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16 THE ANTHROPOLOGY
OF TIME-RECKONING

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THIS PAPER IS less of a completed argument than a report on work in progress, work which resulted from dissatisfaction with a certain statement of my own advanced several years ago. I had, in a brief paper to the Royal Anthropological Institute, described the manner in which two castes in Gujerat had changed their status; one of them, the Patidar, had undergone this change rapidly and within the living memory of many. I concluded the paper with the observation that although the Patidar were aware that some of their customs had changed and that they had in the course of a few generations risen above those who were now their inferiors, they did not in general allow this experience of mutability to extend to their Brahmans. Their Brahmans were of course pure by heredity and raised above the effects of history. And yet at the same time, sometimes in the course of a ceremony which depended for its efficacy upon the unquestioned status of the Brahman, they showed themselves capable of throwing that very status in doubt by suggesting that these were Brahmans of recent growth, pseudo-Brahmans. Equally the peasants would admit the claim made by the local Untouchables that once they had been kings in Gujerat who had fallen to their present condition as a result of some failure in kingly virtue, or sin (Pocock 1955: final paragraph).

Now it is evident from all that we know about the caste system that status is not dependent upon achievement. The Brahman is not elected or promoted, he is what he is because he and his ancestors have always been what they are. And the Untouchables

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likewise. In this scheme of things history can have no place and so long as the people themselves are unconscious of any change, all is well. In such a circumstance we may know what we call the history of a people and compare it with the collective representations of those people but we are not faced with the problem that emerges when the people know that they have changed and continue, nevertheless, to live in a world whose values depend upon immutability. Here we have a choice: Either we credit these people with an immense capacity for self-deception, an ability to live in permanent contradiction with their experience, or we must re-examine the assumptions in the light of which these facts constitute a problem.

One way of dismissing the whole subject would be to say that the phenomenon of contradiction is in a sense a pathological one resulting from the gradual decline of caste values and the rapid rise of the Patidar under the British. Against this I simply advance caution. These facts are not irrelevant but I prefer to look first and find whether it is possible to take a general sociological view of the matter, both outside and inside India, a view which the particular facts of Patidar history can then supplement.

At the outset two terms have to be distinguished, they are time-reckoning and duration. These I shall distinguish by reference to the work of two authors, Nilsson and Van Gennep. For the present it is sufficient to note that as anthropologists we are concerned with the way in which people reckon time and not with any enquiry into the nature of time itself.

Nilsson's work *Time-Reckoning* is the essential starting point for enquiries of this nature and the initial criticism which has to be made does not damage his major contribution. He announces his formal position as follows:

In the matter of the indications and reckoning of time we have not to do with a number of conceptions which may be supposed to be as various and numerous as we please. At the basis lies an accurately determined and limited number of phenomena, which are the same for all peoples all over the globe, and can be combined only in a certain quite small number of ways. These phenomena fall into two main groups: 1) the phenomena of the heavens—sun, moon, stars; 2) the phases of nature, the variations of the climate and plant and animal life—and these latter are of course dependent upon the sun (Lund 1920: 2-3).

In other words Nilsson is saying that time-reckoning resides, in some sense, in these natural phenomena, and the fully developed and rational systems of time-reckoning in the modern world develop as man understands the motions of these natural phenomena more and more.¹ He says, for example, "the units of time-reckoning are given by the motions of the heavenly bodies" but he adds "and the more intimately these enter into the life of man, the more important do they become." And this latter statement gives us our sole concern as anthropologists, because it is by no means inevitable that a given society should find the movement of the heavenly bodies useful in ordering its affairs. Much of the evidence which Nilsson used shows how selective different peoples are in relation to natural phenomena in this regard.

Nilsson's major contribution is that systems of time-reckoning are not necessarily continuous. In his language time-reckoning is preceded by time indications. By continuous time-reckoning Nilsson means the mathematical calendar systems with which we are familiar, in which units of time (seconds, minutes, days, etc.) accumulate and add up to the next larger unit. Discontinuous time indications are exemplified from all over the world and are characterized by reference to events. Thus: six moons, three harvests and so on. The moons or harvests are not units and are not interconnected by other units with which they are considered to be equal. What is counted is the event. This aoristic method Nilsson calls *punktuell* since the calculation is based upon a *punktum*—a particular point. Before going on it might be pointed out that Nilsson is incorrect in supposing that the use of time indications is limited to primitive society, as will be recognised by anyone who recalls how often our continuous time-reckoning lets us down when we are trying to locate an event in the past and how often we are obliged to have recourse to some other event which occurred before, after or simultaneously with the event we are trying to place.²

¹ The same error is implied by Leach in an essay which briefly joins my argument but rapidly diverges from it. E. R. Leach "Two Essays Concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time" in Leach 1961.

