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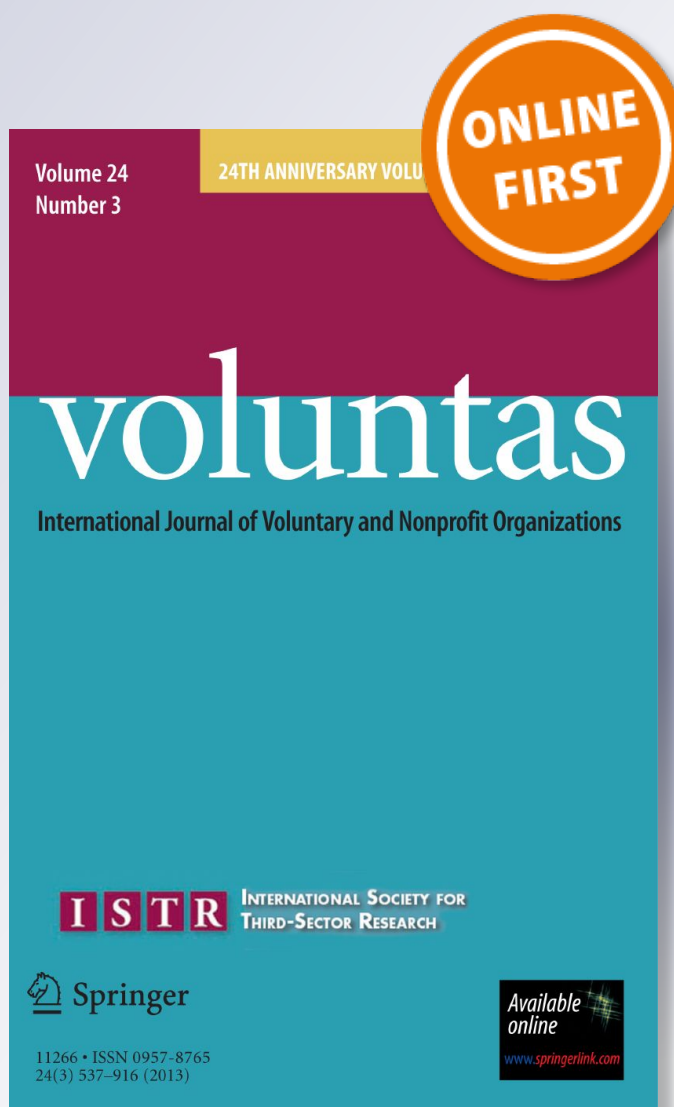
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# African Gifting: Pluralising the Concept of Philanthropy

Alan Fowler<sup>1</sup> · Jacob Mwathi Mati<sup>2,3</sup>

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**Abstract** This article adds to conceptualisations of philanthropy. Applying an ontological approach within an evolutionary perspective, it advances an analogous African narrative of pro-social transactions of gift-giving, or gifting, associated with Marcel Mauss. Originating on the continent, this relational behaviour is subject to indeterminate complex processes which co-determine any society's institutional design. Analysing gifting's sociopolitical influence on the continent pays attention to the (non-)agonistic as well as the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' features of gifting across pre- to post-colonial eras, examining their role in establishing patrimonial systems of governance. When gifting is set against (institutionalised) philanthropy's dominant discourse, issues for its critique are identified. Suggestions for further inquiry and implications for improving development on the continent are provided.

**Keywords** Gifting · Philanthropy · (Non-)agnostic transactions · Ontological analysis

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The field of philanthropy, variously understood, is gaining momentum in scale and diversity the world over. New academic centres and teaching programmes in multiple countries testify to the growing international interest in this area of study. However, 'African philanthropy' as opposed to 'philanthropy in Africa' remains seriously under-researched and often prejudicially understood as 'traditional', anti-modern and under-appreciated as an agent for the continent's development (Mahomed 2012; Moyo and Ramsamy 2014). This situation is reinforced by subordination of Africans' philanthropy to external vocabularies and meanings. In addition to not taking sufficient account of the continent's history, this conditioning overshadows a full appreciation of how philanthropy operates beyond the elevation of individual giving back by 'elites' (Trust Africa 2014). One consequence is that the continent's experience is under-represented in existing theorisation and interpretation. In this sense, from a global perspective, comprehension of philanthropy is biased and incomplete, calling for a more open understanding of the phenomena. Missing in today's conceptualisation of philanthropy is a deep understanding of African behaviours that are dedicated to the well-being of others in their own right and, hence, what it can tell us about better ways to tackle the continent's many problems by building on its inherent potentials.

This article is located within two discourses. One—pluralisation of the concept—is exemplified in initiatives to describe, understand and interpret this type of pro-social behaviour across the world.<sup>2</sup> A recent study (WINGS 2018) is a step forward in systematically describing multiple

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on a monograph (Fowler: 2017).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.psjp.org/the-role-of-philanthropy-in-society-2/>.

expressions of behaviour interpreted as philanthropy across the globe, yet it does not seek to explain why such a diversity has arisen. In addition, there are an increasing number of geographic examples including for the Arab Region (Hartnell 2018), for China (Lai et al. 2015), Egypt, Tunisia and Libya (Eldin et al. 2014), India, (Hartnell 2017a, b), Russia (Hartnell 2018) and Brazil (Hartnell and Milner 2018). In this sense, as a terminology, African Philanthropy reflects and can best be understood in terms of similar usage in other knowledge fields: African politics, African philosophy, African literature, etc.

With a continent of more than fifty countries, examining behaviours analogous to philanthropy as portrayed by African societies requires a thematic approach. It also calls for a critical view of mainstream vocabularies, which confine communication about sociocultural interpretations of the phenomenon. The other critical discourse is found in debates relating to the re-inscription of indigenous epistemologies (Bhargava 2013) requiring a long historical view. These perspectives are informed by Africa as the origin of humanity and the evolution of a human behavioural repertoire, inviting an ontological, rather than a comparative, analysis.<sup>3</sup>

One function of this article is therefore to bring from the shadows the embedded practices of Africa's gift-giving obscured by the academy's concentration on overly narrow western conceptions and normative interpretations. It provides an 'operational' action narrative serving two purposes for different audiences. One is to add to the epistemological and interpretative grounding for pro-social behaviours, that is, human agency dedicated to the well-being of others found in every society, implying an indispensable functionality. Another is to assist those interested in furthering philanthropy on the continent to appreciate how their thinking and practices can better align with what is systemically rooted in existing indigenous systems.

