Gratitude as a Social Mode in South India

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Gratitude, like envy, appears to be a fundamentally social emotion, and finding its place in the emotional economy of another culture is a problem not simply of translation but of discovery and of interpretation. Gratitude is, further, an emotion with policy implications, especially for anthropologists who do fieldwork in strange societies. Cross-cultural traffic in gratitude is often frustrating. Expressing gratitude, we often find ourselves rebuffed; expecting gratitude, we often find ourselves disappointed. Yet, one of the frequent charges against anthropologists by those whom we study is that we proceed callously, returning home at our whim, forgetting old friends and favors rendered. With these practical dilemmas in mind I shall comment on the location of gratitude as a social mode in Tamil South India. I shall not be concerned here with formalized theologies or with explicit philosophical treatments or with historical aspects of the problem. I shall restrict myself to the place of certain attitudes that bear on the giving of thanks in the everyday life of Tamil South Indians. This essay is intended not as a fully documented ethnographic case study but as a schematic set of reflections intended to provoke discussion in a comparative vein.

Let me start with a puzzle. Although Tamil language and culture are rich in forms that express great delicacies of sentiment and complexities of etiquette, it is nevertheless difficult to say “thank you”
in a direct way in Tamil. This difficulty is not because there is no lexeme in modern Tamil for “thanks” (the word nanri is a fair modern Tamil equivalent for the English abstract noun), but there is no easy grammatical way to place this noun in a syntactic form of the sort “I thank you for such-and-such.” Doubtless some contorted, and grammatically acceptable, way could be found but it would reflect very little of the realities of ordinary speech. What does this linguistic fact tell us about the giving of thanks in Tamil society?

Let me say what it does not tell us. I am not making a crude Whorfian argument, whereby the lack of a natural syntactic form for giving thanks is seen as the symptom of a conceptual deficiency: Tamils are deeply concerned, both as givers and as receivers, about appropriate expressions of appreciation. If, however, it is difficult to say “thank you” in Tamil, it is certainly not difficult to show one’s appreciation of something one has received. Such demonstrations of appreciation are frequently nonverbal. In a highly hierarchical society, the nonverbal expression of gratitude is very closely tied with the nonverbal etiquette of rank in general. Thus the touching of the feet of the superior, the lowered or averted eyes, the use of honorific titles and respectful terms of address, the bodily postures of dependence, the tones of deference, these constitute the nonverbal forms that mark rank in general. But they also constitute the nonverbal pool that is drawn upon, in one or other way, to acknowledge the generosity of a human or nonhuman benefactor. If we bear in mind that in Indian society, giving is axiomatically (even if temporarily) the sign of superiority and receiving the sign of inferiority, then it is easy to see that the symbolism of gratitude and the language of hierarchy are closely connected in this situation.

My methodological stance is that, in some cases, the question of why some thought or attitude is not easily expressed in one mode or manner is not simply answered by pointing to the way in which the thought or attitude is expressed. Each side of the problem might repay a separate effort at interpretation, and thus why one cannot show gratitude in an abbreviated verbal way (as in English) illuminates one set of facts about Tamil culture and society. The analysis of how Tamils do, in fact, express gratitude leads to another set of significant observations.

Two questions arise immediately. One is whether gratitude is solely to be seen in these nonverbal forms or whether these nonver-
bal forms gloss and contextualize verbal forms appropriate to the expression of gratitude. The second question is whether there is no way to show gratitude in Tamil society without conceding permanent relations of superiority and subordination. The answers to these two questions are not unrelated. But before they can be directly answered we need a deeper understanding of why there is no simple verbal way to express thanks in Tamil society.

Our own conception of giving thanks implies that someone has been the beneficiary of some sort of generosity, and Tamil culture as much as any other, and more than some, places great emphasis on generosity. Indeed, gods and men, kings and subjects, husbands and wives, patrons and clients may be said to be defined by the obligation to give and receive in appropriate media and in appropriate contexts. Yet in the very conception of obligation I think we see the first clue as to why the direct expression of thanks seems somehow awkward (or in the sense of the English philosopher Austin, infelicitous). Much giving of gifts in Tamil society, as in Hindu India generally, is governed by the idea of the duty of various kinds of persons to give various kinds of things to various other kinds of persons. Thus gods and kings give protection, Brahmins give wisdom and ritual knowledge, wives give devotion and labor in the household, worshippers give jewels and service to deities, lower castes give various kinds of special services and goods to upper castes. The myriad rules of caste dharma are, from a certain point of view, part of an endless set of morally required givings.

