



DANCE AS A SOCIAL GIFT: A STUDY OF MARCEL MAUSS'S THEORY OF THE GIFT IN PERFORMING ARTS PRACTICE

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Abstract

This article discusses the relevance of Marcel Mauss's The Gift theory in understanding dance as a form of symbolic exchange in the context of performing arts. Based on a conceptual study and a performance anthropology approach, this paper highlights the main principle in Mauss's theory, namely the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate, which can be interpreted as a social structure that binds the relationship between dancers, audiences, and society. In dance practice, the act of dancing is seen as a "social gift" that contains moral, spiritual, and cultural values. The dancer's movements, expressions, and performativity function not only as aesthetic representations, but also as a means of communication and exchange of meaning that creates a reciprocal relationship between the performer and the recipient of the performance. Through an analysis of the social function of dance, this article shows that the performance process is a total social event (total social fact), as explained by Mauss, where the values of solidarity, empathy, and appreciation are realized through symbolic interaction. The concept of the "soul of the gift" (hau) in Mauss's theory is reinterpreted as the artistic spirit in the performance that fosters emotional resonance between dancers and audiences. Thus, The Gift theory not only enriches understanding of the social function of performing arts, but also offers a new conceptual framework for dance education and practice in the modern era.

Keywords: *The Gift Theory , performing arts, symbolic exchange, dance anthropology, social gifts.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dance is a form of human expression rooted in the social and cultural need to communicate through movement, rhythm, and symbols. Dance is not merely entertainment, but also a complex representation of identity, spirituality, and the social structure of society (Kaepler, 1978:32). In the context of performance anthropology, dance is seen as a social practice containing messages, values, and ideas embodied through the human body. Turner (1982:11) asserts that every form of performance contains ritual and symbolic dimensions that enable the process of social transformation, both for the performer and the audience. Thus, dance functions as a symbolic medium of communication that brings together individuals in the same social and cultural space.

Dance, like other performing arts, operates within a system of meaning that is inseparable from its social context. According to Schechner (2013:28), performance is "restored behavior" that is produced, represented, and accepted within a specific social framework. This means that each dance movement does not stand alone but is always linked to the cultural, moral, and spiritual values that exist within society. The communication process between dancer and audience is not only aesthetic but also social, namely a process of giving and receiving emotional, symbolic, and culturally meaningful experiences. Through this interaction, dance performances become a means of symbolic exchange that strengthens the sense of solidarity and connectedness between individuals (Turner, 1982:15).

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The idea of symbolic exchange is strongly related to Marcel Mauss's theory of *the Gift* in his classic work, *Essai sur le don (The Gift)* (1925). Mauss explains that in every archaic society, the act of giving, receiving, and reciprocating is not merely an exchange of goods, but also an exchange of values, honor, and spirituality. According to Mauss (1925:10–12), the practice of giving is a total social fact, encompassing all aspects of human life, including morality, law, economics, religion, and art. Such social acts serve to maintain social balance through the moral obligation to reciprocate. In this system, every gift is never neutral, but contains a "soul" or symbolic power, called *hau* by the Maori, which encourages the recipient to reciprocate in order to create social harmony (Mauss, 1925:16).

When the concept of *The Gift* is applied to performing arts practices, particularly dance, a new understanding emerges that art is not an autonomous individual activity, but rather part of a system of symbolic exchange within society. The dancer acts as a "giver" who presents the work, emotions, and meaning to the audience, while the audience acts as a "receiver" who responds through appreciation, interpretation, and emotional participation. This reciprocal action can take the form of applause, inner reflection, or even a shift in perception of the world. This reciprocal process, as Schechner (2013:31) explains, creates a dynamic relationship between performer and audience that shapes both an aesthetic and a social experience.

Dance has a social function closely linked to the principles of mutual cooperation, togetherness, and devotion. Soedarsono (1999:45) states that Indonesian performing arts essentially grow from a collective spirit, where artists and the community are involved in an inseparable creative process. For example, in ritual dances such as *the Pendet dance* in Bali or *the Saman dance* in Aceh, the activity of dancing is not merely an aesthetic activity, but a social act that contains spiritual values and respect for sacred entities. In these practices, dance movements function as "social gifts" offered to gods, ancestors, or communities as an expression of gratitude and devotion (Bandem & deBoer, 1995:43).