A word of caution is that the multiple legal-cultural jurisdictions comprising the continent make any conclusions at best only indicative of shared moral-cultural values and practices. Nevertheless, exploring ontological parameters is in and of itself a contribution to the field's development. We do so using historical analysis covering a period from 'prehistory' up to the end of the previous Millennium. Africa's New Age of philanthropy starting in this Millennium is the subject of a separate writing.

The article begins by laying out a theoretical framework of society as complex adaptive system. This multidisciplinary conceptualisation is necessary to provide coherence in an ontological enquiry spanning some two hundred and

fifty thousand years of *Homo sapien* evolution. It provides a non-deterministic framing to explain evolutionary processes selecting the traits, patterns, predispositions and geo-historical variations seen in the behaviour of humans as transacting agents. Over multiple generations, unplanned patterns of relational rules and norms appear that are generated from and, in return, influence the behaviours from which they emerge as a never ending process of societal unfolding (Byrne 1998). Contingent conditions and long time frames militate against assured, predictable outcomes from human complex adaptive learning capabilities and processes. Paradoxical as it may appear, the permanent presence of complexity in society cannot be 'generalised' in a reductionist fashion as a linear causation (Moore 2012).

Next, the reader's attention is drawn to the power of words by critically appraising the notion of philanthropy, a foreign concept and vocabulary difficult to marry with the continent's endogenous moral philosophies, worldviews and languages. From this observation, we propose 'gifting' rather than 'giving' or 'philanthropy' as the suitable nomenclature that is ontologically coherent with the behavioural practices studied. Thereafter, a geo-historical analysis illustrates the adaptability of Africa's 'gifting' predispositions and practices over a long historical time as outcomes of complex changes in social structures, rules and norms. Specifically, with a view to providing both an empirical grounding and detailed explanation of where African gifting comes from and why it looks as it does today, this section goes through a step-by-step analysis of the evolution of gifting practices and institutions from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras ending at the last Millennium. We conclude by first summarising what appear to be substantive elements and characteristic institutional outcomes of African gifting from which the contemporary pluralism of the field can be understood and analysed from a geo-historical grounding. This is followed by a reflection on what this deepening could mean for those interested in advancing gifting by and for the continent.

### Society and Institutions: A Complex Adaptive Systems Perspective

Social and behavioural scientists are preoccupied with among others, understanding how societies evolve, forming institutions that guide social transactions and deal with the uncertainties that arise as people interact with each other. One useful approach for studying the dynamics involved in societies' evolution and functioning is 'society as a complex adaptive system' model developed by American sociologist Walter Buckley in 1968 (Dodder and Dare 2000). The complex adaptive system (CAS) framework is

<sup>3</sup> An ontological approach tries to understand the essence of a phenomenon, explain how it has arisen and provide a rationale for any categories to be applied.

useful for comprehending how social institutions, such as markets, marriage, philanthropy or banking or gender differences, are over time, formed and reformed by interacting human agents.

In complex adaptive systems, people are transacting agents, influenced by the agency of many other individuals in their immediate environment as well as at a distance. Multiple, microinteractions operating with simple rules give rise to macroemergent outcomes—such as social structures and institutions, as well as a system of laws—that are not reducible to the aggregate of individual behaviours (Johnson 2002). The cumulative effects of interactions between human agents are not linear. Small changes in contingent conditions can have disproportionately large effects (Gladwell 2000).

Human interactions involve a recurrence of positive or negative interactions. Individuals learn from context-sensitive experiences which over time feedback on their subsequent behaviour. There is a CAS selective attraction towards patterns of relations that work better, in part because they reflect human predispositions leading to behavioural regularities, while minimising experiences that people prefer to avoid. For example,

People value an object more when they are giving it up than they do when acquiring it (loss aversion) and over-generalize from small amounts of data (over-confidence). They discount evidence that contradicts their beliefs (confirmation bias); yield to short term temptations that they realize are bad for them (weak self-control); value fairness and reciprocity (bounded selfishness); and so on (Rodrik 2015: 203).

In complexity terms, these predispositions act as ‘attractors’ which underlie patterns of social behaviour, such as people’s selection of preferred sources of information creating ‘bubbles’ in the use of social media.<sup>4</sup> Positive feedback arises if interactions from efforts are rewarded, be it material or otherwise. These patterns interplay with others over generations to form institutions, emerging as ‘rules of the game’ that create ‘incentives and disincentives’ to particular courses of people’s behaviour (North 1990: 4 in Gomez and Richie 2016: 22). Rules are often codified as respected traditions and laws which provide ‘... prescriptions that are used to organise all forms of repetitive and structured interactions within families, communities, organisations and markets, across social, cultural, political and economic realms’ (Ostrom 2005: 3 in Gomez and Richie 2016: 22). Rules therefore shape repetition and habit, reinforcing patterns into social structures which, while not set in concrete, are enduring enough to be valued for the relative (short term) predictability they

bring to daily life by becoming socialised into meaning, language, ways of upbringing and/or socialisation.

Institutionalised rules are sustained by the extent to which, in any situation, they allow a reliable enough expectation of the likely behaviour of others. When this fails for enough people in enough instances, innovations to institutions can be energised and reacted against with outcomes determined by relative access to resources and the distribution of power. In this regard, changes in contemporary social policies can be seen as CAS-related adaptations. In such a process, the past is co-responsible for present and future behaviour of individuals and institutions. To some degree, historical latencies, such as major conflicts or colonial rule, are always in play.

Institutions exhibit a variety of ‘presence’ in society. Often inspired by faiths and beliefs, or secular reactions to them, some institutions become deeply embedded as values allied to habituated, rules and normative expectations lived as a second nature, not requiring conscious thinking (Kahneman 2011). Institutions also function in the form of networks and sites of social heritage whose rules and sanctions are ‘formal’ for those belonging to them, while remaining ‘informal’ in the sense of not seeking public recognition or registration and functioning according to their own rules. Formal institutions are typically registered entities accorded an administrative or legal status within a jurisdiction. Another feature of institutions are their rules ‘nesting’ within others as social complexity gains in scale requiring hierarchy to maintain order and coherence (Ostrom 2005: 38). For example, constitutions overlay laws, which overlay regulations, which can overlay social conventions, etc. These layers are not separate silos, but co-function in shaping people and their institutions in any given society. As a self-organised, self-sustaining behaviour, the institutional expressions of gifting can be understood in this way.

