

Savings as a cultural construction in Otavalo: Pigs, representations and obligations

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Abstract

The article explores how saving is conceived as a cultural construction in Otavalo, integrating economic practices, symbolic meanings and social obligations. Through an ethnographic approach, the study analyses how saving goes beyond a classic economic category to encompass local dynamics such as pig raising, considered an ancestral form of saving. Four main categories of saving were identified in Otavalo: monetary, behavioral, ancestral and credit. Saving is associated with planning for the future, both in contexts of crisis and in the achievement of personal or family goals. In addition, it reflects tensions between the Western model of saving and local traditions, where symbols such as the pig acquire a central meaning. The study concludes that saving in Otavalo is a cultural phenomenon full of meaning, linked to time management, economic resilience and local identity.

Keywords: Savings; Time; Pig Farming; Symbolic Anthropology; Economic Obligations

1. Introduction

Economic anthropology maintains that there are closely related elements between culture and economy; such that profit maximization is not the only economic incentive. Other motivating factors exist, such as the pursuit of power, prestige, or social position, without denying rights, social achievements, comfort, aesthetics, and functionality (Polanyi, 1989). Added to these elements are the diversity of perceptions about sustenance, production, distribution, and the meanings of consumption. The exchange of prestige objects as a cultural process has also been analyzed by Malinowski (2001), and gifts outside of formal trade are positioned as logics distinct from the market (Mauss, 2009). Even Karl Polanyi (1989), in relation to the distribution of goods, differentiated the categories of exchange, redistribution, and reciprocity. Without relegating Marshall Sahlins (2013) who pointed out the opulence of primitive societies due to their ability to satisfy needs with few resources. In this theoretical context, and given that Otavalo is a town endowed with intercultural dynamics, primarily among the white mestizo and Kichwa populations, we address the issue of the cultural construction of the concept of saving and its relationship to economic practices, social representations, and obligations. A key issue was the way in which saving seems to become a defined cultural category, expanding beyond the orthodox definition of economy to encompass unnoticed social and symbolic dynamics specific to the local culture. From a cultural perspective, it was possible to perceive that saving was not merely an economic practice but a concept imbued with meaning. As a specific economic practice, pig farming was revealed as a representation of saving and the fulfillment of economic obligations. The study examined how people understand saving in terms of symbolism and collective duties, with the objective of identifying, analyzing, interpreting, and describing the cultural representations of saving among the city's population. The methodology was qualitative and interpretive ethnography, using the members and employees of a local savings and credit cooperative as the unit of analysis. Fieldwork lasted three months, between October and December 2023.

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2. Materials and Methods

The study used an ethnographic methodological approach based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a literature review. The study describes the importance of observing the cultural practice of saving related to obligations (debts) and pig care in its sociocultural context. San Luis de Otavalo is the second most populous city in the province of Imbabura, with 39,354 inhabitants. Fifty-five percent of the population is indigenous Kichwa (Lalander, 2010), while the remainder is primarily white mestizo. Their main activities are the production and marketing of handicrafts and textiles, food trade, pig farming, guinea pig farming, and poultry farming (GAD, 2020). The population of the study unit consisted of employees (17) and members (10) of a local cooperative. A total of 27 people of both sexes (10 women and 17 men), mestizos and Otavalo Quichua, aged between 18 and 42, with occupations related to agriculture, commerce, and institutional administration, participated. For three months, the institution's activities were shared through focus groups, interviews, and participant observation. Data analysis was conducted after systematization, coding of themes, and identification of cultural patterns.

2.1. Representations of the Pig and Credits (Bonds) as Symbols of Saving in Local Practice

In symbolic anthropology, Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz (1987) focus on the study of cultural phenomena as a complex system of symbols and meanings constructed and utilized by human beings. For Karl Polanyi (1989), from the substantivist perspective, he considers that: "trade finds its origin in an external sphere that bears no relation to the internal organization of the economy" (p. 107), which assumes that it is not only monetary profit that sustains the economy but also the significant values attributed to it. In search of a qualitative interpretation of savings, we invite you to reflect on Geertz' work on the human being and his meanings:

Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal embedded in webs of meaning that he himself has woven, I consider culture to be that web and that the analysis of culture must therefore be not an experimental science in search of laws, but an interpretive science in search of meanings. What I seek is explanation, interpreting social expressions that are enigmatic on the surface. (1987:20)

For Keith Hart (2001), thrift is both an economic strategy and an expression of agency in the face of unequal economic systems. A tool for building economic resilience and adapting to new uncertainties. Caroline Humphrey (2019), exploring local thrift practices in Mongolia and Russia, found that people relied on informal forms of saving, such as accumulating material goods (livestock, gold) rather than money. For Humphrey, thrift is not only a financial practice but also a reflection of community and cultural values, revealing that thrift is dynamic and deeply influenced by historical and social contexts.