The act of dancing can be understood as a form of "giving" in the Maussian sense: it is never free from moral and spiritual values. The dancer gives himself symbolically to the audience or a spiritual entity, and in the process, social relations are formed that strengthen collective solidarity. This aligns with Turner's (1982:45) view of *communitas*, namely the state of equality and togetherness that emerges in ritual and performance experiences.

According to Bourdieu (1977:171), performing arts have a symbolic economic dimension. The concept of *symbolic capital* is a form of power resulting from social recognition. In the context of dance, symbolic capital is manifested when dancers gain prestige, honor, or status through the work they provide to society. Thus, the process of "giving" in art not only implicates emotional relationships but also the reproduction of social and symbolic structures. This reinforces Mauss's thesis that every form of exchange always contains aspects of power and moral responsibility.

Mauss's ideas can also be read as a critique of the modern economic view that positions humans solely as rational and individual beings. He rejected the idea that social relations are based on material gain, instead emphasizing the importance of morality and solidarity in maintaining social balance (Caillé & Godbout, 1998:8). Performing arts, in this case, presents a concrete example of the "gift economy," where the value of a work is measured not by its material goods, but by the depth of its meaning and the social influence it evokes. In the world of dance, this gift can take the form of an aesthetic experience, emotional reflection, or spiritual union between dancer and audience.

The Gift theory in performing arts studies is also in line with Alfred Gell's (1998:15) thinking in *Art and Agency*, which views artworks as "social agents" capable of mediating relationships



between individuals. Gell argues that artworks have the capacity to "act" socially, not because of their materiality, but because of the meanings and relationships they generate. Dance as a form of "gift" is not a static entity, but rather a social act that has the power to change the perceptions, emotions, and social relations of its audience.

The Gift theory can serve as a philosophical and analytical foundation for understanding performing arts, particularly dance, as a system of symbolic exchange that fosters social and cultural relationships. This approach allows us to re-read dance not only as an aesthetic expression but also as a social practice that reflects the moral structure of society. As Geertz (1973:89) argues, culture must be understood as a "web of meaning" woven by humans themselves, and art is one manifestation of this effort. Therefore, dance as a "social gift" can be seen as a means of affirming human values through a continuous process of giving, receiving, and reciprocating.

This article aims to explore how Mauss's concept of giving is represented in dance practice and how social, moral, and spiritual values are manifested in the performance relationship between dancer, audience, and society. This study is expected to enrich theoretical perspectives in the study of performing arts and open new opportunities for understanding the social and ethical functions of art in the modern era

2. IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

This research is a conceptual and theoretical study that aims to examine the relationship between Marcel Mauss's theory of *The Gift* and the practice of performing arts, particularly dance. A conceptual study is used because this research does not involve direct empirical observation, but relies on a review of established literature and theoretical frameworks (Creswell, 2013:28). This kind of theoretical approach is commonly used in arts and humanities studies to interpret social, symbolic, and aesthetic concepts in cultural practices (Neuman, 2014:54). This research is not oriented towards hypothesis testing, but rather on the formation of conceptual meaning and relationships between ideas in the context of performing arts.

The research approach used is qualitative-descriptive analysis with an emphasis on content analysis of social theory texts and performing arts literature. Qualitative-descriptive analysis allows researchers to interpret the meaning behind texts and symbols, rather than simply describing phenomena factually (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:43). Meanwhile, content analysis is used to examine and identify thematic patterns in academic texts related to the concepts of social, symbolic, and moral exchange. Krippendorff (2013:24) defines content analysis as "a research method for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to their contexts of use." In this study, the texts analyzed include works of classical and modern social theory, as well as performing arts literature relevant to the concept of *The Gift*.

2.1 Data Sources

The main data sources for this research consist of primary and secondary literature. Primary literature includes Marcel Mauss's work, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925), which is the main source of gift exchange theory. This work is used to explore the basic concepts of the obligations of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, as well as the understanding of *the total social fact* and the spiritual power of gifts (*hau*). Meanwhile, secondary literature is used to expand the interpretation of Mauss's theory through the thoughts of other social and cultural theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Victor Turner (1982), and Richard Schechner (2013).

