

Reciprocity in folk life

The Serbian Case

THE SERBIAN VILLAGE was for centuries left to itself, and this was the reason why it preserved many ancient and built some new institutions aiming at its self-maintenance. Although in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries considerable changes have occurred in the position and life of the Serbian rural population, many of these institutions have been preserved and even today are in vigour.

In the first place there are various forms of collective property and collective work. It was a common feature till World War II that individual villages, in some regions individual lineages too, collectively possessed woods, groves, pasture lands etc. After World War II these forms of collective property immersed into the collective communal property. Smaller social groups, as individual lineages and hamlets, frequently have as their collective property groves, meadows, watermills etc. Many tasks of interest for the whole hamlet or village, as e.g. building and maintaining of local roads and bridges, of village wells and fountains, cemeteries etc. usually are performed collectively.

Beside institutions on behalf of all members of a social group or obliging them to work on behalf of the whole community, there are many forms of mutual assistance within a smaller or larger group on the basis of reciprocity, and this principle of reciprocity is inherent almost in all aspects of folk life.

Although the reciprocity is usually required by custom and practised between households belonging to a hamlet or village, it also can be practised over a long distance and it sometimes transgresses not only geographic regional but also denominational and ethnic or national reciprocity, i.e. the reciprocity does also exist between Serbs, who are Orthodox, and Croats, who are Catholics, as well as between Christians and Moslems, in the same settlement or region or in two different adjacent settlements or regions.

It is a widespread feature that individual households from two adjacent regions mutually assist one another in the sphere of economics: this reciprocity is due to the climatic factors. It happens that households in mountains get short of bread grain before harvest. In such a case heads of households lacking grain go to their friends in valley villages, where crops ripen earlier, and borrow the necessary quantity which they will return when their own crops get ripe. Similar reciprocity takes place also in sending cattle and sheep for pasturing and oxen for ploughing.

The archaic form of exchanging goods through simple barter is still very common: a peasant carries his products, e.g. fruits, to the region lacking in this kind of food and exchanges them for the products lacking in his region or village, usually for grain or flour. Such barter usually is anonymous and casual, since it takes place between persons or households who meet by chance. Beside such anonymous exchange an institutionalized barter of quite distinct character exists in a large area: individual households from regions distinct by their climate and economic production mutually exchange their products and assist one another with various services.

Along the Adriatic shore from the city of Zadar to the Montenegrin coast there passes a comparatively narrow zone of Mediterranean character; parallel with it stretches a more or less broad Submediterranean zone representing a transitional area to the continental interior. Due to differences in economic production an extensive exchange of goods takes place between adjacent zones, particularly between the

Mediterranean and Submediterranean but also between the Submediterranean and continental zones. Beside the usual trade of money economy character, there is to be found a quite distinct form of exchange or barter: individual households from one zone keep friendly ties with households from another zone and mutually assist one another, really complement one another in that one of them provides the other with needed supplies, e.g. the household from the coastal area supplies its friend with wine, brandy, olive oil and Mediterranean fruits, and the friend from the interior in return provides the first with cheese, butter, meat (fresh and smoked), potatoes, hay etc. Mention should be made that some such friends mutually give or take quantities they simply are in need of; otherwise it is a common practice that the friends once a year make an account taking into consideration market prices of exchanged goods but without using money. The friends (and the members of their families) visit one another on various occasions — on holidays, on family feasts — give or send gifts one to another, assist one another in giving loans, taking sheep and cattle for pasturing and oxen for ploughing, giving refuge in case of emergency etc. Such relations between two households can last for decades, even for centuries. That is the reason that this institution is called *prijateljstvo* (friendship), somewhere *ortaci* (companions, partners), even *kumstvo* (godfatherhood), since it frequently occurs that two households being in such ties mutually get godfathers in order that their friendly ties should get more intimate. It is to be emphasized that the exchange described mostly takes place between households or families of distinct denomination and nationality, i.e. between Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats ¹.

Until most recent times the household and not the individual person was the basic social unity among the Serbs: an individual person was only a member and representative of his family or household. In former times the household usually was composed of several nuclear families. Individual households from one village or from two or more adjacent villages assist one another first of all in the sphere of economic activities and technology. This assistance always is practised on the principle of reciprocity and according to elaborated strict rules prescribing that the accepted assistance in man or animal power is to be returned in equal measure. Reciprocity in mutual assistance is mostly practised between neighbours, who very frequently are relatives, but it must be emphasized that common life and interest are a much stronger bond than kinship ties.