### Philanthropy as a Modern Institution

Behavioural theories of the evolution of societal conditions and institutions typically accord contextualised and acculturated moral meaning to observable social phenomenon, including philanthropy. With a spelling adopted in English in the sixteen hundreds, the Latin etymology of philanthropy is ‘a love of humanity’.<sup>5</sup> Understanding why this type of behaviour exists and became ‘modernised’ as part and parcel of human relational patterns is much researched. With economics emerging as a dominant discipline in the West, human relational behaviour was assumed to be driven by a materialist self-seeking rationality—a *homo economicus* (Phelps 1975). With time, this hypothesis proved

<sup>4</sup> <https://hbr.org/2010/03/the-social-media-bubble>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=philanthropy>.

unsatisfactory in answering some fundamental questions, such as why generosity, what does altruism do for society, why do voluntary action and non-profit organisations exist? What, then, is an alternative explanation of people's relational behaviour if it is not solely about self-interested rationality? Much contemporary micro-economic behavioural research relies on game theory. Findings from its real-life applications have invalidated the canon of people being inherently predisposed to optimising the personal utility of transactions in life (Beinhocker 2006). Instead, a picture of human behavioural predispositions emerges around variations within and distributions across patterns of altruism, reciprocity and free-riding.

Recent comparative research has shown that reciprocal behaviour is a universal feature of human cultures on the one hand, and that on the other, there is a cultural and historical variety of interpretations of what generosity and reciprocity mean (Henrich 2005).

The 'unselfish' or altruistic findings of this type of research align with recent investigations in neuroscience, suggesting that a dopamine-associated 'hard wiring' of behaviour premised on advancing the well-being of others permeates every society. This implies that gifting, helping and caring are a neurologically engrained, caused, *inter alia*, by the values required for and acquired from a long nurturing period for humans after birth (Pfaff 2015). At some time or the other, all people everywhere provide or receive gifts (even if they do not want them), contributing their own agency as a social good. This inherent predisposition emerges from its selective value in *Homo sapiens* development, most of which has been in Africa. Human migration to other continents is in an evolutionary sense, but a blinking of an eye (Harari 2015: 45).

An ontological perspective of gift-giving is, therefore, an evolution of a universal human predisposition, with observable acculturated mores, values and practices. Over thousands of generation, as a complex adaptive system human learning tied to feedback has operated as selective mechanisms. What works well for groups and societies in enough instances over time is reinforced and institutionalised as social norms (Walker and Ostrom 2007). What does not is eventually selected down or out of the human relational repertoire, where 20:63:13 is seen to be a fairly socially stable ratio of free-riding, reciprocity and gifting, respectively (Kurzban and Houser 2005: 6). Stability does not, however, mean static. Societies are in a constant state of becoming.

The relative prevalence of three types of behaviour has evolved over long evolutionary time, adaptively differentiating societies as they do so. As discussed below, social contracts between citizen and states are geo-historical

complex adaptive outcomes which relatively weight and institutionalise these human behaviours.

Modern, institutionalised philanthropy—that is, formally organised and dedicated entities for giving—has emerged from relational principles self-selected through trial and error by demonstrating adequate value for a society. Gifting practices that work for enough people enough of the time are reinforced and encoded as laws and rules, with fifteen-century charities as precursors of current formalised arrangements (Whitaker 1974). Institutionalisation is further seen for example, in the tax incentives for foundations and in a moral acclaim for private giving for public benefit found in Euro-America. Hall (1999) explains how unprecedented capital accumulation by individuals some hundred-odd years ago and a Christian moral ethos in America has shaped what philanthropy has come to mean in modern economies, apparently set to expand worldwide (Future Agenda 2018).

### African Gifting—Language and Normative Characteristics

At this point, we turn to the question, why the terminology 'gifting' and not 'giving' in describing the behaviour being studied? A simple reason for speaking of gifting rather than giving is that the former is premised on a positive moral element while the latter needs to be qualified to understand its value. One can give someone a cold shoulder, influenza, misinformation, a helping hand, a job contact, an introduction which expands a social network and so on. Without the qualifier, giving is not, *a priori*, an act dedicated to the well-being of others. Gift-giving is a compound option that implies a normative value to the interaction. However, a more substantive argument for use of gifting is that, from an ontological point of view, it is preferable because of its place in the evolution of the human behavioural repertoire that is cooperative rather than competitive. It is a type of transaction that co-determines the collaborative nature of the social order to be found within and across all societies. There is an implied 'altruistic' morality in gifting, analogous to modern philanthropy, inviting theorisation (Bolnick 1975) seen in the field of behavioural economics (Thaler and Sunstein 2008).

Within the normative moral premises of altruism, gifting is an asymmetric transaction where recipient(s) are anticipated to value the gift more than the gift-giver(s). Recognising that a gift-giver has an anticipation of the recipient's appreciation is essential to leave open the use of gifts for reasons that are not altruistic (Fowler 2017; Bello 2014). Moreover, can we still talk of a gift when, for example, the recipient accords a lesser value to the gift than that anticipated by the giver and others? Research

highlights the complexity of attributing value by sellers and buyers in market relations (Sánchez-Fernández and Ángeles Iniesta-Bonillo 2007) and by givers and recipients in gift transactions (Davison et al. 2008). This enduringly problematic issue is bound to the presence of contending morals, values and worldviews.

The conception of gifting above says nothing about the motivation for giving, nor the calculus employed against which a decision to gift or not to gift and to receive or not is made. Yet, gifting can have shadow sides of the giver using such a transaction for political capture or manipulative tool (Author removed 2017; Bello 2014; Otaluka 2017). There is also a thin line differentiating gifting as a moral imperative and reciprocity as a mutual exchange (Sundstrom 1974). We take the view that the difference is an asymmetry between the value of the gift for the giver and receiver in favour of the latter. In other words, gifting has a non-reciprocal premise. However, in and of itself, altruism does not necessarily mean that the gift provider gains nothing in return. His, her or their feelings of justice can be rewarded, egos can be boosted, a sense of self-worth reinforced, etc. The point is that there is always an element of value gain for both the giver and recipient.<sup>6</sup>

By way of summary, the introduction of gifting into current discourse on philanthropy is intended to invite critical reflection within a call for greater pluralism. Gifting anywhere can be appreciated through three types of institutions—embedded, informal and formal. Institutional embedding of African gifting is expressed through the moral philosophies and values that people live by day to day and inform the other two (Metz 2007; Kanu Ikechukwu 2014). Gifting's informal institutionalism is predominantly 'horizontal' in nature between people of similar means (Wilkinson-Maposa et al. 2005). Formal institutionalisation is predominantly 'vertical' that is a positioning of the giver in terms of greater resources and power with respect to the recipient, seen in grant making. The table below adapted from Arrow (1975) provides illustrations of behaviour/institutional combinations in society (Table 1).