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research also refers to scientific works that discuss the local context of Indonesian dance, such as *Indonesian Performing Arts in the Era of Globalization* by Soedarsono (1999), *Tradition and Innovation: Some Notes on Indonesian Dance* by Murgiyanto (2015), and *Balinese Dance in Transition* by Bandem & deBoer (1995). These literatures help link Mauss's theory of social exchange with real practices in Nusantara performing arts, especially in the traditions of ritual dance, offering dance, and creative dance that reflect social and spiritual values.

2.2 Analysis Procedure

The analysis is carried out through three main stages which are interactive and interpretive:

2.2.1 Identifying the Key Concepts of *The Gift Theory*.

The first stage focuses on examining the contents of *The Gift* (Mauss, 1925) to identify the core ideas of the social exchange system. This process includes an analysis of the three fundamental obligations (giving, receiving, and reciprocating), the concept of *hau*, and the meaning of total social phenomena. Each concept is described in a historical and anthropological context, taking into account the social structure of archaic societies that form the basis of Mauss's analysis (1925:15–25).

2.2.2 Connecting Concepts with Performing Arts Theory.

The second stage involves a comparison between Mauss's theory and the performing arts theories of Turner (1982) and Schechner (2013). At this stage, similarities in social structures between the practice of giving in traditional societies and modern performance practices are identified. Turner (1982:45) views performance as a form of ritual that creates *community*, while Schechner (2013:29) emphasizes that every performance involves a reciprocal relationship between the performer and the audience. This approach allows researchers to view performing arts as a system of symbolic exchange that aligns with Mauss's concept of "social giving."

2.2.3 Interpretation of the Social and Symbolic Functions of Dance.

The third stage is the interpretation of the social and symbolic role of dance as a form of "social gift." This process is carried out through a content analysis of ethnographic texts and dance literature that describe the ritual and spiritual functions of dance in Indonesia. For example, in *Balinese Dance in Transition*, Bandem and deBoer (1995:43) show that every dance in Bali has the meaning of offering, not just entertainment. Using a content analysis approach, this symbolic meaning is interpreted within Mauss's framework of social exchange, where performing arts are understood as a medium that strengthens moral values, solidarity, and collective spirituality.

2.3 Content Analysis Approach

In this study, content analysis is not only used to calculate the frequency of concepts in the text, but also to interpret the symbolic and ideological meanings contained therein. As explained by Elo and Kyngäs (2008:109), qualitative content analysis allows researchers to develop thematic categories through in-depth interpretation of the text. The content analysis procedures in this study include:

- (1) repeated reading of the main text (*close reading*),
- (2) coding of key concepts such as "giving," "reciprocation," "solidarity," "spirituality," and "performance symbolism,"
- (3) grouping concepts into analytical themes such as "social exchange," "symbolic communication," and "social gift," and



- (4) compiling conceptual interpretations that link Mauss's theory to performance art practices.

These steps allow for the emergence of theoretical links between classical social theory and contemporary cultural realities.

2.4 Validity and Validity of Analysis

In conceptual studies, research validity is not measured based on statistical reliability, but rather on the credibility of theoretical arguments and logical consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:290). The validity of the analysis is maintained through triangulation of sources and theories. This means that each theoretical finding from Mauss is compared and confirmed through the views of other theorists such as Bourdieu (1977) with the concept of *symbolic capital*, and Turner (1982) with the concept of community. In addition, the relationship between global theory and the local context of Indonesian dance is strengthened by content analysis of ethnographic and anthropological literature on Indonesian dance (Soedarsono, 1999; Murgiyanto, 2015). Thus, the results of the analysis are not only conceptual, but also relevant to the reality of performance practices that live in society.

2.5 Reasons for Choosing the Method

The choice of conceptual approach and content analysis in this study was based on their suitability to the research objective, which is to construct a theoretical relationship between the concept of *The Gift* and performing arts practices. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014:9), a qualitative approach with content analysis is very useful for understanding the symbolic meaning behind social actions. In the context of performing arts, this approach allows researchers to read the hidden meaning behind the movements, rituals, and interactions between the audience and the dancers. By positioning the text as a representation of social actions, content analysis helps reveal that dance is not just an aesthetic product, but a communication system rich in social and moral values.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Gift Theory and Social Exchange Structure

In his work, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Marcel Mauss (1925:15–17) asserts that the acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating are not voluntary activities, but rather a social obligation that binds all members of society. According to Mauss, this gift system is not only about material transfers, but also about maintaining social, moral, and spiritual relationships. He studied Polynesian, Melanesian, and Northwest American societies, finding that each gift contains a “soul” or spiritual force called *hau*, a moral energy inherent in the object of the gift and requiring the recipient to reciprocate. This obligation to reciprocate ensures the maintenance of social balance and harmonious relationships between individuals and groups (Mauss, 1925:22).