In this ethnographic route, we find some consistency with the theory when the actors express that: "Saving is keeping 'something,' not just money, that is, consciously using an asset, for example: saving water, saving fuel. Economically, it would be having an economic reserve (monetary) saved in an account" (HB1)1. That is, there would be monetary savings (USD) for eventual and institutional reserve purposes and savings in services, products, and goods of daily use, but which have a financial impact on local life and on the potential for savings. Another actor expresses himself directly: "For me, saving, as a custom from my family and ancestors, is the raising of large and small animals. Especially the pig. The economic savings are in a piggy bank shaped like a pig. But saving is also the raising of the same pig" (MI2). This smaller animal represents the qualitative interpretation of savings, a definition that we structured inspired by Geertz's "thick description" and culture, when he argues that the concept of culture essentially advocates a semiotic concept."

The representation of savings is consolidated when another participant draws a representative figure of a pig-shaped piggy bank, adding the message: "the bigger and fuller, the better." (MB4). These elements lead us to reflect on the importance of savings as a cultural construction and representation related to pig farming and economic solidity. Benquet (2023) argues that we can recognize that poverty is defined by the (in)ability to save, not by one's job, and Guérin et al. (2020) highlight the importance of the economy, where ceremonial gifts are also a form of savings. On the contrary, trying to encourage savings through banking mediation can strip populations of control over their wealth, their socialization, their territories, and their time. From the analysis of the conversations and reflections held in the workshops, different definitions are established, closely related to the categories of the concept of savings. One of them is linked to the classification of the types of savings that are culturally recognized and validated by the participants. These types of savings are: monetary, which is considered the classic Western model, where savings are made through financial resources and in relation to formal institutions (cooperatives, local banks) that manage the savings deposits.

The second is a behavioral model, which relates to the daily consumption processes of basic goods, such as water, electricity, telephone, fuel, and clothing. This is recognized as an indirect savings system, since decreasing expenses

facilitate consumption savings, which are linked to the daily habits or behaviors of family members. There is a third category, which we call ancestral, which relates to the raising of small or large animals (pigs, chickens, guinea pigs, rabbits, sheep, goats, cows) and the planting of legumes, which are identified as productive and savings capital, either through their sale at the end of the breeding period or through the goods received (milk, meat). A final category identifies savings as the purchase of material goods. This involves the family's credit capacity, which is seen as a commitment to saving, in relation to the obligation of payments. That is, institutional or informal debts are perceived as savings, since they are an instrument for acquiring goods (animals, houses, vehicles, household goods).

The cost of credit, such as monthly or annual interest, is not taken into account. One of the participant's states: "I can't, nor do I try to, save every month, but if I want to do something in the future, I take out a loan, so I can buy a motorcycle or make a down payment on a piece of land, and I know they'll deduct the money each month" (MI26). "Saving is taking out a loan, because instead of spending on anything, you pay your bills on time and invest that money in something important. (HB15). Culturally, saving is seen as an activity of separating, separating, withdrawing, or isolating a portion of your financial resources for other purposes over time. This is a difficult, even painful, action, as it involves reducing spending opportunities in the present.

Regarding the objectives of the savings categories, participants defined two types: resources intended to respond to or contain unexpected situations in the future, such as crises, unforeseen events, or deaths. The second objective is also related to the future, to the future. That is, to execute, fulfill, and realize the dreams or goals established at the individual or family level for the future. Consequently, saving has a connotation with the future, with tomorrow, whether this be a tomorrow of crisis or dreams (negative or positive), but it is always related to the future; it is not an action framed in the imaginary of the present, even though it is performed daily. This is confirmed in the comments of another participant: "Saving is allocating a portion or percentage of my income to save for a rainy day" (MI5). "Saving is a small capital that we accumulate day by day.

It helps us with any planned or unforeseen expense" (HI23), saving is not only an economic practice but also a means of negotiating identities and aspirations. This reminds us that Jane Guyer (2004) emphasizes that saving is not simply an economic practice, but a way of managing uncertainty, establishing social networks, and building identity in challenging economic contexts. These results contrast with the experience of Bird-David (1990), who explains that certain rural communities perceive the world as an abundant and reliable environment, where resources are available according to immediate needs. Therefore, the concept of long-term saving may not be central in these cultures.

However, by highlighting practices of sufficiency and reciprocity, her research suggests that saving can manifest itself in non-material ways, such as investing in relationships. Rather than accumulating material goods or money, communities invest in social relationships and networks of reciprocity. These networks act as a form of "social savings," as people rely on mutual help to overcome times of need, an aspect not studied in this paper.

3. Conclusion

Saving is a meaningful cultural practice, where local society constructs and reproduces its visions of time, giving meaning to their lives. Saving is perceived beyond resource management, as a ritual that helps postpone the impulse to consume, as in the granting of obligations or credit.

In the local cultural imagination, there are several categories of savings. In addition to the Western monetary savings, there is behavioral savings (consumer reserve or frugality), ancestral savings (animal husbandry and survival agriculture), and the paradoxical formulation of credit (obligations) as savings. Saving is intimately linked to future time, to becoming. If there is no hypothetical tomorrow, saving makes no sense. The purposes of saving are linked to responding to crises and negative unforeseen events or the achievement of positive dreams or goals. Tensions were also detected between the classic monetary and institutional model of savings and its adaptations, influenced by local ancestral culture, where raising domestic pigs can have much more meaning than the classic symbolic representation of a piggy bank.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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