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The gift of free money: on the indeterminacy of unconditional cash transfers in western Kenya

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In the area surrounding the western Kenyan market town of Kaleko, almost half of the households targeted by the NGO GiveDirectly refused to participate in an unconditional cash transfer programme. Based on interviews and repeated visits to Kaleko over the last ten years, the article illuminates the reasons for the high refusal rate. Instead of understanding it as a technical problem to be fixed, the article situates it in local understandings of the economy as relational. Observing that different actors understood the transfer differently (e.g. as embedded in market exchanges with occult actors, asymmetrical gift relations, or political redistribution schemes), the article concludes that it was difficult for GiveDirectly to control how its cash transfer programme was interpreted locally because it did not accept the paradoxical nature of 'the gift of free money'. If actors oppose money conceptually to the free gift, interpretations of unconditional cash are bound to be multiple and the transfer will remain indeterminable.

Osiepe mabeyo yudo tek [Good friends are hard to find]

Musa Juma 'Oyoo Daktari'

On a hot morning during western Kenya's dry season, I was out collecting information with Samuel Muga,[1] a former field officer of the North American non-profit research organization Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA). We had reached the homestead of our next respondent later than we had anticipated. Unexpected rainfall had turned sections of the rough road into ponds and we had to take several detours on our walk through the densely populated area around Kaleko, Samuel's ancestral home and my long-term ethnographic fieldsite situated in Homa Bay County. We had teamed up in order to answer a question that we were both intrigued by: why did almost 50 per cent of the inhabitants of Homa Bay County reject the unconditional cash transfer offered by the US NGO GiveDirectly (GD – GiveDirectly 2016*b*; cf. Weller 2016)?

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The homestead head who belonged to those who had rejected GD's unconditional cash transfer of US$1,000 welcomed us and invited us to sit outside his house. Immediately after we had started with the first, more structured part of our interview, he shook his head and told us that it was unnecessary for us to know his name. Subsequently, he also refused to give us any demographic or quantitative data about his family or livelihood. During the rather informal part of the interview, he told us that his father as well as his church leaders from the locally popular church of Seventh-day Adventists had taught him not to take anything for free (*nono*). This, he concluded, was the reason for his refusal.

After finishing our interview, we informed him that we had brought 'something small' (*gimoro matin*) 'to say thank you' (*goyo erokamano*) for the time he had spent with us. Samuel had suggested following this protocol of semantically decommodifying the recognition of our respondents, which was a practice he was familiar with from his ten-year-long experience with IPA, during which he had also been responsible for conducting surveys on behalf of GD in Siaya County. Before we started the interviews, we had, however, agreed that 1 kilogram of sugar, the usual *gimoro matin*, was a commodity which many *jo*-Kaleko ('inhabitants of Kaleko') would not consider equivalent in value to the time they gave us for the interview. We thus decided to substitute the pack of 1 kilogram of sugar with 500 Kenyan shillings (KSh, roughly US$5 and slightly more than the daily casual labour wage rate), thereby offering our respondents a monetary recognition that we did not frame as a payment but explicitly as an appreciation of their willingness to sacrifice time. After we had made our offer and had repeated that we were not paying him (*ok wachuli*) but merely offering a 'token of appreciation', the homestead head started laughing and told us that he never understood the 'rules of the other side' (*chik ma loka*) and why everybody from there wanted to give him something although he, the host, should have given us something. Waving around and pointing at his small house in need of renovation, he continued laughing and told us that we should leave now. On our way to our next respondent, Samuel shook his head: 'Only people like him, deeply rooted in tradition, refuse to take free money'.

In this ethnographic encounter, all three obligations identified in Mauss's famous *The gift* (2016 [1925]) – i.e. the obligation to give, to accept, and to reciprocate gifts – were violated. As much as our host did not have enough money to offer us something like tea with bread, he decided that he would not be willing to receive our 'token of appreciation'. He thereby did not allow us to reciprocate for what he had given us: valuable scientific data for which he had, although his name remained anonymous, given us consent. At the same time, our own practice of semantically decommodifying our monetary 'token of appreciation' illuminates the intricacies of human exchange relations and the difficulties of finding the proper 'ethical gift' (Biruk 2017) in contexts where we, as anthropologists, depend upon research assistants and informants. This article analyses the refusal to accept unconditional cash transfers against the background of the literature on gift exchange, which has, time and again, argued that economic transfers cannot be understood without considering their fundamentally relational nature, no matter whether we are dealing with commodities (Gregory 2015), forms of redistribution (Polanyi 1971 [1957]), charity (Hanson 2014; Parry 1986), or gambling (Pickles 2020), among other transactions.

The article's findings are based upon evidence gathered during fifteen long interviews with recipients of GD's cash transfer, three former field officers of IPA and GD, villagers who rejected the offer, as well as locals who could not participate in the cash transfer programmes because they did not fit GD's eligibility criteria. Ethnographically unpacking these interviews, I suggest that it is necessary to take a more nuanced view on GD's activities and the craze for unconditional cash transfer programmes more generally and analyse the latter against the background of the anthropological literature on the gift.[2] This is considered urgent as most of both the affirmative and the critical literature on cash transfers discusses the latter in light of an explicitly monetary framework and thereby eclipses the gift character of free money (cf. Garcia & Moore 2012; Olivier de Sardan & Piccoli 2018).