The concept of *gift* is key to understanding the social logic of giving. According to Mauss (1925:23), gifts are never truly “free” because they always carry a part of the giver's identity. In traditional societies, refusing to give or reciprocate is considered a violation of social norms and can lead to disharmony. Therefore, the gift system creates a complex network of relationships in which each individual is bound by a moral obligation to maintain a cycle of reciprocity. This demonstrates that in human social systems, economic and moral actions are inseparable; both reinforce each other in shaping the social structure (Caillé & Godbout, 1998:15).

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Mauss introduced the term *total social fact* to describe how the practice of giving involves various aspects of life simultaneously, namely economics, law, religion, politics, and aesthetics (Mauss, 1925:76). Giving is a comprehensive social act, not only because it encompasses various dimensions, but also because it functions as a glue for social solidarity. This view later became the basis for a number of modern social theories on symbolic exchange and reciprocity. Bourdieu (1977:171), for example, developed the idea of *symbolic capital* to explain how giving can function as a social strategy in gaining honor and status, while Lévi-Strauss (1969:52) interpreted the exchange system as a fundamental structure in culture that regulates social relations and symbolic meaning.

The Gift theory can be interpreted as a model of symbolic exchange between the performer (dancer) and the recipient (audience). Every performance is an act of "giving" that involves emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions. The dancer presents a performance filled with meaning and inner experience, while the audience receives through the processes of perception, empathy, and aesthetic interpretation. The audience's response whether in the form of applause, emotion, or personal reflection functions as a form of "symbolic retribution" for the gifts given by the dancers (Schechner, 2013:34). Through this cycle, performing arts embody the logic of social exchange as described by Mauss, namely a reciprocal relationship that builds a sense of connectedness and social solidarity.

Schechner (2013:42) asserts that performance is a social event in which performers and audiences co-create meaning. There is no performance without the presence of an audience, and no appreciation without the act of giving from the performers. This reciprocal relationship is a form of *reciprocity* that parallels Mauss's concept of giving. Dance performances become a space where social, spiritual, and emotional values are transferred through symbols and bodily actions. Every movement and expression becomes a "gift" laden with meaning and containing a moral dimension that binds dancers and audiences in a web of symbolic communication.

From a cultural anthropological perspective, the act of giving in performance can be viewed as part of a society's moral economy. As Polanyi (1944:49) explains, traditional economic systems function not only to distribute goods but also to maintain social and symbolic relations between community members. Similarly, in the performing arts, the exchange process between dancers and audiences involves an economy of emotions and symbols, not simply material exchange. In this case, giving in the form of a dance performance is a social act that affirms the values of togetherness and sincerity.

Turner (1982:45) views performance art as a form of *liminal ritual* in which individuals experience social and emotional transformation. During the performance, both dancers and audiences enter a liminal space that allows for shared experiences and the formation of *community*, namely a sense of unity and social equality. This phenomenon illustrates that dance performance is not only an aesthetic act, but also a form of giving that creates social solidarity, as described by Mauss. In this "performative giving," the dancer's body becomes a medium for the exchange of meaning, and the aesthetic experience becomes a means of building social relationships.

Mauss's notion of the "gift" as a moral contract is also related to Pierre Bourdieu's thinking on *habitus* and *symbolic exchange*. According to Bourdieu (1977:183), every social act, including giving, is never value-free; it always contains symbolic strategies to maintain honor and social position. In the context of art, the gift of a work or performance can be seen as a form of symbolic investment that strengthens the artist's cultural identity and social existence. However, as Mauss



(1925:25) emphasized, the true value of giving lies not in the calculation of profit, but in the morality of the relationship formed through the act of giving and receiving.

