

CONDITIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SILENT TRADE

John A. Price
University of California, Los Angeles

In 1903 P. J. Hamilton Grierson wrote The Silent Trade, A Contribution to the Early History of Human Intercourse. This work has stood as the classic record of early trading contacts where exchange took place without the face-to-face meeting of the parties to the exchange. However, the record of data on this kind of trade is still far from complete, and the development of theory to explain it is still inadequate. This article is an attempt to reopen the investigation of silent trade by a review of the most important data reported on the subject and by presenting a tentative theoretical scheme to explain why it developed.

For a certain period of time, on the fringes of civilization in Africa, Southeast Asia, and northern Europe and Asia, an important form of intersocietal economic exchange was "silent trade," an impersonal form of trade without oral communication or even face-to-face contact. Divergences in both time and place indicate that these regional occurrences are not historically related. They appear instead to be cases of the independent development of strikingly similar institutions under similar conditions, with some regional diffusion and some tenacity as a tradition over time. Two major varieties of silent trade are discernible: 1) a long distance type between traders from state societies and peoples from tribes or chiefdoms (e.g., Carthaginian - West African, Arab - Nigerian, and Chinese - Philippine) and 2) a short distance type between traders from tribes or chiefdoms and peoples from band organized societies (e.g., Bantu - Pygmy and early Malay - Semang).

It appears that the few cases purported to be silent trade that do not fit this classification, in fact, involve either oral communication or face-to-face contact and are therefore not silent trade but just

borderline cases. For example, Bogoras (1909:54) cites a Chukchee tradition of trade with the Eskimo. "They come to meet our traders on the border of the forest, and shout, "Let us trade!" The traders take a bundle of tobacco and fling it far away. "Tobacco, tobacco!" rings through the forest, but nobody is seen. After a while a bag filled with fox or beaver skins is flung from the forest.'" Mead (1930:118) suggests another borderline case for the Manus - Usiai trade: "In the old days, a lattice work was built across a stream, and silent bargaining between men armed to the teeth was conducted by floating taro downstream and flinging the purchasing fish upstream." Voegelin (1938:3) cites a case for Tubatulabal trade with the surrounding Indians in California that was probably face-to-face but lacking in oral communication. In the exchange between aboriginal societies that speak different languages the use of gesture communication and a few words for ideas like "let us trade," "I will give you this for that.," agreement, and disagreement is standard, but exchange without a face-to-face meeting of the parties is very rare and developed as a regional tradition only under certain conditions.

Ibn Batuta (1290:151) described silent trade in "the Land of Darkness" (probably northern Siberia) in the 1300's:

Each traveler arriving "at the Darkness" leaves the goods he has brought there and they retire to their camping-ground. Next day they go back to seek for their goods, and find, opposite them, skins of sable, minever, and ermine. If the merchant is satisfied with the exchange, he takes them, but if not, he leaves them. The inhabitants then add more skins, but sometimes they take away their goods and leave the merchants. This is their method of commerce. Those who go there do not know whom they are trading with or whether they be jinn or men, for they never see anyone.

The silent trade between the medieval inhabitants of Bolghar, north Germany, and the far northern and primitive Lapps may have been a tradition of long standing (Grierson 1903).

AFRICA

The area with the longest and most widespread tradition of silent trade is a zone across the center of Africa in which there was contact between foreign, civilized, long distance traders and the local relatively primitive tribes and chiefdoms. The most famous case comes to us from a Carthaginian description of trade along coastal West Africa,¹ presented by Herodotus (Beloe 1830:242-43):

It is their custom, on arriving amongst them, to unload their vessels, and dispose their goods along the shore. This done, they again embark, and make a great smoke from on board. The natives seeing this, come down immediately to the shore, and placing a quantity of gold by way of exchange for the merchandise, retire. The Carthaginians then land a second time, and if they think the gold equivalent, they take it and depart; if not they again go on board their vessels. The inhabitants return and add more gold, till the crews are satisfied.

