

chapter 13

TIME AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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13.1. Introduction

Anthropology sometimes appears the most ambitious of the human sciences, claiming, not only the capacity to represent the whole world, but in addition the ability to understand how these representations come into being as social facts. Social (biological) reproduction, and material and ideological production all fall within its ample scope, and it is often sufficient to say, that if a thing exists or may be conceived, then there is an 'anthropology' of it, i.e. an account of how it plays a part in the humanly constituted world. Naturally, anthropologists, who are conditioned to accept the claims of their chosen discipline, have not failed to conclude that there must also be an anthropology of time. No living creature is immune to time in the form of environmental rhythms and as a biologically inherent constraint on organic life; and how much more true this must be of human beings, who construct their ambience conceptually, and who recognise their mortality, their time limitations? Anthropologists have therefore been accustomed to speak of time as falling within the cultural domain, as something shaped and conditioned by society, by interaction, by practical and symbolic dispositions.

I am one of these anthropologists, and I plead guilty to having written a whole book on the *Anthropology of Time* (Gell, 1992). But the experience I gathered while researching this book – which I promised to my colleagues and myself before I had the least notion as to its contents – has rendered me more skeptical than I was at the outset of my project. Without meaning to, I lost my assurance as to the merits of the anthropological case regarding 'social time', and this chapter expresses a more cautious view than the one which I think is still characteristic of the discipline as a whole. I came to believe that anthropologists allow themselves too much liberty in asserting that this or that fundamental aspect of the world is 'socially constructed' and therefore belongs to them, as of right, and they are insufficiently critical, sometimes, of their relativist assumptions.

13.2. Social construction of time: Durkheim and Evans-Pritchard

I will outline my reasons for skepticism in due course, but first it is necessary to trace the history of the notion of time which has become installed within

forms of the Religious Life (1915, pp. 9–11) proposed the social origins of human temporal awareness in the following terms:

What philosophers call the categories of the understanding, the ideas of time, space, class, number, cause, personality . . . correspond to the most universal properties of things, . . . they are like the solid frame surrounding all thought [which] does not seem to be able to separate itself from them without destroying itself, for it seems that we cannot think of objects which are not in time and space, which have no number etc. . . . Now when primitive beliefs are systematically analysed, the principal categories are naturally found. They are born in religion and of religion, they are a product of religious thought. . . . Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities . . . so if the categories are of religious origin . . . it is allowable to suppose that they are rich in social elements.

. . . we cannot conceive of time except by distinguishing its different moments [i.e. periodicities] . What is the origin of this differentiation? . . . observation proves that these indispensable guidelines are taken from social life. The division into days, weeks months, years, etc. correspond to the periodical recurrence of feasts and public ceremonies. A calendar expresses the rhythm of collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity . . . what the category of time expresses is the time common to the group a social time, so to speak.

What is perhaps most surprising about this sociological hi-jacking of the Kantian categories is the extent to which it was, and still is accepted as valid by social scientists. Durkheim appears to be saying, and really is saying that, but for 'religion', human beings would not know whether it was day or night, summer or winter, or whether the moon was waxing or waning. Such an evidently absurd collection of propositions survives because certain questions are never asked, being obscured by an over-riding disciplinary interest in demonstrating the ubiquity of 'social' motives. (Which is linked to a moral position emphasising linkages between ethical virtue and social solidarity).

Durkheim's thesis, i.e. that human time cognition and time concepts were socially determined, found favour with a later generation of British social anthropologists, who responded both to Durkheim's intellectualism (his focus on 'collective representations') and his functionalism – representations could be explained on the basis of their contribution to the 'organic' life of society. Among these British post-Durkheimians, the most notable were Evans-Pritchard and Leach. In 'The Nuer' (1940) Evans-Pritchard made a sensible distinction between 'oecological time' and 'structural time' which enabled him to preserve the more useful features of the Durkheimian theory¹ while silently abandoning its more grandiose Kantian claims. Essentially, what Evans-Pritchard did was to separate out 'practical' (environmental, oecological) time from ideological or 'social' time, which was only relevant within certain symbolic frames of reference, notably religion and politics. The time-frame of (oral) genealogical reckoning, with its conventionally tidied-up generations, and its insistence on maintaining a fixed number of generations between founding ancestors and living descendants is the

¹ To which he continued to pay lip-service, *Perceptions of time*, in our opinion, are functions of time reckoning and hence are socially determined (1939, p. 209).

paradigm case of 'structural time'. Thus, time concepts are socially determined only in contexts of intrinsically sociological types of discourse, otherwise they are oecological. Evans-Pritchard here anticipates Bloch's (1977) contrast between ideology and cognition.