In the world of Indonesian performing arts, this concept is evident in various traditional dance forms that function as offerings. For example, *the Pendet dance* in Bali is considered a form of "gift" to the gods and ancestral spirits before becoming a welcoming dance for guests (Bandem & deBoer, 1995:43). Similarly, *the Saman dance* in Aceh displays togetherness and social harmony as a form of respect for the Creator and the community. In both examples, the practice of dancing represents an act of giving and receiving rooted in spiritual and collective values. The act of dancing is not only to display beauty, but also to strengthen social and religious relations within the community.

The concept of *The Gift* provides a powerful framework for understanding performing arts as a complex system of symbolic exchange. He reveals that dance performances are not merely aesthetic events, but also forms of moral and spiritual communication between people. When a dancer gives a "gift" in the form of a performance, she affirms her existence within an interdependent social network. The audience who receives and reciprocates helps maintain the symbolic balance within the community. Thus, Mauss's theory shows that performing arts are essentially a total social act (*total social fact*), an event involving symbolic economy, moral ethics, and human spirituality.

3.2 Dance as a Social Gift

Dance can be understood as a concrete form of "social gift" manifested through the human body, movement, and expression. Within the framework of Mauss's *The Gift theory*, the act of giving is not limited to material gifts, but also includes symbolic expressions that serve to strengthen social relationships (Mauss, 1925:22). Dance, as a form of performative action, becomes one means through which the process of giving and receiving occurs symbolically. Every movement, rhythm, and bodily expression of the dancer contains the intention to "give" meaning to the audience. Thus, dance is not only an aesthetic performance, but also a social practice that reflects the spirit of giving, sacrifice, and collective empathy.

Movement in dance functions as a symbolic language that conveys spiritual and cultural values. As explained by Kaeppler (1978:35), dance is a nonverbal communication system capable of conveying the social structure and cosmology of a society. Through their bodies, dancers transform personal experiences into social experiences that can be shared. In this context, dance becomes a means of conveying meaning, where the dancer acts as a mediator between the material and spiritual worlds. Dance movements contain not only formal beauty, but also moral values and sincerity that radiate the "soul of the gift" (*hau*) as described by Mauss (1925:16). In Balinese offerings, every movement has profound symbolic and religious value. The *Pendet dance*, originally offered to the gods, is a manifestation of the community's gratitude and respect for supernatural powers. According to Bandem and deBoer (1995:43), this dance is not simply a performance to be seen, but a social act that connects humans with the spiritual world and the natural environment. When the audience watches the performance, they are not merely passive recipients, but participate in a collective ritual experience that fosters a sense of unity and togetherness. This aligns with the concept of *community* described by Turner (1982:45), namely a state in which individuals merge in a shared emotional and spiritual experience, transcending social boundaries and hierarchies.

Dance as a "social gift" can also be understood through the perspective of symbolic exchange as developed by Bourdieu (1977:183). Bourdieu emphasized that every social act, including artistic acts, contains a symbolic dimension that reproduces power relations and social structures. In this

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case, dancers who present dance works not only provide entertainment but also convey cultural values that strengthen the collective identity and social status of their community. Performances become a form of "symbolic gift" that affirms the existence of a society's culture before themselves and others.

In addition to its social function, dance also has a spiritual dimension that deepens the meaning of giving. In Mauss's concept (1925:25), every gift contains an element of *mana* or spiritual power inherent in the object or action. This spiritual energy, when connected to the world of dance, can be likened to the artistic spirit that brings the performance to life. Dance works created with sincerity and spiritual intention radiate energy that can touch the audience's innermost being. When the audience expresses appreciation, whether through applause, tears, or inner reflection, a cycle of "symbolic reciprocation" occurs that strengthens the social relationship between dancer and audience (Schechner, 2013:34). In this moment, performing arts become a space for the lively exchange of emotions and meaning, in line with the logic of Maussian "reciprocity."

This concept can also be found in various dance traditions in Indonesia that are communal and ritualistic. For example, *the Saman dance* in Aceh is not only an aesthetic performance, but a collective expression of the togetherness and spiritual strength of the people. Each movement performed simultaneously reflects social solidarity and gratitude to God (Murgiyanto, 2015:62). In the context of *The Gift*, this simultaneous movement is a form of collective giving, in which all dancers participate in imparting meaning and spiritual energy to the community. Thus, *the Saman dance* becomes a concrete manifestation of the spirit of *hau*, the soul of giving that binds individuals within a broader social and spiritual network.