The great florescence of silent trade in Africa was between the Arabs and tribes of West Africa, particularly in the areas of Nigeria, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. In reference to the Arab - Nigerian trade Shaw (1757:239) wrote in 1738 that the Arabs

still continue to carry on a trade with some barbarous nations bordering upon the river Nigar, without seeing the persons they trade with, or without having once broke through the original charter of commerce which from time immemorial has been settled between them. The method is this: at a certain time of the year (in the winter, if I am not mistaken) they make this journey in a numerous caravan, carrying along with them coral and glass beads, bracelets of horn, knives, scissors, and such like trinkets. When they arrive at the place appointed, which is on such a day of the moon, they find in the evening several different heaps of gold-dust lying at a small distance from each other, against which the Moors place so many of their trinkets as they judge will be taken in exchange for them. If the Nigritions, the next morning, approve of the bargain they take up the trinkets, and leave the gold-dust, or else make some deduction from the latter. And in this manner they transact their exchange without seeing each other, or without the least instance of dishonesty or perfidiousness on either side.

Lyon (1821) reported on a silent trade between the Arab traders from Fez and the people of the Sudan, and Cado Mosto (1844:294) related that the inhabitants of the kingdom of Melli receive salt from the Arabs for gold in this way. Diedrich Westermann (Die Kpelle, 1921:21-27, cited by Thurnwald 1932:150) gave a case for the recent development of silent trade.

The Gola had their fields tilled by the agricultural Kpelle, many of whom were living among them as slaves. A few decades ago the pressure exercised by the Gola was so severe that they completely dominated the trade between the interior and the coast, and vice versa, so that the Kpelle coming from the north were forbidden to travel through Gola country. The exchange of goods was effected by the Kpelle laying down their wares at a spot previously agreed, where the Gola took them over, leaving in return articles of corresponding value. This silent trade was always conducted at a distance from the villages, and the memory of this usage survives in the Kpelle word for market, dowo (bush).

Farther south in Africa some of the Congo Bantu trade with the neighboring Pygmies is reported as silent. Since these societies were living in close proximity using different parts of the same environment, the Bantu-Pygmy trade shifted over time into a more intimate symbiotic exchange with the Bantu supplying agricultural products to the Pygmies and the Pygmies supplying wild forest products to the Bantu. Burrows (1899:39) wrote of the Belgian Congo.

As a rule the pygmies settle near a village of some big chief, where they are sure to find extensive banana plantations. . . On his return from a day's hunting, small pieces of meat are carefully wrapped up in grass or leaves and the pygmy betakes himself to the nearest banana plantation. There he selects the bunch of bananas he requires, shins up the tree and cuts them down, affixing one of the small packets of meat to the tree-trunk with a little wooden skewer - by means of payment. . . This custom is recognized universally by the tribes among whom he lives: even to the extent that the pygmy will select a bunch of bananas long before he requires it, intimating his desire by shooting an arrow into the stalk.

Somewhat later Torday (1925:57-58) reported another variety of the Pygmy-Bantu trade.

To obtain vegetable food or iron (required for their arrows, or knives or spearheads) they use the most primitive form of barter known: an animal they have killed is deposited at night near the entrance of a village; next night they come to fetch the price, which they expect to find in the same place where they have put their game.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

The practice of silent trade in Southeast Asia became an alternative to regular barter under certain conditions with primitive people by early civilized commercial traders, whether they were Malays, Indians, Chinese, Islamized Indians, or Arabs. Europeans were never involved in silent trade here. They came comparatively late to Southeast Asia, when large trade networks had already been established and internal markets, transportation, and port towns were fairly well developed. While the Chinese and the local Malay speaking traders used silent trade, the small scale, time consuming, silent trade was probably seen by the Europeans as unprofitable. Silent trade is reported up until the 1890's between the Malays and the Kubu of Sumatra (Loeb 1935:282). Schmidt (1926) writes:

The Malay announces his presence by a signal and withdraws. Then the Kuba appear, deposit such wares as they mean to exchange, announce by signal that this has been done, and withdraw. Now the Malay deposits beside the Kuba wares as many of his wares as he intends to offer for what has been deposited by the Kuba. If both sides are satisfied each in turn takes away its goods.

