RECIPROCITY IN GAUTREK'S SAGA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

I argue that Gautrek's Saga, while fictional rather than factual in nature, reflects important aspects of the saga writer's society, then in transition to a state organized society. The saga explores the logic of reciprocity by examining each logical possibility. It reaches no clear resolution, perhaps because none was apparent in the newly developing social relations of the state.

In 1262-64 Iceland was incorporated into the Norwegian Polity, an inevitable consequence of its dependence on foreign intercourse for necessary goods such as grain. Until that time, during the Commonwealth period, Iceland had not been organized as a state. From the time of settlement in the mid-ninth century, there had been local chiefs *(godar)* with entourages of followers, thingmen. The relationship between a thingman and chief was voluntary and reciprocal. The thingmen supported the chiefs, the chiefs supported the thingmen. Alliances among chiefs were also reciprocal and feasting and gift-giving were central aspects of this reciprocity. The chiefs were centers of local redistributive economic networks. The fluctuations of weather from year to year and region to region motivated inter-regional reciprocal relationship as a guard against devastation in localized bad times. The society was stratified, not egalitarian, as there was unequal access to subsistence resources.

Icelandic writers of the 13th century produced a rich literature of the Commonwealth period and settlement period, even though they were writing their sagas some two hundred years after the events with

the aid of written and oral historical materials (Turville-Petre, 1953:231). It is tautologous to argue, as Turner (1971) does that these sagas are social dramas. If they were not, no one would have written them. In fact, the periods when nothing happened are recorded as just that, periods in which nothing happened. A contemporary commentator wrote:

> Every story will reveal that not all men are made in the same way. Some have great wisdom attributed to them others have strength, courage, or some quality of distinction or good luck, and this is why stories are told about them (Pálsson and Edwards, 1971: 37).

In the year 1,000 Iceland became Christian, though there were no immediate extensive institutional changes (Foote, 1963: 97; Pálsson and Edwards, 1971: 12; Sveinsson, 1953: 110-111; Turville-Petre, 1953: 69). This raises the question of whether it was possible for the now Christian saga writers to portray a pagan past realistically. Turner (1971:358) and Tomasson (1980: 31) agree that the institutional continuities were more significant than any ideological differences between pagan and early Christian Iceland, so the sagas are credible accounts. Others argue that the sagas are manifestations of older heroic archetypes and are retellings of this lore in Icelandic settings with Icelandic characters (Andersson, 1967; Pálsson, 1975: 15). Some argue for strong Christian influences (Pálsson, 1971; Turville-Petre, 1953: 54-55, 251). At one time Hrafnkels Saga was accepted as historical. Then saga scholars accepted Nordal's analysis which proved the impossibility of its being historical (Turville-Petre, 1953: 45). More recent analyses suggest that it might be historical by disproving many contentions of Nordal's analysis (Halldórsson, 1976). He concludes this saga is neither a reflection of heroic poetry nor a Christian story.

> . . . the author's view of life appears to be based, not on the ancient heathen belief in fate or on hero-worship, but on the experience which contemporary events have taught him. By his treatment the ancient Frey-worshipper is transformed into a thirteenth century chieftain who realizes that what really matters in the last resort is the aid of other men (Halldórsson, 1976: 74).

In addition to these family sagas which reflect the social realities of a stateless stratified society of chieftains and thingmen in the 10th through the 13th centuries, there is a group of later, more fantastic sagas which were written in the 14th century. The balance between entertainment and history of the family sagas is lost and there were "the dry factual records of annals . . ./and/ the translated romances of chivalry and the fantasies of the legendary sagas" (Boucher, 1981: 95). After incorporation into Norway, the Icelandic law code was replaced by Norwegian law, the chieftains with their reciprocal and voluntary ties to thingmen were replaced by sheriffs with allotted territory, "to administer or exploit". Church and secular power had been separated (Foote, 1963: 99). The transformation of the literature parallels the transformation of social reality. Fantasy becomes a central theme rather than the existential struggle of individuals in real situations.