Gell (1998:17) explains that works of art possess "agency," or the ability to act socially. Art not only represents reality but also creates tangible social and emotional effects on its recipients. In this context, the dancer's body can be seen as an agent conveying a "gift" to the audience. Through movement and expression, the dancer channeled aesthetic and spiritual energy, which then formed a collective experience. Therefore, giving in dance is not limited to objects or works, but also encompasses the interaction process that builds emotional and moral connections between the performer and the audience.

The concept of the "social gift" in modern society persists in dance, even though its form has transformed. Contemporary dance performances, for example, often become spaces for social reflection and human empathy. When dancers present social issues such as violence, gender, or the environment, they are essentially "giving" moral awareness and experience to the public (Foster, 2011:24). The emotionally moved audience responds with support, reflection, or social action. Thus, although the context differs from the archaic society studied by Mauss, the basic principles of *The Gift* remain alive in modern performing arts practices. namely that giving is a social action that fosters solidarity and humanity.

Dance as a "social gift" demonstrates that artistic acts possess moral and spiritual values that transcend aesthetic aspects. In every performance, a symbolic exchange process occurs that not only strengthens the relationship between dancer and audience, but also affirms human values such as empathy, togetherness, and devotion. In line with Mauss's view (1925:76), performing arts can be understood as *a total social fact*, namely a total social phenomenon that integrates aesthetic, moral, and spiritual aspects into a single social action. Dance, thus, becomes a medium for the Maussian values of solidarity, empathy, and morality, which are revived in the context of modern culture.

3.3 Performance as a Total Social Fact



Marcel Mauss, in his classic work *The Gift* (1925:76), refers to the gift system as a *total social fact*, a social phenomenon that involves all dimensions of human life, including economic, social, moral, legal, political, and spiritual. According to Mauss, each act of giving does not stand alone but rather serves as a moral bond that ensures social order and community solidarity. This concept emphasizes that social activity is always multidimensional, where every dimension of human life is intertwined and forms a complete system. In this context, performing arts, especially dance, can be understood as a manifestation of a *total social fact* that truly combines various aspects of human life in one social and cultural event.

Performing arts not only operate within an aesthetic space, but also reflect complex social realities. As Schechner (2013:52) argues, every performance is a “restored social event,” in which various social, ritual, economic, and political elements are reorganized into symbolic expressions that can be shared. In this sense, performing arts serve a dual function: as a reflection of social structures and as a medium for reproducing those social values. Every dance performance contains an economic dimension (funding and patronage), a moral dimension (ethical and spiritual messages), and a social dimension (community participation and the structure of the performer-audience relationship).

The Bedhaya Ketawang dance at the Surakarta Palace perfectly represents the concept of *total social fact*. According to Soedarsono (1999:121), *Bedhaya Ketawang* not only possesses high aesthetic value but also holds profound symbolic and spiritual meaning. This dance is performed only during certain state ceremonies, such as the coronation of a king, and is believed to be a sacred offering to Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, a spiritual figure who guards the legitimacy of the king's power. Here, dance serves as a platform where politics, spirituality, economics, and art blend into one. The performance is not merely a spectacle, but a form of social and spiritual contract between humans, power, and the supernatural.

Within the Maussian framework, such performances can be seen as social acts involving moral and symbolic obligations. The acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating are embodied in the relationship between the dancer (offering giver), the audience (receiver), and a spiritual entity (symbolic third party). Turner (1982:47) explains that ritual and performance events create a liminal space, a temporary space where the boundaries between the profane and sacred worlds become blurred. In this liminal space, people experience community, a sense of unity and equality that transcends social hierarchies. Thus, dance performances can be seen as a means of social and spiritual transformation that strengthens collective solidarity.

The concept of *total social fact* can also be applied to understand the economic and political functions of the performing arts. As Appadurai (1986:41) points out, every work of art has a “social life” that makes it more than just an aesthetic object. In modern society, dance performances involve a creative economic system, starting from production, distribution, to cultural consumption, which also plays a role in shaping the social and economic value of artists. However, unlike pure commodities, the value of art is not only measured by its materiality, but also by the social and spiritual meaning contained within. This is in line with Mauss's (1925:22) idea that every gift always carries moral value and social relationships, so that performing arts become a means of symbolic exchange between artists and society.

