



The striking of the tubuan figures with shell money during the mortuary ceremony

SPACE, TIME, AND THE CONCEPT  
OF PERSON IN KARAVAR\*

Shelly Errington

"Between a people's conception of what it is to be a person and their conception of the structure of history there is an unbreakable internal link," says Geertz in his brilliant essay called *Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali*.<sup>1</sup> In the West, the notion of what it is to be a person and the notion of linear time are certainly linked. Westerners tend to conceptualize an individual's life as a journey of self through time, as the development of a self during that self's life-span. The structure of history, regardless of its content or direction, consists of a linear chronological sequence; while the structure of an individual's life, regardless of its content or direction, consists of the development of the self, in a chronological sequence. It can hardly be an accident that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the fullest development of both evolutionary theory (which seeks to make explicit the structure of history) and the notion of the psyche (which seeks to make explicit the structure of the developing self). They are parallel conceptual principles by which we organize the events of history, on the one hand, and the events of an individual's life, on the other, each of which consists of the same sorts of data.

Nor can it be an accident that, in the West, the notions of subjectivity and objectivity, of linear time, of causality, and of homogeneous space all emerged at approximately the same time. Together, they form a logically coherent conceptual organization by which Westerners deal with the physical world and man's place in it. The notions of subjectivity and objectivity imply each other; we could not conceive of what "objective" laws, facts, or events consist if we did not implicitly contrast them with subjective views or attitudes. The notion of linear time not only parallels the notion of the development of self (the subjective), but without linear time the scientific notion of causality is meaningless. The idea of causality is, of course, basic to the notion of objective laws in science as we know it. Finally, homogeneous space, being homogeneous, is discountable; it cannot interfere with the operation of objective laws which, to be counted as "objective," must be in effect everywhere.

Anthropological literature abounds with evidence that few, if any, of these notions are shared by other peoples. For instance, many peoples do not distinguish between subjective and objective, or

---

\* I would like to thank Benedict Anderson, Dennis Blair, and Carlene Bryant, whose questions and comments helped clarify my understanding of the Karavaran concepts.

1. Clifford Geertz, *Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1966), p. 42.

at least do not draw the lines where we do.<sup>2</sup> A people's concept of "person" may be radically different from our own.<sup>3</sup> Time may be measured or thought of in ways very different from our own.<sup>4</sup> Theories of causality, or the questions such theories seek to answer, may be different from our own.<sup>5</sup> Space may be thought of as being different in different places rather than as homogeneous.<sup>6</sup>

Few efforts, however, have been made to relate these views to each other within a single culture with the assumption that they might (as in the West) form a logically coherent system of thought. This paper is a preliminary effort to relate the notions of space, time, and personhood to each other in the society of Karavar, a small island in the Duke of York Group of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.

Although I would hazard that Karavarans notions of causality in the physical world would be different from Western ones and would be related to their notions of space and time, to try to elucidate them would be beyond the scope of this short and exploratory paper.

Karavarans divide space into four major types: the *lokor* (deep forest); the *taraiu* (men's ground); the *bual* (light forest or bush); and the *taman* (the village, or women's and children's place).

The *lokor* is untamed and uninhabited, a place of wild animals and sorcerers. While Karavarans believe that sorcery is practiced in the present era, they think that very little is practiced on Karavar itself, and they identify its decline at least in part with the elimination of deep forest on their island. The island is now almost completely covered with man-planted coconut trees to provide copra, and sorcerers have had to retreat to the deep forest on a neighboring island. The deep forest is where, the women are told, the *tubuan* ritual figure originates. The *tubuan* mask, which is thought by both men and women to be inhabited by a powerful and dangerous spirit, is central to the Karavaran mortuary ceremonies at which big men<sup>7</sup> make their reputations and

