total system of prestations and counter-prestations. But the succession of heterogeneous times organized as well the process of singular individuation. On the one hand, agents experienced a periodic reshaping of their “person” during the periods of intensification of sociality. On the other hand, once the “persons” had been re-distributed and re-established, the agents lived in the freest and most individual way during periods of dispersion.*

It is equally indisputable that in all the oldest known societies as in ours, there is a kind of retraction of the individual and the family from these states of more or less intense collective life. (M. Mauss, “La cohésion sociale dans les sociétés polysegmentaires” (1931), *Œuvres*, t. III, 1969, p. 14, my trans.)

Rhythms organized the global process of singular and collective individuation.

The fact remains that all these Indians, and in particular the Kwakiutl, installed in their settlements a whole social and religious system where, in a vast exchange of rights, goods and services, property, dances, ceremonies, privileges and ranks, persons as well as groups [pay off their debts to one another] [*se satisfont les personnes en même temps que les groupes sociaux*]. We see very clearly how, from classes and clans, human “persons” adjust [*s’ajacent*] to one another and how, from these, the gestures of the actors in a drama fit together [*s’ajacent*]. (M. Mauss “Une catégorie de l’esprit humain. La notion de personne. Celle de ‘moi’ - A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of Person; the Notion of Self,” (1938), trans. W. D. Halls, p. 7, my mod.)

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## Footnotes

[1] As W. D. Halls noticed, in his new translation, “the French terms “*prestations*” and “*contre-prestations*” have no direct English equivalents. They represent respectively the actual act of exchange of gifts and rendering of services, and the reciprocating or return of these gifts and services” (*The Gift*, trans. W. D. Halls, 1990, p. vii). Consequently, he proposed to translate them as “total services” and “total counter-services.” However, the French term “*prestation*” has another meaning: as Ian Cunnison, the first translator of the essay, rightly noticed, it also means “any thing or series of things given freely or obligatorily as a gift or in exchange; and includes services, entertainments, etc., as well as material things” (*The Gift*, trans. Ian Cunnison, 1954, p. xi). As a matter of fact, “*prestation*” designates the thing that is exchanged as well as the act of exchanging, a double meaning which sheds some light on Mauss’ choice of the word, since for him things do exist only as part of a general circulation or exchange that rhythmically re-generate the persons as well as the society. For this reason, I will keep using the translations proposed by Ian Cunnison as “*prestation*” and “*counter-prestation*.”

[2] C. Lévi-Strauss, “Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss” dans M. Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, Paris, PUF, 1950.

[3] On this conception, see M. Mauss, “A category of the human mind; the notion of person, that of ‘me’” (1938), in *Sociology and Anthropology*, Paris, PUF, 1950 and my reconstruction of the successive Maussian conceptions of the person in P. Michon, *Marcel Mauss retrouvé. Origines de l’anthropologie du rythme*, Paris, Rhuthmos, 2015.

[4] This interpretation is close but probably more accurate than that of Georges Bataille, who insisted only on the question of expenditure. See G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 1949. A. Testart, *Les chasseurs-cueilleurs et l’origine des inégalités - The Hunter-gatherers and the origin of inequalities*, PhD Dissertation, Paris, Institute of Ethnology of the University of Paris X, 1981. It is, as a matter of fact, as we saw above, a point that Mauss already noticed in his essay on *Seasonal variations*...