There is no indication of when silent trade was first used in Southeast Asia, but it could have been very early. Possibly as early as 300 B.C. merchants and colonists from Tonkin, Annam, and South China moved through Indonesia bringing the tools and techniques of a bronze-iron age culture. Later, Han Chinese influences were felt that are seen archeologically today in stone-cist graves and Pasemah sculptures.

After the beginning of the second century colonists and Brahman and Indian Buddhist missionaries made a strong impact on Southeast Asian culture and thus on the forms of trade. After the fourth century fairly regular trade was established between China and India, and we see that Indian and even Arab merchants were traveling as far as Canton and other ports of trade along the coasts of China. The sailing routes went with the trade winds, going south before the northwest monsoon and returning north to China with the southwest monsoon. The usual routes kept near land when possible and followed the Asiatic coast, especially on a voyage from China toward India. However, in traveling toward China, especially when headed north of Canton for the Amoy-Fukien district of China, some ships traveled along the west coasts of Borneo, Palawan, Luzon, and Formosa.

It appears that, even in ancient times, silent trade was never more than a minor form of trade in the area. Within Southeast Asia the major flow of trade was with the rich and powerful kingdoms on the continent, and on Java and Sumatra. The forms of trade in these cases were more equal status and open bartering forms than silent trade. In most cases the early foreign trader had to deal directly with the representatives of a powerful chief or king even though commercial port facilities and market places were usually absent. Then too, there were commercial centers like the Sumatran state of Sri Vishaya, "a coastal state, a 'commercial power,' a 'sea power'. . . basing its might on the stapling of the international trade of Southeast Asia. . . Military and maritime force was used without hesitation to maintain that power. There were tributary overseas possessions, and overseas predatory expeditions" (Van Leur 1955:105,124). By the early 1600's Indonesia was exporting around 2.2 million pounds of spices (cloves, nutmeg, and mace) annually and probably very little of this was handled at any point by silent trade.

Beyer (1921:924-70) cites considerable material on the forms of Chinese trade in Indonesia and the Philippines without specifically mentioning silent trade. He mentions the increase of trade in Southeast Asia noted in the Chinese sources after the tenth century and that these accounts of Bruni, Sulu, Mindoro, and other Philippine Islands became numerous in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries. The early Chinese trade in Indonesia and the Philippines was carried on largely from ships trading along the shores with few Chinese settlements before the thirteenth century. In the thirteenth and later centuries the number of Chinese settlements increased rapidly. Beyer writes in reference to the San Hsu or "Three Islands" in the Philippines from a Chinese source during early contact times.

Whatever foreign traders (that is Chinese or Arabs) arrive at any of the settlements they live on board ship. . . The ships are moored in midstream, and they announce their presence to the natives by beating drums. Upon this the savage natives race for the ships in small boats, carrying cotton, yellow wax, native cloth and coconut-husk mats, which they offer for barter. If the prices cannot be agreed upon, the chief of the traders must go in person in order to come to an understanding. . . the foreigners still retain on board one or two natives as hostages. After that they go on shore to traffic, and when they have finished, they return the hostages.

In spite of the indications that it was a quantitatively minor form of trade, silent trade was apparently widespread and the context of this trade was quite similar from one case to the next. For example, Cole (1945:28) writes that in the Philippines

Chinese junks laden with silks, beads, iron, copper pots and gongs, and many kinds of jars came close to shore where they made their presence known by beating gongs. The natives would bring to the beach whatever they had to trade and then retire to a distance. The trader would then take ashore what they believed a proper amount of goods, and if this proved satisfactory they took the native articles and moved on to the next settlement.

Silent trade was used in Indonesia when trading with the Kubus of Sumatra and the people of Buru, Ceram, and the Aru Islands (Riedel 1886:15, cf. Forbes 1885:235).