The family sagas are about people. The complexities of the society are represented through the actions of the individuals. The legendary sagas do not represent social reality as such. They are not "about" people but, rather the viking ethos, heroes with fantastic abilities and powers, and romance (Pálsson and Edwards, 1971: 07). These sagas are more like mythology than accounts of daily life. Like mythology, they must have some relationship to social reality. Even the most fanciful imagination is limited by conditions, the logic of socially constructed reality.

It is clear that Gautrek's Saga is an exploration of the social relation of reciprocity. The saga was written in the first part of the 14th century when "saga authors were ceasing to explore the well-mapped history of early Iceland and instead were turning their attention to antiquity, to the remote and nebulous Scandinavian past with its vikings, valkyries, trolls, and demons" (Pálsson and Edwards, 1972: 20). The social reality of the period was one of Church and State. Reciprocity was no longer a central social relationship as it had been in the Commonwealth period. Perhaps this was the "message" of the saga, as it centers on a series of "abuses" of reciprocity. In earlier times when reciprocity was a central social, economic, and political relationship, it was not problematic. There was nothing to contrast it with. Only with the advent of non-reciprocal relations does reciprocity emerge as a category in contrast. As it emerges as a category, it is

available as a theme for saga writers to explore. This was only possible after reciprocity ceased to be a basic organizing principle for the society.

Figure 1 represents the genealogical relationships among the characters in the saga. The broken lines represent foster relationships.

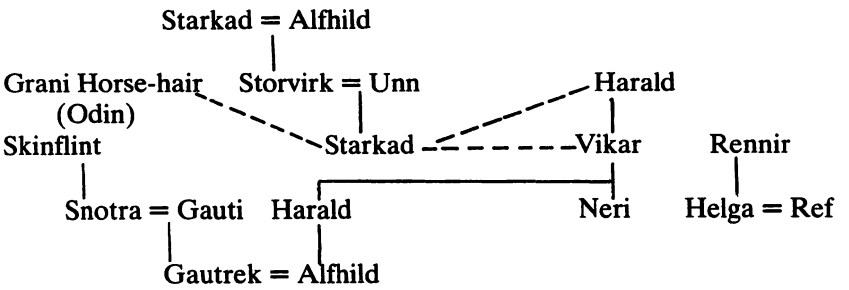

Figure 1

King Gauti is hunting and, pursuing a stag, becomes separated from his party and comes upon Skinflint's house in the woods where antisocial people live because of some misdeed or to protect "themselves against people's scoffing and sneering /and/ get completely away from it all . . ."(25). Skinflint cannot bear to see his possessions dwindle, and whenever anything untoward happens, the people of the household jump off a cliff to kill themselves.

> . . . we use it to cut down the size of our family whenever something extraordinary happens, and in this way our elders are allowed to die straight off without having to suffer any illnesses. And then they can go straight to Odin while their children are spared all the trouble and expense of having to take care of them.

Two significant themes are stressed. One is making fun of the concept of "going to Odin" and the other is the non-reciprocity between children and parents. There was never a cult of Odin in Iceland. Odin was a god of kings. (Turville-Petre, 1972).

The household slave had tried to bar the king's way into the house, so Skinflint rewarded him by allowing him to jump the cliff because Skinflint was "quite sure Odin won't ever receive the slave until he goes with him." (28)

The parents divide their property among the children and jump the cliff after the king has left. During his stay, the king has impregnated a daughter, Snorta.

Snotra gives birth to Gautrek, and one of her brothers, having touched her, thinks it is his fault. "They said it wasn't his fault, particularly since he'd repented and was wishing it had never happened." In addition to scoffing at the cult of Odin and the notion of a pagan afterlife, the saga writer now makes fun of Christianity as well.

Two snails crawled over the gold one of the brothers had inherited and blackened it.

> "It's a terrible thing," he said, "to suffer such a loss. If this should happen once more I'll be penniless when I go to see Odin. So I'd better pass on over Family Cliff just to cover myself in case it happens again. (31)

He and his wife take the jump. A sparrow ate a grain of another brother's cornfield. He and his wife took the jump rather than risk another such loss. Young Gautrek killed the other brother's ox, so he took the jump leaving only Snotra and Gautrek, who went to join the king. These comical characters prefer life with Odin to a life on earth where they might suffer some loss of possession. Clearly they represent antisocial and anti-reciprocal characteristics.

