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Temporal Disjunction and Collectivity in Mustang, Nepal

by Charles Ramble

This article examines the uses of time-reckoning, temporality, and historical record in the creation of individual and collective identity. The focus is the community of Te, a closed, endogamous settlement in Lo (Mustang), an old Tibetan kingdom in the high Himalayas of Nepal. The inhabitants of Te apply a range of temporal devices to represent their community as a reified entity distinct from the individuals who compose it. The collectivity is set apart from both the world of Buddhist ideology and the local political environment by a unique calendrical system and the concept of quality-free “cracks” in the continuum of time. The transcendent character of the collectivity is established by using temporal distortions to represent counterintuitive properties of institutions. Stability is further ensured by a written constitution that freezes the parameters of social action within a 12-year legal cycle.

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There is a lighthearted definitional dispute that recurs through Anthony Burgess's *Enderby* novels concerning the nature of sameness. It surfaces for the first time in the saloon of a pub in an English coastal town, where most of the patrons are octogenarian eccentrics (Burgess 1995:22–23):

“Crump,” called the major-general in an etiolated martinet's voice. “Crump. Crump.” He was not reminiscing about the first World War; he wanted the barman to replenish his rum-glass. Crump came from behind the bar, seventyish, in a waiter's white jacket. . . . “Yes, General,” he said. “Similar, sir? Very good, sir.”

“I'm always telling him,” said an ancient with the humpty-dumpty head of Sibelius, “about that use of the word. It's common among barmen and landlords. They say you can't have the *same* again. But it is, in fact, precisely the same again that one wants. One doesn't want anything *similar*. You deal in words, Enderby. You're a writer. What's your view of the matter?”

“It *is* the same,” agreed Enderby. “It's from the same bottle. Something similar is something different.”

It is not only the denizens of watering holes in coastal resorts who are teased by this problem. The confusion has provided almost endless opportunity for discussion in anthropological writing. One example (to pass over favourites such as the identity of twins and birds among the Nuer) is the false opposition of cyclic time to linear time. Alfred Gell (1992) has demonstrated clearly enough that cyclic time *is* a form of linear time. The distinction hinges on the identity or non-identity of events that fall on the same date in consecutive cycles. These events are not *similar*; they are the same. Christmas 1999 is the same festival as the one that fell on December 25, 1998. But of course the two are not the same, any more than a second round of rum is the same as the first. Immediately after the exchange cited above, Burgess puts the argument on a donnish footing: “‘Professor Taylor used to argue that out very persuasively,’ said an old man mottled like salami, a dewdrop in the hook of his nose” (1995:23). I do not know whom, if anyone, Burgess had in mind when he invoked Professor Taylor. Apart from the fact that, as we then discover, the said professor has died the previous year at age 80 (“not all that old”) from a heart attack brought on by pulling a cork out of a bottle, he might have been Peter Winch. Winch tackles the question of sameness in the preamble to his essay “The Idea of a Social Science.” “A uniformity,” he says, “can only be grasped in a generalization. . . . Criteria of identity are necessarily relative to some rule: with the corollary that two events which count as qualitatively similar from the point of view of one rule would count as different from the point of view of another” (Winch 1977: 1). The crux of the matter is of course the rule that determines whether two things are to be regarded as the same and how great a disparity it can endure before it has to be abandoned.

Elsewhere, Gell develops Bourdieu's image of "islands of time," in which the present is not just a point on a continuum but an "enclosed unit . . . embracing both the retained past and the anticipated future" (Bourdieu 1963). Gell's own exegetic analogy is that of a roller-coaster ride, in which the visceral memory of a sheer plunge coexists in the present with the vivid anticipation of "the racketing crunch which will occur as one hits the bottom of a slope" (Gell 1996:16–17).

In this article I will present some ethnographic observations from the high Himalayan region which reveal how the coexistence of such disparate temporal representations helps to generate the idea of a collectivity. The examples will deal less with the way in which time concepts are internalized by individuals than with their incorporation in institutions, notably in the domains of ritual, law, and calendrical reckoning.

