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Short Thought Report

Nigerian Traditional Economy in the Ethnography of Paul Bohannan

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Abstract - African traditional economics has attracted the interest of colonial hegemonic scholars who wanted to fathom the rationale behind the peasant socioeconomic structure. In Nigeria, there is a corpus of ethnographers who have studied some of the societies that make up Nigeria. In this article, my deliberately restricted aim is to reassess Bohannan's studies on Nigerian peasant economies as a contribution to anthropological knowledge. Paul Bohannan studied the Tiv economy. In the literature on colonial knowledge and traditional economics in British Nigeria, Paul Bohanna's Tiv economy has generated a whole lot of theoretical mainstreaming in economic anthropology.

Key words: African traditional economies, Ethnography of Nigeria, Peasant economies, Paul Bohannan, Tiv economy

Introduction

Economic anthropology has attracted considerable interest since the 1950's (Dalton 1970). It studies the structure and performance of village-level economies under traditional and modernizing conditions. To the older literature of ethnographic description are added analytical writings which delineate principles of socioeconomic organization, measure levels of performance, and make systematic comparisons between primitive and peasant economies, as well as between these economies and their modern and developed counterparts.

Economic anthropologists, however, have been confronted with problems in the creation of a theoretical framework. Among the most acute of these problems, although not the subject matter of the present, is that of the unavailability of sufficient quantitative data to measure economic performance effectively (Dalton 1970). He states that there is a base of factual knowledge of industrialized capitalist and communist countries stated in quantitative terms that has no counterpart in traditional African economies.

African traditional economics has attracted the interest of colonial hegemonic scholars who wanted to fathom the rationale behind the peasant socioeconomic structure. In Nigerian, there are corpus of ethnographers who have studied some of the societies that make up Nigeria. Among these is Paul Bohannan, who theoretically, and drawing from debates on classical economics, set out to understand the Tiv economy.

In the literature on colonial knowledge and traditional economics in British Nigeria, Paul Bohanna's Tiv economy may have generated a whole lot of theoretical mainstreaming in economic anthropology. In this article, my deliberately restricted aim is to reassess Bohannan's studies on a Nigerian peasant economy as a contribution to anthropological knowledge. I examine the ethnographic information, especially traditional economics. I pay particular attention to the distribution of goods and services. Finally, I route for the theoretical strength as regards to general debate in economic anthropology.

Economic anthropology

Economic anthropology studies how human societies provide the material goods and services that make life possible. In the course of material provisioning and during the realization of final consumption, people relate to each other in ways that convey power and meaning (Kottak 2008; Park 2000; Hann & Hart 2011).

In their own view Haviland *et al.* (2008), defined economic anthropology as the systematic study of the economies of traditional small-scale societies. They believed that the degree to which something is necessary for life has long been debated and differences between one society and another have environmental, historical, and cultural reasons; but some wants must be inescapably satisfied, otherwise death ensues. Therefore, there is a physical limit to relativism regarding material means of livelihood. On the other hand, nonmaterial goods such as the goodwill of deceased ancestors might be conceived as essential for the reproduction of a society. Most non-material needs, however, have some material expression, such as food sacrifices during ancestor worship or wealth exchange during mortuary ceremonies. The domain of economic anthropology covers the recurring interaction of individuals, within and between social groups and with the wider environment, to provide material goods and services necessary for social reproduction.

According to Gudeman (2001) economic anthropology studies industrial life as well as ethnographic situations, because comparable processes in securing and managing valued things are found everywhere. But the economy, which revolves about making, holding, using, sharing, exchanging, and accumulating valued objects and services, includes more than standard market theory suggests. Anthropology plays a special role in broadening our understanding of material life, for the less-recognized processes are displayed with special clarity in the situations that ethnographers study.

Traditionally, economic processes have been divided into production, distribution and circulation, and consumption (Hann & Hart 2011). These analytical categories respond to observable social interaction in all societies, although the categories themselves are product scholarly western tradition. People, however, engage in social relations that can be described as economic and which can be analyzed as participating simultaneously in the production, distribution, and consumption categories (Kottak 2008; Park 2000).

Economic anthropology originally focused on the economic life of primitive peoples (Herskovits 1965) where many of the elements present in the Western economy (such as money, a market system) were absent. Direct observation of non-capitalist societies through ethnographic fieldwork produced impressive and contextually rich information on economic activities worldwide. The way in which anthropologists reacted to the confrontation of this diversity, and how they coped with it in theoretical terms, generated most debates within economic anthropology.