If unconditional cash transfer programmes want to be successful, they must therefore take into account their own entanglement with the anthropologically well-known ideology of the free gift (Douglas 1990). As argued for by Derrida (1991), this ideology of the free gift gives birth to a paradox. A transfer can only become free and unconditional if the source of the gift is anonymized and the gift transacted in an unmediated way. The anonymization of the giver, however, results in the non-reciprocability of the gift, which thereby becomes morally and ethically 'disquieting' for the recipient (Bornstein 2012; cf Laidlaw 2000: 617-18). Arguing that GD's unconditional, impersonal, unexpected, and digitally transacted cash transfers resemble Derrida's free gift, which O'Neill characterized as 'unconstrained, … asocial and unconscious' (1999: 134), the article offers ethnographic evidence on how *jo*-Kaleko dealt with free money's two-fold indeterminacy: who gave us this money? How should we use it?

Different actors in Kaleko answered these questions in different ways, but all of them tried to embed GD's 'free money' into transactional modes they were familiar with. Some chiefs, field officers, and respondents aimed at creating the illusion of an ongoing and personal gift relation; politicians and church leaders viewed it as an attack on their own privilege to decide upon how monetary redistribution is organized; and many *jo*-Kaleko interpreted it as a tit-for-tat exchange of money against the blood of one's children. Through remodelling the unconditional cash as a market exchange, an ongoing and future-orientated gift relation, or a form of redistribution, different actors aimed at accomplishing different things. However, and in contrast to GD, which, like most neoliberal capitalists, understands unconditional cash as a context-independent techno-fix, all actors (re)framed unconditional cash as a relational entity embedded in and crystallizing social relations.

GD's cash transfers were thus not what the donors had been promised: a free and unconditional transfer to the poorest. Rather, they were many things at once: a 'gift multiple', in the sense of Annemarie Mol's (2002) ethnography on how arteriosclerosis is enacted as multiple in a Dutch hospital. Eclipsing free money's relational nature by rendering the giver anonymous and the transfer unconditional made the transaction eerily indeterminant. Consequently, different actors multiplied the transaction's relational nature in a variety of different directions. Such a more practice-orientated perspective taking into account the ultimately relational nature of economic transfers allows us to understand why presenting what has become one of the most important local commodities, money, as a free and socially disembedded gift poses massive challenges in a place such as Kaleko into which money had been introduced as a commodity one had to work for in order to survive (Fouksman 2020). Before I describe several examples of how *jo*-Kaleko multiplied the eclipsed relationality of GD's cash transfer, I shall introduce GD and the ways in which *jo*-Kaleko have been exposed to money and how local interpretations of money changed in the course of the twentieth century. This allows me to situate historically the ways in which GD's cash transfer programme is interpreted in Kaleko.

GiveDirectly: detaching the gift from social relations

Fuelled by capital from philanthrocapitalists like Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz, whose foundation Good Ventures donated US$25 million, and by a multitude of smaller donations from the average donor, GD has handed out over US$300 million to 500,000 poor families in Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, the United States, and Liberia since 2009. In western Kenya alone, GD has 'distributed millions of dollars to 20,000 individuals living across 197 villages' with the help of Kenya's celebrated FinTech (financial technology) miracle M-PESA, a mobile money transfer service. The inhabitants of western Kenya thereby, willingly or not, assumed a crucial role in the social engineering dreams of a few philanthrocapitalists (Eikenberg & Mirabella 2018). Testing the feasibility of what Fouksman and Klein call the 'conceptual cousin' (2019: 492) of the much-heralded Universal Basic Income, namely unconditional cash transfers, apparently justified highly localized interventions in an area that has become a hotbed for interventions of all sorts, not the least because it feeds the Western imaginations of needy Africa: a patriarchical, polygamous, rural, and relatively poor community that has been massively affected by the HIV epidemic. Consequently, since the 1990s, western Kenya has been flooded by NGOs working and agitating for the empowerment of women, the use of antiretroviral therapy, the destigmatization of HIV/AIDS, or the restructuring of local foodways.

The turn towards unconditional cash transfers is, however, not GD's only trademark. The NGO also claims that the beneficial effects of their programme have been proven by scientific and 'rigorous evidence'.[3] The latter has been furnished by IPA and, later, also by the Nairobi based non-profit research and advisory firm Busara, who 'remodelled' the cash transfer programmes as randomized controlled trials (RCTs). This validation of the programme through empirical data, so GD believed, would circumvent the problem of trust highlighted in Neumark's (2020) study of an unconditional cash transfer programme in an informal settlement of Nairobi (cf. Bornstein 2012: chap. 2). In light of robust evidence, donors would have to fear neither that recipients would use the money irrationally or recklessly (e.g. by spending it on alcohol or on gambling), nor that the intervention would cause inflation.[4] By allowing donors to 'give directly' to needy recipients who are, as proven by the scientific evidence, worthy of the gift, GD attenuates the 'tension between giving away to proximate strangers in need, and giving to organized charity that is regulated by accounting systems' (Bornstein 2012: 20), so that 'impulsive philanthropy' is no longer 'condemned as being outside of reason' (2012: 24).