Predictably, Evans-Pritchard's prestige as an anthropological theorist owes more to his analyses of the fictions of 'structural' time than to his account of the hard facts of oecological time, and his school (based at the Institute of Anthropology, Oxford) produced a series of illuminating studies of temporal fictions, notably the work on African age-grade systems (Spencer, 1965; Hallpike, 1972; Stewart 1977) and 'generations' (Needham, 1974).

Meanwhile, the leading British anthropologist of the ensuing generation, Edmund Leach, remained more firmly within the Durkheimian orbit, at least so far as the anthropology of time was concerned. In 1961 Leach republished two essays written in the 50s which proclaimed 'The idea of Time, like the idea of God, is one of those categories we find necessary because we are social animals, rather than because of anything empirical in our objective experience of the world' (1961, p. 125). According to Leach, our category of 'time' conflates two 'basic' experiences (1) that certain processes are repetitive, or cyclic, and (2) that human life consists of irreversible changes, beginning with birth and ending with death. 'Religion' (society) creates 'time' only in order to fool us into thinking that life → death (change) is actually only a 'phase' of recurrence, (repetition) life → death → life, etc. Time is humanity's answer to entropy.

13.3. Directionality, cyclicity and circularity

Edmund Leach, in his capacity as 'social animal' and Provost of King's College Cambridge, attended innumerable divine services, but one is entitled to doubt whether he really borrowed his notions of time (or God) from traditional Christian eschatology. He would first have had to exclude himself from his account of cognitive time in order to find an external point of vantage from which to diagnose its fundamental illogic; yet in the passage quoted, he seems to include himself in that sweeping 'we'. This is a characteristic anthropological stance, ambiguously poised between acceptance of belief systems at face value, in the name of seeing the world 'from the native's point of view', yet obliged to discount any genuine possibility that the natives might have got things right, in the name of science and reason. In fact, Leach's evocation of archaic temporality as a pendulum swinging between now and not-now, never able to free itself from the repetition of what was before and will be hereafter (forever and ever) is wildly off the mark when placed against even the most schematic ethnography of the time concepts of non-western peoples.

Barnes (1974) made a necessary distinction, systematically elided by Leach, when he pointed out that societies which operate with 'cyclical' notions of time

do not imagine that time literally goes round and round, or back and forth. In fact, such societies may have no visual metaphors of time at all (he is writing of Kedang in Indonesia, but the point applies very generally). They simply have collective representations of time which consist of a schedule of repeatable events which they regularly anticipate, and around which they plan their individual and group activities. Having a repetitive/cyclical schedule for events does not mean having an idea that time itself is repetitive.

We can make this clearer by means of the type-token distinction. The Kedang have a social time-schedule which consists of a temporal ordering of event-‘types’ (astronomical indices, seasons, agricultural operations, ritual festivals, etc.) ‘tokens’ of which recur periodically in unrepealable, oriented, time. Only tokens are real events, with real consequences, and the purpose of cyclical time-schedules is not to allow for a denial of time’s irreversibility via the metaphysics of recurrence, but precisely to anticipate real events (tokens) advantageously. ‘Be prepared’ is their motto. The Kedang, just to confirm this point, are in fact very anxious to ensure, not that the dead are reborn in ‘cyclic’ time, but that they stay safely dead in irreversible time, and do not return to plague their relatives in the land of the living. Here ‘religion’ is devoted to keeping time linear, against the countervailing pull towards cyclicity which is built into peasant calendrical lore.

The Durkheimian equation of social schedules and time itself (‘category’ time) has misled many anthropologists and sociologists, like Leach, into drawing a broad distinction between archaic ‘cyclical’ time and modern linear time (Gurvich, 1961). In fact, were time actually cyclic, events could not ‘recur’ at a period of once per cycle. If all of time were one week, say, then we would not have ‘repeated’ tokens of Wednesday, but just one instance of Wednesday in the whole of time. The repeatedness of successive Wednesdays depends precisely on the (local) linearity and orientedness of time which alone allows us to say, ‘Wednesday – *again*’.