² While re-typing this paper I overheard in a public-house an argument concerning the time of arrival of a newcomer to the district. This was conducted fruitlessly in terms of number of years until the landlady recalled what she had been wearing at the time, which she remembered because it was on the occasion of Her present Majesty's wedding. Once this was fixed the date was then easily arrived at.

It might seem that these time indications are simply synecdochical and poetic ways of "telling time." But the *punktuell* or "eventual" character comes out when we look at the primitive evidence. Professor Evans-Pritchard states categorically of the Nuer that although they are aware of the natural rhythms of the universe they do not use them as points of reference:

. . . the concept of seasons is derived from social activities rather than from the climatic changes which determine them (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 95).

Again, the Nuer division of the year into two "halves" is not abstract time-reckoning:

The words *tot* and *mai* are not pure units of time-reckoning but stand for the cluster of social activities *characteristic* of the height of the drought and height of the rains . . . (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 99, *my italics*).

This author notes of the divisions of the Nuer day that it is the activities that determine the time indications so that

. . . there are as many points of reference between [our] 4 and 6 a.m. as there are for the rest of the day (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 101).

That is the period which sees the greatest social activity centering upon the cattle.

An important difference between continuous time-reckoning and the time indications which Nilsson does not bring out relates to the kind of activity. It does not need to be argued at length that the more diverse are the activities of a number of people or groups, the more abstract and systematic must be the time-reckoning if any form of co-ordination is desired or effected. The larger co-ordination subsumes the less. This is true of political activity as much as of economic activity. Two men who go out separately to fish in the morning can arrange to meet again when the fish are no longer rising. This event will bring them together at roughly the same time. If one has gone to hunt and another to fish, some other indication than their activities must be found, such as the position of the sun. In political organization the activity (or, in the case of the Nuer, the coming into being) of a political group overrules the activities of the smaller groups, and with the activities the time indications to which they relate.

In Europe, for example, the Christian, Jewish and university years are subsumed in the national and continental calendars.³ In more primitive societies the time of the chief or king's court overrules the time of villages. Among the Nuer we can see from the set of concentric hemispheres by which Professor Evans-Pritchard represents their political consciousness that these are not only socio-spatial categories as the author calls them but also temporal ones (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 114). The time indications of the homestead give way progressively to those of the tribe just as finally the time-reckoning of the Nuer is subsumed in that of the European world which is at once the most systematic and abstract in the series. The important aspect of this progressive subsumption is that what are opposed at any point in the series are not two distinct conceptions of time but a time indication on the one hand and a number of individual people or groups on the other whose previous activities are in that context seen as having mere duration. If I am alone I am not the creature of my society's system of time-reckoning. My life and my activity endure and it is only through interaction with others that I am subject to time. The man who is fishing carries on until he stops, sleeps until he wakes, eats and then goes on fishing. These activities are not meaningful in terms of time except insofar as other people are concerned. Similarly, at a moment of co-ordination in social life what is meaningful is the synthesis in relation to which the elements, whether individual people or groups, are meaningless. As a temporary conclusion we can suggest that the relation of the individual person or the individual group to the larger whole is intimately related to the relation between time-reckoning and mere duration.

It is at this stage that Van Gennep's classical work *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) takes on a new relevance. And this relevance seems to lie exactly where Marcel Mauss, in his review of the book, failed to see it. His acid comments in the *Année Sociologique* may be remembered:

M. Van Gennep can see nothing but separations, margins and aggregations . . . It is obvious that all rites imply movement. Since there is nothing in the world but the sacred and the profane any

³ The different calendars do not add up, nor except in the eyes of an observer "cut across each other". From the point of view of any one the others do not exist.

positive act is either the consecration of a profane individual or the desacralization of a sacred person. If one acts ritually it is to change something. At this degree of generality, the thesis becomes a truism (*Année Sociologique* 11: 200-2).