2. See G. Lienhardt, Divinity and Experience (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961); and Victor Turner, "A Ndembu Doctor in Practice," The Forest of Symbols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).
3. For instance, see K. E. Read, "Morality and the Concept of the Person Among the Gahuku-Gama," Oceania, XXV, 233-282.
4. See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Nuer Time Reckoning," Africa, XII (1939); and John Middleton, "Social Aspects of Lugbara Myth," Africa, XXIV (1954).
5. See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1937).
6. See J. Littlejohn, "Temne Space," Anthropological Quarterly (1963); and his "The Temne House," Sierra Leone Studies (New Series), No. 14 (1960).
7. A direct translation of the term Karavarans use for their leaders is "big men." The term "big men" is generally used by anthropologists to describe the leaders of Melanesian societies, which lack class structures. A big man's position in both fact and indigenous ideology is achieved rather than ascribed.

to the secret men's society in which big men must attain the highest grade. The mask requires materials for its construction which are available only in the deep forest, although it is actually made in the men's ground. When the mask's construction has been completed and it is ready for presentation and use in a ceremony, it is smuggled to the deep forest and then brought back on a canoe with great ceremony, as though it were arriving for the first time. These masks vary somewhat in their designs and are individually owned by men who have reached the highest level of the men's ritual grades. If a man wants to make a new pattern of tubuan mask, he eats a concoction made from a plant called *inambua* and goes to the deep forest to fast and wait for the ancestors to show him a new mask in a dream.

The taraiu is tabu to all females and to male children prior to the time they are symbolically torn from the village and taken to the men's ground for the first time. Preparations for the ritual season--making the tubuan masks and the less important *dukduk* masks and initiations of various sorts into men's secrets--take place at the men's ground. Many of these activities involve secrets, or are secrets, which must be kept from the women. When the ritual season is not imminent, the men's ground is a place for pleasant loafing and male camaraderie.

The bual separates the village from the men's ground. On Karavar, it consists of coconut trees and light bush. The light forest is not inhabited, but it is freely traversed by humans. It is the place where lovers meet. A variety of spirits (*turangan*) live in the light forest, but during the day they are not feared.

The taman is the village, a group of dispersed hamlets linked by paths running through the light forest. Although men often eat and sleep there, it is considered the place of women and children. It is a place in which men must be careful. For one thing, it contains women. Contact with women can be dangerous for men: contact with menstrual blood will make them grow old and die quickly or become extremely sick. Less dangerous but still unhealthful is to indulge excessively in sexual intercourse. To combat the ill effects of sex and of inevitable but less intimate contact with women, men regularly eat a coconut oil preparation at the men's ground called *polo*, which restores their health and vitality and the smooth glossiness of their skin--thus making them once more sexually attractive. Even staying around the village without physical contact with women is deleterious to a man's health. Such a man (he is called a *naur* and is viewed with contempt) will look old quickly, his skin will become wrinkled and dirty-looking, and his energies will wane.

During the ritual season when the tubuan and dukduk masks are made and displayed in mortuary ceremonies, the distinction between the men's ground and the village is most pronounced. For instance, during the time the dukduk mask is being made on the men's ground, men must not have sexual intercourse, must not eat or sleep in the village, and must avoid loitering in the village. Even the village dust which clings to their feet must be washed off before they re-enter the men's ground.

Karavarans divide time into two phases.<sup>8</sup> The first they call

---

8. Time is not structured in any way except by the momboto myth. Unlike the Nuer, for instance, they do not structure time using

*momboto*, which they contrast to present-day society. In the *momboto*, they say, there was no shell money, and there were no moieties (all Karavarans are born into an exogamous matri-moiety). Women were then--as they are now, they say--a constant source of trouble, for men would fight over them. Without moieties or shell money, there was no way to regulate access to women. Brides could not be bought, so marriage did not exist. Without moieties to separate the categories of marriageable from unmarried women, people committed what would now be considered incest; without shell money (which now is used for buying brides, paying adultery fines and the like), disputes over women could not be settled without fighting. The *momboto* was a time when sorcery, cannibalism, murder, and incest were rife. A sorcerers' society was extremely powerful. People could hardly sleep for fear of being killed. When they did sleep, they kept spears in their hands and jumped up at the slightest noise. Individual houses were fenced in (they are not now). Karavar was full of deep forest. Fighting and warfare not only between islands but also within Karavar were unceasing. There were no domesticated animals then. Men themselves lived like wild animals--having sexual relations with kin, killing anyone, and eating each other. They let their hair grow unshaven, and they had "red eyes like wild pigs."