Although GD tries to integrate cash transfers into RCTs during which GD's standard transfer – a one-time transfer of US$1,000 in three instalments of US$100, US$500, and another US$500 – might be altered depending on the research question, many recipients just receive money without participating in an RCT. In both cases, however, the general procedure is similar. After approaching the local chiefs and subsequently 'sensitizing' the local population in a village meeting (*baraza*), GD identifies the poorest households[5] in the respective regions according to different criteria and with the help of village elders. Initially, GD used the presence of grass-thatched roofs as their only criterion. However, in Homa Bay County, which GD penetrated in 2015

(GiveDirectly 2015), very few homes still have grass-thatched roofs. This forced GD to experiment with a wide variety of different criteria (e.g. different poverty indexes or community-based targeting; cf. GiveDirectly 2016*a*), which led to confusion among *jo*-Kakelo. Several of our respondents, for example, assumed that enrolment depended on performing well in the survey conducted after the *baraza*. During this survey, field officers visit every household in the respective area in order to clarify which household is eligible. Once this has been done, the enrolment process begins. Recipients need to consent to their participation and are instructed on how the transfer will be enacted. In case they do not possess a mobile phone, GD offers one and deducts the cost from the total amount of money transferred. During the transfer phase, GD engages in several forms of auditing such as telephone calls in order to secure that everything works as planned.

Riding the waves of enthusiasm for effective altruism, behavioural economics, RCTs, and FinTech (cf. Bateman, Duvendack & Loubere 2019; Kusimba, Yang & Chawla 2016), it is unsurprising that the international press coverage of GD has been positive.[6] As the enthusiasm for charity organizations backed up by RCTs and robust scientific evidence might be further fuelled by the decision to give the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences 2019 to the rising 'randomistas' Abhihit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer (cf. Donovan 2018) – a Nobel Prize the Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation* has called 'truly a Nobel for the people' (Byatta, Asman & Nekesa 2019) – a closer ethnographic look at what happened on the ground appears to be timely.

Although GD portrays the high refusal rates in Homa Bay County as an exception, I argue that the shortcomings visible there point to underlying structural problems applicable to other areas as well. The main problem, I argue, lies in GD's unwillingness to deal with the paradoxical nature of its cash transfer, which is framed as unconditional and anonymous. In contrast to what *jo*-Kaleko have been experiencing since colonial times, GD's money pretends to be unimplicated in hierarchical social relations. GD's 'free money', like Derrida's (1991) perfect gift, thus constitutes a transfer whose relational character is negated. This negation leads to a proliferation of different relational offers and explanations brought forward by local actors. The respondent who refused to tell us his name and did not accept our 'token of appreciation' is a case in point here. Instead of engaging in relationalizing GD's transfer, he decided it would be best not to be drawn into any relation whatsoever. Refusing to give us hints about his own social relations, which we could have probably inferred from his name or birthplace, blocking further contacts by not handing out his mobile number, and not allowing us to draw him into our potentially existing circle of economic dependants were strategies of reflecting back what he conceived of as GD's anti-relational nature. Before I offer further ethnographic data on how other *jo*-Kaleko framed GD's cash transfers, it is necessary to take a closer look at how they have understood money since colonial times.

From bitter to sweet and back? A short history of how money became normal in western Kenya

The patrilineal and patrilocally organized *jo*-Kaleko have been in contact with banknotes and coins for over a hundred years. The colonial administration drew them into global value chains and local development plans by demanding compulsory labour and, from 1901 onwards, taxes. In order to pay these taxes, *jo*-Kaleko had to sell their agricultural produce or become labour migrants. From the start, colonial authorities marked Luo from Homa Bay County as 'thriftless and lazy' (Annual Report for South

Kavirondo 1909; Kenya National Archives [KNA], Folder DC/KSI/1/1) and as being sceptical about external monetary innovations: 'The circulation of so many different denominations of coinage and notes during the year has been looked on by the native as another complex form of arithmetic attended with a risk of being cheated by traders and sophisticated natives' (Annual Report for South Kavirondo 1922; KNA, Folder DC/KSI/1/2). Colonial authorities thereby laid the foundation for the stereotype of the economically irrational western Kenyan that, in its contemporary form of the flashy Luo, continues to dominate the Kenyan cosmos of ethnic stereotypes until today. Some Dholuo-speaking elites, however, used their newly gained monetary wealth to set new standards of living and introduced indexes of a successful migratory life, such as Samuel's paternal grandfather, who, trained as a carpenter, brought European-style furniture, clothes, and new recipes for food from Nairobi and emphasized the necessity of formal Western education.