Unfortunately, anthropologists, confronted with religious rituals apparently designed to bring the year – or the life cycle – back to its point of origin, have reasoned that such behaviour would be inexplicable unless people believed that time itself were cyclic. This move is really only a way of dealing with the problem of other peoples apparently irrational beliefs (which have to be accepted as ‘true’) by constructing metaphysical scenarios within which they might actually be rationally true. Thus, *if* time were cyclical, then the world would return to its point of origin. If we observe a ritual which is designed to renew the world, ergo, the parties to it believe that ‘time is cyclical’, and because they believe it, it is (locally) true.

The attribution of the idea of ‘cyclic time’ to the ethnographic Other arises because the anthropologist needs to rationalise the Other’s behaviour, and one way of doing this is to attribute to this Other an imaginary metaphysic of recurrence. Actually, if time were circular, there would be no point to the world-renewing

ritual, since the world would be renewed anyway, with or without the ritual, so the construction of this scenario is self-defeating and explains nothing about the ritual practices that provoked it. But anthropologists like to attribute non-standard metaphysics to the Other, and indeed to claim that the Other lives in a totally differently constituted 'reality' than our own.

13.4. Temporal cultural relativism and its discontents

This position is known as 'cultural relativism' The thesis that different cultures 'live' in different temporal frameworks can be called 'temporal cultural relativism' and is widespread, deriving not just from Durkheim, but also from the neo-Kantian traditions within American Cultural anthropology from Boas onwards. Cultural relativism is not necessarily a mistake; indeed, unless belonging to a different culture and experiencing the world in the light of a particular set of cultural premises made a difference, there would be nothing for anthropologists to study, describe, and analyse. The difficulty is in defining the scope and import of the relativity of cultures, not in admitting the existence of the phenomenon.

The position I take is that there is almost no limit to the substantive beliefs (representations) people may entertain as to this world, and other worlds; what beings are to be found therein, what spirits, influences and powers, by what means they may be influenced and controlled, and so on. But (like Kant) I believe that the formal properties of (cognitively accessible) time derive from the bare possibility of having representations of the world, independently of their content, which may be indefinitely variable. In other words, the world is a process which goes on in time; different cultures may posit entirely different pictures of this process, and in that sense, occupy different culturally-constituted 'worlds' – but this leaves unaffected the schema of time per se, which is logically prior to any specific concept of the world-process which is understood to transpire in time (and space). Temporal cultural relativity is not a sub-species of cultural relativity in general (as religious cultural relativity, or gastronomic cultural relativity, or judicial cultural relativity might be considered sub-species of cultural relativity). Cultural relativity is only possible because 'categories' (time, space, number and other logical parameters) allow for diverse representations of the world, i.e. because these categories are not culturally relative at all, but logico-cognitive universals.

These categorical universals have to be sharply distinguished from empirical facts. I do not at all want to say that all cultures must see the world in the same way (fundamentally) because the factual make-up of the world obliges them to. There are infinitely many sustainable interpretations of the world as factually constituted because it is always possible to sustain false premises on the basis of true factual conclusions. (Thus, 'if sorcery is true, those who have many enemies

will be ensorcelled' – my uncle has many enemies, and there he lies, coughing, so sorcery is clearly to blame). The position I take is entirely permissive in this regard, which is all that is necessary to make the anthropological investigation of cultural relativity a feasible enterprise.

13.4.1. Geertz and the Balinese

In the literature on temporal cultural relativity the debate has become polarised between relativists and anti-relativists arguing at cross purposes. Let us take the most hotly debated example, the Balinese, as described by Geertz (1973). Geertz describes the Balinese as 'detemporalised'. Their lives are enacted within 'a motionless present, a vectorless now'. (ibid. 404) How does Geertz come to this assessment? Geertz has two main lines of evidence. Firstly, he cites the cyclical character of the Balinese kinship and naming systems, in which living individuals are strongly socially identified with their same-sex ascendants of the grand-parental generation, to the extent of being treated socially as these very individuals reborn. Secondly, he draws attention to the proliferation and complexity of Balinese calendars. The most 'Balinese' of these calendars is the ritual-permutational one, which combines five- six- and seven-day cycles to produce a 210-day 'year' each day of which is specifiable via a unique trinomial expression. Each individual day, says Geertz, has its own specific character (of auspiciousness for this or that purpose, inauspiciousness for others) so that time is read qualitatively and non-progressively rather than quantitatively and progressively.