I trust not to have done Mauss an injustice if I say that he appears to have ignored Van Gennep's emphasis upon what he calls "le pivotement de la notion de sacré" in which we recognise that relativity of the relation between the sacred and the profane that has become commonplace in our own time (Van Gennep 1909: 16-17; 1960: 12-13). The rather substantialist division of the world into sacred and profane that Mauss seems to take for granted vanishes and, indeed, it could be argued that *Les Rites de Passage* is a book as much about the inflection of the sacred and the profane in primitive society as it is a book about certain kinds of rite. Here Van Gennep has something to say of the greatest relevance to this discussion. It is usually accepted that the importance of the book lies in its description of the biological individual passing through an almost hierarchical series of rites. It is, I think, significant that in English anthropology at least, the term has come to be used almost exclusively in describing initiation rites at puberty when both the biological and hierarchical aspect are most to the front. Now Van Gennep is careful at the outset to emancipate himself from the narrow consideration of groups and relations between groups. For him society is, properly speaking, composed of societies, or better, particular conditions.⁴ Thus we are able to relate the condition of being married, which implies no necessary group affiliation, to the condition of being a member of an age-set, which does. In a word the discussion is not about the life history of individual people or individual groups as they move, but about the reaction of society to such individuals. If distinctions of age are important, or if distinctions of occupation are important, or distinctions between sacred acts and profane ones—if all these distinctions mark the centres of value for a society, then it is quite obvious that these are precisely the areas in which individual preference, natural sympathy and biological development, summarily the fact of difference, must be subordinated to principles upon which that society places

⁴ See French edition, p. 1, 4. The English translators speak of social groupings and subgroups where Van Gennep has written "society" and "categories."

value. Difference, whether in the individual person or group, is experienced, biological duration for example cannot be ignored, but through rites these differences are subsumed. The notorious unevenness of biological development, the vagaries of human wills constitute a threat to the valued order. We can imagine what would happen to the distinction between pre-puberty and manhood in a given society if it were left to the biological process to produce men. On the contrary society does not change precisely to the extent that it is able to cope with the effects of duration by denying them any individuality and consequently any historicity. Following the schema of the *rites de passage*, the individual person or group is cut off, isolated and then restored. But in this restoration individual distinctions and differences are translated into social ones. Van Gennep is then talking not about particular rites and finally not only about the inflection of the sacred and the profane in particular societies. He is talking about the nature of society as a complex of meaning maintaining itself against forces that would devalue it, render it meaningless. Forces which are nevertheless conditions of its existence.

This play of society against the corroding effects of duration can be observed in a field apparently quite distinct from that of time-reckoning, the field of primitive law.⁵ Dr. P. Howell, writing of Nuer law (1954), speaks of their concepts of right and wrong—*cuong* and *dueer*. *Cuong* means upright in the moral and in the material sense. A post is *cuong* if it stands upright in the ground. A man of good behaviour is *cuong* also. *Cuong* is used in the sense of right when, in a dispute, one says that a man has *cuong* on his side, or he has more *cuong*, more right, than another. *Dueer* is the opposite of *cuong*. It means to miss the mark in hunting and also to be at fault in moral matters. Now, although Professor Evans-Pritchard has told that "strictly speaking the Nuer have no law" we may nevertheless observe from Howell's account of arbitration among the Nuer the same relation of society to the individual event—in this case a dispute—as we found in our discussion of Van Gennep. For the Nuer, *cuong* and *dueer* cannot be used or defined abstractly—there is no one primary meaning to which the other meanings are secondary. The anthropologist may define them by accumulating what they have meant at dif-

⁵ Cf. the discussion of Gluckman's material in Pocock 1961: 106-8.

ferent times but his is the outsider's view. For the Nuer, if a man takes another's life (not during war) his act cannot be immediately classified as *dueer*. Whether he had *cuong* on his side or how much right he had, this can only be ascertained by consideration of the particular moment in the life of the society in which he acted. The effect of this we may observe when we see what happens after the introduction of legal tribunals among the Nuer. The English notions of justice initially demanded consistency and it seemed only just that some law of precedent should be established. Thus if on one occasion a man was fined ten cattle for stealing another's wife, then if another man did the same thing he also should be fined ten cattle. This was contrary to Nuer notions of right, for they could not see that the superficial similarity of the two acts made them of equal moral value, for the two men were not the same nor were the two women, and all the parties stood in different relations to different people (Howell 1954: 23-24). For the Nuer, each case should be considered as an unique event, but always in the light of the notions of *cuong* and *dueer* which are eternal and unaffected by time. The difference between the Nuer and the English in this matter is the difference between their reactions to the unique. The Nuer recognise it in the event but deny it historicity or value, it happens and it is over. The English on the other hand value it and give it determining power over subsequent events. For the Nuer the absolute resides in the terms *cuong* and *dueer*; for the English it has come to reside in the event. It is interesting to note in this connection how, in English law, the notion of equity has evolved to correct the rigidity of the law, so that equity is to the law what among the Nuer the circumstances of a particular event are to the unchanging principles of right and wrong.⁶