With the behavioural repertoire and processes of institutionalisation in mind, we turn to reviewing the evolution and functions of gifting in Africa's societies.

### African Gifting—An Ontological Enquiry

The historical approach used in this section is illustrated in Fig. 1. It explores the question: How has African gifting evolved and co-shaped sociopolitical structures? We address this query in an analytic framework made up of three thematic strands of gifting—endogenous, exogenous

and blended—playing out over three eras: pre-colonial; colonial; and post-colonial. A fourth era of New Age philanthropy, starting around the beginning of the current millennium, is subject of a separate article.

#### Pre-colonial: Gifting as a Social Institution

Anthropological studies of human exchanges in 'primitive' societies show that the rules at play in human inter-relations are seldom singular acts, but part of a complex adaptive relational system which, while based in the past, are oriented towards the future. In these societies, gifting was part of an endogenous relational repertoire serving social and strategic functions, ensuring that life was abundant rather than poor (Sahlins 1974a, b; Harari 2015: 87–102). Complex adaptations to sustain reproduction responded to changes in climatic and other factors co-determining livelihoods and health (Diamond 1999). Cognitive development, for example, associated with the 'invention' of cutting instruments introduced human-induced adaptations as hunting and gathering became more productive and competitive. As assets accumulated, populations increased and groups split off in search of sustenance, where gift transactions between groups—including women—could seal alliances (Mauss 1969: 17).

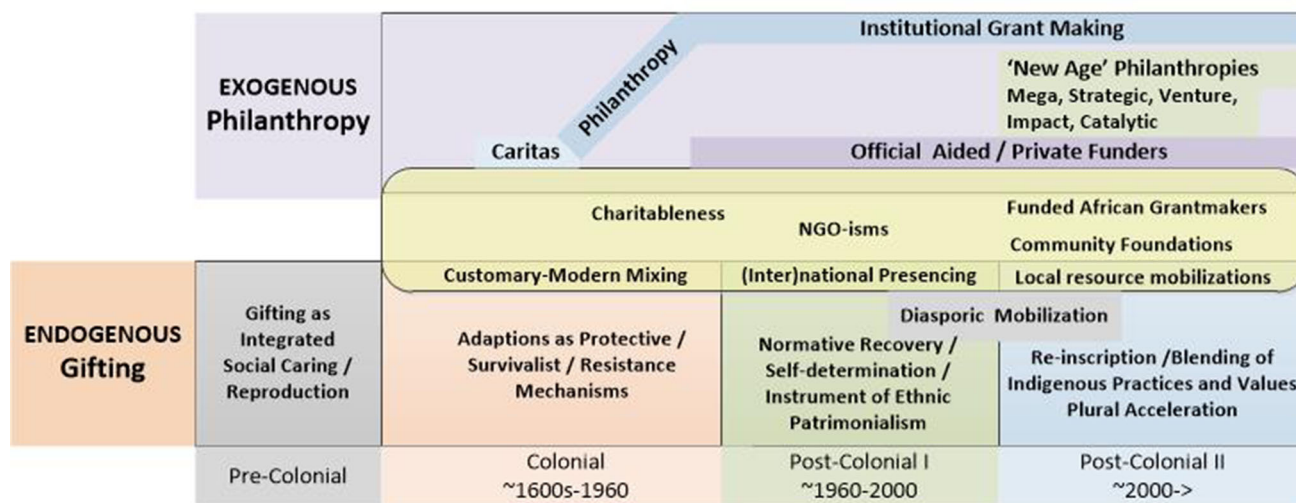
Mauss' (1969) influential study of gifting practices in archaic societies is a useful contribution for theorising gifting practices in pre-colonial African societies which had 'passed from the stage of *'total prestation'* (between clan and clan and family and family) but ... not yet reached the stage of pure individual contract, the money market sale, proper fixed price and weighed and coined money' (Mauss 1969: 45). By *total prestation*, Mauss (1969: 3) means that a gift transaction encompasses all aspects of an individual's relations with others: a gift contains the personal information—social standing/capital, trust, motivation, commitment, ability, resources, risk tolerance, world view/moral philosophy and so on—that are used to update a relational script operating between people (Bell 1991). That is, along with other types of transactions, a gift assists in knowing who to trust, who belongs, what social status they have and what (legitimate) expectations provide a normative frame for the gift transaction. Gifting serves an important relational function in terms of self-identification, cohesion and collective resilience, especially when life and livelihoods are precarious over multiple generations, impeding the organic formation of African states beyond localised kingdoms in the higher areas of population density, mainly in West Africa (Herbst 2001). In sum, gifting fulfils multiple roles in socialisation, acculturation, socioeconomic and political formation.

Accordingly, gifts need to be treated with a holistic perspective that does not dichotomise utilitarian and

<sup>6</sup> Giving up one's life for another is an exceptional case.

**Table 1** Illustrations of relational behaviours and institutional categories

Institutional category	Relational behaviour		
	Free-riding	Reciprocal	Altruistic
Formal/registered (vertical gifting)	Ponzi schemes	Producer cooperatives	Charities/foundations
Informal/non-registered (horizontal gifting)	Plagiarists	Self-help groups	Personal volunteering
Embedded (guiding values)	Exploitation greed	Mutuality solidarity	Compassion kindness



Note: The temporal schema must not be read as transitions, but as successive histo-geographic layering.

**Fig. 1** Ontology of African gifting

normative explanations. Put another way, determining the grounds of social policy which preoccupies many analysts of modernisation exhibits a dichotomised positioning which a proper understanding of Mauss' analysis of archaic gifting can resolve as: 'actions that are simultaneously self-interest *and* disinterested, voluntary *and* obligatory', (Adloff 2016: 4, emphasis in original). It is beyond the purpose of this article to detail how gift-giving has informed interpretations of the sociopolitical institutional design, relations between citizens and state and social policies of modern Atlantic societies advanced by theorists' such as Hobbes, Bourdieu, Durkheim and Rousseau (Adloff 2016: 5–10) and economic interpretations of altruism and morality (Phelps 1975). At issue here are ways in which gifting has shaped the contours of Africa's historical development.

Mauss (1969: 47) identifies two types of gifting: non-agonistic and agonistic with distinct functions. The first is collaborative, serving bonding, social cohesion and trust. The second are gifts associated with struggles for wealth, by building and continuing social status with power hierarchies serving collective protection. In his anthropological, pre-colonial analysis, gifting transactions are tied to

identities of biological kinship and social belonging, serving both social cohesion and hierarchy goals (Rossi 1980: 333). Over long historical time, the ambiguous duality of gifting exerts complex selective pressures shaping pre-state societies formed from family and kinship groups into communities and more complex socially integrated structures—bands, tribes, chiefdoms, kingdoms and archaic civilisations. Increased structuration involved interplay between gift types, which drive rule-making around forms of cooperation and social control as well as what emerges and accepted as 'customary'. The role of gifts within family bonds was central to sociopolitical life, its organisation, the functioning of lineage systems and the economics of survival, growth and nascent forms of institutionalisation (Diop 1987).