Geertz has been criticised by a number of writers, some, like Howe (1981) only seeking to moderate his rather sharp polarisation between Balinese time-keeping and our own, others, like Bloch (1977) denouncing him in stronger terms for confusing ritual ideology and practical cognition. It seems certain that the Balinese are just as adept in using their calendar(s) to plan and predict as we are in using our own; and though the Balinese calendar looks unnatural to us, that is only because we are habituated to a calendar which has oddities of its own, e.g. so-called 'months' which ignore the phases of the moon, the weekly cycle, and which may have 28, 29, 30, or 31 days – features which seem quite perplexing to non-users of the Gregorian calendar.

But to focus on such practical issues is to miss the point which Geertz is really driving at, which is to suggest that the Balinese may (in some, if not all contexts) conceptualise the world/process in terms different from our own. Their 'detemporalizing' of genealogical succession, such that each living individual is so to speak a 'token' of an immortal person (type) who reappears in each alternate generation is a feasible reading of how persons come to be in the world, but not a theory about cyclic time; equally, their assumption concerning the calendrical determination of lucky and unlucky days (which has echoes in western notions

about Friday the 13th) is a feasible reading of how contingency operates, rather than a theory about time as such. Geertz is trying to put us into the shoes of a Balinese for whom certain potential aspects of the world/process are much more salient than they are for us; but in order to do so he often sounds like a more radical relativist who is trying to demonstrate that the Balinese live in a world whose time dimension is differently articulated than in the west, which is hardly so.

Bloch (1977) however, does not see things in this way. He sees Geertz as a proponent of Durkheim-derived relativism in its full-blown, rather than 'interpretative' form. If Balinese time is so different, he asks, how is it that anthropologists are not the ultimate authorities on time, dictating to physicists and others the concepts of time they must employ, if these are 'cultural' products? Bloch proposes a basic division between 'cognitive' time and 'ideological' time, and he accuses Geertz, and other anthropologists, of mistaking ideological fictions, designed to legitimate authority, for 'reality', when it is precisely in order to mask reality that these fictions have been invented. The de-temporalizing character of the Balinese ritual-permutational calendar immobilises time in order to obviate the possibility of questioning authority and inducing social change. It serves a sectional interest, the interest of the elite and the patrons of ritual demonstrations of symbolic power. But ideological representations of time do not abolish the capacity of human beings to cognise temporal relations practically, and thus undercut the fictions which sustain the politico-religious status quo. In effect, says Bloch, Geertz is the willing victim of the propaganda of the lords and their pundits, who want to circumscribe reality in an unmoving frame; but we should not be beguiled.

Bloch contrasts practical time to ideological time in a number of ways. Practical time is linear and progressive, ideological time is cyclic/immobile; practical time comes from experience, ideological time from ritual dogma and performance. Practical time has biological roots in innate schemata necessary for learning both to act and to speak (Piaget, 1971), ideological time is arbitrary, and so forth. While it is obviously useful to draw a distinction between the kind of elaborate cosmological schemes which are sometimes enacted in ritual, and the schedules and time-handling schemes which are deployed in practical contexts, it is not so easy to divide up 'practical' and 'ideological' time in quite the cut-and-dried manner Bloch suggests.

The Balinese calendar, for instance, does not just determine ritual life, but also commercial, domestic, and political life, because in all these domains, one needs 'luck' in order to succeed. From the Balinese perspective, finding an auspicious day is the most 'practical' of all considerations, limited only by lack of knowledge and conflict among authorities (see Davis, 1976; Tannenbaum, 1988, for similar considerations relating to Thailand). Nor are 'cyclic' time-schemes necessarily ideological rather than practical – after all, agriculture everywhere is cyclical and

repetitive, year after year. Astrological almanacs are resorted to by peasant farmers not because they are the gullible dupes of ideology, but because they need a framework for practical planning, and the seemingly arbitrary advice they obtain often incorporates tried and tested traditional agronomic principles. Different environments and productive technologies can motivate a variety of calendrical devices adapted to specific circumstances, and it would be hard to extract from this diverse mass of cultural schemes a few which could be said to be 'basic' temporal- cognitive universals.

In effect, the anthropology of time, once it abandons the Durkheimian notion that 'time' is socially determined, becomes the anthropology of time-use, and time-talk (both of which are very culturally variable) rather than the anthropology of time as such. The study of time-use is one which anthropology shares with social geography, which has been productive of much research and theory in this field (Parkes and Thrift, 1980; Carlstein, 1985), the study of time-talk with comparative linguistics (Comrie, 1976, 1985). But anthropology has something special to offer in the study of the organisation of temporal relations in social life, and the description and analysis of contrasted temporal regimes. One writer who has contributed to this field greatly is Bourdieu, and it is to his treatment of the subject that I will now turn.