The king dies and gives his kingdom to Gautrek, who had always been obedient and loyal. The king reciprocates.

Now the story shifts to another locale to develop another set of characters. Starkad was a giant who had abducted Alfhild from Alfheim (the elf-world). Her father, the king, called on Thor to return her. Thor killed Starkad and returned Alfhild who had a child, Storvirk. He abducted Unn and had a son, Starkad. Unn's brothers

avenged the abduction by burning Unn and Storvirk in their house, afraid to attack lest Storvirk escape. King Harald raised Starkad.

The theme of anti-reciprocity is established again in this series of events entailing abduction of women and vengeance for their abduction.

Harald had a son named Vikar, foster brother of Starkad. King Herthjof killed Harald and conquered his kingdom and collected tributes throughout the country. Grani Horse-hair, one of Herthjof's followers, took Starkad and raised him. Vikar was put in charge of a warning beacon, part of a system to alert Herthjof in case of attack. Vikar and Starkad collected some troops and defeated Herthjof against great odds.

This series of episodes echoes the theme already established of anti-reciprocity and revenge. Someone takes something from someone else by force, and the victim takes revenge. Two types of abuses of reciprocity have now been established: taking by force and not being willing to offer anything to others.

Vikar and Starkad successfully defended their kingdom and expanded it. Vikar married and had two sons: Harald and Neri. "Neri was the wisest of men, and every piece of advice he gave turned out for the best, but he was such a miser that he could never part with anything without immediately regretting it" (36). King Vikar appointed Neri to rule over a place near King Gautrek's kingdom. Neri became friends with Gautrek and advised him.

Neri is the personification of the anti-reciprocity. ". . . his meanness is a household word, and all the most niggardly men, the most reluctant to give anything to others, have been compared with him ever since."(36). Neri now meets Gautrek, the offspring of an antisocial group hidden in the woods who prefer suicide to generosity, the beneficiary of his father's belated reciprocity in making him heir and king.

> Vikar and Starkad remained close. King Vikar had given him /Starkad/ a good many striking gifts, one of them a gold bracelet

> weighing three marks. In return, Starkad gave the king Thruma Island, which King Harald had once given to Storvirk, Starkad's father.

This illustrates more appropriate reciprocal relations. They were on an expedition when they ran into unfavorable winds. The divined to find when the wind would be favorable and were told Odin wanted a human sacrifice, to be chosen by lot. Vikar was chosen. That night Starkad's foster father Grani Horse-hair, took him to an island where the gods were debating. The foster father was Odin. Thor, offended that Alfhild had preferred the "brainy giant" to him, did not like Starkad and set many negative conditions for the rest of his life. Odin countered each with a positive condition. Odin, for instance gave him vast sums of money but Thor decreed he should never be satisfied with what he had. The gods agreed on these conditions and the foster father told Starkad, as they left, "You should repay me well, my foster-son, for all the help I've given you"(39). Starkad agreed. Odin said he wanted Vikar and arranged a scheme whereby Starkad tricked Vikar, with Odin's help, so that Vikar was killed. Everyone hated Starkad, and he had to flee to Sweden, and out of the saga.

In this episode there is a contradiciton between two demands for reciprocity. The reciprocal relationship with Vikar has been established. Then the reciprocity with Odin is established. The two demands contradict and Starkad is destroyed.

Gautrek married Alfhild, daughter of Harald, son of Vikar and brother of Neri. They had a daughter named Helga. There was no abduction, but a properly negotiated match. Gautrek gave feasts and presented people with gifts. Alfhild died and Gautrek grieved so much that he paid no attention to his kingdom but flew his hawk while sitting on Alfhild's burial mound.

