

The Name of the Gift

— Sacred Exchange, Social Practice and Sayyad Category in North India —

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要 旨

本稿の目的は、高度に階層化された北インド・ムスリム社会の贈与をめぐるイスラーム実践を、預言者の「子孫」、すなわちサイヤド(サイイド)に焦点をあてて描写し考察することにある。北インド・ムスリム社会とイスラーム的贈与のヒエラルキカルな性質は、サイヤドをめぐる諸観念と諸慣行にはっきりと表現されている。そうした特殊なムスリム・カテゴリーであるにもかかわらず、サイヤドを直接的な議論の対象とする人類学的研究は、これまでほとんどなされてこなかった。本稿では、一方的な贈与者であることを理想としているサイヤドが受贈者となる際に用いられるレトリックとトリック、すなわち「贈与の名前」とその仕掛けに注意しながら、神の恩寵バラカの媒体としてのサイヤドの特殊な役割を明らかにする。この作業を通して、ムスリムにとってのヒエラルキーは、サイヤドの特殊な位置づけと役割に焦点をあてた時にはじめて理解可能となることを示す。

Introduction

This paper will focus on the special position and role of the 'descendants' of the Prophet Muhammad, namely the Sayyads(Sayyids), in the Islamic gift-giving practices observed in a North Indian Muslim society. The hierarchical nature of North Indian Muslim society and Islamic gift-giving there is clearly expressed in the ideas and practices surrounding the Sayyads. Despite being such a unique and important Muslim category, hitherto there has been almost no anthropological research that takes the Sayyads as the direct subject of discussion. For example, the theory of 'Muslim caste' only argues that the Sayyads are at the top of a hierarchical Muslim society and has not asked why the Sayyads are positioned at the top, or why it is only they who can fill that position.

Looking back at the 'Muslim caste' theory, the importance of the following analytical perspective becomes apparent. First, the hierarchy among Muslims has been perceived as an

entirely Hindu-like phenomenon, however if one looks at the position of the Sayyads, it may well be necessary to reappraise it as an 'Islamic' phenomenon. Second, the egalitarianism preached by Islam makes no exception even for the Prophet; however a section of the fraternity (the Prophet and his family and descendants, as well as the saints) is transformed by baraka (blessing) from God into people who perform a special role, which may well be the primary factor in the creation of the hierarchy.

We will look at the relation between Sayyads and non-Sayyads regarding the gifts. The Sayyads see 'helping' and 'giving' as a 'duty' and act according to the ideal of being unilateral donors. However, there are cases in which they are the recipients. While also paying attention to the rhetoric and trick, that is, the name of the gift and its concept, employed on such occasions, the special role of the Sayyads as mediums of baraka is made clear. I would like to suggest that only when we focus on the special position and role of the Sayyads does it become possible to understand what hierarchy means to Muslims.

Social Setting

The town of C, the site of my field research is a local town with a Muslim majority in Western Uttar Pradesh. Muslim society in C town is composed of 22 endogamous zat categories/biradari groups that possess proper names. Three zat categories are supposedly the descendants of immigrants. The first two of these, in theory of Arab origin, have honorific names: Sayyad and Shekh, while the following one has ethnic name: Pathan, that is, roughly, Afghans*¹. The Sayyads are the descendants of the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, Fatima, and his paternal cousin Ali, but the Shekhs claim to have descended either from the Arab tribe of Qraish, the tribe to which the Prophet Muhammad belonged, or from one of the close associates or friends of the Prophet.

The rest nineteen biradari groups are local origin, and have Hindu like occupational names, such as, the weavers (julaha), the blacksmiths (lohar), the carpenters (barhai), the masons (rajgiri), the butchers (qasai), the confectioners (halwai), the oil pressers (teli), the washermen (dhobi), the winemakers (kalar), the inn-restaurant (bhathiyara), the potters (kumhar), the cotton carders (dhune), the tailors (darzi), the dyers (rangrez), the barbers (nai), the milkmen (ghosi), the bangle makers (manihar), the water carriers (saqqa), the bandsmen (tabalchi), the bards (mirasi), and lastly, the beggars (faqir).