Provisionally we come to a sociological use of the term individual, whether person, group or event, by relating it to the term duration, which is after all a succession of meaningless individuals in this sense. The use of the term *individual* here to refer to the human experience of particularity and uniqueness should not be confused with the normal sense of (valued) Individual as it is used in everyday English. Here the recognition of the individual is simply the recognition of the effects of duration and it is duration

⁶ Cf. R. Lingat 14: "The dharma, through its atemporal nature, is immune to the changes of the ages."

and not the individual which is put in opposition to the social.⁷

To return to India: it is I suppose by now a commonplace that traditional Indian society sets little value upon history. Nevertheless it is, I think, interesting to consider what happens in that society to the experience of duration, that experience of the particular which is, however denied or devalued, a part of the human experience. At the outset everything points to the annihilation of the particular and of duration. We have the well known cycles of time repeating themselves *ad infinitum*. The *mahayuga* follow each other. Each is divided into four *yuga*, each one of which is shorter than those that preceded it and each is marked by a progressive moral and physical deterioration. According to some Puranas, Vishnu takes his tenth incarnation at the end of each Mahayuga (*kalki avatāra*), overthrows the mleccchas, heretics and Shudra kings who will by then be dominant and then inaugurates another *mahayuga* beginning with its golden age, the *kṛta* age.

It is of course the last *yuga*, the Kaliyuga (the age of Kalyavan—death and time itself) which is the best known. Although shorter than the preceding ages it endures for 432,000 years, of which only 5,049 have elapsed. In fact this Kaliyuga is the time in which men live. The Hindu as we know and have known him is a creature of the Kaliyuga; according to Kane, the idea that man lives in an age of degeneration evolves simultaneously in Hindu thought with the whole cyclical theory of time-reckoning (Kane 1946, vol. 3: ch. 34). The characteristics of the Kaliyuga taken by themselves are almost a parody, certainly a dramatic statement, of the effects of duration ungoverned by concepts of time and human lives ungoverned by society. There is a progressive decay of all that gives meaning to Hindu life, a deliquescence of all value. But, of course, this experience is not seen as an isolated and rectilinear process. It is given meaning and value by its place within a whole system of time-reckoning. The horror of duration and the human experience that things fall short of the ideal are

⁷ I am grateful to L. Dumont for a lengthy correspondence on this point which revolves around the question of terminology. Both here and in my *Social Anthropology* the intention is to use the term "individual" as a fact of experience which is only opposed to society as the meaningless, or non-conceptual to the conceptual and meaningful. I am aware that it is open to misinterpretation and no doubt some alternative term must be found which will distinguish the individual in this sense from the valued and conceptualized individual of Western theology and philosophy.

made tolerable by being made understandable. The Kaliyuga is the night that follows the day, and morning will come—even though that morning will belong to somebody else.

The theory of *kalivariya* plays an important part in the justificatory role of the *mahayuga* scheme. The drinking of *soma* and alcoholic liquors, the practice of offering cows in sacrifice, the right of Brahmans to steal in times of need are condemned not as eternally wrong but simply because unsuited to people living in a corrupted age. Thus not only are departures from the current ideals justified but changes in social practice can be recognised and justified by reference to the condition of the time. The changes which duration inevitably brings about are recognised, but they are recognised only to be subordinated in a wider and changeless scheme. In short the Kaliyuga is not homogeneous with the other *yuga*, it is opposed to them, and the radical difference is that it is the age of time which is actually lived.

Parallel to this and at another level we may consider the great theory of successive births which is a counterpart of the caste hierarchy. Here apparently the individual is lost in a succession of births and can be said to achieve *satya*, true being, only by rebirths through the hierarchy of things and men. Nevertheless, and I think my experience is not unique, I was struck by the indifference of the greater part of the peasantry in Gujerat to this belief which they still formally accepted. Quite apart from those who were recognised *bhagats*, everyone placed over against the idea of rebirth a faith in devotion itself, in *bhakti*. Sectarian allegiances are strong in this part of Gujerat it is true, and we do not need to argue for a connection between sect and *bhakti*. But what is the effect of this double belief? Certainly reincarnation is intimately associated with the dignity of the Brahman to the extent that both rest upon a basic notion of hierarchy. But it is evident that for the people themselves their sectarian adherence or, if they do not formally belong to a sect, their private *bhakti* constitutes the religious reality. Thus at the highest levels of the Patidar caste where many belong to the relatively modern Swaminarayan sect, the Brahman is reduced to a village functionary, no less essential than the barber but no more so. I would go so far as to say that the Brahman tends to become profane. Even at lower levels of the Patidar caste there is ambiguity: a

man says that he believes in, accepts the existence of this god or that when he is speaking in the context of Brahmanic practice, but he speaks of adoration or worship when he refers to his *Bhagvan*.⁸