But if every giver, whether he be god or untouchable, is only doing his duty (dharma), why should the receiver be grateful? Indeed, leaving aside the question of hierarchy for a moment, thanking someone who is simply doing his duty is not simply linguistically infelicitous but, if I am right, potentially morally inappropriate, for it implies a voluntaristic act of generosity rather than a morally prescribed gift. Yet the laws of dharma and the codes of generosity obviously leave a lot of room for volition and interpretation, and Tamils know very well that generosity lies not in giving but in the liberality with which the maxim to give, in any particular context, is construed. Thus, whether directed to god or man, thanks in Tamil India are directed not to simple generosity, but to a kind of second-order generosity, which transcends (either in quantity or in quality) the prescriptions
of particular roles and duties. It is, in part, this ambiguity that is reflected in the absence of a simple way to say “thank you” in Tamil.

But there is a second awkward implication in thanking a benefactor, as far as Tamil culture is concerned, and it raises another aspect of the problem involving duty, which I have just discussed. Thanking a benefactor for his generosity suggests that the benefactor is not only the transmitter of good things but is in some important sense their source. This is an uncomfortable idea for most Tamils, since it subverts the benefactor’s own notion of the source to which he owes his largess. I myself encountered this problem in the field in the following vivid form. When I was doing some research, a decade ago, on temple politics in South India, I was helped in a variety of ways by one of the major priests in the temple that I was studying. One day, standing outside the temple, I was struggling, unsuccessfully, to thank him for something he had just done for me. After observing my linguistic discomfort with amusement for a while, he let me off the hook by pointing at the sanctum and saying, in effect, “I did not do anything for you, he (the Lord Pārtaśarati) did it through me, so don’t try to thank me.” The tone of his response was instructive. On the one hand, the lesson was that I should not misplace my sense of gratitude, for he was only an instrument of the Lord’s generosity. Yet, in the larger context of my relationship with him, I know there was a covert message, consisting of a reminder to me of his direct and tangible link to the deity he served. In thus deflecting my gratitude, he succeeded simultaneously in appearing humble and in reminding me of his exalted connections. The reluctance of benefactors to be directly thanked for their generosity is, in part, rooted in the pervasive feeling that every act of generosity is built on some other one and that the direct expression of thanks, in suggesting a terminal source of generosity, is dangerously misleading and must therefore be carefully hedged.

I use the words “dangerously misleading” advisedly because I think one other source also accounts for the circumlocutory ways in which Tamils express their thanks and that is their local version of the idea of “the evil eye.” Although this is not the place for a discussion of this important idea, I think I can safely say that one of the reasons benefactors tend to deflect expressions of gratitude and beneficiaries tend to hedge them in a variety of ways is to avoid drawing excessive attention to the prosperity and munificence of the
giver, because it is felt that too much direct attention will invite the malevolent forces, the social and cosmic jealousies, and the free-floating ill will that are summarized in the idea of the evil eye. In a society that lays great store by the importance of giving and the acknowledgment of the gift in some way, this further explains the absence of direct ways to express gratitude.

But so much for explanations for the lack of ways to express gratitude directly in Tamil society. It is now time to return to the positive side of the question and ask how Tamils do expect gratitude to be expressed, in a world where givings and receivings are essential to the fabric of social life. I have already suggested that although it may be hard to say "thank you" in Tamil, it is certainly neither impossible nor inadvisable to show one's gratitude in Tamil society. I also suggested that one way of doing so was by the appropriate use of a variety of nonverbal codes, involving posture, tone, manner, and so forth. But this is only a part of the story.

The major form in which Tamils show their gratitude for something given them is by making the appropriate return gift, at the appropriate time and in the appropriate form. Indeed, the moral machinery of Tamil society, as I have already suggested, turns critically on the proper maintenance of relations of reciprocity between men and gods, lower and upper castes, servants and masters, bridegivers and bride-receivers, husbands and wives, kings and subjects, children and parents. In this regard, Tamil society is strictly comparable to many societies that define key social relationships through highly codified notions of reciprocity. To say this, of course, does not imply that reciprocity is simply a matter of following well-established rules and recipes and is devoid of a sense of uncertainty, of strategy, and of risk (Appadurai 1981; Bourdieu 1977; Schieffelin 1976). But this statement does suggest that the logic of gratitude in such societies goes as follows: gratitude implies appreciation, appreciation involves acknowledgment, and the only significant form of acknowledgment is return.

Thus in all societies where nonmarket reciprocities are critical to the construction and maintenance of social relations, it may be that direct, immediate, and verbal expressions of gratitude are regarded either as inappropriate or simply as modest promissory notes for the substantial thanks that must take the form of the eventual return gift. This logic underlies the contractual nature of vows to specific
deities, loans from superiors to inferiors, gifts at the time of marriage between the two parties, and so forth. The notion that there is no sharp semantic boundary between the expression of appreciation to a benefactor, the acknowledgment of a debt, and the receipt of a loan, is vividly demonstrated in an episode of the Kambaramayanam, brought to my attention by my colleague Dr. Rajam Ramamurti. In this episode, caught in a conflict of duty involving his debt to his benefactor, the evil Ravana, and his duty to his brother, the hero Rama, Kumbakarna speaks of his debt to Ravana with the phrase “chen chōrru kaṭan kazhiṭṭhal,” which can be glossed as the “repayment of the loan of perfect food.” This graphically unites the language of gratitude, debt, and unpaid loans.