Besides being an economic and spiritual practice, performing arts also serve as a medium for customary law and social morality. In many traditional Indonesian societies, dance is used as part of an informal legal system to maintain social and cosmic balance. For example, in *the Seblang Dance* in Banyuwangi, performances are held after the harvest season as a ritual of social and

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spiritual restoration. Murgiyanto (2015:58) notes that this dance involves the entire village and is believed to possess magical powers to ward off disease and disaster. Through these practices, performing arts serve as a social mechanism that upholds customary law, strengthens solidarity, and restores the moral balance of society.

In the modern context, the “total social fact” nature of performing arts persists despite changing forms. Contemporary dance performances, for example, are often used as a medium for social critique of economic inequality, gender issues, or environmental crises. Foster (2011:29) explains that contemporary dance works can function as spaces for social dialogue, where artists “give” awareness and reflective experience to the audience. This action demonstrates that art, although packaged in modern and individual forms, still maintains the social and moral character as described by Mauss. Performing arts become an arena for symbolic giving that strengthens collective consciousness and social empathy.

Gell (1998:15) adds that works of art possess *agency* (the power of social action) because they can mediate relationships between individuals and groups. Dance performances, therefore, are not merely representations, but also social actions that impact human relations. Through symbolic exchanges between performers and audiences, performances reinforce broader social networks. Each time a dancer performs a work, a process of giving meaning and re-establishing social solidarity occurs. In other words, performing arts are a form of "total giving" to all aspects of life : economic, moral, political, and spiritual, all combined in a unified social action.

When Mauss (1925:76) called the gift system a *total social fact* , this idea finds relevance in the performing arts. Dance, as a concrete manifestation of the “social gift,” demonstrates how artistic acts can unite aesthetic values with moral and social responsibility. Every performance is a total social event, in which beauty becomes a means of upholding collective values and strengthening cultural awareness. The performing arts are not only a mirror of society, but also a force that shapes and sustains humanity itself.

3.4 Ethical and Aesthetic Dimensions in Giving

Giving in the performing arts has two main interrelated dimensions: ethics and aesthetics. In the Maussian sense, the act of giving cannot be separated from the moral obligation to establish social relationships, maintain balance, and foster solidarity between individuals (Mauss, 1925:17). Meanwhile, in the performing arts, the act of giving is also manifested through aesthetic expression that presents beauty, harmony, and collective emotion. Thus, dance as a form of "social gift" combines moral and aesthetic values in a single symbolic act that unites humans spiritually and socially.

Ethically, dance reflects sincerity, responsibility, and respect for others. Every dance performance embodies a moral commitment between the dancer, the audience, and the community. Dancers give themselves completely in movement, energy, and expression, not only to demonstrate skill, but also to convey meaning to others. In the context of Indonesian culture, this value of sincerity is closely related to the concepts of *ikhlas* , *sumeleh* , and *nrimo* , three Javanese ethical principles that emphasize self-awareness, acceptance, and sincerity in work (Soedarsono, 1999:118). The act of giving through dance, therefore, becomes a form of moral devotion to life and others.

Mauss (1925:76) asserted that every gift carries moral value because it compels the recipient to reciprocate in an equal manner, both symbolically and emotionally. In the performing arts, this process is evident in the reciprocal relationship between performer and audience. When the audience expresses appreciation through applause, attention, or emotional involvement, they are essentially



"returning the gift" given by the dancer. This reciprocal relationship strengthens social solidarity and creates an ethical space where art functions not only as entertainment but also as a moral act that builds togetherness.

Turner (1982:47) explains that in the context of ritual and performance, the ethical dimension emerges through the formation of community, namely a feeling of unity and empathy born of shared experience. During the performance, both dancers and audiences experience an emotional connection that transcends social barriers and individuality. This condition shows that ethics in art does not only originate from external norms but also grows from a collective consciousness built through shared aesthetic experiences. Dance, therefore, serves as a vehicle for the formation of social morality based on empathy and respect for life.

The aesthetic dimension in performing arts relates to how the gift is realized. Aesthetics regulates form, harmony, and balance in a performance, allowing the audience to experience beauty and emotional resonance. According to Dewey (1934:14), aesthetic experience arises when the interaction between artist and audience achieves a complete unity, so that both experience the same meaning and feeling. In this context, dance not only displays the beauty of movement but also presents an emotional experience that allows the audience to "feel" the meaning of the gift itself.