The foreign merchants from Ternate and elsewhere lay down their goods in an appointed place, sound a gong, and retire. Then the shy natives bring their wares, and having placed them opposite the merchants' goods, sound the gong in their turn, and retire. The foreigners return, and, if satisfied with the native wares, take them away, leaving their own goods behind. The Ternate merchants call this transaction 'potage tagali vuru,'--going to savages in order to barter--in contrast to 'potage tagali damaroi,'--barter in the ordinary fashion in the presence of both parties.

The close distance type of silent trade also occurred in Southeast Asia in trade with the Semang of the Malay Peninsula and the Negritos of Northern Luzon. The Semang had "A certain amount of trade . . . with the Malay: wax, resin, gums, and other jungle products are exchanged for salt, beads, cloth, and metal articles. . . The timid Negritos would deposit their goods at an appointed spot and retire, returning in a few days to remove the articles which the Malays had meanwhile left in exchange" (Murdock 1934:93). Vanoverbergh (1925:421) reports this for the lowland Christian Philippine traders and the Luzon Negritos.

THE CONDITIONS OF SILENT TRADE

The most important condition is that silent trade was always intersocietal trade. The extent of social distance is vital to the patterning of the flow of economic goods and services in all societies and it was particularly important prior to the development of the modern impersonal market. That is, a sharing morality, local and intimate patterns of redistribution, and an affectively positive form of reciprocity obtains among close relatives and friends, but the exchange relations lose moral sanctions, intimate qualities, and positive affect as the parties involved are more socially distant. This occurs within

societies, but the continuum reaches well beyond one's own society to increasingly different societies. The range of exchange relations is all the way from the desire (backed by social and legal sanctions) to give freely to one's children without thought of return to the social encouragement of killing, enslaving, and plundering of one's enemies from alien societies.

However, a difference of societies is not a sufficient cause for the form of silent trade rather than regular barter. Apparently it is a combination of differences, an extreme extension of social distance, in the presence of a strong desire to trade, that creates this institutional island of neutrality that is so similar to the "port of trade" found in more advanced commerce.

One important difference that is typically found between the parties to silent trade is a difference of level in cultural evolution.² The Carthaginian, Arab, Malay, Chinese, and other long distance traders came from state societies and traded with people predominantly at the chiefdom or tribal level. At the still lower level of the band any intersocietal trade is extremely minimal so we find only a few groups such as the Pygmy and the Semang at this level in our sample. In these latter cases the advanced people with whom they traded tended to be simply local residents rather than long distance traders and this trade tends to shift over time to a symbiotic exchange of agricultural for forest products.

Differences of physical appearance in race as well as dress, hair style, etc. was characteristic of the parties to silent trade. If we can judge from wider ethnography, each party would consider the other as ugly and perhaps not fully human. Differences of language were always present and these differences were of a major order. That is, they are usually of different historically derived language families with basic differences in grammatical and phonemic structure.

Thus, social distance induced by differences in society, in evolutionary level, in physical appearance, and language set the stage for extremely tenuous contacts. Additionally, a concrete basis for fear between the parties to trade and certain geographical-historical factors entered in as pre-conditions for the development of silent trade. We shall also see that there appear to be conduct-conditions which allow for the maintenance of silent trade over time.

In the African and Southeast Asian cases we know that many long distance traders were involved in the slave trade. This was particularly important for the Carthaginians and Arabs so that the primitives had a good reason to avoid them in addition to the fear and misunderstanding that usually obtains between societies at this evolutionary level. In Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines, the primitives had the custom of taking heads as war trophies (Cole 1945:339). Thus, in this area, the long distance traders had good reason to avoid the primitives and when they did contact primitives they often took hostages to maintain the peace.

There are several facets of the history and geography of silent trade that suggest that regional diffusions have been important. First of all, silent trade is not found in the New World. It is found on the remote fringes of the civilizations of the Old World (northern Siberia, northern Europe, a broad zone across Africa, and Southeast Asia). Usually it has taken the form of civilized traders going out from the center of a civilization to the extreme fringes of the world known by that civilization. We do not hear of silent trade beyond that fringe in South Africa, Australia, or in the Pacific Islands. Also, there are a few hints of possible historical connections. The Carthaginian case may have a related precedent in northeast Africa in a silent trade that occurred between the early Egyptians and the peoples of Ethiopia (Grierson 1903). The Carthaginian and Arab customs are probably historically related. Although there is evidence of long standing and widespread trade with primitives in Southeast Asia prior to the arrival

of the Arabs, it is possible that the African Arab custom was brought to Southeast Asia by Arab traders.