The Place

A few words may be said by way of an ethnographic and historical introduction in order to clarify what I mean by "community" and "collectivity." The village of Te, consisting of some 300 people living in 48 households, is located at an altitude of 3,000 m in Mustang District, Nepal. Like those of much of the northern Nepalese borderland, the inhabitants of Mustang are culturally and linguistically Tibetan, but a few enclaves retain features of a more archaic Tibeto-Burman civilization. Te is one of five settlements that make up such an enclave. While the society has undergone several centuries of Tibetanization, distinctive features remain in the form of a non-Tibetan language and the fact that Buddhism—to which the villagers subscribe—has to coexist with cults of mountain gods that involve blood sacrifice. Buddhist authority is represented by a family of Tibetan tantric priests who live in a small hamlet, called Tshognam, on Te's territory.

There are five named patrilineal clans of diverse provenance. To judge from the abundant local archives, the corporate identity of these clans was very strong in the past, as witnessed by annual clan gatherings, the existence of clan chiefs, clan land, clan gods, and so on. Over the course of time this system underwent a radical change. Clan identity dissolved to the point where its only relevance at the present time is in the regulation of marriage (members of the same clan may not marry). There are now two polarized focal points of identity. On one hand there is the household—or, more accurately, the estate, since each estate may be made up of several lesser households. A dutiful, responsible attitude to one's estate is marked by economic self-interest, acquisitiveness, and an attitude of rivalry with other estates. (For example, it is said, only half-jokingly, that a good household should urinate only in his own domestic midden-heap so as not to contribute his valuable nitrates towards the agrarian prosperity of a neighbour.) This atomistic ideal is offset by the ideal of community, which is distinguished by values of generosity, poverty, and civic-

mindfulness. The community is not just the "generalized other" of the estate; it is tightly circumscribed by the territorial boundary of Te. Beyond this boundary is the enemy, a diffuse sense of hostility "out there" that is as menacing to the integrity of the community as the unchecked fissiveness of the estates within it. The archives of Te bear witness to centuries of disputes and wars with its immediate and more distant neighbours which did indeed menace its very existence. Te's insularity is further reinforced by the fact that it is endogamous, a situation that is unique in Mustang at the present time.

"Stealing the Crack"

I shall have more to say below about the relationship between the "official" Tibetan Buddhist calendar and that of Te. To begin with, however, I would like to describe a device that illustrates how the Tepas are able to avoid a head-on confrontation between their own priorities and the exigencies of Buddhist temporal determinism. The lamas of Tshognam have not shown as much missionary enthusiasm as other representatives of Buddhism in forcing the Tepas to abandon traditions that are incompatible with Buddhist tenets; the Tepas in turn make certain compromises that illustrate their respect for the priests' alien package of propositions about the nature of the world. This adjustment is particularly well illustrated in the case of funerals.

When a person dies, a member of the bereaved family immediately summons the lama. Tepas, like most people in Mustang, do not like to leave a dead body unattended because of the terrifying possibility of the "rising corpse," the *rolang*, a sort of malevolent zombie. The idea of spending the night in a room with a dead body is, however, appalling, and usually one of the first tasks of the priest is to sleep beside the corpse and keep an eye on it. The day on which the body is removed from the house for "sky-burial" is determined by an astrological calculation performed by the lama. Removing a body from a house on a particularly inauspicious day can result in misfortune and death throughout the community, and most communities in Mustang will wait up to three days before removing a corpse. The Tepas, however, have an aversion to keeping a dead body at home that is stronger than the comfort provided by the presence of the lama or his assurance that the corpse may safely be removed three days thence without any harm's befalling the household or the rest of the community. As far as the Tepas are concerned, when a member of the household dies he or she immediately becomes the enemy, a hostile, polluting presence that must be got rid of as soon as possible.

Let us suppose that, according to the priests' calculations, the coming day is going to be highly inauspicious and so is the day after. What the Tepas will do in such a case is—to translate the expression literally—to "steal the crack." Between two consecutive days, sometime before the first cock crow (reckoned to be around three o'clock in the morning) of the second day, is a narrow

space or crack that does not properly belong to either. It is in this lacuna between two unlucky days that the Tepas will hastily slip a corpse out the house. Once the critical act of removal has been achieved, the body can be taken up for disposal at any time during the day.

In historical terms, the astrological techniques used by the priests may not be intrinsic to Buddhism, but they have been an important component of Tibetan sacerdotal craft for centuries and form a standard part of the stock-in-trade of the Tshognam priests. The classification of what is auspicious and nefarious according to these astrological principles nevertheless clashes with the Tepas' view of things; the priests may maintain that it is fine to keep a corpse at home for three days, but for the Tepas the prospect is intolerable. The priests cannot change what is written on the charts and in the scriptures, and the Tepas in turn are unconvinced by their assurances. But here, as so often, the Buddhist scheme contains certain escape clauses that enable the Tepas to act according to the demands of custom without challenging and undermining the authority of the priests.