They believe that the *momboto* ended suddenly with the coming of George Brown, the first Christian missionary in the area. Moieties are thought to be a Christian institution invented by Noah, and were introduced with Christianity. Shell money is thought to have been introduced by the German colonial administration specifically in order to regulate the chaos of the *momboto*. Karavarans state explicitly that in the *momboto* there was simply no way to regulate behavior, because there was no shell money to use as a threat or as an inducement to make people act in a social manner.

The Karavaran notion of time as consisting of two phases, an anti-society and a current society, may at first seem to be one of linear time which is divided into episodes rather than being gradually evolutionary and which is similar to Locke's or Hobbes' notion of a state of nature preceding society as we now know it. But on further reflection it is apparent that it has little or nothing to do with linearity or with time but is, rather, a way of knowing society as it is by contrasting it with something it is not. The anti-society of the *momboto* has its significance not because it took place in the past, but because it shows what human life would be like if it were not organized by moiety and regulated by shell money. If the *momboto* is indeed significant as a contrast, it could occur somewhere else in space rather than at another point in time. In fact, it does both, for the *lokor* of distant space is very much like the *momboto* of distant time: both are wild and unregulated. They are both peopled with untamed creatures: wild animals, uncurbed sorcerers, unrestrained lust, unregulated appetites

---

genealogies: ancestors who were big men are remembered but cannot be arranged in a chronological sequence. The moieties do not have origin myths nor do the smaller "kin" groups (which consist of big men and their followers) within moieties.

(even cannibalism), unregulated killings, and unshaven hair. By contrast, the taraiu and taman are present society, both spatially and temporally. The men, who control each other and are controlled by shell money, have as their center of activities the men's ground. They are poised between the uncontrollable wildness of the momboto/lokor and the objects of their control and source of their troubles, women.

Karavarans conceive of the momboto as a time when human nature ran wild and society was therefore impossible. The momboto ended with the introduction of shell money and moiety, which regulated human appetites. The momboto did not end with a change of heart, or with a social contract which all agreed to obey. Human nature is the same now as it was in the momboto: only the external conditions have changed. Karavarans do not have a word which could be directly translated as "human nature" but refer to the anarchic greed which they think is the natural human tendency merely as the "momboto." For instance, one man who was very angry at the Australian plantation manager of a nearby island said to us, "He disdains us as though we were only dogs. He should watch out. The momboto will come up again and I will bite his ear off." At first I was puzzled by the fact that the momboto, a matter of the past, could "come up again." The momboto's significance is not that it happened in the past but that it tells Karavarans what their world would be like if people were unregulated by shell money and moiety.

While human inclinations and desires are predictably greedy and anti-social, there is no predicting what form those desires will take. Karavarans consider what is going on in other people's minds (as we in the West would say) totally unknowable. Their favorite expression is "pan dat nunure ava i ki ura balandat," which means, "We [inclusive] do not know what is in our [inclusive] stomachs."<sup>9</sup> (The stomach is the seat of emotions.) If a Westerner were to say something not unlike that, such as "We cannot know what is in another person's heart and mind," it would be a statement of an epistemological problem: X cannot know what Y is thinking. But for Karavarans, the unknowability is absolute. It is not just that we cannot know what is in another person's stomach: his stomach's desires are unknowable, because they are formless, anarchic, like the momboto itself. They have no coherence, pattern, or structure which would make them explicable. For the same reason, we cannot know what is in our own stomachs; it is unknowable. At times when a Westerner might talk about someone's reasons for doing something, or about his motives for doing something, Karavarans say only, "We do not know what is in our stomachs." They never speculate on motives and have no concept of a motivational explanation which would make comprehensible overt behavior.<sup>10</sup>