In such cases, the critical token of gratitude is the return gift. What is verbally and nonverbally expressed at the time of the initial act of generosity is not what we call a statement of thanks, but an acknowledgment of the social relations of giver and receiver, and a tacit promise of future return. Thus one common way of expressing appreciation for an act of generosity is to say that one will never forget this act (nāṉ ithai marakkavē māṭṭēn). Although this phrase, at first glance, looks like a simple token of appreciation, its semantics can also be construed as a statement that the receiver will not forget, at the appropriate time, to make the appropriate return. The act of generosity is thus acknowledged to be “unforgettable” in two important senses. This latter point leads me to identify two different forms for the immediate expression of gratitude (apart from the eventual return gift) that characterize two different types of social relationships.

Early in this discussion I raised two questions. The first was whether there were verbal ways to express gratitude, notwithstanding the many hedges I have discussed. The second was whether the expression of gratitude was always an expression of inequality. I would like to suggest now that, although the most substantial expression of gratitude is the return gift and although the direct expression of thanks is regarded as inappropriate, there are two major, though circumlocutory, ways in which thanks can, and indeed must, be expressed in the immediate context of the act of generosity or as close to it as practically possible.

The first major, though indirect, form in which thanks are verbally expressed is through the praise of the benefactor by those who
are the beneficiaries of the gift, whatever its nature. The most public and culturally standardized form of praise as a form of gratitude is in the form of the ritual chanting of the names of various divinities in South Indian temples. But it can also be seen in the praise of kings in inscriptions and, in general, the praise of superiors by inferiors in a variety of formal and informal ways. Such praise is the sign of permanent, rather than temporary, relations of superiority and subordination between giver and receiver and is thus especially to be seen between gods and worshippers, kings and subjects, husbands and wives, and castes that have a sizeable rank gulf between them.

Praise can take either the highly formalized and standardized forms of eulogy and panegyric, as it does in poetry or inscriptions, or it can appear in the ordinary (and nonhyperbolic) forms of ordinary speech where debt to a benefactor is usually acknowledged. Although such praise seems at first sight to contradict the concern I have described about the evil eye, it seems to be insulated from such dangers partly by the fixity and distance in the relationship between praiser and praised and by the attention to standardized and formulaic good qualities in the benefactor rather than to his possessions or to the act of generosity at hand. Such acts of praise constitute the main verbal form for the expression of gratitude between parties or individuals in a permanent relationship of inequality.

But there are other contexts in which gifts flow between more structurally equal persons, or at any rate, between persons or groups whose inequality is either temporary or is contested. The best example is the gifts that flow between bride-givers and bride-receivers at the time of marriage in Tamil India. In such contexts, not only is the direct expression of gratitude inappropriate for all the reasons I have suggested, but praise as a verbal mode for the expression of gratitude is also seen as inappropriate, since the parties are, whatever the subtleties of status, not in a permanent or structural relationship of inequality. Here, since the giver cannot realistically be praised, how can gratitude be expressed?

I suggest that in these situations what is praised is the gift, and great care is taken to separate the gift from the giver in the construction of praise. Anyone who has witnessed the appraisal and display of, and sensual interaction with, the clothes, jewelry, utensils, and so forth that make up the required gifts at a wedding will have no difficulty in seeing that in these contexts it is the gifts, not the givers,
who are the public objects of praise. Now it must be pointed out that such praise is not always enthusiastic, and a very delicate series of tonal, lexical, and nonverbal cues have to be analyzed and interpreted in order to determine whether a particular verbal assessment of an object constitutes authentic praise, mere formulaic praise, or an actual negative assessment, the inverse of gratitude. Further, a good deal of the politics of generosity in a Tamil wedding turns on the encoding and decoding by both parties (assisted by volunteers from the public) of these verbal acts of praise directed at the goods that flow through a wedding.

But, for our purposes, the praise of the gift, rather than of the giver, is a way to express gratitude without conceding permanent subordination, on the part of the receiver, to the giver. As a corollary, it might be pointed out that it would be extremely presumptuous of a person in a permanent relationship of inferiority to another person to praise (or assess in any way) the gift rather than the giver. Thus if a farm laborer presumed to praise the thickness of the cloth given to him at the time of harvest, or the sweetness of the rice given to him at a ceremony by his patron, he would be seen as acting insubordinately. On the other hand, such weighings and measurements and judgments are seen as the appropriate prerogatives of affines in a wedding.