Mauss argued that gifting in 'primitive' societies was a practice with an integrating function of caring where 'presentations' which bond and tie under a voluntary guise were actually strictly obligatory with sanctions which were private or open. Examples of similar reciprocal obligation in gifting transactions in African societies are shown in Sundstrom (1974) and Bello (2014). Further, 'gifts' are simultaneously bound up with self-interest in mutual



survival and reproduction. Gift-giving therefore was acts involving strong reciprocity and 'found simultaneous expressions in religious, legal, moral and economic' spheres of society (Mauss 1969: 1; Sundstrom 1974). What was exchanged included material goods, wealth and personal property and items of economic value, 'courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dances and festivals, and fairs in which ...the circulation of wealth was but one part of a wide and enduring contract' (Mauss 1969: 3).

The concept of 'potlatch' or the tradition of a gift-giving festival distributed wealth and resources while demanding allegiance and recognition. Mauss (1969: 37) argued that as higher-order social organisation such as chiefdoms and kingdoms developed, intrinsic to gifting were 'three obligations: giving, receiving and repaying'. The demonstration of a Chief's fortune was by expending it to the humiliation of others 'in the shadow of his name' (Mauss 1969: 38). Refusing to receive a gift was itself problematic as it may show a fear of having to repay, so losing face or being interpreted as putting forward a challenge to the incumbent. (For examples of similar framing of the obligation to accept a gift in Africa, see Sundstrom 1974). Similar to Mauss, Sundstrom (1974) argues that in pre-colonial African gifting practices, obligation to repay/reciprocate a gift was essential for retaining face and entitlement to further support, where repaying more than was received could build relational capital and amass social merit and preference with those in power. However, destroying a gift communicated that the recipient had the power not to adhere to the obligation to reciprocate. In the struggle for superiority—where agonistic gifting serves in a potlatch event—the receiver must accept subservience, solidifying the other's position, or must compete to gain the status involved (Mauss 1969: 5).

Set against this asymmetry was an accountability of those with power who must meet people's expectations day by day and consult to retain their blessing on authority over matters affecting the whole. A Chief, for example, could only preserve (usually) his authority and position if he could show that he was favourably regarded by the spirits, and by good fortune, was possessed by it (Mauss 1969: 50). The point to be stressed and to be taken forward is that all gifts involve an obligation between the parties. In this sense, a gift is never free of a relational meaning (Bell 1991).

In explaining the moral philosophical embeddedness of traditional African gifting, for example, Asante-Darko's (2013: 83–103) study of pre-colonial Ghana concentrates on its role in redressing poverty in an enduring way. In doing so, he points to the matrilineal responsibility for the upkeep of individuals within a communal organisation. This task was achieved, inter alia, by gifts offered in kind

as well as financial, typically gold and cowrie shells. Pre-colonial gifting was inspired by a morality of collective dignity: 'the ultimate objective of philanthropy was to ensure that no one needed philanthropy' (Asante-Darko 2013: 90). Non-agonistic gifting was relied on to restore a normal life of dignity when this condition was involuntarily lost. Because the Asante considered dependence to be a form of humiliation, non-agnostic gifting was applied to ensure fairness. Agonistic gifting was relied on to ensure a bonding required, inter alia, for defence or expansionist conflicts with others. It also formed the basis of the Kings' (*asantehene*) and chiefs' wealth, but with it a set of obligations, ensuring that none within his or her jurisdiction lost dignity through need and poverty. Philanthropy in Asante was, thus, half way between a right and a privilege, with the rich being cautioned to be respectful towards the poor. This system of gifting exhibited a moral philosophy where the right to help was a solidarity expressed in the saying '*Nipa nua ne nipa* (literally a person is a person's brother/sister)' (Asante-Darko 2013: 88).

This philosophy of bonding and exchange in pre-colonial era had a psycho-social effect on human identity. Humanity was conceived and encapsulated in a humanistic (*Ubuntu*) ethic of a profound mutualness of being as humans.

*Botho/Ubuntu* is the ideal of being human, derived from a worldview based on the guiding principle of "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (I am a person through other persons) (Broodryk 2008: 41, in Dolamo 2013).

This entrenched an African humanism ethic as the substrate on which moral judgements about gifting were made and institutionally embedded. A moral philosophy of a collective self-rooted in Africans' lived experience reframes what a gifting transaction means in terms of imbuing a cognitive 'we-identity' from which collective agency is always imminent (Searle 1990).

Migration to Africa of Christian and Muslim faiths and teachings from the Middle East, seen in Ethiopia and countries bordering the South of the Sahara, introduced additional moral imperatives associated with alms, tithing and *zakat*. This natural migration was accelerated, steered and politicised by colonial action.

In sum, by the time of colonial incursion, there existed a customary morality of gifting as an embedded practice of strong reciprocity in social relations and collective identities. The giver and recipient were usually, but not always, known to each other, their relational capital tied to their gift exchange behaviour.<sup>7</sup> The obligations involved served to

<sup>7</sup> There were nonetheless exceptions to the giver and recipient knowing each other. Sundstrom (1974) documents of incidences, in

hold structure and authority in place but with direct accountability. In this era, the most prevalent notion of gifting was not primarily an asymmetric form of altruism but a 'horizontal' bonding mechanism where a gift 'implied an intention to develop or maintain a social relationship between parties to the exchange' (Bell 1991: 156).

### The Colonial Period: Customary-Modern Adaptations

Colonial penetration and subordination of the continent's population brought with it economic, political, psychological and cultural forces, disrupting pre-existing embedded relational processes which demanded adaptation, endogenous gifting included. Legitimacy for governing was that of a 'civilising' conquest, re-enforced by the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference, which imposed and codified the geography of the Scramble for Africa. Fuelled by a hunger for raw materials for Europe's industrial revolution, territorial conquest aided resource extraction and incorporation of Africa into the economy of the Metropolis. As far as possible, costs for colonial administration and pacification had to be financed locally in Africa, increasing economic demands on her populace.