Murgiyanto (2015:62) states that in Indonesian dance tradition, beauty cannot be separated from moral values. Beautiful dance is a dance that combines form (movement), content (meaning), and intention (ethos). The value of *feeling* is at the core of the aesthetics of Nusantara dance, namely the artist's ability to touch the inner dimension of the audience through subtle movements and honesty of expression. Within the theoretical framework of *The Gift*, *feeling* can be seen as a form of "gift soul" (*hau*), namely symbolic energy that transfers from the dancer to the audience (Mauss, 1925 : 23). When the dancer dances with sincere and meaningful intentions, this "gift soul" lives in the performance and is received by the audience as a unifying emotional experience.

Foster (2011:24) adds that in modern dance, aesthetics has a social function because it governs how empathy is choreographed (*choreographing empathy*). Through movement, the dancer's body becomes a medium of emotional communication that allows the audience to share in the suffering, joy, or social anxiety expressed. Thus, beauty in art is not merely a harmony of form, but also a manifestation of moral concern for fellow human beings. Beautiful performing arts are those that move the heart, not just delight the eyes.

Forms in Indonesian culture combine ethical and aesthetic dimensions into a single symbolic whole. *The Rejang Dewa dance* in Bali, for example, depicts how the beauty of graceful female movements becomes a form of spiritual offering to the gods. Bandem and deBoer (1995:43) explain that the beauty of this dance is not merely visual aesthetics, but also a moral expression of purity and devotion. Similarly, *the Saman dance* in Aceh embodies ethical values of togetherness and collective discipline. The dancers' simultaneous movements reflect social harmony based on mutual respect and spiritual solidarity (Murgiyanto, 2015:63).

The relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the performing arts reflects the basic principle of *The Gift theory*: that giving is a social act that contains both beauty and goodness. In every dance work, beauty becomes a medium for moral messages, while ethics becomes the foundation for beauty itself. As stated by Gell (1998:15), works of art have *agency* in the form of social power that influences and changes human relations. Therefore, dance can be seen as a "total social gift" in which aesthetics (beauty) and ethics (goodness) function together to strengthen cultural and human solidarity.

Dance as a Social Gift: A Study of Marcel Mauss's Theory of the Gift in Performing Arts Practice

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According to *The Gift* framework, giving in the performing arts not only produces an aesthetic experience but also strengthens moral and spiritual values. Dance functions as a total social act that unites beauty and goodness in a collective experience. When the dancer gives sincerely and the audience receives with empathy, a circulation of meaning is created that revives the Maussian values of solidarity, respect, and humanity. Performing arts, ultimately, becomes a “total gift” that brings together the ethical and aesthetic dimensions as the core of social and cultural life.

4. CONCLUSION

The Gift theory provides a solid conceptual basis for understanding the performing arts, particularly dance, as a system of symbolic and moral exchange. Mauss (1925:7-6) explains that every social act involves the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate. In the context of the performing arts, the act of dancing can be seen as a form of social giving that unites the dimensions of aesthetics, spirituality, and human solidarity. The dancer “gives” through performance and emotional energy, while the audience “receives” with appreciation and empathetic experience, then “reciprocates” with moral and social participation. This process demonstrates that dance performance is a total social act (*total social fact*) that involves all aspects of human life—moral, aesthetic, and spiritual (Turner, 1982:47).

Dance, as a form of *social gift*, serves to strengthen relationships between individuals and renew collective consciousness in society. Through the practice of sincere giving, artists contribute to the maintenance of cultural solidarity and universal human values (Murgiyanto, 2015:62). The beauty of movement and harmony in dance not only provides an aesthetic experience but also serves as a means of ethical reflection on the meaning of living together. Thus, giving in art is not merely aesthetic, but also moral and spiritual—uniting body, emotion, and values in meaningful symbolic acts (Foster, 2011:24).

The Gift theory to the study of performing arts opens up new interpretive space, emphasizing that art is not merely a representation of beauty, but rather a living social practice that continually affirms human values through symbolic acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Dance, then, is not merely an individual expression but also a “social gift” that maintains the moral and cultural sustainability of society.

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