In addition to the "pre-conditions" for silent trade, a few "conduct-conditions" were always present. Trade took place in each case according to a conventional system that developed, a social contract that assured the continuation of trade. Even though the amount "said" was extremely small and the transfer of information from one side to the next was very slow, there was communication between the parties about the initiation of trade and what was considered to be a fair trade. It was literally and not figuratively "silent." The Carthaginians used a smoke signal to indicate their readiness to trade and waited until the proper amount of gold had been deposited next to their goods before they took the gold. The Arab-Nigerian trade cited by Shaw took place at a conventional time and place and there was an opportunity to argue about equivalencies. The Malaysians and Chinese sounded a gong to indicate readiness to trade and again allowed for some silent haggling. In each case of long distance silent trade, the party with the first opportunity to declare an equivalence by taking their part of goods in the trade was the first party to lay out their goods: Carthaginians, Nigerians, Filipinos, and the merchants from Ternate. In the short distance silent trade with the bands of Pygmy and Semang we see a special type of silent trade with more of the character of gift exchange than barter.

NOTES

¹Macan (1895:146) suggests Senegambia or the Gold Coast as the site.

²For a discussion of these levels of evolution see Service (1962).

REFERENCES

- Beloe, William
1830 Herodotus. London, Jones.
- Beyer, Otley H.
1921 Early Chinese relations with Malay lands. Asia,
Vol. 21:924-70.
- Bogoras, Waldemar
1909 The Chukchee. Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural
History, Vol. 11, Part 1.
- Burrows, Guy
1899 On the natives of the Upper Welle District of the Belgian
Congo. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of
Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 28:35-47.
- Cole, Fay-Cooper
1945 The Peoples of Malaysia. New York, Van Nostrand.
- Forbes, H. O.
1885 A Naturalist's Wanderings in the Eastern Archipelago,
1878-83. London.
- Grierson, P. J. Hamilton
1903 The Silent Trade, A Contribution to the Early History of
Human Intercourse. Edinburgh, Wm. Green & Sons.
- Ibn Batuta
1929 Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354. Translated by
H. A. R. Gibbs. London, G. Routledge & Sons.
- Loeb, Edwin M.
1935 Sumatra, Its History and People. Vienna, Des Institutes
für Völkerkunde der Universität Wien.
- Lyon, George F.
1821 A Narrative of Travels in Northern Africa in the Years
1818, 19, and 20. London, J. Murray.
- Macan, Reginald W.
1895 Herodotus. London, Macmillan.
- Mead, Margaret
1930 Melanesian middlemen. Natural History, Vol. 30:115-30.
- Mosto, Cado
1844 Histoire des Voyages. Vol. 2.
- Murdock, George P.
1934 Our Primitive Contemporaries. New York, Macmillan.

- Riedel, J. G. F.
1886 De Sluik-en Kroesharige Rassen Tusschen Selebes en Papua.
's-Gravenhage.
- Service, Elman R.
1962 Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary
Perspective. New York, Random House.
- Schmidt, Max
1926 The Primitive Races of Mankind. Translated by Alexander
K. Dallas. Boston, Little, Brown & Co.
- Shaw, Thomas
1757 Travels. London, Oxford.
- Van Leur, J. C.
1955 Indonesian Trade and Society. Essays in Asian Social and
Economic History. The Hague, W. van Hoeve.
- Vanoverbergh, Morice
1925 Negritos of Northern Luzon. Anthropos, Vol. 20.
- Voegelin, Erminie W.
1938 Tubatulabal Ethnography. Anthropological Records, Vol. 2,
No. 1.
- Thurnwald, Richard
1932 Economics in Primitive Communities. Oxford University
Press.
- Torday, Emil
1925 On the Trail of the Bushongo. London, Seeley, Servie
& Co.