THE MAIN FORM OF MUTUAL ASSISTANCE in economic and technological activities is the *moba* (working bee), a very ancient institution known also to other peoples. In spite of all social and economic changes in modern times, *moba* is still in vigour and practised for achieving many tasks, particularly when a household is in need of man (and animal) power for performing some heavy or urgent task.

The same intention and the same principle are inherent in various forms of cooperation. It is very common that two or more households having only a small number

1. Milenko S. Filipović, *Prijateljstvo na osnovi razmene dobara i usluga* [Friendship based on exchange of economic goods and service]. *Geografski pregled* (Sarajevo), 5 (1961), pp. 83-93.

of sheep put their sheep together and jointly keep them on pasture or jointly milk them and make butter and cheese which at the end of the season they divide according to their shares in the number of sheep. As among many other peoples it is a common practice also among the Serbs that two households possessing each only one horse or ox assist one another in that they jointly use their horses or oxen for ploughing, transporting goods etc.

The principle of reciprocity explicitly or implicitly operates in innumerable social relations. It accompanies a person from birth to death; a dead person can not return any service, but his family can do it, and the family must care and keep in mind who and in what way has attended the funeral of one of its members in order to return in the same way when a death occurs in those families.

Gifts are mutually exchanged on many occasions: when a baby is born and baptized, when somebody marries, when some guest comes by chance or by invitation, when ritual kinship (blood or sworn brotherhood) is established, etc. There is a very similar custom: the invitees usually are obliged by unwritten rules to bring some contribution in food and drink to help performance of a family feast. There are precise rules prescribing what a person has to contribute and how this contribution is to be returned. Returned are not only received material goods but also services.

The following case will illustrate how the principle of reciprocity is deeply rooted in the social conscience of the Serbs. Almost all Serbs until recently belonged to the Serbian Orthodox church. According to the Orthodox Canon Law when a person, A, performs the duty of godfather to another person, B, they acquire ritual relatives: members of their families can not intermarry, even B and members of his family can not officiate as godfathers to A and his family. But godfatherhood among the Serbs is attached to the family or to the household, and not to an individual person, as it is prescribed by the Canon Law. A peculiar and widespread custom among the Serbs is that two families mutually officiate as godfathers one to another, which is quite contrary to the Canon Law. This reciprocity is due to the fact that the exercise of godfatherhood usually requires great expense and these expenses are compensated when two families mutually perform this service one to another.

A peculiar Serbian custom is the celebration of the family patron's feast: every Serbian family (or lineage) has a Christian saint as its patron and on this saint's day arranges a family feast, when some particular rites are performed too. Although it is a family feast, it can not be normally performed without the attendance of several guests from other families or houses. In order to secure the performance of the feast, it is a widespread practice that the housemaster in advance invites several friends or acquaintances to the feast and he will return them the same service. This is the way to establish links between households or families which can last for generations. This reciprocity in assisting the performance of the ritual is institutionalized, and the involved families mutually visit one another.

In that way, and on a quite voluntary basis, came into existence informal groups consisting of several families, whose members mutually exchange visits on the family patron's feasts in order to make possible the performance of the ritual. Each member of such a group is at the same time the centre of a group and member of several other groups.

This institution of mutual help in attending and performing the family patron's feast is usually called *zvanica* (a group or a circle of invitees). In a large part of Serbia proper the households forming such a group assist one another also on other occasions too. These occasions are: wedding parties, visits to women in childbed, funerals and memorial feasts for the dead. It also was customary that members of such a group or association had to dig the grave when a member of one of the associated families died. Households or families forming such a group assist one another in farming work too. The partnership in a *zvanica*-group is inherited from generation to generation within the same family and lineage ².

Finally one particular case of reciprocity in the sphere of religious life should be mentioned. The Serbs use early on Christmas morning to expect and ceremonially accept and entertain the first visitor. This visitor has to perform certain rites, and all that happens to the household in the course of the next year is attributed to that visitor. Due to the importance resulting from the ritual and magic functions of this visitor, in the region of Jadar (W. Serbia) it is customary that individual families mutually send the first visitor one to another ³.

2. Milenko S. Filipović, "Zvanica" ili uzov, ustanova uzajamnog gošćenja ["Zvanica", a Serbian institution of reciprocity in rural life]. *Naučno društvo Bosne i Hercegovine* (Sarajevo), 26 (1965), pp. 149-171.

3. P. Kostić, Novogodišnji običaji (Jadar-Vukov zavičaj) [Newyear's customs in the region of Jadar]. *Glasnik Etnografskog muzeja u Beogradu* (Beograd), 27 (1964), pp. 413-414.