13.4.2. Bourdieu and the Kaybele

Bourdieu's work (1963, 1977) on the anthropology of time is based on his experience among the Kaybele of Algeria, but it can also be taken more generally as representative of temporal attitudes in societies outside the orbit of modern capitalist production. The Kaybele *fellah* (peasant farmer) lives according to a temporal rhythm determined by the divisions of the ritual calendar and the cycle of agricultural operations. These schedule-bound technical activities are not understood abstractly, but are constructed according to schemata embodied in a rich accumulation of traditional attitudes; practical life is 'mythology in action'. Man lives by nature's grace, but only by violating nature with ploughs and with fire. These necessary liberties must be recompensed by sacrifices and the maintenance of ritual respect towards the earth. It is important not to be too greedy or to attempt to hurry things along.

*It is useless to pursue the world
No one will ever overtake it*

The Kaybele are immersed in nature and are part of it. They do not abstract time and set it apart from the flux of interlocking and culturally preordained events which carries them along. Times are not specified by the hour or the minute, but by social conventions (we will meet 'at the next market'). This lack of specificity about time is adequate because if an event is not already an inevitable element in the working out of the preordained flow of socially expectable happenings, then

there is no point in making special provisions to bring it about; indeed, to do so borders on sacrilege, disrespect towards the established order of things,

The Kaybele know nothing of the standardised, metered, objectified duration which rules the lives of modern city folk.

The intervals of subjective duration are not equal and uniform. The effective points of reference in the continual flux of time's passage are qualitative nuances read upon the surface of things. . . . Temporal points of reference are just so many experiences. One must avoid seeing here points of division, which would presuppose the notion of regular measured intervals, that is to say, a spatial conception of the temporal. The islands of time which are defined by these landmarks are not apprehended as segments of a continuous line, but rather as so many enclosed units . . . the lapse of time which constitutes the present is the whole of an action seen in the unity of a perception embracing both the retained past and the anticipated future (1963, pp. 59–60).

Because Bourdieu is trying here to evoke a species of temporal experience and attitude which is by definition 'not' that available to his (metropolitan, educated) readers, he is obliged to use rather indirect language, and anybody would be forgiven for finding his words baffling. Perhaps a more extended parable may help. I think that most of my readers will at some stage in their lives have been on a roller-coaster (or 'Big Dipper') ride. Going on a ride like this is, first of all, an intense experience, or sequence of experiences, of 'presentness'. While the ride is in progress, the ride constitutes the whole available world, as a single, whizzing, plunging, swerving, trajectory. The ride is a temporal whole focused around a 'now' which continually transforms while remaining continuous with itself, undivided into discrete blocs or periods. And one notices another thing. As the car plunges down one apparent cliff-face, one is already anticipating – and indeed already living through – the racketing crunch which will occur as one hits the bottom of the slope. And moreover, when that crunch comes and is followed by the next dizzying ascent, the violence of this transition is signally increased by the fact that so far as one's stomach is concerned, the plummeting descent is still going on, so that one's entrails seem to be going one way and the rest of one's shattered body another. This exhilarating sequence of temporal dislocations – experiences of anticipating an imminent future ('crunch') which is as present as the present itself (if not more so) and of a past which seems, likewise, to live on into its own future as a visceral wrench – is something urbanites will happily pay good money for. It is a certain experience of vivid temporality unbounded by divisions and schemes, which is simply lived through. It is a time of past-present-future all rolled into one.

Now imagine the whole of life as a ride on a very, very slow roller-coaster, and you have Kaybele time, according to Bourdieu. And it could be so. It could be that the anticipated future could emerge out of its present, not on the time scale of seconds, as in a roller-coaster ride, but on a time-scale of days, weeks, years and whole lifetimes. It could be that the past lives on into the present as a visceral inertia, experienced as a rootedness in established routines and rhythms. We can

only have access to this kind of continuous, unbounded self-transforming time in the artificial setting of a funfair, but that is because the regimentation of time has become an imperative of capitalist production (Le Goff, Thompson) – but for others, not so constrained, why should time be anything other than a self-generating ‘present’ coming out of a past and oriented towards a future which are both included within it, as lags and anticipations?