We have come close once more to the problem with which the paper started. But it has almost ceased to be a problem, for we have moved away from a sociology of harmonies and the resolution of contradictions to a sociology that operates in terms of contradictions and disengages the structure which is founded on them. We have on the one hand an *experience* of change and duration set against a *system* of values that appears to deny it. On the other we have a belief in the individual's capacity to achieve salvation set against the formal negation of the individual contained in the doctrine of transmigration. And I have said that the peasants I studied affectively stress the former, i.e. *bhakti*. There is a parallel here but I believe we can go still further.

Let us return to the theory of the cycles of time. The progression of the cycle from freshness to decay, from dawn to sad evening is inexorable. The gods themselves are no less subject to it. Nevertheless we find the element of intervention even here. We have the belief growing in strength from the Middle Ages onwards that Vishnu plays with the cycles of time. His avatars come increasingly to be considered as interventions on the behalf of society or some virtuous individual. He is believed to break through the progressive decay, arrest its course and even reverse it. This is a remarkable contradiction and one of which our texts seem to be aware for we find some attempt at a reconciliation. The final avatar of Vishnu, Kalki, is to intervene in that he punishes the wrongs of that time but, because his intervention coincides with the last moments of the Kaliyuga, the righteousness which he restores is in fact the inauguration of a new *Kṛta* age. So also Krishna in the Gita: "Oh son of Kuntī, at the end of each *kalpa* all natures become one with me and again as each *kalpa* begins I send them forth from me again."⁹

In the relation of the two theories, the avatar theory and the *kalpa* theory, we have then another parallel. But this time there is an important link. For although Shiva has been associated with

⁸ The distinction is between *mānavū*—to affirm the existence of, and *bhājavū*—to worship, revere, adore.

⁹ *Bhāgavadgītā*, IX. 7.

bhakti (notably, I suppose, in the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad) the pre-eminent object of *bhakti* in later years is Krishna as avatar of Vishnu. And how appropriate this is we see when we consider that just as *bhakti* is opposed to, cuts through, the inevitable succession of rebirths, so Vishnu cuts through the inevitable succession of the yuga.

To conclude: our problem was how we could reconcile the experience which the Patidar have of change with their adherence to a set of values which denies change. We examined this relation of mobility to fixity in terms of the relation of the social to the individual or particular and the relation of the repetitive eternal to the unique event. It seemed possible to equate the two instances of particularity under the term duration, a fact of experience, as opposed to time-reckoning which is social and conceptual. We observed in some societies how the effects of duration are played upon and devalued. We saw nevertheless that the fact remains as a challenge to that total, meaningful complex which we call the social. In Indian theories of time-reckoning we found a highly complicated recognition of the opposition, a parallel to that which exists between the order of castes and the doctrine of *bhakti*. The "problem" among the Patidar is then only a version of a pan-Indian pattern. When that is established it is profitable to go on and consider what is distinctive about the particular balance which the Patidar strike between the opposed notions. We can observe a greater emphasis among them upon *bhakti*, upon history and the individual but we should be mistaken, were we to imagine that this must be an exclusive emphasis, a choice between what seem to us to be contradictory notions.

17 CONCEPTS OF TIME AMONG THE TIV OF NIGERIA

Paul Bohannan

THE TIME NOTIONS held by the Tiv of central Nigeria¹ are of importance in analyzing all aspects of Tiv society and culture, but are basic to political structure, to the study of quasi-historical myths and legends, especially those of migration, to mystical beliefs, and to studies of social change among them. The present article deals with (I) the main Tiv words relevant to "time," (II) the ways Tiv indicate time and lapse of time over short periods, (III) the ways they indicate time and lapse of time over long periods, including periods which exceed the lifetime of a single person; it ends (IV) with some implications of the fact that Tiv indicate but do not measure time.

I

All the Tiv words which might be translated "time" can be better and more accurately translated into English another way. There are several adverbs and adjectives expressing long and short duration: for example, the word *cha* means "far" and is used of space, of time, and of kinship. However, such words are not dependent on time indication or reckoning for their primary meanings.

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