Rennir, follower of Vikar, had an ox and a son. He prized the ox, but not the son, who never helped anyone. "His father was a very thrifty man and took a very poor view of his son's shiftless behavior. So Ref didn't earn his fame by any wisdom or bravery but rather by making himself the laughing stock of all his sturdy kinsmen."(38). Not contributing anything to the household of his father, Ref represents

anti-reciprocity, but anti-reciprocity in a normal situation, not the abnormal one of the suicidal forest dwellers in which the parents spared their children the necessity of reciprocity by killing themselves. Here, Rennir expects reciprocity and gets none. His son is a laughing stock because he offers none. The suggestion is that he is similar to the people of the woods who had gone there to escape others' scorn.

Ref takes his father's ox and goes to Neri, who "would never accept any gifts, for he was so mean he could never bring himself to give any in return" (43). Ref presents Neri the ox. Neri refuses it because he doesn't want to make a return gift. Ref says he will accept advice, that no return gift is necessary, so Neri accepts the ox and gives Ref a shield. The loss of the shield is so hard on Neri that Ref returns it, because he had no weapons to go with it. And Neri gives Ref a whetstone.

Neri advises Ref to take the whetstone to Gautrek, who sits on Aflhild's burial mound throwing stones at his hawk to make it fly. Ref was to put the whetstone in the king's hand when he reached behind him searching for a stone. The whetstone would make the hawk fly and the grateful Gautrek would reward Ref. Ref did as he was instructed and was rewarded with a gold ring. A whetstone for a ring. This is unbalanced reciprocity, and now the story explores this theme in a series of similar incidents in which Ref, on Neri's advice, visits various kings, presenting them with gifts until he parlays his original whetstone into a fortune because each king strives to outdo the other in lavish reciprocity. He won the name "Gift-Ref."

There was a plundering king named Olaf with eighty ships. Ref presented him gifts. Olaf's advisor said, "I wouldn't advise you to accept them if you don't know how to repay them," and objected. Olaf accepted Ref's gift and asked him to name what he wanted in return. Ref wanted the use of his fleet for a fortnight. With these forces, he approached Gautrek's kingdom. Neri, meanwhile, offered to negotiate for Gautrek, who accepted his advice. Ref was given Gautrek's daughter and the title of earl. Ref then dismissed Olaf and his men. Gautrek said, "I've been dealing with cunning men in this business, but I'll not break my oaths." (53).

Neri said to Ref, "It looks as though the ox has been paid off. All the same, I've been less generous than you deserve: for you gave me all you had, while I'm still left immensely rich." (53).

> King Gautrek had a feast prepared, and there Ref married Helga, King Gautrek's daughter. The king also gave him the title of earl. Everybody thought Ref a very enterprising fellow; he was descended from men of rank, and his own father had been a great viking and champion. So Ref ruled his earldom, though he didn't live very long.
>
> Earl Neri died suddenly, and there's nothing more to tell about him in this story. King Gautrek gave a funeral feast for him. By now the king himself was getting old and infirm. He'd won a great reputation for his generosity and bravery, but it's not said he was a very profound thinker. However, he was well-liked and exceptionally open-handed, and was the most courteous of men.
>
> And so we end Gift-Ref's Saga. (53).

Gautrek's original asymetric reciprocity toward Ref results in Ref's extortion of even greater prizes from him through trickery. The story indicates that asymmetric reciprocity is just as dangerous or foolish as non-reciprocity.

The story examines different sorts of reciprocal relations and describes the possible perversions of reciprocity, perhaps because the place of reciprocity in 14th century Iceland was changing. Ref's extortion is at best mock extortion. The abductions and raids that represent negative reciprocity in the early part of the story are replaced by the cunning of a miser. But the cunning has the threat of armed force behind it.

There is no resolution, no suggestion of appropriate reciprocal relations. Perhaps it is already too late for that. Perhaps there is another form of symbolism in which Ref and Neri represent Norway and Gautrek represents Iceland. Everything Norway has given Iceland has been overcompensated for and Norway in a bungling stupid and coarse fashion uses intimidation against Iceland at least from the time

of conversion until the final fall of the commonwealth. While this may be too much to attribute the author, Willis (1973) argues that the Fipa of Tanzania were conscious of the effects of European colonialism on their social relations and developed an indigenous critique through their oral tradition. Surely the change from the centrality of reciprocal social relations to hierarchic relations based on territory was a major shift in Iceland. In any case, Gautrek's Saga is an exploration of the theme of reciprocity in many of its possible forms, none of which was quite appropriate. In that sense it represents the social reality of the post-commonwealth colonial period of Iceland.