Bourdieu’s emphasis on the ‘experience’ of ‘pastness in the present’ and ‘futurity in the present’ as diagnostic features of time outside the orbit of capitalist production, represents a signal advance on earlier attempts to distinguish between ‘primitive’ cyclic time and non-primitive ‘linear’ time as distinct temporal topologies. Bourdieu overcomes such structuralist schematics by concentrating in the different ways in which time can be ‘lived through’ rather than ‘classified out’. And I am inclined to agree, on the basis of my own field experience with peasant and tribal societies (in India and in New Guinea) that there is much to recommend the idea that quite different temporal attitudes prevail there, as compared to the west. It really is as if one were immersed in an evolving present, rather than passing from period to period according to an abstract scheme, imposed on all by the rigorous scheduling constraints of technologically-dominated life.

So much is true: but as Bourdieu himself recognises, there is another side to temporal experience, even where peasants and tribesmen are concerned. The dense, evolving past-present-future of the Kaybele is articulated by a calendrical scheme, by a series of feasts and fasts, periods of intensified labour and periods of relative relaxation; and though it is true that these feasts, fasts, etc. seem to loom up like changes in the landscape viewed from the windows of a moving train, it is not true that they cannot be contemplated except in the vividness of ‘presence’. They can also be regarded synoptically, as a schedule, which everybody has internalised and can recount, at least to some degree (i.e. the ordering of months, market-days, ritual seasons and so forth). There may not be perfect agreement among all informants as to what, precisely, the community wide schedule or calendar is; but all are equally sure that such a schedule exists, and it is used, practically, to coordinate action. It is just not such a matter of dominant, even obsessive, concern as it is here.

13.5. Re-universalising time

We are not alone in having to calculate in time; and against Bourdieu’s occasionally rather rhapsodic evocation of peasant time, it is necessary to consider other material which suggests that ‘technical’ attitudes towards time are by no means a monopoly of our own, though the particular guises in which technical mastery of time may appear, often seem strange to us.

Let me cite two kinds of instance, both of which are dealt with by Bourdieu himself. These are, the timing of exchanges, and the use of calendrical lore.

One of Bourdieu's most admired analyses concerns the precise moment at which recipients of gifts feel obliged to repay them with a counter-gift. A large proportion of anthropological literature concerns gifts and counter-gifts – of food, of valuables, of livestock, of brides and grooms – because pre-capitalist non-commodity 'embedded' economies are linked with kinship, marriage, politics and religion via 'gift' exchange institutions. We may take it that in most of the societies in which Bourdieu's past-present-future time prevails, gifts are given as part of the essential fabric of social life. But when should a gift be returned? Not according to a contract-date, like a commercial loan. But if not by an agreed due date, then when? To repay too quickly is to seem to despise the initial gift (and by extension, the giver) and it robs the giver of his enjoyment of the temporary ascendancy a gift-giver has over a gift-recipient. But to be tardy is equally to seem to despise the giver and the gift, because it suggests that the gift is too insignificant to need reciprocation, and the ascendancy of the giver so trivial as not to need to be reversed. There is, however, a moment between impolite haste and excessive laggardliness, which is 'just right' (like the temperature of the middle bear's porridge) – and this is the moment when the counter-gift should be returned. This moment is not (according to Bourdieu) known by calculation, but by a gut feeling, a feeling of rightness, which comes from lifelong habitual absorption in the rhythm of community affairs. That moment looms up as part of the unfolding present-in-being, and the gift-returnee just acquiesces in the flow of events, without having to ask what motivates his action.

This account has undeniable verisimilitude, but it has to be set against the actual testimony of real participants in gift-economies, as opposed to the 'typifications' of non-western practices reconstructed by anthropologists. Occasionally this testimony is disconcerting, as witness the following crystal-clear account of the timing of exchanges given by one Kisian of Tewara. He is describing his strategy in the famous 'Kula' exchanges which circulate ceremonial valuables in and among the islands of the Massim district, New Guinea.

Suppose I, Kisian of Tewara go [north] to the Trobriands and secure a [famous, prestigious] arm-shell called Monitor Lizard. Then I go [south] to Sanaroa and in four different places secure four different armshells² promising each man who gives me a shell necklace, Monitor Lizard in return, later. I, Kisian, do not have to be very specific in my promise. It will be conveyed by implication and assumption for the most part. Later, when four men appear at my home at Tewara, each expecting Monitor Lizard, only one will get it. The other three are not defrauded permanently however. They are furious, it is true, and their exchange is blocked for a year. Next year, when I, Kisian, go again to the Trobriands, I shall represent that I have four necklaces at home waiting for those who will give me four armshells. I obtain more armshells than I did previously, and pay my debts a year late. . . . I have become a great man by enlarging my exchanges at the expense of blocking [the exchanges of others] for a year. I cannot afford to block their exchanges for too long, or my exchanges will never be trusted again. I am honest in the final issue (Fortune, 1932, p. 215.)