The Territorial Gods

Much of the Tepas' ritual activity is focused on the propitiation of a small set of territorial gods, which are identified with cairns or rocks in and around the settlement; the most commonly used local term for these gods is in fact *yuka*, which means "territory." And yet the presence of the gods is not the same as the presence of the place: among other things, the gods have the counterintuitive property of being invisible, having position but no substance. Here, as in other situations which will be discussed below, the quality of being simultaneously present and absent is expressed through the special inflexion of everyday concepts, namely, of time and space. In the case of the place-gods of Te, the fact of their simultaneous nearness and intangibility is expressed through the creation of imaginary distance.

The most dangerous of the gods, Shartsenpa, must be worshipped once a month at his usual shrine with purifying juniper smoke and a few small offerings. The site is located on the main trail up to the eastern pastures, a trail that is travelled daily by people on a variety of everyday errands. This trail, called "New Road," presents no physical difficulty. It is met, near Shartsenpa, by another that also extends from the village but on a more northerly arc. This second trail is called the "Fumigation Road," because this is the route that must be taken by the officials who visit Shartsenpa once a month to worship him. The way is longer than the New Road, and the upper section of it consists of a nerve-racking climb up an almost sheer cliff. The officials are, nevertheless, obliged to take this trail on pain of being fined by the village constables. There are two things that should be said about the obligation to follow the Fumigation Road. First, the name of the everyday trail, "New Road," suggests that the Fumigation Road itself is the "old road" that was once used for everyday purposes but then aban-

doned because of its degeneration to the point of being impassible for livestock, if not for humans. The fact that this road continues to be used for ritual purposes will be discussed presently as an instance of *the sacred character of that which is pragmatically obsolete*.

Although they both lead to Shartsenpa, the Shartsenpa which is reached via the Fumigation Road is different from the one that is arrived at by the New Road. The former leads to the presence of the god and the second to a topographical marker.

To repeat the main point I wish to make: The physical markers of the gods—a cairn or a rock—are immediately accessible and tangible to anyone who would reach out and touch. Obtaining access to the divine world which they represent is possible only by crossing a greater distance, over a longer time, within a constant physical space. This greater distance must somehow be simulated and, if possible, the performance of the activity located at a different point in time—in this case, the past.

Calling the Gods to Witness

Here is another example of the gods' being made present by means of spatial and temporal manipulation. At the end of their one-year term of office, the three headmen and four constables of Te have to swear a number of oaths concerning the honesty and efficiency with which they have taken care of the village. The protocol for the oath sworn by the constables is as follows: Three officials stand in a threshing yard, looking up towards the rock of another god, Pholha Yonten Karpo. Above them stand three other officials, known as the Headmen of the Yield, not in a cluster but spaced at intervals of 30 ft. or so up the hill towards the Pholha. Between the Pholha and the topmost of the Headmen of the Yield is a rock that is said to be the Acolyte of Pholha. In front of this rock stand the four outgoing constables who have to take the oath. They link hands in a line, and from the threshing yard the three officials call up, in unison: "Have the constables linked hands?" The site of the god is not very far from the threshing yard, and the call is easily audible to the constables. However, the question is repeated, verbatim, by the lowest of the three men on the hill, who shouts it up to the man immediately above him, and the highest of the three relays it directly to the four constables. When they have received the message the constables reply in unison: "We have, we have."

On hearing this confirmation the officials in the threshing yard call the three main gods to witness:

Jowo Shartsen Nyenpo [i.e., Shartsenpa]
Pholha Yonten Karpo
Molha Chutsen Nyenpo
Come and be witnesses to the oath!

This message is also relayed up the hill by the three men. When the topmost of the latter has finished speaking, the officials in the threshing yard call out:

When they went to [check the source of the irrigation canal at] Yatso
 If they took care with the allocation [of village duties],
 If they took care to check [that the proper] tools [were used in common labour],
 If they behaved as they ought to have done, may they be blessed.
 If they did not do these things, may the three village gods punish them!