The writer of Gautrek's Saga examined thoroughly the logical permutations of reciprocal relations. Reciprocity entails giving, receiving, and obligation to return. One can expect others to feel obliged if they accept a gift and therefore expect a return. Likewise, one can receive a gift and, recognizing the obligation incurred, expect to return a gift. Two tables express all possible combinations.

Receive	Expect to Give	Give	Expect to Receive
+	+	+	+
+	−	+	−
−	+	−	+
−	−	−	−

There are four categories in each table, a total of eight. If one does not take or receive anything, by the logic of reciprocity, one would not expect to give; if one does not give, one cannot expect to receive. Therefore, these two categories (indicated by −,+ in the tables) cannot occur. That leaves six possible categories. Neri is perhaps the clearest example, for he refuses to receive gifts and does not expect to give any, does not part with wealth and does not expect to receive any return. He is total anti-reciprocal. Skinflint gives to hs family but expects no return, hence he is ready to kill himself before he must rely on the reciprocal generosity of his children. In this he differs from Neri, but he is like Neri in that he does not expect or wish to give anything to anyone outside his family or expect to receive anything from them, so he has withdrawn from society to live an isolated life in the backwoods. Neri is also opposed to Gautrek and the other kings as well as Vikar and Starkad all of whom receive generosity and respond

to the obligation to reciprocate. Neri is also opposed to those like Vikar, Odin (Grani Horse-hair, foster father of Starkad), Rennir (father of Ref), and Ref who give and expect to receive. Rennir expects Ref to return his generosity by contributing to the work on the farm, but Ref show his similarity to the abductors and raiders by receiving with no expection of returning anything until Rennir throws him out. Ref certifies this classification by taking his father's most prized possesion, his ox, when he leaves.

Starkad contrasts with Ref in his relations with his foster father, Odin. When Odin makes a request, Starkad accedes.

The following table summarizes the characteristics of the characters:

Character	Receive	Expect to Give	Give	Expect to Receive
Vikar	+	+		
Starkad	+	+		
Gauti	+	+		
Gautrek	+	+		
Abductors	+	−		
Ref	+	−	+	+
Neri	−	−	−	−
Skinflint	−	−	+	−
Rennir			+	+
Odin			+	+

Table 1

In terms of these formal similarities and contrasts, Neri is the central character of the saga. This is clearer in Figure 2, which shows each formal contrast as a solid line.