Paul Bohannan

Bohannan did a study on the economy of the Tiv. He developed a model for understanding the Tiv economy. Spheres of exchange, as is called, is a heuristic tool for analyzing trading restrictions within societies that are communally governed and where resources are communally available. Goods and services of a specified type are relegated to distinct value categories, and moral sanctions are invoked to prevent exchange between spheres. It is a classic topic in economic anthropology.

Bohannan (1959) used this concept in relation to the Tiv of Nigeria, who he argued had three spheres of exchange. He argued that only certain kinds of goods could be exchanged in each sphere: each sphere had its own different form of money. The term is also used in reference to gift economies.

He argued that the introduction of money into communal societies where these spheres of exchange/restriction exist can disrupt resource allocation, by creating a pathway for exchange that is not accounted for in the existing restrictions. However, in some societies, money has been more or less successfully integrated into spheres of exchange.

Bohannan (1959) states that the most distinctive features about the Tiv economy is what can be called a multi-centric economy. A multi-centric economy is an economy in which a society's exchangeable goods fall into two or more mutually exclusive spheres, each marked by different moral values.

Bohannan states that traditionally, there were three spheres of exchange in the Tiv economy. First is the sphere that is associated with subsistence, which the Tiv call *yiagh*. The commodities in this sphere include all locally produced foodstuffs: the staple yams, and cereals, plus all the condiments, vegetables, side-dishes and seasonings, as well as small livestock – chickens, goats, and sheep. It also includes household utensils (mortars, grindstones, calabashes, baskets, and pots), some tools (particularly those used in agriculture), and raw materials for producing any items in the category (1967).

He observes that within this sphere, goods are distributed either by gift giving or through marketing. Although there was a highly developed market at which people exchanged their produce for their requirements, all goods changed hands by barter as there was no money of any kind in this sphere.

The second sphere of the Tiv economy is one which is in no way associated with markets. The categories of goods within this sphere are slaves, cattle, ritual offices purchased from the Jukun, a type of large white cloth known as *tugudu*, medicines and magic, and brass rods. Akiga observes that the Tiv still quote prices of slaves in cows and brass rods, and of cattle in brass rods and *tugudu* cloth. The price of magical rites, as it is described, was in terms of *tugudu* cloth or brass rods (though payment might be made in other items); payment for Jukun titles was in cows and slaves, *tugudu* cloth and metal rods. Tiv refers to the items and the activities within this sphere by the word *shagba*, which roughly translates as prestige (Bohannan 1959).

The third and the supreme sphere of exchange of values for the Tiv contain a single item: rights in human beings other than slaves, particularly rights in women. All exchanges within this category are exchanges of rights in human beings, usually dependent women and children. Its values are expressed in terms of kinship and marriage.

In calling these different areas of exchange as spheres, it implies that each includes commodities that are not regarded as equivalent to those commodities in other spheres and in ordinary situations are not exchangeable. Each sphere is a different universe of objects, marked by different sets of moral values and different behavior. Consequently, it is considered immoral to use prestige objects to purchase goods from the lower sphere. Although, any man who successfully converts his wealth into higher categories is termed successful, he has a strong heart. He is both feared and respected.

Modes of Economic Exchange

The concept of economic exchange refers to the allocation of goods between different individuals or groups, while the concept of circulation refers to the movement of goods.

These processes mediate between the 'production' and 'consumption' moments of an economy. They also reproduce differentiated categories of people concerning the access of resources in general which makes them central aspects of social reproduction.

Economic anthropology has developed a typology of forms of distribution that was proposed originally by Polanyi (1957). Distribution was for Polanyi the element that provided continuity and structure to economic processes. Through a comparative method, he concluded that three main forms of distribution were used to integrate the economy: reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange. This typology expresses institutional arrangements not so much the form of particular transactions.

The concept of reciprocity had an early start in Mauss' (1923/2002) essay on the 'Gift.' The essay was based mainly on available ethnographic descriptions of the Potlatch and in Malinowski's (1922) description of the Kula ceremonial exchange. For Mauss, the 'gift' was an entirely different form of transaction from market exchange. The sustained relationship between persons and things was essential to the 'gift' value. Conversely, market exchange was based on the total disjunction between autonomous objects and individual agents. Mauss (1923/2002) describes the 'gift' as a movement related to three obligations of a social and moral character: to give, to receive, and to return. Further developed by Sahlins (1972) who related reciprocal transactions to the social distance between the persons involved, reciprocity has become a useful concept in economic anthropology. Weiner (1992) has described how, by entering or remaining out of circulation, objects could create and regenerate social relations. Her work opens the concept beyond the give-return movement originally associated with reciprocity.