The stanza is at once conveyed up the hill by each of the men disposed up the slope calling it out in turn. The officials in the threshing yard then call out two more stanzas, also concerned with civic duties, and each is relayed up the hill in turn. After this message has reached the top of the chain, the gods are respectfully dismissed from the place.

The choreography of oaths that offers access to the god Pholha and the use of the Fumigation Road to reach Shartsenpa are examples of the disjunction between Euclidean and affective space, where the protraction of an event over time is a crucial procedure. The spatial manipulation entailed in these procedures distinguishes the terrestrial marker of a god from the coterminous location in which he may actually be encountered face to face. The site where the god is encountered is the same as the locus of the cairn or rock on any ordinary occasion—but in another sense, it is not the same. Villagers who are forced to confront the god in this dramatic way speak of it as a terrifying experience.

The Zatönse Ceremony

To return to a problem that was raised earlier: How do the Tepas reconcile two such dramatically opposed sets of ideals, those associated with the individual estate versus those of the community? An important part of the strategy involves reifying the community and turning it into a thing “out there.” There are numerous ways in which this is done, but here I would like to concentrate on the temporal devices involved.

People can't see a community: It isn't accessible to individuals. All that can be apprehended is its components: geographical features, people, houses, myths that purvey ideals of collectivity. The presence of the community is rather like that of the gods. The gods are marked by cairns, but to go to the gods themselves a deferral of time and distance is required. Let us examine certain features of an important annual ceremony that forms a crucial part of the celebrations that mark the end of the Tepas year. The week-long ceremony is called the Lama Guru, and it ends with an exorcism called the Zatönse.

The Zatönse begins after dark on the 29th (and penultimate) day of the last month of the year. The headmen appoint two people to fire muskets into the air continually during this section of the ceremony. The other men of the village take up an assortment of arms: Some

dancers carry staves, while most of the remainder collect swords and rhinoceros-hide shields that are normally attached to pillars in their homes. The swordsmen stand inside the circle of dancers, but instead of singing they emit shrill whistles and strike their swords against their shields.

There then follows an interlude known as “Translating Nepali,” in which the sword-bearers at the centre utter menacing expressions in Nepali. (Nepali, it may be noted, is the national language, but the Tepas use it only when communicating with outsiders.)

The sacristans will have prepared male and female exorcistic effigies of dough and placed them together in a basket. On top of the sacred rock of Sumdü Deyang is piled a series of flat rocks over which red clay is poured. The basket is placed beside the rock. Also near the rock the villagers set a slab of stone roughly the size and proportions of a low Tibetan table. Upon this stone is set a plate of consecrated barley containing a number of sacred objects: a *vajra* (ritual thunderbolt), a small ceremonial bell, and a volume of scriptures. Behind this slab, on a cushion, sits one of the constables to guard the objects and prevent them from being knocked over. No rituals are performed with the tantric paraphernalia, and the book is not even opened; the items are merely left on display.

The procedure for the disposal of the effigies begins. Three men pick up the basket and carry it down the valley towards the boundary between Te and the neighbouring village of Tshug. They are followed by all the swordsmen and staff-bearers, who brandish their weapons while exclaiming “O-ho! O-ho!” It may be said here that this procedure is standard practice in any such Tibetan exorcism, and the number of people following the effigy and the size of the weapons they carry is proportionate to the magnitude of the effigy's power. In relatively minor domestic exorcisms such measures are considered unnecessary, and one or two knife-bearing men will suffice.

According to the foundation myth of Te, when the first lama came to the region his first patrons were three householders from the village of Tshug, of whom the most important was a member of the house called Khangtö. The disposal of the exorcistic effigy from the Te Zatönse was originally this household's responsibility, and this obligation was handed on to its successors until the practice came to an end at some unspecified period before living memory. However, the original procedure is still recalled in the subsequent stages of the disposal. The sword- and staff-bearers stop a short distance from the village boundary while the three bearers continue on to the very limit of Tshug's territory. Here they set down the basket and cry out loudly towards Tshug: “Khangtö Palden [the estate holder at the time of writing], come and take the ransom!” The armed escort then calls out to its three fellow villagers, who are invisible in the darkness: “Have they come?” No one stirs from Tshug, but the three bearers reply to the escort: “They have come, they have come!” The company then returns to Te, singing and beating drums.