These categories/groups are conceptually divided into an upper and lower half by dichotomous folk terms which overlap with the zat/biradari distinction; for example, foreign

origins/local origins, forward classes/backward classes, landlords (zamindar)/artisans who make a living with their hands (dastkar), high level people (unchi quam) /low level people (nichi quam), literate people (parelikhe)/illiterate day labourers (anpar manzdur), patrons (jajman)/clients (kamin), and ashraf/non-ashraf. The boundaries between the two are created and maintained via (1) a residential pattern that tends to segregate according to religion, occupation and group, (2) a paucity of the social intercourses of invitation, participation and commensality through reciprocal visits or ceremonial occasions, and (3) matrimonial restrictions, the most important apparatus in maintaining boundaries.

Upward mobility via imitation of the higher rank is often seen in a stratified society, and C town is no exception in this. First of all, if we observe trends in the changing of biradari names, it can be seen that, while Shekhs tend to be a target of imitation, Sayyads are special beings who are not targeted for imitation. Secondly, a closer inspection of examples of biradari who were successful in their upward mobility reveals that the rise in economic status, and the active involvement in various religious practises and political activities that this makes possible, brings extremely effective results in the appraisal of biradari status. To put this the other way round, that is how fluid biradari status is.

In contrast to this is the stable hierarchy amongst the zat, with the Sayyads at the top followed by the Shekhs, then the Mughals and Pathans. The names of each zat subdivision are derived from the name of a personage or tribe to whose lineage they are deemed to be connected. If we focus on the connection between these eponyms and the Prophet, it can be seen that the closer the connection to the Prophet, the higher the status in the hierarchy is. Namely, amongst the zat, positions in the hierarchy are determined by proximity to the Prophet (or the order of conversion), and the hierarchy expressed by this Islamic syntax is distinctive in not being swayed by actual politico-economic status.

Sayyads in particular are endowed with the highest ritual status in Muslim society, regardless of politico-economic status. This hierarchy stressing ritual status becomes strikingly apparent in the asymmetrical relationship involving marriages and gifts between Sayyads and non-Sayyads. This brings to the surface the unbreachable boundary which exists not only between zat and biradari, but also between Sayyads and non-Sayyads.

Asymmetrical Donor/Recipient Relationship between Sayyads and Non-Sayyads

Marriage and gift-giving are two occasions upon which the boundary between Sayyads and non-Sayyads is actualized. For Sayyads marriage is a practice to maintain an honourable lineage

that stretches back to the Prophet; basically, great pains are taken to create and renew relationships within the category. Hypogamy is carefully avoided in the case of marriage with other *zat* Muslims. Baraka is passed down an unbroken chain through the generations; it continues to trace a vertical trajectory from ancestors to descendants through the family tree. Baraka can also move horizontally, namely when it flows out from Sayyads to non-Sayyads via gifts. At such times the Sayyads function as mediums for baraka. Let us look at a concrete example.

According to a member of the Rizvi family, who are Sayyads and known by the inhabitants of C town as 'descendants of a saint (*pirzade*)', landlords (*zamindar*)' and 'the family of chairman of the municipal board (*chiamanon ka khandan*)', as the head of Muslims Sayyads have a number of obligations, amongst which helping and giving are of extreme importance. In fact, they engage in constructing and renewing asymmetrical donor/recipient relationships with specific people or at random, both routinely and on ritual occasions such as weddings and funerals. This is not unrelated to the fact that they are wealthy and distinguished families; however, the issue of the political and economic predominance they enjoy, and the prestige that comes with this, certainly cannot be interpreted in a worldly context alone.

Thus there is a member of the Rizvi family who says such things as that Allah will not help those who do not help others; who says that we have already received a lot of baraka from Allah so it our duty to help others; who recites a verse that says that if you listen to the voice of the poor then God will listen to your voice (*garibon ke suno, vo tumhari sunega*) and that if you give one rupee to a poor man you will be given a million rupees by Allah; who says that helping the poor will produce good results (*sawab*) of such a magnitude.

The Rizvis put into practice their idea that their helping and giving is not due simply to their political and economic pre-eminence but rather to the pre-eminence of their lineage; in other words, that as Sayyads who are connected to the lineage of the Prophet blessed by God and who are naturally endowed with baraka via this lineage, it is their duty to share that which they have been given with others, rather than keeping it to themselves.

