NEGOTIATING THE VALUE OF THINGS: GIFTS AND COMMODITIES IN RURAL ETHIOPIA

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This paper examines the interactive process determining the valuation of things among farmers in rural Ethiopia. Nowadays, in highland Ethiopia, while most villages cultivate cash crops, people do not simply regard them as commodities but, rather, negotiate their crops' meaning and categorize them as either gift or commodity. I argue that people's actions decide the value of things, causing fluctuations in the boundaries between economic spheres, fluctuations that are reflected in the contexts of their interactions.

In the village where research was conducted, people usually shared food crops, such as maize and taro, particularly with close relatives and poor villagers. At the same time, they had to make their living by selling crops such as coffee and vegetables at the market. As most crops can be both sold for money and shared with others, there is not necessarily a clear distinction between "cash crop" and "subsistence crop." Crops can therefore be both "gifts" and "commodities," according to the situation at the time. This gives rise to the question: how do people manage to balance sharing and giving? This paper presents cases to illustrate the relationship between sharing with others and self-provision.

These cases indicate that the same crop can be treated as "distributed wealth" and "occupied wealth," depending on the context of the individuals' interaction. In the village, relatively wealthy individuals constantly felt pressured to share wealth with their kin and poorer neighbors, while the poor tended to demand their share of cash crops by behaving as if wealth should naturally be distributed. In some cases, however, people successfully managed to change the social meaning of crops from wealth that is to be distributed, to wealth that is to be kept. For example, it was observed that, on one occasion, a farmer sold sugar canes, a common market commodity, before they were ripe in order to avoid any further distribution. Turning the sugar cane into cash before they had even been harvested was a strategy of the wealthy, because it was harder for the poor to demand money instead of crops. This shows that the value of crops is not fixed in advance, but can be changed through people's interactions.

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