- 
9. Like most Malayo-Polynesian languages, Karavaran distinguishes the inclusive we (which includes the person spoken to) from the exclusive we (which excludes the person spoken to). The use of the inclusive we in this expression emphasizes that all humans are included in the statement.
  10. This notion is quite different from the post-Freudian idea of the "unconscious." The unconscious is filled with powerful and instinctual desires, not unlike those of the momboto. But, unlike the momboto, the unconscious disguises and restricts

Their lack of a notion of motive is consistent with their lack of a notion of "character," of an internal core of self which develops over time but which shows a continuation from one period to the next and therefore makes behavior understandable. They do not conceive of people as being governed by the consistency of character, and to speculate on the reasons that people behave as they do would be fruitless.

How, then, do they explain the fact that people have different personalities? Karavarans notice, of course, that some people have a tendency to anger, some to gossip, some to smoke a great deal. Sometimes those people are referred to as "one of anger," "one of aimless talk," or "one of smoking." (The grammatical construction is the same in all cases, and is the same as that for a crocodile, "one of lying in the sun.") But there stops any characterization of their behavior. *Why* this person or that displays these characteristics is never a subject of discussion. If pressed, they will say, "Aaaiii! All of us do not know what is in all of our stomachs." Karavarans' observations on personality, then, are not so much about what causes a person to behave as he does as they are a quick summary of observed behavior.

One would think that Karavarans would recognize that big men, at least, have extraordinary qualities of character. An outsider observes the intricate maneuverings and judgment of circumstance and personality which big men must surely use in order to achieve and maintain their reputation, and is impressed. Big men universally appear to be intelligent, cagey, close-mouthed, and in control of themselves. They are forceful and frequent public orators, and they exude self-confidence at all times. In fact, Karavarans were firm in asserting that big men are like anyone else, except that they have shell money. They pointed to Alipet, an impressive big man at the height of his career, with all that that implies in behavior: boasting at rituals, speaking forcefully at meetings, asserting himself at court cases. Then they pointed to his younger brother Machiat, a retiring, hesitant, timid, silent person. Alipet, they said, was exactly like Machiat before he got shell money.

Of course the crucial question for us is, "What personal qualities does he have which would enable him to get shell money?" I found that saying "personal qualities" is impossible in the language. I asked if Alipet were not the same person before and after he got shell money, and they agreed, rather puzzled, that he certainly was. I conceded that he might not *behave* like a big man--boasting and so on--before getting shell money, but asked how he, rather than someone else, got shell money. In Karavarans' thought there are two ways: one is the luck of inheritance; the other is simply that some people have struck on a secret which makes shell money "come up." There was no way

---

itself in entirely "rational" clever ways: it builds defense mechanisms, displaces aggressions, etc., all in order to hide itself from the conscious mind. The unconscious is completely decodable once the key to its mysteries (psychoanalysis) is discovered, for, in its perverse way, it is entirely consistent and "rational." There is no key to the momboto.

that I could get anyone to say that there was anything "inside" a big man rather than "external" to him which would explain his being what he was. To speculate, then, on who will become a big man in the future is fruitless.<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to identify people as future big men before they become big men, because they act like big men only *when* they have shell money, and *because* they have shell money.