Thus it becomes clear that the self-image depicted by the Rizvi family of the Sayyads as helpers and givers is underpinned by an outlook on the world that in the first place their political and economic pre-eminence itself is due to baraka, that they will please God by giving to others what they have been given by Him, and that doing so will lead to even more gifts from God in this world or the next. This kind of reciprocal relationship with God in connection with gifts is, of course, not confined to the Sayyads ^{*2}. However, the concept of baraka transmitted through the bloodline particularizes the Sayyads and, via the asymmetrical gift-giving relationship between

Sayyads and non-Sayyads, introduces inequality amongst believers who are meant to be equal.

The division between Sayyads and non-Sayyads is thus decisive in this gift practice imbued with religion. In the religious act known as giving alms (zakat or sadaqa) there is a rule connected with zat/biradari status. Ideally almsgiving should be done from a high to a low zat/biradari status. A Shekh woman was troubled in this regard.

According to her, a Sayyad man died, leaving behind a wife who, in zat terms is a Shekh, and two small children. She felt very sorry for the widow and children whose source of income had been severed and decided to help them financially. However in North Indian Muslim society, where the concept of paternal lineage is strong, children born to a marriage between people of a different zat/biradari status can only inherit that of the father so, even though it is in fact money that she wants to be used for the children, they are Sayyads so she is unable to give them alms. Eventually she overcame her misgivings with the thought that if she gave alms to the Shekh widow she, in her position as their mother, would spend the money on the children.

We can see from this example that people think that alms may not be given to Sayyads ^{*3}. The method described above is one way of helping Sayyads who are economically-challenged, but generally speaking this problem is resolved by using the Arabic word 'hadiya', which means 'gift', instead of the word 'almsgiving' for money or goods to be given to Sayyads. The word 'hadiya' is also used in North India when referring to the price of the Quran^{*4}. In other words, largesse to help Sayyads and the price of the Quran are expressed by the same word. What is more, it is not only money and goods that are provided for Sayyads. A Shekh man often goes to a certain Sayyad home, saying that being of service (kidhmat karna) to Sayyads will lead to good results ^{*5}.

The Name of the Gift

Almsgiving may be done by all Muslims but there is a tendency to limit the recipients to the socially and economically weak, such as the poor ^{*6}. However, only Sayyads cannot become the recipients of almsgiving, whatever their social or economic status may be. Sayyads can only receive hadiya, largesse which is given the same name as the money proffered when a Quran changes hands.

This kind of manipulation of the name of the gift can also be identified with regard to Muslim saints. A gift to a saint is expressed by the Persian word 'nazrana'. Nazrana is a gift given to great people such as Sufi saints ^{*7}. Gifts involving the Sayyads can be sorted as below.

- (1) Zakat is given by all Muslims, including Sayyads, to poor Muslims other than Sayyads.
- (2) Sadaqa is given by all Muslims, including Sayyads, to poor people other than Sayyads.
- (3) Hadiya is given by ordinary Muslims to Sayyads.
- (4) Nazrana is given by ordinary people to saints, who are often Sayyads.

The characteristic shared by all these gifts is that they are unilateral. In other words, in each case there is no gift with the same name to be given in return. In order to understand the form of such unilateral gifts it is necessary to consider not only the donor/recipient relationship that unfolds before our eyes but also the one in the symbolic dimension, including the relationship with God.

For example, from the perspective of market exchange, the act of purchasing a Quran is seen as a transaction involving a commodity and cash: (1) X (the shopkeeper) transfers the Quran (Q) to Y (the customer) and Y (the customer) transfers cash (C) to X (the shopkeeper). However, the Quran is not simply a book. It is a medium for baraka in which the words of Allah are recorded. Accordingly, (1) should be seen as a symbolic transaction on the lines of (2) given below.

(2) G (God) transfers baraka (B) in the form of the book of the Quran to Y (the customer) through X (the shopkeeper), and Y (the customer) hands X (the shopkeeper) hadiya (H) in the form of cash. It is not an economic transaction (= exchange) between X (the shopkeeper) and Y (the customer) but the prestation and counter-prestation (= gift and counter-gift) transaction discussed by Mauss in "Essai sur le don" [Mauss 1973]^{*8}. Meanwhile, Y (the customer) is indebted to G (God) and must therefore persevere in amassing good deeds as a Muslim to make a counter-gift^{*9}.