² Armshells are always exchanged for necklaces and vice-versa.

This passage shows that a 'calculative' notion of time is perfectly compatible with the Bourdieu notion of pragmatic time. Kisian shows that he is perfectly able to grasp the abstract 'temporal' principle which governs cash-flow in contemporary business organisations (i.e. that growth is dependent on ensuring that debts owed to the firm by customers are cleared marginally more rapidly than debts owed by the firm to its suppliers). At the same time Bourdieu is vindicated to the extent that Kisian has to rely on 'gut feeling' in determining just how long he can hold out against his angry suppliers before his credit collapses completely. But once again, that predicament is one shared by all too many modern businessmen, so the contrast between 'pre-capitalist' and 'modern' temporal attitudes proves less clearly drawn than at first sight.

It seems to me that while there may be a different balance between Bourdieuan 'evolving' time versus abstract, calculated and manipulated time as between peasant/tribal temporal regimes and our own, it cannot be said that either has absolute preponderance anywhere, because each requires, and calls forth, the other. The Kaybele have a calendar and a series of work schedules which require some degree of formal calculation to be implemented, while we also have, though in more muted form, the experience of social life as an imminent flow of events. The real problem for the anthropology of time is to understand how abstractly-represented time and 'lived' time are interrelated. So far, anthropology has not really come to grips with this problem, because the emphasis has always been placed, rather too heavily I think, on showing how much 'the Other' differs from 'Us'. But I will conclude this rather selective account of the anthropology of time, with one more example, which might point towards a way of making more progress towards this objective.

13.6. Calendars, commensurability and calculation: the Mursi

Numerous non-technological societies in the world have 'lunar' calendars, i.e. 'months' are lunations, and successive lunations throughout the (solar) year have names. Given that ordinary day-to-day work in many of these societies (and in particular the Mursi of Ethiopia, whom I am about to discuss) is not organised on a prescriptive calendrical schedule, it is something of a puzzle to know why these month-naming systems occur so widely. The mystery deepens when one reflects on the fact that these month-naming systems must encounter the intellectual challenge presented by the non-coordination of the lunar cycle and the solar year. The solar year is on average 11 days longer than 12 successive lunations of between 29 and 30 days each. A set of 12 month-names is too few to keep up with the solar (and meteorological) year, 13 is too many. Whatever use they may be, lunar calendars are going to come unstuck unless some extra machinery for 'intercalation' exist to cover the 11-day deficit.

Let us consider what happens among the Mursi, who garden and herd cattle along the escarpment overlooking the Omo river in southern Ethiopia. They have 12 'named' months (Bergu) each associated with a particular activity, and a thirteenth 'unnamed' month, which is associated with the annual flooding of the Omo river. I will not give the actual month-names, replacing them with numbers, for convenience's sake. The 'activity' calendar looks like this:

Bergu 1: Omo river subsides, move to riverside gardens

Bergu 2: Clearing riverside gardens

Bergu 3: Planting sorghum

Bergu 4: Planting maize, weeding

Bergu 5: Harvesting sorghum, bird-scaring

Bergu 6: Harvesting, firing gardens

Bergu 7: Store Crop, plant bush gardens

Bergu 8: Heavy rain, plant bush gardens

Bergu 9: Weeding young plants

Bergu 10: Weeding, bird-scaring

Bergu 11: Harvest bush crop, collecting honey, duelling

Bergu 12: Store bush crop, drinking, duelling

(Bergu 13: the Omo floods)

(Turton and Ruggles 1978)

The Mursi think they know, more or less which Bergu it is, as the year goes by, not by counting, but because they can easily see what activities they and their immediate neighbours are engaged in. But when pressed by a curious anthropologist to be totally specific on this point, they disclaim knowledge and/or cite the (unavailable) authority of dead or distant 'experts' as the following dialogue brings out. (This conversation is also worth citing because it gives a rare sidelight onto the actual process of anthropological investigation).

Anthropologist: What number is the Bergu now?

Mursi: Don't ask me.

A: Don't you know then?

M: Not me, I just listen to what people say about the Bergu.

A: Well, what do people say at the moment then?

M: Some say it's 5 and some say it's 6.