Luo's relation to money has also been the focus of anthropological observation due to the work of Parker Shipton, who started fieldwork close to Homa Bay County in the 1980s. After scholars such as Paul Bohannan (1959) had argued that money has a corrosive influence on 'traditional' societies in the 1950s, anthropologists increasingly highlighted the complex and diverse ways in which local actors dealt with money's allegedly inherent potential to abstract and commensurate (e.g. Bloch & Parry 1989; Taussig 1986). In this context, Shipton published a short book entitled *Bitter money: cultural economy and some African meanings of forbidden commodities* (1989), in which he observed that, not far from Kaleko, people talked about *pesa makech* ('bitter money'), which referred to money gained by theft, by windfall,[7] or through the sale of commodities that were not to be sold: ancestral land, gold, tobacco, and cannabis. Spending 'bitter money' on bridewealth, for example, could cause the death of cattle or the infertility of brides. The money was, like other stolen goods, unreproductive. The bitterness, however, was a property not of the money itself, but of a disordered social relation. It could therefore be removed through an elaborate ritual reorganizing the social relations of the homestead (Shipton 1989: 40-2).

In contrast to the above-mentioned work on the effects of monetarization from the 1950s, and comparable to other anthropological analyses from the 1980s interested in how communities at the peripheries of the global capitalist system deal with money's individualizing potential, Shipton highlighted the multifaceted or 'polythetic' (1989: 55) nature of 'bitter money'. He concluded that through the narrative of *pesa makech*, his interlocutors had neither voiced their total resistance towards nor fully embraced what he calls 'possessive individualism' (1989: 66). In contrast, they had opened up a space to deal with money's potential to advance 'possessive individualism' in a context-dependent and historically specific way: 'In the 20th century the Luo have tasted money and private property as never before, and refused to swallow these ideas whole' (1989: 67).

It is thus unsurprising that I came across a variety of different and related classificatory terms, such as *pesa marach* ('bad money'), *pesa nono* ('free money'), and *pesa mamit* ('sweet money'; Schmidt 2017), when I returned to Kaleko almost twenty-five years after Shipton had published his book. While *pesa marach* referred to banknotes and coins that were bewitched and caused the owner to make disastrous decisions such as spending the night with a prostitute, *pesa nono* described money given to *jo*-Kaleko by politicians. Some viewed such exchanges as legitimate exchanges of money for votes, while others framed them as undeserved and not grounded in 'hard work' (*tich matek*). *Pesa mamit* appeared to capture the common understanding of money that also became manifest in phrases like 'money is money'. Not unlike 'bitter money' in the 1980s, 'sweet money' mainly denoted money gained from the sale of ancestral land. It was, however, no longer conceived of by the majority of *jo*-Kaleko as affecting entities necessary for maintaining and establishing social relations, although sales of land were and are still looked down upon and considered problematic. *Pesa mamit*'s sweetness thus had two sides. On the one hand, it allowed the seller to quickly gain money in case of, for example, health emergencies, such as the chemotherapy of one of Samuel's classificatory brothers. On the other hand, it seduced the seller to purchase unnecessary commodities such as in the case of a mototaxi driver who sold land to fly from Kisumu to Nairobi and back the same day – a story frequently told in Kaleko.

Since Shipton studied *pesa makech* in the 1980s, *jo*-Kaleko have thus continued to create narratives and cultural classifications of money that allow them to criticize capitalism's 'possessive individualism' whenever they feel the latter threatens communal ties or is not attenuated by the simultaneous maintenance, creation, or strengthening of social relations. Inasmuch as *pesa makech* was considered a result of a transgression of social rules, *pesa mamit* cautions people to be prudent, financially smart, and to use money not only for individual purposes. By way of conclusion, one could say that, since the 1980s, local actors have recognized money's inherent capacity to improve or impair social relations and thus agreed on its fundamentally relational nature. As the next three sections show, GD's refusal to embed cash in locally relevant economic relations by obfuscating the source of the money and by withholding a specific purpose led to a proliferation of different ways in which local actors envisioned free money's relational character. These correspond to the three classic transactional modes explored in economic anthropology since Mauss and Polanyi: the barter or market exchange, the enduring gift relation, and the redistribution between patrons and dependants.

On 'blood money' and market exchanges with the devil

'People on the market and those I met going home told me that the money is blood money (*pesa remo*), but for me it would have just been money', said Millicent Ouma, a 40-year-old mother of eight who had not received anything apart from *gimoro matin* ('something small'), namely 1 kilogram of sugar. 'I hope that the money will come later', she lamented while sitting in her chair, looking much older than here age. Three years ago, a field officer had told her that she would receive money soon, but that she should spend it on *gik manenore*, 'things that can be seen'. This would allow GD to collect evidence for the programme's success when it returned. As Samuel had confirmed that Millicent belonged to the control group of an RCT and was thus never supposed to receive money, we asked her if she really believed that the money would come. She smiled shyly and told us that she trusted the field officers, but the village elder, who had never done a good job in her opinion, might have 'eaten' her money. The rich people and those who had received money from GD, she concluded, were the ones who spread the rumours. They did not want poorer members of the local community to reach their level of economic success.