In other words, the phenomenal partner in the transaction whereby Y (the customer) obtains a Quran is X (the shopkeeper), but when this is seen as a symbolic act to acquire baraka G (God) becomes the partner in the transaction. However, Allah does not receive money or goods from human beings. He only ever gives. Human beings consequently try to provide through good deeds a counter-gift for the baraka they have been given, but good deeds produce good results so they always remain in a state of indebtedness. Then, how should the gift of hadiya to the Sayyads be perceived?

Hadiya is donated to economically-challenged Sayyads. Meanwhile, the Muslim donating the hadiya may be considered to be reasonably affluent. Accordingly, (3) G (God) transfers baraka (B) to Y (the Muslim) in a variety of forms such as wealth, thanks to which Y (the Muslim) amasses riches. Y (the Muslim) gives hadiya (H) to the Sayyads in the form of money and goods. Since this is a good deed that pleases God, He will no doubt provide Y (the Muslim) with further good

results. Here too Y (the Muslim) always remains indebted. What is more, it is probably possible in terms of structure to replace the gift of hadiya to Sayyads with the zakat given to ordinary impoverished Muslims.

Finally, in the donating of nazrana to a Muslim saint, (4) G (God) transfers baraka (B) to the worshipper in a variety of forms such as miracles, and Y (the worshipper) gives X (the saint) nazrana (N) in the form of money or goods as a mark of gratitude for his intercession. Here the role of X (the saint) differs from X (the shopkeeper) in (2) in that he intercedes between G (God) and Y (the worshipper). The almsgiving known as sadaqa has a similar function in that it is a gift for intercession.

In South Asia sadaqa is a gift given out of gratitude to God after surmounting various perils [Nishikawa 1992: 391], or an expiatory gift made when confronted with an extreme, and possibly life-threatening crisis [Werbner 1998: 104]. In Bangladesh the recipient is a faqir who, although a common beggar, is a being imbued with a kind of religious tinge [Nishikawa, 1992: 391-392] and in Pakistan the recipient is a poor person other than a saint [Werbner 1998: 104].

In C town too sadaqa is a gift made before departing on outings or trips and at critical junctures such as rites of passage; the recipient is a poor person, as someone who distanced far enough so that the gift will be unilateral. Just as with nazrana to a saint, sadaqa is given as a gift imbued with a feeling of gratitude towards Allah in exchange for the good fortune of the donor. In this sense, to the donor the recipient of sadaqa is a holy being who fulfils the function of intercession, receiving the gift in place of Allah.

We have seen the respective structural and functional similarities between hadiya / zakat, and nazrana / sadaqa. Then, why must the name be different in these two pairs of gifts? The concept of a hierarchy related to the amount of baraka seems to lie behind this.

That is to say, affluence is the due of the Sayyads, who are naturally endowed with baraka, but it is not unusual for them to be so impoverished as to need financial help. They may not be able to provide even the small sum of the zakat. However, according to a member of the Rizvi family, it is a sin (gunah) to demand almsgiving (zakat and sadaqa) from such impoverished Sayyads. He probably considers that such an impolite act is none other than blasphemy which hints at the Sayyads' dearth of baraka and thereby at the imperfection of God. Therefore it must be considered that Sayyads possess baraka in a form other than wealth.

Furthermore, according to Crooke, the descendants of the Prophet must never become beggars, however poor they may be, since that is a disgraceful act for them [Crooke (ed.) 1972 (1921): 114-115]. In short, both begging from impoverished Sayyads and begging by impoverished Sayyads are unacceptable; if impoverished Sayyads are to be beggars they may

only beg from Allah.

Thus, while hadiya/zakat and nazrana/sadaqa have their respective structural and functional similarities, zakat and sadaqa are gifts to ordinary impoverished people who lack baraka, while hadiya and nazrana are gifts to holy people who possess baraka. The latter, holy men, are endowed with this baraka via their connection with the Prophet. The holy men occupy a higher position than the former, the poor, or the average Muslim, in the symbolic hierarchy of the amount of baraka to which they were born, and it would seem that this bestows upon them a special position and role in the actual stratified society as well.

Conclusion

It can be seen from the example of C town given above that the hierarchical nature of North Indian Muslim society and Islamic gift-giving there is clearly expressed in the ideas and practices surrounding the Sayyads. The main points may be summarized as follows.

Since in the Muslim society of the town of C there are no 'Untouchables', who perform such 'unclean' 'traditional' occupations as sweeping, there is no need among the Muslims to avoid commensality or contact. It may be said that to them 'untouchability' and 'inequality' stemming from the 'unclean' are something that only exists in Hindu society, and that on this point they are preserving the Islamic principle of equality.