Prior to this, and continuing, the moral intentions of colonial European powers were to 'civilise' backward populations. Christianity was the social-psychological handmaiden in this endeavour founded on *caritas*, or love for others. We need not dwell on debates about Christianity's role in ameliorating the sharper, dehumanising facets of colonial rule or its prophetic role in standing up against injustices, such a slavery, which reached into the ruling power's political decision-making process (Page and Sonnenburg 2003). Theology decreed that all those suffering had a right to succour and comfort by the church. *Caritas* introduced a form of ostensibly non-agnostic gifting that, in not relying on personal obligation between parties, aligned with agonistic, hierarchical outcomes of native subordination. From a complexity perspective, anonymity allied to *caritas* introduced material and psychological complications into established patterns of (non-)agonistic gifting of populations now subject to extraction of economic surplus by the colonial power.

The advent in England in the early sixteen hundreds of charity legislation (Old Poor Law) had institutionalised a vertical form of supposedly non-agnostic gifting conforming more closely with asymmetry in relative value between foreign gifter and (African) recipient (Whitaker

1974). This British legislation usually became incorporated in the laws of colonised countries, as did France's Civic Code in its colonies. These codifications complemented customary rules providing opportunities for nonlinear institutional blending to fulfil dual sources of obligation that would play out in the relationship between gifting and African politics described below.

By the end of the colonial period, 'charitableness' had become part and parcel of gifting in its full asymmetric sense. Populated and propagated by missionaries, while reflecting the evolution of social policies in colonial powers, Christian gifting was increasingly provided by donations from growing middle classes in the colonial homeland, enabling faiths and non-profit and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) across Africa and elsewhere to globalise social welfare as a non-state system. Foreign gifting—seen in medical clinics and hospitals, schools, institutionalised care for orphans, the destitute and others—served people that both communal and official (state) supports were ignoring or leaving behind (Author removed 1995).

This formalisation of institutionalised gifting on the continent was both accelerated and expanded by emergence, in the late nineteenth century and most notably in America, of secular, endowed philanthropies. These non-profit entities—enjoying tax benefits for bequests—were initiated and endowed by ultra-rich capitalists like Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford who bequeathed their personal wealth for public benefit. This impetus gave rise to a practice and profession of grant making that took an international turn as Africa and other colonised countries gained independence.

In parallel, on economic and political fronts, a peasant mode of production with subordinated livelihoods tied to insecurity and uncertainty about generating a surplus for sale had to accommodate the extractive demands of colonialism. Enforced monetisation and internal dislocations provided the labour required to take out raw materials for value-added use in metropolitan economies. That which was 'traditional'—including values—was treated as an obstacle to be transformed. Consequently, individuals and their relations required a modernising change in personal qualities, skills, values and norms (Inkeles and Smith 1974: 21–24). These pressures acted inter-generationally in ways that worked against, but also reinforced endogenous dimensions of social relations, such as kinship ties, family life; women's rights; reproduction and family size; religious resistance; the place of the aged; politics and civic engagement; expansion of communication; consumerism; social stratification; and commitment to work (Inkeles and Smith 1974: 25–32). In relation to gifting, these processes are difficult to assess and weigh against each other. However, history points to a patterning with, in this era,

Footnote 7 continued  
pre-colonial Africa of host–visitor gift exchanges especially among visiting long distance traders and local hosts who did not necessarily know each other.

complex adaptations of African gifting serving four broad purposes: risk spreading, reputational maintenance, political resistance and continuity in reproduction (Aina 2013: 13–19).

One review of responses to colonial penetration across the continent shows adaption of customary gifting practices by the self-formation of an *economy of affection*.

A network of support, communications and interactions among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities, for example, religion. It links together in a systematic fashion a variety of discrete economic and social units which in other regards might be autonomous. ... These are 'invisible organisations'... (Hyden 1983: 8–10).

Within this system, gifting based on genealogical ties extended from rural to urban areas, diversified income away from the uncertain seasonality of subsistence household production, helping to spread and attenuate family survival risk. Hyden's argument that this system impeded progress was criticised by those who attributed positive value to the coping function it served (Semboja and Therkildsen 1995) as African states struggled to provide social services, a condition prevailing today.

With forced displacement of males, migration and loss of face-to-face interaction on a daily basis, social status and reputation maintenance became tied to the quality and frequency of gifting in both directions. Remaining a respected member of a group meant that attention to customary obligations mattered, perhaps more than before. Resistance to colonial rule spreads through affection networks and embedded social institutions operating below the view of the authorities, resourced by giving of privileged information, time for mobilisation, organising materials and providing funding (Aina 2013: 17). In addition, reproduction, both physical and social, drew on a reciprocal and gifting economy to gain recognition and support for separated offspring: a communal obligation seen today, for example, in grandparents looking after HIV/AIDS orphans of others than their own family.

The overall point is that throughout the colonial era, adaptations to giving and gifting generated emergent outcomes, such as resilience as a system of social protection among the indigenous population, with its own accountability, self-financing and self-governing mechanisms (Aina 2013: 15). However, what was seen as voluntary gifting was often in fact a form of community levy or tax whose use was collectively agreed (Ekeh 1994: 242). This resource could be money raised to send a members' child to school, or saving and mutual aid groups as the means of local, or horizontal, resource mobilisation with collective accountability, oversight and control. A dynamic of adaptation also held true for populations imported by colonial

powers: Asians in East Africa, Levantines in West Africa. Their modus of gifting oriented towards charity and making good welfare failures of the colonial government found it morally incumbent as well as politically expedient not to limit gifting to their own communities (Aina 2013: 17–19).

The degree to which colonial penetration reached deep into endogenous society and giving practices varied. For example, sedentary economies and populations often proved easier to administer than nomadic pastoral ones. The resources attractive for extraction—agricultural or mineral—made different demands on: labour needs, the speed of urbanisation and the geography and intensity of family separation and communications country by country. Consequently, how networks of an *economy of affection* operated were contingent and unlikely to have been 'standardised'. Whatever the case, Ekeh's observation of dual publics, discussed below, suggests that customary legacy and 'ubuntu' morality of social obligation, reciprocity and gifting were probably reinforced as mechanisms for economic survival and political mobilisation rather than being eroded by the demands of a modernising economy with replacement by western logics and post-Enlightenment moralities.