The rumour about GD's unconditional cash being 'blood money' has forerunners in narratives about medical doctors collecting blood, as described by Geissler (2005) for Siaya County. It was, however, only one of many rumours circulating. *Jo*-Kaleko spread narratives about banknotes that turned into venomous snakes, demands of blood sacrifice by a sinister cult group called Illuminati, and mobile phone lines that established a direct link to the devil. As much as the cash had been given directly, the recipients would later be forced to sacrifice 'directly' one of their family members. Other rumours were even more bizarre: women who started laying eggs, which they sold at local markets and shops; a huge snake in Lake Victoria that vomited all the money given out by GD (cf. Smith 2006); mobile phones that could be charged under the armpit or found their way into the bed of the recipient if lost or thrown away – some *jo*-Kaleko threw their phones away in order to cut what they came to understand as the disastrous relation with GD; a pack of sugar that was placed in a cupboard only to transform into a crying baby overnight; money that replenished automatically; or a Norwegian cult that abducted local children and exported them to Scandinavia, where they were adopted into infertile marriages. All of these rumours, however, revolved around a familiar anthropological trope: the (anti-)reproductive potential of capitalist money circulating in an 'occult economy' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2008).

These rumours, which are epitomized in a phrase some recipients considered to be GD's motto, *Idak maber, to idak matin* ('You live well, but you live short'), revolve around the same paradox: money initially offered with no strings attached, but whose reproductive potential will soon demand blood sacrifice or lead to fundamental changes in one's own reproductive capacities. Many *jo*-Kaleko, both recipients and non-recipients, thus did not perceive the transfer as unconditional. Rather, the conditions of the transfer had not yet been made public. They existed in the form of what Cookson (2018: 11) has called 'shadow conditions' in her splendid ethnography on conditional cash transfers in Peru. By conceptualizing GD's cash transfer as the first half of a barter exchange with opaque, occult, and powerful forces that had withheld the true conditions in order to lure people into a binding but devilish contract, *jo*-Kaleko grappled with a transactional logic unknown locally: the gift of free money.[8]

Entering gift relations through anticipatory obedience

'Those were guidelines on how to use the money. It was important that whatever you did with the money was visible and could be evaluated', William Owino explained to us after we had asked him about the 'sheets of paper' (*kalatas*) other respondents had mentioned. These *kalatas* refer to a 'brochure' that GD field officers showed people during their first visits.[9] While the researchers claim that in order to 'emphasize the unconditional nature of the transfer, households were provided a brochure that listed a large number of potential uses of the transfer' (Egger *et al.* 2019: B1), all respondents could only remember 'good' uses of the money. The brochures did not show people drinking, dancing at funerals or weddings, or gambling the money away, but depicted houses, cattle, or shops (i.e. *gik manenore*, 'things that are visible').

Presenting the brochure created a double-bind situation during which potential recipients were told that the money was unconditional while they were 'nudged' (Thaler & Sunstein 2008) by pictures of measurable evidence of how to use the money. Several recipients understood this nudge as an invitation into a long-lasting relationship with a donor who would return with more money if the recipient invested it well. Several chiefs in Siaya County adopted a similar logic but turned the softer nudge of the 'brochure' into a politically reinforced instruction. As a former IPA field officer told me, these chiefs had summoned recipients to meetings where they announced that the donors would only return to the village if the recipients used the money to buy corrugated iron sheets in order to renovate their houses. One recipient personally known by Samuel, for example, initially wanted to use the money to start a business, but decided against it after the *baraza* because, to quote Samuel, 'the chief was on his neck and wanted him to build a house'. The chiefs thereby reacted towards GD's initially used criterion for participating in the programme already mentioned above. GD's decision that villagers were only eligible to participate if they lived in grass-thatched houses was interpreted by the chiefs as a clear sign that the NGO would not return to Siaya with more money in the future if the recipients were to prove resistant to advice and did not change their livelihood in accordance with its criteria.

While some *jo*-Kaleko interpreted GD's transfer as an invitation into a direct exchange relation with opaque and dangerous actors, others interpreted it as a test that could lead into an ongoing patron-client relationship between charitable donors and obedient recipients. In both cases, recipients as well as those who refused to participate were aware of their subordinate position in hierarchical power relations. People like Millicent who still had hopes that the money would one day end up in her phone were willing to adjust their behaviour so that it fitted with what they thought was expected from them by the donors. From such a perspective, free money is not really free, but, like gifts, an invitation into what Mauss called a 'contract by trial' (2017 [1928]: 448), which has the potential to turn a one-off transfer into a long-term relationship benefiting both partners if recipients pass the test and reciprocate with what could be called anticipatory obedience.