There are three degrees of reciprocity: *generalized*, *balanced*, and *negative* (Sahlins, as cited in Kottak 2010). Generalized reciprocity, the purest form of reciprocity, is characteristic of exchanges between closely related people. In balanced reciprocity, social distance increases, as does the need to reciprocate. In negative reciprocity, social distance is greatest and reciprocation is most calculated. This range, from generalized to negative, is called the reciprocity continuum.

With generalized reciprocity, someone gives to another person and expects nothing immediate in return. Such exchanges are not primarily economic transactions but expressions of personal relationships. Most parents don't keep accounts of every penny they spend on their children. They merely hope their children will respect their culture's customs involving obligations to parents.

Balanced reciprocity applies to exchanges between people who are more distantly related than are members of the same band or household. In a horticultural society, for example, a man presents a gift to someone in another village. The recipient may be a cousin, a trading partner, or a brother's fictive kinsman. The giver expects something in return. This may not come immediately, but the social relationship will be strained if there is no reciprocation.

Exchanges in nonindustrial societies also may illustrate negative reciprocity, mainly in dealing with people on the fringes of or outside their social systems. To people who live in a world of close personal relations, exchanges with outsiders are full of ambiguity and distrust. Exchange is one way of establishing friendly relations, but when trade begins, the relationship is still tentative. Often the initial exchange is close to being purely economic; people want to get something back immediately. Just as in market economies, but without using money, they try to get the best possible immediate return for their investment.

Generalized reciprocity and balanced reciprocity are based on trust and a social tie. Negative reciprocity involves the attempt to get something for as little as possible, even if it means being cagey or deceitful or cheating.

The concept of redistribution as an institutionalized process refers to centralized polities that concentrate goods through tribute or taxation systems and reassign them later between groups, individuals, and specific domains. Ethnographic examples range from 'Bigman' systems to strongly centralized state polities (Weiner 1992).

In Polanyi's typology described above, exchange, as an institutionalized process, relates to societies that integrate the economy through the market system. However, multiple forms of transaction can be called 'exchange,' be it the routes of trade partners crossing Asian, African market places, or the elaborate systems of ceremonial exchange. Exchange raises two fundamental problems of transactions: first, comparison between the items exchanged and, second, non-simultaneity of the agents' needs. Comparison is the central question of value. Things exchanged always are valued, but how this valuation proceeds is very different from one society to the next. Generally, for a transaction to take place there must be some measure of value that enables the agents to reach equivalence acceptable to all. When some sort of standard item is used as a measure of value, we may speak of money, although some other functions that generally are associated with money, such as serving as a medium of exchange, may be lacking. Often, the process of reaching equivalences of value takes place during exchange such as in bargaining practices; while in other cases, a central authority sets up a fixed rate of exchange. Yet in other cases, as the model of the market system pretends, value is reached automatically through the free circulation of all commodities subject to the constraints of supply and demand. Classical economists tried to find a universal measure of value in work: the energy spent in producing the commodities exchanged was seen as their only common element.

Most societies have various spheres of circulation where different measures of value apply. In Bohannan's (1959) example of the Tiv's (Nigeria) multi-centered economy, he describes how different goods circulate in distinct spheres, each of which is marked with different moral values relating to subsistence, prestige, and alliances, and conversion from one sphere to another, while possible, always is sanctioned morally. The idea that various measures of value might simultaneously be at work in a society has proved very fruitful. Increasingly, anthropologists are paying attention to the circulation of goods among different individuals, social groups, or polities along chains of transactions. This perspective integrates the variation of meaning attached to goods or processes together with its material causes and consequences (Appadurai 1986).

Conclusion

The importance of the contributions of Bohannan, to economic anthropology cannot be overemphasized. Bohannan was able to describe the activities of the Tiv speaking people of Nigeria. Theoretically, Bohannan study established that something in the nature of money existed in the traditional Tiv society. The rationality of division of labour which facilitated specialization marks what could be understood in modern economics as comparative cost advantage where one gets what one wants in exchange for what one has.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

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