As colonialism drew to a close, African gifting had become basically dualistic and pluralising. Non-agonistic endogenous gifting was by now, paralleled by externally driven and codified forms of giving that separated the giver from knowing or relating to the recipient. This condition started to select what elements of a 'total prestation' would matter more. For example, personal trust started to matter less than compliance with written agreements. Anonymity between giver and recipient gave decision-making power to professionals with their ideas and norms—usually in their own image—about the value of a gift to a recipient. Over a long time span, often bounded by ethnic affinities, mixed with religion and nascent class differentiation, customary adaptations to demands of the colonial order and modernity had self-established relational webs of giving and gifting permeating every country. This 'invisible system' of a safety net for the still high proportion of mainly poor and oppressed populations came to play a significant role in the post-colonial order and philanthropy as it operates in Africa today. Charitableness also arose as a sort of intermediary blending that was increasingly Africanised as Christian or Muslim religious affiliations grew and became imbued with the use of pre-existing symbols, references, values and African religious thinking (Mbiti 1975).

### Post-colonial: (Inter)national Presencing

The period covered here is about 40 years from the independence of many African countries to the start of this

Millennium. In this era, Africa sought to become present on the world stage in its own way, in its own right. This agenda called for an authentic standing, vision and voice in the continent's global affairs, a reinstatement of indigenous norms and values accommodating African cosmology. Legitimacy in governing called for a re-inscription of an African identity (indigenisation) often overlaid with that of Christianity and Islam and other faiths introduced by colonial powers (Nyang 1984. c.f. Leopold Senghor's Negritude and Steve Biko's Black Consciousness, etc.). The inclusion of customary laws and recognition of traditional leaders in the colonially modelled 'modern' post-independence constitutions of imposed nation-states countries introduced a legal pluralism (Tamanaha et al. 2012). This mode of re-inscribing African heritage sowed seeds of legal confusion and conflicting values as well as reinforcing ethnicity as a legitimate reference point for politics.

Some have argued that given Africa's subordination in the world economy, foreign control on many investments and an impoverished population, this indigenising agenda needed to be realised with the helping hand or gift of foreign aid. The UN publication *African Renewal* continues to reflect this perspective. What transpired in this post-colonial process is a narrative of gifting which, while gaining in scale, became highly politicised. Two major interacting factors led to this outcome. One is the predatory ethno-centric politics of post-independence 'nation-building' abetted by foreign aid. This way of governing fed the second: reinforcement of the tried and trusted systems of communal mechanisms for survival and resistance that was further crafted and networked during the colonial era.

#### *Gifting in Post-independence Politics*

With Pan-Africanism as an inspiration, leaders of post-independence countries voiced powerful aspirations for the continent to regain its own identity, function by its own values and norms and re-inscribe into consciousness that which had been denied as knowledge if it did not correspond to western post-Enlightenment rationalities and prescriptions—that is an epistemicide (Muchie 2003; Bhargava 2013). These intentions translated into programmes for 'nation-building' that, after an encouraging start, led to economic setbacks in the mid-seventies, entrenching (ethnically sensitive) single party-political systems and virtually unaccountable Big Man leaders, conditioned towards the *Politics of the Belly* (Bayart 1993) patronage, clientalism, corruption and clinging to power with Museveni, Kenyatta, Biya and Mugabe as examples. Fanon's warning that rulers of the newly independent Africa would identify with the bourgeoisie of the West to exploit their own people largely came to pass (Bond 2005).

The initial post-colonial period therefore reproduced the colonial structure of governing which preceded it (Author removed 2012), but now with agonistic patron-client gifting playing a major role in an ethnic patronage system of 'two publics' described below. A potential break occurred in the late 1980s when a 'second liberation' through multi-party politics appeared as the new dispensation, albeit unevenly adopted (Bboya and Hyden 1987). By then, a major alteration had occurred in the public-private gifting landscape. To a large extent, this change can be traced to the tensions generated by coexistence of two publics with different types of moral linkages to the private realm in African societies. One, a primordial public, is '... moral and operates on the same moral imperatives as the private realm'; and the other, a civic public is 'amoral, lacking the generalised moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public' (Ekeh 1975: 93). This interpretation places African gifting in a particular sociopolitical and institutional light.

#### *Gifting and African Institutions*

Ekeh's two republics infers a particular configuration of institutions in Africa where allegiance to kin and lineage provide the moral grounding for people's relations on the one hand, while allowing for amoral extraction of public resources to gift into the primordial/private realm on the other.

The unwritten law of the dialectics is that it is legitimate to rob the civic public in order to strengthen the primordial public (Ekeh 1975: 108).

In his framework, it can be argued that Mauss' two types of archaic gifting—non-agnostic and agonistic—can be seen as mechanisms that connect the polity to a patronage-dependent political dispensation that has strong ethnic sensibilities illustrated in the elections in many African countries. Non-agnostic gifting serves the private realm; agonistic gifting from civic to private realms sustains the positions of elites and socioeconomic hierarchies. It has also been argued that a continuing 'separation' of citizens from state institutions (Ayode 1988) was also part enabled by flows of international aid, reducing reliance on and sensitivity to citizens as tax payers with rights (Adam and O'Connell 1997). Put another way, foreign gifting to African governments sustained this deeply rooted form of institutional design and relations.

Often with a sense of entitlement from roles in anti-colonial struggles, or the advantages of colonial appointments deployed in systems of (in)direct rule, social formations were reproduced by new African elites, trading ideologies with their elite colonial counterparts (Aina 2013: 17). These developments led to distortion and

reconfiguration of the primordial public realm (Gumedé 2015) as Africa's new rulers reconfigured the inherited system of governance by building on the latencies of customary practices where personal affinities and gifting were 'expected' of chiefs and kings (Osaghae 2006).

The difference in gifting became one of the extracting, controlling and allocating public resources for personal wealth and political power. Bringing trade unions and producer associations under the wing of the single party undermined alternative mass/member-based sites of resistance. Requiring sales of agricultural products to parastatal corporations ensured capture of surplus into government coffers while controlling their distribution to favoured constituencies. Economic and political elites intertwined to create barriers to entry of others, continuing the process of wealth accumulation from the population by refining the state as a predatory instrument, but in the name of people's own development (Joseph 1983; Bavister-Gould 2011; 1–2). Gifting became a political instrument for buying allegiance and punishing dissent by denial of public resources. Communal self-help principles such as *Harambee* in Kenya were co-opted and enforced as a sort of tax (Aina and Moyo 2013).

Faced with elite predatory behaviour, people resorted to the trusted *economies of affection* initially crafted from pre-colonial systems and refined under colonial rule, resulting in further institutionalisation, deepening and thickening of affinity networks. Mechanisms included: establishing and registering ethnic-based organisations for resource transfer from the formal to the informal economy as well as opening pathways to voice in governance; forming networks facilitating access to state employment; and attracting public resources. Un-captured peasants created parallel markets denying the state revenue. These *economies of affection* were also a sort of internal Diasporic sociopolitical and economic structuring, operating alongside the formal systems of (decentralising) public administration at a scale hard to determine in value or effectiveness. Perhaps paradoxically, these innovations to better avoid state predation for personal enrichment by the elite actually 'modernised' and pluralised the customary horizontal gift economy and its social welfare provisioning. A subsurface gifting system prevented people falling into greater deprivation (Author removed 2016, 2017).