In contrast to GD's operational logic, which eclipses the social relations behind its unconditional cash transfers by enacting a form of gift fetishism where the social background of the transfer is muted, the recipients were aware of the inherently social and relational character of all economic transactions. As shown by my discussion of *pesa makech* and *pesa mamit*, economic behavior among *jo*-Kaleko still revolves around and is embedded in social obligations and duties that influence the trajectories of incoming and outgoing cash. These trajectories can potentially, as the next section shows, be redirected to an actor's own benefit. The depoliticized gift of free money, in other words, can also be repoliticized.

Redirecting the redistributive flow of direct cash

'Where are the 27 shillings for withdrawing 500? And don't forget to send me money from your book sales', Philemom Odongo jokingly complained after I had sent him our 'token of appreciation' through M-PESA. In contrast to the homestead head who refused to receive our money, Philemom even asked for more. He had delivered what we had asked for, an interview, and he had given us all the information he had. Would it not only be fair and our duty to add 27 KSh so that he would not be forced to use his own money for withdrawing his payment from a local mobile money agent? Philemom had been a recipient of GD's cash transfer programme and he had helped Samuel and me to identify potential respondents in the area as he is well known and well connected. With the help of GD's money, Philemom had built a massive permanent brick house overseeing a beautiful compound and large fields. His newly constructed house was an architectural testimony of his social position and constituted a stark contrast to the home introduced in the vignette.

Asked if he had ever believed in the rumours about *pesa remo* and wives who turned into snakes, Philemom raised his mobile phone and told us that he would have been scared if people had given him cash, but the money came through the phone, directly from a donor in 'America'. Philemon's understanding of GD's cash transfers as individual and unmediated donor-recipient relations constitutes another form of how the gift of free money had been multiplied around Kaleko. If recipients called a mobile phone number offered by GD, however, they would never be connected to an individual US donor. They would talk to field officers, who, as Samuel has told me several times, often get accused of mishandling or 'eating' money by recipients, accusations which they have to ward off by being understanding and taking over the unpaid duties of 'caring bureaucrats' (Neumark 2020).

One goal of GD, however, and as its name suggests, is to minimize intermediary actors as much as possible and to transform the cash transfers into direct and smooth transactions.[10] Both the directness and the smoothness of the cash transfers are among GD's trademarks and selling points as these traits assure donors that a huge portion (88 per cent) of their contribution flows into the mobile wallets of poor Kenyans. While the unconditionality of the transfer marks it as a non-market exchange and as free, the directness aims at distinguishing it from politically influenced redistributions. To prevent corruption, GD does not transfer money to local stakeholders such as Members of Parliament, community ward representatives, or other politicians. GD also does not rely upon local bureaucrats who collect and distribute the cash. The NGO, in other words, shies away from getting involved in local political patronage relations and economic networks of 'entrustment' (Shipton 2007).[11]

Despite GD's attempts to remain apolitical, it could not prevent one regional and democratically elected office holder from actively agitating against taking money from the NGO. At funerals, she had circulated rumours and several people told me that during church services and other community meetings she actively contributed to negative perceptions of GD. This, as one former GD officer assured me, was a result of the politician's failed attempt to become the NGO's local face. The politician had contacted GD's local office and tried to redirect the money to her own pockets in order to become the person responsible for the NGO's presence in the area. Facing challenges in acquiring enough funds for running her re-election campaign during the primaries for the 2017 general election, which she would eventually lose, might have been one reason why she wanted to prevent other people from bringing money into the area. GD's intention of distributing free money would make her look even more incompetent with regard to her ability to give handouts to potential voters. As a member of the most influential political party in the region, an active participant in the above-mentioned Seventh-day Adventist church, and a member of a well-known local clan, she attempted to use her political, social, and religious networks to redirect GD's redistributory channels.[12] When that attempt failed, she started spreading rumours like the ones discussed above. While the paradoxical transfer of free money was interpreted as a hidden market exchange of money against one's reproductive potential by some, other actors, like this politician, tried to gain access to the money so that they could claim to be the source. In other words, they tried to transform a gift of free money with no strings attached into a redistributed handout demanding political loyalty.

While several respondents believed that the mobile line they had been given by GD to receive the cash transfer linked them directly to individual donors in 'America', thereby producing a narrative of a proper charity relation between two individuals, others claimed that the money had been organized by Barack Obama, who became the alleged mastermind behind GD for many *jo*-Siaya as well as some *jo*-Kaleko. According to rumours that circulated widely during GD's first years in Siaya, Obama, whose father hails from a small village in Siaya County (cf. Carotenuto & Luongo 2016), had teamed up with Raila Odinga, an almost mythical Luo politician, in order to channel US funds 'directly' to western Kenya: that is, without passing through the central Kenyan political elite who had – in 2007 as well as 2013 – 'stolen' the elections from Raila. Consequently, some recipients did not agree with interpretations of the cash transfers as market exchanges with shadowy actors or invitations into long-term relationships of patronage. Rather, they conceptualized the transfers as reparations originating in Obama's attempt to recoup losses accumulated by the Luo community due to political injustices provoked by the actions of what many consider to be a corrupt Kikuyu elite (cf. Morrison 2007).

