

**Domestic moral economy: rethinking kinship and economy in contemporary Oceania:  
Report on Workshop held on 3-4 September 2012 at University House, Canberra**

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The pioneering ethnographical studies in the Asia and Pacific regions have had a profound effect on the history of European thinking about the relationship between kinship and the economy. Mauss's classic 1925 study of the gift, for example, was based for the most part on early ethnographic reports from Asia Pacific region. So too were subsequent theoretical developments by Lévi-Strauss on kinship in 1949 and Sahlins on reciprocity in 1972. The theory of reciprocity is, perhaps, one of anthropology's most important theoretical achievements and the idea is now much discussed in the disciplines of history, philosophy, sociology and law among others. Paradoxically, just as the theory of the gift is about to reach its full inter-disciplinary development, anthropologists are turning away from it as contemporary ethnographers in the Asia and Pacific regions question some of the fundamental assumptions upon which it is based. For example, ethnographers working independently on the domestic moral economies of India, Melanesia and Aboriginal Australia have shown that the moral values informing money transfers between kindred need to be rethought; the generality of the obligation to repay has been a particular focus of attention and the rising importance of familial requests for money highlighted. The reason for this is that the economic history of the region has been radically transformed in past decades and with it kinship relations. The emergence of the transnational family, for example, has seen remittances rise to become twice the size of foreign aid flows. Remittances are the macro-economic expression of micro-sociological inter-household transfers and it is these new transfers of wealth, and the moral values that inform them, that scholars from different

regions and academic specialties have struggled to grasp because they represent a new departure from the standard theory of reciprocity.

The pioneering theorists sought to grasp the big picture by using a comparative method that covered the entire Asia Pacific region. This approach is no longer possible or desirable today: not possible because regional specialists have produced vast quantities of data that are beyond the capacity of a single theorist to comprehend; not desirable because the comparative method of Mauss, Lévi-Strauss and Sahlins was ahistorical. The aim of this workshop was to bring together scholars in different disciplines and from different parts of Oceania who have been working independently on these questions. Regional and disciplinary specialization has hampered a general discussion of these questions and it was our hope that through the sharing of new data and ideas participants will be better able to appreciate the generality and specificity of their material. In this respect our workshop was a great success and ASSA's involvement was the key to its success. Not only did the ASSA provide the necessary infrastructure and support (along with the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at ANU, and the ESRC - UK) we were also fortunate to have the intellectual input of its Executive Director, Dr John Beaton who opened the proceedings with a stimulating welcome speech and stayed on to participate in the discussions.

Our workshop was held on 3-4 September 2012 at University House and was hosted by Professors Altman, Sykes and Gregory who, along with Professor Magowan, are collaborators in a transnational research project funded mainly by UK's ESRC. This was the first substantive workshop in a series of four annual workshops that will be held in different countries; we met in Australia on this occasion because a number of project participants were in the region and to maximise engagement with Australian social scientists working in Oceania. The discussions have given us many new ideas and questions to pursue over the next three years. Twenty one people were invited, fifteen of whom were paper givers and six

where discussants. Papers were pre-circulated which gave time for discussants to prepare insightful comments on the papers and to draw out the common themes. Papers givers ranged from PhD students just returned from the field to established senior academics and included overseas visitors from UK, NZ, Norway and PNG. The papers reported original data collected from fieldwork done in rural Aboriginal Australia, urban multicultural urban Australia, Fiji, NZ, and various parts of PNG.

Six sessions were held and designed in a way to bring together papers from different regions so that the discussants could draw out the comparative implications. The first session set the framework of the general debate by including papers from Peterson, Altman and Gregory. The former two are the authors of important papers of 'demand sharing' and the 'hybrid economy' These have their origin in work done in Aboriginal Australia and have set the terms of debate here; by including Gregory in the session, whose fieldwork has been carried out in India and Fiji, we sought to develop the general implications of these competing theories of household economy and kinship in Asia Pacific today.

The second session involved papers from PhD students (Smith, Buchanan and Maggio) who literally came straight from the field. This gave them the chance to try out some preliminary ideas and for the participants to have access to the survival strategies that slum dwellers in Honiara, returned migrant workers in Vanuatu and Aboriginal rangers in remote Australia are employing today. Session Three involved a rich mixture of papers that addressed the vexed issue of the relationship between commercial morality and kinship. Sykes, who also came straight from the field, gave a paper on the moral values PNGian betel nut sellers in Cairns; Jolly presented a review of recent literature on the domestic moral economy of Vanuatu that revealed that ni-Vanatuans, unlike academics who are keen to find reciprocity everywhere, have no problem with the notion of bride price. Muru-Lanning's paper dealt with the 'selling of Maori ancestors' on the Waikato River where electricity generating assets are being

privatized. Session Four focused on PNG, the classic home of the gift but the paper by Busse on the morality and immorality of urban market traders from his current research in the Eastern Highlands, and the paper by Rasmussen informed by new fieldwork on the culturally specific form that demand sharing takes in PNG left no doubt that the classic reciprocity paradigm needs revising. The fifth session, which involved papers by Moutu and Martin on PNG and Magowan, who also came straight from the field, on the intercultural dynamics of money, rights and emotions among Yolgnu, reported data that enabled us to develop these general themes.

The final session was devoted to 'wrapping up' and 'looking ahead'. The former discussion was led by Professors Hage and Rowse from Australia and Professor Phillips from the University of Sheffield. This discussion returned to the general theme of 'rethinking kinship and the economy' in the light of the ethnographic data presented. It became clear that the specific issues that Peterson and Altman discussed in their agenda-setting papers on 'demand sharing' and 'hybrid economy' have an applicability that extends beyond the Australian Aboriginal case for which it was developed. The ever-increasing monetization of Asia Pacific has obviously contributed to this but the equally important paradoxical movement of the growing importance of kinship in the form of transnational linkages creates specific variations that can only be understood with detailed ethnographic investigations. The policy implications of these findings were hotly debated as were the contradictions one finds in the views of policy makers. Every policy maker, it seems, is agreed that remittances are a 'good thing' but when it comes to demand sharing – its micro-sociological form – the same policy makers view this as a form of 'familial theft' and a 'bad thing'. It cannot be said that a general consensus emerged on the issues but that was not to be expected. Issues like this involve paradoxes and dilemmas that have no simple solution but debate is needed to comprehend the nature of these paradoxes and to think about strategies for coping with

dilemmas. In this respect the workshop was an outstanding success. The presentation of the fresh new data in the light of old and current theories gave us all much to think about. But, most importantly, it gave us questions to guide our research into the future.

Forthcoming workshops in the DME series, as Sykes and Magowan reported, will deal with the issue of the high and rising cost of life-cycles rituals and with another conference on the economy and kinship where attention is focused more on the latter. Some of the comparative questions to be addressed concern issues about contemporary life-cycle rituals and the new place that they hold in everyday life, such as the question of why 'sorry business' is so important in Aboriginal Australia, why exchanges at death are so important in the nations of Island Melanesia and why weddings mean so much to Indians. These questions need to be investigated not in isolation but in the historical context of an Asia Pacific region where intercultural relations and transnational migration have become the norm. Our workshop was the first step towards achieving this end. A working paper series is planned and we hope to produce an edited collection that brings together revised papers from the conference, which Routledge has invited for consideration for publication.