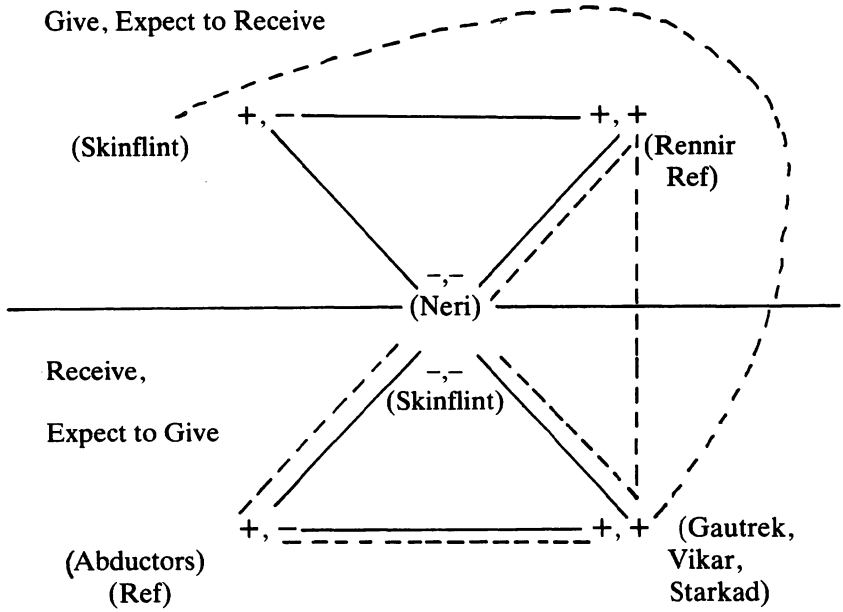

Figure 2

The broken lines indicate connections in the narrative. Some possible relations are not made in the narrative, for instance between the upper left category (Skinflint) and the others, or between the lower left and upper right. Skinflint, Neri, and Ref occur twice, they have dual roles in the formal scheme. This allows the saga writer to suggest connections without making them directly in the narrative. For instance, the fact that Ref occupies both the upper right and lower left formal positions obviates the necessity for a narrative connection. The saga writer even points up some of the contrasts, as for instance, between Ref, Rennir and Skinflint. Ref receives from his father but refuses to contribute and is therefore a laughing stock. Skinflint has withdrawn from society because of his anti-reciprocal nature. The saga writer points out that such isolated people were escaping the scorn of others, thus making the relationship with Ref.

In spite of his thoroughly misanthropic formal position, Neri did receive, though reluctantly Ref's stolen ox, and did return him a

whetstone. The reciprocal balance is absurd. By the end of the saga, Neri can claim that the ox is repaid, but even then denies responsiblity for it, affirms his misanthropy by pointing out that he is still immensely wealthy even after this sham reciprocity. The saga writer is careful to restate Neri's formal role in the story with this dialogue.

The saga writer contrasted and compared each possible kind of reciprocal relationship. I have shown why this was an important issue just at the time the saga was written. Beyond being a decadent fantasy saga, Gautrek's saga is a lesson in reciprocity.

This much is clear from the structural analysis and the narrative itself. There is another theme to the saga, the relations of people to the supernatural, especially to Odin. The saga clearly ridicules the Christian notion of repentance. The pattern of relations with Odin is opposite that of relations with people. Skinflint, who has withdrawn from society to avoid having to be involved in reciprocal relationships, who does not want to part with anything to another person, gives everything to Odin. Vikar honours his reciprocal obligations to other people and is generous. When Odin demands *his* life, he refuses to give it. The opposition is clear. People who give nothing to other people will give much to gods; people who relate well with people will not. Starkad proves the point. He is directly involved in social relations with Odin and feels obliged to honor his request for reciprocity. Honoring the request by helping to sacrifice Vikar ruined Starkad's life. Destruction is the lot of people who take the gods seriously. Because the saga is anti-pagan does not mean that it is Christian. I think it is equally anti-Christian, that it is anti-religious.

The writer of Hrafnkel's saga made the same point earlier. Hrafnkel is antisocial and anti-reciprocal, but very religious in the cult of Frey. This leads him to an otherwise unmotived killing, and ultimately to his loss of his chieftaincy. He renounces Frey and all gods, engages in a campaign of reciprocity and public relations, builds a following, and restores his position. People who follow the gods are destroyed; people who relate to gods do not relate well with people; people who relate well with people do not relate with gods. Again, because the saga has an anti-pagan aspect does not make it a bible story as Pálsson (1971) argues. Hrafnkel simply learns that it is better to

make friends with people than with gods. He then uses his new power to support his own interests, even engaging in further unmotivated violence. He undergoes no character change as Andersson (1967) suggests, but simply a change of tactics (Halldórsson, 1976: 73-74).

Gautrek's Saga explores the logic of reciprocity among people by examining each logical possibility. It was written in an age when reciprocal relations were being supplanted by a state system of power. Perhaps this is the reason it reaches no clear resolution, but simply explores possibilities. The saga is also clearly anti-religious, both anti-Christian and anti-pagan. This might be a reflection of the fact that the enthusiastic Christians in Iceland were systematically destroying the roots of social, economic, and political structure of the society. (Sveinsson, 1953).

NOTE

1. I completed most of the work on this paper while doing research in Iceland supported by a fellowship from the University of Iowa and a grant from Sigma Xi. I thank Gísli Pálsson lecturer in anthropology, University of Iceland, who read an earlier draft of the paper and offered useful suggestions.

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