Such narratives, without a doubt and as attested to by several field officers who had been active in Siaya, helped to get the programme accepted throughout *piny Luo* ('Luo country'). They, however, also point towards an understanding of the free money not as a gift, but as a share in wealth that has been amassed with the help of an active kin relation that every Luo partook in fostering: the patrilineal connection between Obama and his father. The 'difference between receiving "assistance" and receiving … a "rightful" share' (Ferguson 2015: 188) is indeed a crucial one and reminds us that the success as much as the failure of cash transfer programmes can be based upon unforeseen causes that make valid predictions about, for example, scalability impossible. As it appears to be a small interpretational step from an unconditional cash transfer to a large programme of redistribution or a barter with the devil, taking over a more symmetrical perspective on the questions why programmes fail and why they succeed might prove helpful.

Indeterminable transfers and the perpetual denial of relationality

Money is either earned through hard labour, in exchange for commodities, given for free in intimate spheres of care that Marshall Sahlins famously called relations of 'generalized reciprocity' (1972: 193), or redistributed by someone who demands interest or loyalty in return. This, it appears, has been the lesson learned by *jo*-Kaleko through quarrelling with colonial taxation and the increasing necessity to find cash to pay for medical bills and the education of one's children in the post-independence era. The transition from *pesa makech* ('bitter money') to *pesa mamit* ('sweet money') illustrates this process neatly. Yet the tides of the development industry have turned once more. Free cash has superseded different credit programmes (Shipton 2010) and is on the agenda from Kenya to Southern Africa (Ferguson 2015) and many other parts of the world (cf. Fouksman & Klein 2019). Meanwhile, the blossoming RCT industry covers the Global South with localized interventions that leave the general political and economic structures in place and thereby help to justify an understanding of unconditional cash transfers as neutral techno-fixes. The multiple interpretations of GD's cash transfer should, however, not be depoliticized in the sense of James Ferguson's *The anti-politics machine* (1990). There is a danger in responding to local actors' ambiguous interpretation of unconditional cash transfers by introducing 'outreach teams' that utilize a 'variety of different tactics', terms employed by two chief operational directors of GD in a conversation with the NGO GiveWell (GiveWell 2016). This is shown by the Ugandan government's decision to ban GD from operating in Uganda, as announced in September 2020 (Kisakye 2020). Instead of rendering the cash transfer's indeterminacy as a technical problem to be fixed (Li 2007), I suggest that the multiplicity of interpretations indicates a structural problem of unconditional cash transfer programmes: their inability to disentangle unconditional cash from the paradox of the free gift.

As exemplified by the ease with which Samuel linked the refusal to take free money to a stubborn traditionality, not integrating the cash transfer into local understandings of the relational nature of economic activities is a failure akin to the proverbial preaching to the converted. If GD does not accept that the willingness to take something for free correlates with the culturally variable extent to which economic actors are able to understand themselves as individuals bearing the right to maximize profit whenever it is legally permitted, it can only hope that the 'free money' it hands out will be interpreted at face value and not remodelled as an enduring gift relation, a barter exchange, or the result of a redistribution. If we go back to Mauss, we cannot fail to see how his observations resonate with how *jo*-Kaleko perceived GD's unconditional cash transfers: 'The gift is … simultaneously what one must do, what one must receive, and yet what is dangerous to take. This is because the thing given itself forms a bilateral and irrevocable bond' (Mauss 2016 [1925]: 168). With whom is that bond formed? What are its conditions? Why is the transfer not embedded into local networks of redistribution? These might have been some of the questions *jo*-Kaleko would have liked to get an answer to, and yet they cannot be answered by GD as knowing the individual donor would set in motion intimate bonds of care, and getting involved with local politics would mean exposing the NGO to accusations of corruption. GD's unconditional cash transfer programme is thus entangled in the same confusions outlined and explored by Mauss almost one hundred years ago: a free gift that carries the potentially dangerous spirit of its unknown giver.

Unpacking the ethnographically rich interviews of recipients and those *jo*-Kaleko who have refused to be drawn into the unknown relational orbit of GD's unconditional cash, however, should have also reminded us that James Carrier's (1995) cautionary remark that anthropologists should not distinguish too drastically between gift and commodity societies remains a mere first step in the process of approaching economic transfers in an empirically more nuanced way. Instead of assuming that any observed economic transfer can be neatly analysed as, for example, a market or a gift exchange, *jo*-Kaleko's multiple interpretations of the same transfer exemplify the existence of what could be called 'indeterminable transfers'. Like Annemarie Mol's 'body multiple' in a Dutch hospital, any unconditional cash transfer in Kaleko always already existed as a 'gift multiple' haunted by its own perpetual denial to become relational. The unconditional cash transfer, 'forever unknown … is nowhere to be seen' and 'recedes behind the interpretations' (Mol 2002: 11-12) and transactional practices of *jo*-Kaleko who attempted, often successfully, to use the cash transfers to maintain, create, and alter social relations with neighbours, donors, politicians, potential voters, and, ironically, this anthropologist as well.