Nevertheless, a distinction exists within Muslim society between the high ranking zat, who stress their 'foreign origins', and the lower ranking biradari, who are held to be indigenous Indian converts. A significantly strong consciousness of the ranking and differentiation between the zat and the biradari is expressed by dichotomous folk terms and social customs, as well as by variations in matrimonial practices. Certainly the notion of a hierarchy may be recognized here. However, it is one that is thoroughly 'Islamic' in its nature, being based upon 'proximity' to the Prophet.

Only when we focus on the special position and role of the Sayyads does it become possible to understand what hierarchy means to Muslims. Namely, the Sayyads are placed at the top of Muslim society regardless of politico-economic status. Moreover, in terms of matrimonial restrictions (they are to avoid hypogamy), choice of occupation (they are not to perform certain services or manual labour) and gift-giving (they are not to accept certain gifts), they are subject to limitations that are not imposed on non-Sayyads. Such special characteristics of the Sayyads are linked to the concept of the inheritance and transmission of baraka that comes from God. Baraka has the power to transform a section of the brethren into people who fulfill a special role,

and 'proximity' to the Prophet is a mark of how much baraka a person possesses.

To ordinary Muslims, the Sayyads are not so much other-worldly beings such as saints (= 'recognized saints') as people who, while still worldly beings like themselves, have clearly been made special by their lineage (= 'laicized or latent saints'). The Sayyads possess an 'honourable lineage' that transmits baraka between the past, present and future, and they are intermediaries between ordinary Muslims and God. It may be considered that working behind this Islamic practice that separates Sayyads from ordinary non-Sayyad Muslims is a sense of reverence towards the Prophet and a feeling of respect and affection towards His 'descendants'.

Veneration of the Prophet is a unifying element of the Muslim community. An attitude of respect and affection towards the Sayyads who extend His family line is a 'ubiquitous' phenomenon common to many Muslim societies; it is by no means an 'individual' phenomenon restricted to particular regions. There are various methods to express 'closeness' to the Prophet or to 'approach' Him in the Muslim societies of every region; however it may be said that in the Muslim society of Northern India this finds its expression in the ranking system with the Sayyads at its top and the form of the relations with the Sayyads involving marriage and gifts.

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Notes

- *1. In South Asian Muslim society there are also zat called Mughal who assert that they are the descendants of tribes from Iran or Turk (Central Asia).
- *2. Ohtsuka discusses the form of direct and indirect exchanges between ordinary Muslims in this world and the next [Ohtsuka 1989: 123-130].
- *3. Apparently this is also stated in Hadith.
- *4. This is not held to be a price since the Quran is not subject to commercial transactions. However, in practice the Quran is traded. At such times the word 'gift' is used in the sense of a counter-prestation for the prestation of the Quran.
- *5. Similarly, the founding father of Pakistan and poet Iqbal (a non-Sayyad) is said to have politely refused a man who was trying to massage his feet as soon as he found out that he was a Sayyad.
- *6. As specified in the Quran, zakat may be received by the poor, by the destitute, by people who supervise zakat, by converts to Islam, for the emancipation of slaves, by debtors, by those persevering for the way of Allah (combatants, etc.) and by travellers. People who may receive sadaqa include one's own family, dependents, relatives, the poor, the destitute, widows, orphans, debtors, travellers, Islamic missionaries, and people who are in need of help.
- *7. The Arabic word 'nazar' is also used to refer to a gift from a person of lower status to someone of a higher status. Examples include gifts from people who had submitted to the Mughal emperors [Cohn 1983] and gifts to Imams, the leaders of worship [Platts 1988 (1884): 1128]. Based on examples in Pakistan, Werbner also states that, since Muslim saints cannot accept alms (saddaqa), they only accept gifts respectfully known as nazrana [Werbner 1998: 103-104].
- *8. Hadiya is displayed as the price, however it is considered ideally that X (the shopkeeper) should not profit from the sale of the Quran and that Y (the customer) should pay an appropriate sum within his means for the purchase of the Quran. The transaction between the two is different in nature from equivalent exchange based on market principles.
- *9. See Ohtsuka [1989: 123-130] with regard to how a good deed can become a counter-gift to Allah.

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