Within the continent, endogenous gifting followed two interacting tracks. One was non-agonistic and 'horizontal' based on updated customary norms, organisational forms and practices. The range of resources available widened, as were the types of values sought and given. Money was but one form of support, alongside prayer, voluntary time, advice, access to contacts and mechanisms to maintain and gain social capital through gifting behaviour within ones means. The other track was 'vertical' in terms of the state

as an elite-serving untrustworthy intermediary to resource allocation of external aid and voracious taxation, where gifts—essentially money and materials—served patrimonial and voter allegiance purposes. Gifting was imbued with (distributional) politics. From a poor person's point of view—almost fifty per cent of the continent's population of 1.3 billion—survival required judicious decision-making to optimise being a recipient of both.

## Conclusions

The long period under review up until the end of the last Millennium leads to a perspective of an African pro-social behaviour referred to as 'gifting' with particular drivers and forms of pluralism. The years of the new Millennium are further adding to a dynamic, complex evolution of the practices of philanthropy as well as Africa's gifting landscape (Mati 2017; Murisa 2018) meriting a separate writing. The current purpose is to ontologically explore the evolution of African gifting as an action relationship analogous to philanthropy, offering a southern contribution to current discourse.

The conclusions which follow require two caveats. First, while Africa is the origin of human behaviours predicated on the well-being of others, this does not make its institutional configuration 'superior' to different geographies. Pluralism requires each configuration to be adjudicated in its own right from its own histories. Second, it is highly unlikely that genealogically equivalent elements of African gifting will not be found elsewhere. They will arise from (mixes of) moral philosophies and sociocultural mores, religious belief, contending values as well as political, economic and other societal trajectories, creating distinct institutional arrangements, coming better into view with more country studies.

What can African philanthropy contribute to a more plural understanding of behaviours regarded as philanthropic? We argue that, as currently articulated, philanthropy is: (a) too narrowly framed in terms of an emphasis on the ultra wealthy 'giving back', implying (b) their superior moral agency (Adloff 2016: 156), with (c) an overstated social contribution (*Economist*, 11 February, 2107, p. 11), which (d) under-appreciates the complex functions and expressions of gift-giving in the precariousness of daily life, while (e) obscuring agnostic functions in structuration of power relations, leading to (f) relative neglect of political interpretations and shadow sides of philanthropy as a developmental phenomenon. Africa's narrative moderates an assumed robustness of the West's standpoint on philanthropy, with a potentially wider import. As an action concept, interdisciplinary and evolutionary perspective and practices of African gifting offer a

grounded, integrated set of lenses to examine sociopolitical processes that can enrich philanthropy studies by highlighting the issues described above.

How has gifting's evolution co-shaped Africa's sociopolitical structures? First, African gifting has and continues to be a *resilience mechanism* for substantial proportions of the population experiencing poverty. Its non-agonistic value should not be underestimated when coping with elite predation, state weakness, inequality and the legacy impacts of colonial penetration and post-colonial marginalisation within the global order. Within an *economy of affection* as a living system, gifting is a practical transaction serving, inter alia, maintenance of collective distinctiveness and status. These functions do not preclude emergence of multiple identities as African societies develop, but are anchor points in people's world views and attribution of meaning. A research issue will be to ascertain if and how socioeconomic development, (in)equity and stratification in the continent are altering this 'hidden' system.

Second, because ethno-linguistic identity is the dominant ideology in popular mobilisation, Africa's politics remains an arrangement where *gifting connects dual publics* operating on different moral principles. Consequently, it is prudent to differentiate between the roles of non-agnostic and agnostic gifting in mediating the balance, or otherwise, between Ekeh's civic/public and primordial/private institutions which are ostensibly separate but are bidirectionally penetrated. In this sense, in the politics operating between Africa's citizens and their governments, *gifting does not dichotomise* between utilitarian expectations of material benefits from public resources, and norms of (corrupt) personal gain for one's group. Public policy may benefit from drawing on 'gifting' as a way of thinking about the nature and distribution of public goods alongside prevalent supply–demand and rights-based frameworks. Such considerations are behind the rise of institutionalised decentralisation in countries like Kenya.

This element leads to a third development, that is, the high *relative proportion* of the 'horizontal' gifting between people, and 'vertical' forms associated with institutionalised practices and the complex blends in between (Author removed; Wilkinson-Maposa 2017). The former operates 'below the radar' of a formal economy. While a recent country study concludes that 93% of Kenyan's are philanthropic (Yetu 2017: 11), its value is difficult to compute and hence too easily treated as of little significance (McCabe and Mayblin 2010). Urgent work is required to gain a sense of the relative proportion of Africa's non-institutionalised and institutionalised gifting.

Fourth, African *gifting is holistic*. Its origins as a face-to-face '*total prestation*' in Mauss' terms, providing multiple types of information that circulates within Africa's

endogenous social system, co-determining its effectiveness for members, near or afar, seen, for example, in collective action of Diaporas self-organisation around remittances (UNECA 2014; Flanigan 2017).

A consideration for those wishing to support existing or add to African philanthropy or improve its effectiveness is threefold. First is to be more aware of the multiple types of information and the norms that beneficiaries apply to gifts as well as the holistic way in which third-party gifting behaviours are interpreted, for example, in terms of dignity and being treated with respect. Second, gifting behaviours in the African context are woven into the political fabric, where the status of the giver—a foundation, an NGO, a corporation, an entrepreneur—is previewed in terms of whose interests really count. Third is awareness of the political nature of what gifting means for a country's institutional design, institutional interactions and the indeterminate complexity of outcomes when, for example, there is a change in head of state—recently seen in South Africa—where a neo-patrimonial political system has relied on sophisticated agonistic gifting as an instrument of state capture.<sup>8</sup>

An ontological appreciation of philanthropy in context is a less than usual treatment of the topic, selected as a response to two complementary calls. One is for a narrative that is 'home grown', so to speak, while also adding empirically to a southern source of knowledge, hopefully advancing the field.

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#### Compliance with Ethical Standards

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.saccps.org/pdf/5-1/5-1\\_DRMartin\\_DrSolomon\\_2.pdf](http://www.saccps.org/pdf/5-1/5-1_DRMartin_DrSolomon_2.pdf).

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