A: What do you think it is?

M: I told you, I just listen to what they say. I'm not an expert on the Bergu.

A: Who is, then?

M: Well, there's . . . [pause for thought] there's that Gongwi man who died the other day . . . what's his name . . . Chuah; he was a real expert on the Bergu. If he were alive now he would be able to tell you.

A: Is there anybody who *is* alive who could tell me?

M: Well there's . . . Girimalori [*a man living 65 miles distant*].

(Turton and Ruggles, 1978, p. 588)

What the Mursi have is not so much a calendar as a calendrical debate, an running argument about what month it is, to which Turton and Ruggles' informant claims he only listens – though one suspects he may put in his two-pennies' worth when the anthropologists are out of earshot; and, from one point of view, it is just as well that this permanent state of collective indecision exists about what 'month' it is. This ambiguity allows the Mursi to 'intercalate' the necessary extra days to align the sequence of lunations and the solar year without making calculations at all. They can do this because the ambiguity is regularly ironed out by the unnamed 'Omo flooding' month which all agree marks the end of the year. Once this month arrives everybody can silently re-assess the assertions they may have been making about the month in the period immediately prior to the arrival of the floods.

Take Bergu 11 and 12, for instance:

11	12	13
Honey collecting	Drinking duelling	No activity

—————[the Omo floods]—>

If we reconstruct the picture during the second quarter of lutation 12, it is likely that Mursi opinion on the Bergu will be divided into two parties, the 'leaders' who have finished honey collecting and hold that it is Bergu 12, and the 'followers' who have not, and hold that it is Bergu 11. Once the Omo floods, there is no reason to resist the consensus that the ensuing lutation is Bergu 13 as the 'leaders' were claiming. The 'followers' will have to keep their peace; but when next year comes round, they may be proved right, as the 'leaders' come to the end of (their) lutation 12, and the Omo fails to flood, and then it will be the 'followers' turn to feel smug.

This solves the intercalation problem, but one is still entitled to wonder why the Mursi bother with all this. Especially as the Mursi also have some surprisingly sophisticated means of cross-checking their running count of lunations with the progress of the solar year. The Mursi monitor the solar year by looking out, from observation posts atop the cliffs overlooking the Omo valley, for the winter solstice when, as they say, 'the sun goes into his house'. However, although the solstice is monitored in this way, the Mursi hold that the winter solstice does not necessarily fall in the same Bergu each year. Some years the sun goes into his house in Bergu 5, and in other years in Bergu 6. If the solstice comes in Bergu 5,

or more precisely, in what any particular Mursi takes to be Bergu 5, then that portends a poor rainy season, come Bergu 8. Another Mursi, who thinks that it is Bergu 6, not 5, will not draw the same inference.

In other words, the sun is observed, like the weather, to provide partial clues as to which Bergu it is, but is not the source of evidence which is in any way stronger than the evidence provided by the weather, the progress of the agricultural year, or attempts to count lunations. It is all a matter of the flux of village opinion, there being no single knock-down argument – other than the annual arrival of the Omo floods – to identify the Bergu once and for all. Each may interpret the available evidence as he wishes. Turton and Ruggles rightly compare Mursi time reckoning with divination, a similarly tentative procedure, equally swayed by the currents of public opinion.

13.7. Conclusion: a shared constraint

The point is, that this continuous and unavailing effort to align the abstract scheme of lunar months against the flow of quotidian life, is productive of socially very useful knowledge. Charting the months means attending to life in an organized, structured, way, measuring the progress of daily affairs against an abstract scheme which produces continuous feedback and feedforward in day-to-day decision making. The babble of dissenting voices debating the identity of the ‘current’ month are channelling information about the progress of gardens and harvests into the common pool. Trying to keep track of time is part of the more general process of trying to keep up with events, seeking to anticipate marginal changes in conditions, the onset of a prosperous or particularly difficult season. Watching the sun go into his house and worrying – or not worrying – about the still distant rainy season is also part of the process of keeping up with time. The Mursi calendar shows how the mere existence of a classificatory scheme applied to time generates the very types of day to day observations of ‘how we are getting on’ which the tribal subsistence farmer, no less than the businessman poring over his sales charts and spreadsheets has to engage in in order to keep up. Bourdieu’s concept of inertial, visceral, time only tells half the story; the other side of temporal awareness the calculative, detached, intellectualising side of temporal awareness also has its rightful role, among people who seem, but only seem, much less pressurised by time constraints than we are ourselves.

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