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NOTES

[1] Names of places and individuals have been anonymized throughout the article.

[2] Let me emphasize that I do not doubt the beneficial effects of unconditional cash transfers to households in western Kenya or elsewhere. In Kaleko, an area whose inhabitants suffer from a chronic inability to save due to lack of money, many recipients were able to improve their livelihoods by, among other things, renovating their houses, paying school fees, or starting a business. Beneficial effects of cash transfers, however, are quite predictable if one does not blindly subscribe to an economic theory obsessed with the supply side. I furthermore do not intend to scale up my insights in order to question the validity of GD's activities as such.

[3] All quotes are taken from the GD homepage (https://www.givedirectly.org/).

[4] Scientific studies already published discuss, for example, the spill-over effects of cash transfers on the whole region (Egger, Haushofer, Miguel, Niehaus & Walker 2019), the presence of negative feelings among non-recipients (Haushofer, Reisinger & Shapiro 2019), or the relation between cash transfers and individuals' stress levels (Haushofer & Shapiro 2016).

[5] GD's definition of a 'household' as a social entity whose members 'all eat from the same pot' creates several problems. On the one hand, it excludes bachelor huts, whose owners generally do not cook their own food. On the other hand, polygamous homes are treated as consisting of different households, which is questionable as well (cf. Schmidt 2020).

[6] In what follows, I do not focus on ethical and epistemological problems of non-medical RCTs conducted in vulnerable societies such as difficulties of randomization (cf. Ouma 2020), the problem of informed consent (people who refuse consent are probably affected by the intervention as well; cf. Hoffmann 2020); or the lack of a placebo treatment (cf. Barrett & Carter 2010; Reddy 2012). (For a more general critique of non-medical RCTs and the new prospect of Africa becoming the laboratory of the world, cf. Bédécarrats, Guérin & Roubaud 2019; Rottenburg 2009; Tilley 2011.)

[7] Shipton's informants would have probably classified GD's cash transfer as 'bitter' due to its character as an undeserved and unexpected 'windfall gain'.

[8] Comparable to Edelman's analysis of the recurrence of the devil in Central American peasant narratives about economic changes, the historical *longue durée* of several of these rumours suggests that they constitute a particularly evocative 'cultural matrix through which to view relations of power and exploitation' (Edelman 1994: 60). The trope of the snake, for example, has historical roots linking back to the millennial movement focusing on the serpent god Mumbo active in the area from the 1910s until the 1930s (Shadle 2002).

[9] These brochures were introduced after GD had received 'anecdotal reports' about people being coerced to use the money on corrugated iron sheets (GiveDirectly 2019). Despite these brochures, one of my respondents had claimed that the money needs to be used to build a very specific house with a specific amount of iron sheets so that GD would be able to identify the houses that had benefited from its programme immediately.

[10] In a report by the German radio channel WDR, a GD staff member regrets the necessity to involve intermediaries such as field officers to enrol recipients. He hopes for a fully digital form of enrolment where potential recipients could register on their own, thereby further reducing the probability of corruption (cf. Hellenkemper 2020).

[11] In order to get the permission to conduct their programme in western Kenya, GD almost exclusively has to deal with the colonial infrastructure of district commissioners and chiefs who are not elected locally but appointed. GD therefore can circumvent democratically elected representatives such as Members of Parliament or community ward representatives, who are much more entangled in local economic networks.

[12] According to local rumours, a local preacher had found a more ingenious way of redirecting GD's money. He allegedly told his followers that the only way they could get out of the devilish contract with GD was to hand over their mobile phones and M-PESA PIN numbers to him so that he could redeem their sins.

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Le don de l'argent gratuit : sur l'indétermination des transferts monétaires inconditionnels dans l'ouest du Kenya

Résumé

Dans la zone entourant le bourg de Kaleko, dans l'ouest du Kenya, près de la moitié des ménages ciblés par l'ONG GiveDirectly ont refusé de participer à un programme de transferts monétaires inconditionnels. L'article met en lumière les raisons de ce taux de refus élevé sur la base d'entretiens et de visites répétées à Kaleko au cours des dix dernières années. Au lieu de le comprendre comme un problème technique à résoudre, l'article le situe dans les conceptions locales de l'économie en tant qu'outil relationnel. Observant que les différents acteurs comprenaient le transfert différemment (par exemple, comme étant intégré dans des échanges de marché avec des acteurs occultes, des relations de don asymétriques ou des schémas de redistribution politique), l'article conclut qu'il était difficile pour GiveDirectly de contrôler la façon dont son programme de transfert monétaires était interprété localement parce qu'il n'acceptait pas la nature paradoxale du « don d'argent ». Si les acteurs opposent conceptuellement l'argent au don, les interprétations de l'argent inconditionnel seront forcément multiples et le transfert restera indéterminable.

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