A notion of "conscience," an internal regulator of behavior, would make no sense in the Karavarans notion of what personhood is like. Karavarans do not think that society is possible due to people's having internalized norms resulting in their acting in a social way. Human nature is controllable and regulable only through shell money. With shell money people can attain prestige (by becoming big men), satisfy lust (by buying a wife, or paying adultery fines), satisfy hunger (indirectly by buying a wife, as women do much of the garden work; directly by buying food with shell money), as well as fulfill many other wants. What is interesting about the control exerted by shell money is that if human nature were not what it is--greedy and without conscience--shell money would not be effective as a social regulator. It presupposes human desires, which are channelled by it into social forms.<sup>12</sup> It is impossible to conduct one's life on Karavar without shell money. Not only major life events (marriage, attainment of stages in the men's society, funerals) are marked by the exchange or distribution of shell money, but virtually every social interaction is marked by its use. It is a much more pervasive and generalized symbolic medium of interaction than is money in the West. One might almost say that an event is marked as "social" and registered as "public" only if shell money is exchanged at it. Simple need for shell money in order to conduct one's life, desire for prestige which comes of having ample supplies, and fear of gossip if one does not have sufficient--all are inducements to seek shell money and to regulate one's behavior so as not to lose it.

Regulating one's behavior so as not to lose shell money becomes morality in Karavar. It is right and proper that people should be (as we say) "motivated" by the desire for gaining shell money or the fear of losing it, for all other human desires are anti-social. Old men exhort young ones to good behavior, or rebuke them for their

---

11. The discussion came up originally because I remembered that Margaret Mead said that future big men were identifiable, in Manus, while still children. I did not feel confident of my "character assessment" even of men in their thirties.

12. In a real sense all social form depends on shell money and the framework of moiety organization. Events of social life are given "form," that is, social meaning, by being marked by the exchange of shell money. For instance, without the exchange of shell money, sexual intercourse is momboto-like and anarchic and therefore socially unacceptable by society; with the exchange of shell money, it becomes marriage, a social form. Even the social form which we call "kinship" is made possible by shell money, for big men's followers are considered to be his kinsmen (the Karavarans do not distinguish between them terminologically or, I believe, conceptually, though demonstration of this assertion is impossible in this short article).



transgressions: "Don't waste shell money on trivia! Don't commit adultery, you'll be fined, it's a waste of shell money! Be good to your wife or she'll leave you and you'll have to buy another one! What do you think already, that shell money grows on trees?!" (That last is literally, "What do you think, shell money comes up willy-nilly?")

Without a notion of conscience, it is not surprising that they have no conception of guilt. We in the West think of guilt as the internal feeling in the psyche following the performance of a sin. Guilt is a great force for morality and society, we think, as we will feel guilty after doing something wrong whether anyone finds out or not. We do not need a policeman for every citizen because we have internal regulators and restraints. Karavarans have no notion of guilt, a feeling which follows a breach of social norms. Rather, if an offender is caught, he will be fined in shell money or else will be the subject of gossip, which can "hit" him and make him sick. Both are to be avoided. But people are expected to try to break social norms whenever they can do so with impunity and sometimes when they cannot. I carefully quizzed a variety of informants and of course listened to gossip and comments on breaches of good conduct. I could discover only one category of activity (sexual relations between true mother and son, true father and daughter, or true mother's brother and sister's daughter) which was considered reprehensible whether anyone found out or not. Shell money is, then, the policeman for every citizen: it infiltrates every aspect of social life, assuring that social life itself will be possible. Morality and good behavior are accomplished not through an internal regulator in individuals (conscience) but through an external regulator in social life.

The Karavaran oppositions between deep forest and human habitation (the division of space), between anti-society and present society (the division of time) and between human nature and social control through shell money, not only parallel each other but are each other. The lokor, the momboto, and human nature are wild, anarchic, and energetic, while human habitation, present-day society, and social life are characterized by the control or "domestication" of human behavior. These two categories are not static; they are in continual interaction, as human nature in the process of social life is constantly being channelled into social form. Energy resides in the lokor/momboto: it is the generative, active force in life. Form or control resides in shell money and moiety: they are the regulating, form-giving elements. Without society, energy is chaotic; without energy, society will not happen. Each implies the other, and neither makes sense without the other. These dichotomies provide the basic conceptual principles by which Karavarans make sense of their world.