I hope I have shown, in the course of this discussion, that there are interesting cultural reasons for the fact that it is not easy to say “thank you” to a benefactor in the Tamil context, and that there are equally significant, though more complex, ways of showing one’s gratitude. Lest there be any doubt that gratitude is an important part of the moral lives of Tamils, in spite of its slippery linguistic qualities, I should end by pointing out that, at least among Tamil Brahmins, one of the strongest forms of verbal abuse is to call someone a nanrikketṭa nāāye, a gratitude-lacking (or ungrateful) dog.

I should like to conclude my comments with two rather more general, and difficult, comparative points. The first concerns the problem of the authenticity of gratitude. As Rodney Needham has shown for the Western conception of “belief,” it may also be that our Western (and probably Christian) conception of “gratitude” refers ultimately to some inner disposition of the actor, and thus when gratitude is at issue, we always have at hand some technique for assessing whether a beneficiary is really grateful or is simply going through
the motions (Needham 1972). In Tamil society, as in most societies built around the morals of reciprocity, since it is the return gift that is the ultimate sign of gratitude, the question of authenticity or sincerity is not strictly relevant. Yet, in the contexts of praise (of giver or of gift) Tamils are perfectly capable of detecting and condemning hypocrisy. How can this be if they have no concern with the authenticity of gratitude?

I think the answer to this paradox is that Tamils tread very difficult ground in regard to gratitude. Since gratitude is culturally constructed not as a matter of inner states but of various kinds of return, they are obliged to take the forms of return (both verbal and nonverbal) seriously. If they suspect inauthenticity, they have no direct recourse except to withdraw their generosity in the future. This is not to imply that contemporary Western society has no relationships built on moral reciprocity, or that gratitude in the West has no implications for return. But it is to suggest that this idea of reciprocity in the West has gradually become restricted to the domain of kinship and friendship, domains that are no longer the basis of large areas of public life, which are governed by other principles.

This leads me to my final, and explicitly comparative, point. The Tamil discomfort with gratitude appears to be reflected in the ordinary language of the West, when we shy away from a profusion of thanks, ask the beneficiary “not to mention it,” tell the person thanking us that “it was nothing” or to “forget it,” and so forth. It may be that there is a level at which it is somehow uncomfortable to be the recipient of thanks, in many different kinds of societies, perhaps for a rather narrow range of reasons. But in societies, like the Tamil one, that are based on reciprocity as a fundamental social principle, morality and etiquette are inextricably linked. In the modern West, by contrast, etiquette and morality are distinct domains, and although gratitude might be a moral question, thanking someone is frequently just a matter of good manners. Apparently similar kinds of awkwardness might therefore conceal dramatically different moral assumptions about the appropriate currency for the giving of thanks. What we need are more case studies of the language and psychology of gratitude, to test my own suggestions about reciprocity, thanksgiving, and good manners.
NOTES

Acknowledgments. For their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft I am grateful to Sandra Barnes, Carol Breckenridge, Shelly Errington, Dilip Gaonkar, Peter Just, Igor Kopytoff, Renato Rosaldo, and Edward Schieffelin. This paper was originally presented at a seminar on “Acts of Thanksgiving” in Dallas, Texas on December 17–19, 1983, and I am grateful to all the participants in that conference for their comments. Finally, an anonymous reader for Ethos made several helpful suggestions. The final version of this paper was completed while I was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and I acknowledge the financial support of NSF Grant BNS-8011494.

1 In writing this paper, I have been inspired by Apte (1974), which is the only treatment of this topic of which I am aware, and by Jain (1969) and Singh (1984) which deal with similar sociolinguistic problems in India. My own analysis is intended to complement these arguments and to elaborate the sociocultural, rather than the linguistic, side of these phenomena.

2 Dr. Rajam Ramamurti of the University of Pennsylvania has pointed out to me that the pre-modern meaning of the word namri is simply “good thing” and that its use in the sense of “thanks” or “gratitude” is probably very modern. Dr. Carol Breckenridge, ISHI, Philadelphia, suggests that this modern meaning might well be a product of early missionary efforts to find a reasonable Tamil lexeme for the relevant Christian conception. Clearly, this is a matter for further research.

3 Dr. Breckenridge has also suggested that the problem of praise in inscriptions is very complex and would require separate treatment, because in some cases, kings praise themselves in the context of their own gifts; at other times, other donors praise their sovereigns; finally, very often, the deity or place that is being endowed is also praised. Thus the relationship between gifts, praise, donor, and donee in Tamil inscriptions is a complicated matter indeed. The problem of praise is dealt with in a more extended manner in a forthcoming paper by the author called “The Pragmatics of Praise in Hindu India.”

REFERENCES