The Loss of Utility

Religious people of an intellectual bent frequently express their bewilderment at both the fickleness of the unenlightened in changing their faith overnight and their attribution of sacred authority on the grounds of sheer antiquity. John Milton, for example, expressed his frustration at his compatriots' adherence to religious traditions for no better reason (as he saw it) than that they had always done and believed these things: "Neither ought custom to hinder that truth should not prevail; for custom without truth is but agedness of error" (1958 [1641]). An educated Buddhist who witnessed the Zatönse would probably react in much the same way. Why do the Tepas so carefully preserve their aged errors?

The three episodes of the Zatönse outlined above are (1) the display of ritual objects, (2) the "Translation of Nepali," and (3) the summoning of the Khangtö household at the conclusion of the exorcism.

All these episodes may, I think, be classed as belonging to a single type of performance. The essential features of the class are most easily identifiable in the first. Until a few decades ago a lama from a neighbouring village used to officiate at the ceremony; he would read appropriate passages from a text and make ritual gestures with the bell and the thunderbolt. The text was there to be read and the ritual objects to be held and moved in a certain way. All three items were functional, with the function in question being specified by the religious tradition that produced them. In Buddhist tantric convention the bell represents wisdom, the female principle, while the thunderbolt stands for the male principle, which is method. Wielding the two in the designated way, with the accompaniment of appropriate visualization and magical formulae, helps to achieve the efficacy of the ceremony being performed. To put it another way: Within the terms of Tibetan Buddhism, the book, the bell, and the thunderbolt have a primarily utilitarian value. As they figure in the Zatönse at the present time the three items have no such value, because there is no lama to use them as they should be used and no Buddhist rite which they might make effective. They are, in a word, objects. But although they have no Buddhist functional value, they obviously have a certain importance for the Tepas, who put them on display and set someone to guard them. What is the basis of their value?

To turn to the "Nepali Translation": This interlude is a dramatization of an encounter with outsiders. The tone of the piece is distinctly aggressive; the speakers' heads and faces are swathed in big turbans, and they brandish their swords angrily as they speak: "We must kill them; we must drive out the witches," and so forth. The type of exorcism that follows the Nepali-translation—the casting out of an effigy beyond the village boundary—would normally, within a Buddhist ritual, be preceded by the reading of some appropriate text such as a "repulsion" of the evil that is the focus of attention. It may be that the drama emerged as a substitute for an

abandoned liturgy. But why should the participants speak in Nepali?

The mention of witches clearly accords with other indications that the rite has to do with the driving out of supernatural menaces, but the passage is also a brief historical martial play. The drama of Te's young warriors, dressed for battle and speaking aggressively of "killing" and "driving out" in the language of Te's old enemies, is a theatrical equivalent of the narratives of invasion by Nepali-speakers contained in the village archives. The Zatönse has not preserved the historical context which is the source of the Nepali-speaking interlude; the only enemies are the invisible evils that are concentrated in the exorcistic effigy. All that has been retained is the martial paraphernalia and posturing with which the Tepas went to war and the language in which they waged it.

And finally, the casting out of the effigy: The effigy has not been collected and borne away by the Tshugwa patrons of Te's priesthood within living memory, and the brief exchange at the village boundary ("Have they come?" "Yes, they have come.") perpetuates a fiction. Everyone knows that the Tshugwas do not come, so the purpose of the assertion that they do is obviously not to use the cover of darkness to fool the community into thinking that the old patron-priest relationship is still alive. So why sustain the myth?

Let us return to the first example and phrase the same question in more general terms: When functional artifacts have lost their utility, they sometimes acquire a new, far greater, value as objects to be exhibited. Why? This question has been asked by the historian Krzysztof Pomian in his study of collections and collectors. The phenomenon of collecting in industrialized societies may be interpreted in terms of the usual gamut of more or less banal impulses: psychological reasons relating to acquisitive instincts, the gratification of an aesthetic sense or awareness of historical value, economic astuteness, socially motivated considerations of prestige, and so on. These are all insufficient as explanations, says Pomian, because they merely defer the problem: What is it that creates historical, aesthetic, social, or economic value in the first place? (As for the latter, while artifacts in collections lose their utilitarian worth their exchange value is both retained and greatly increased.) He suggests that an answer to the problem may be found by examining the nature of collections "in societies other than our own," in places other than museums and the hoards of private connoisseurs. The examples cited include funerary objects interred with the dead, accumulations of offerings in shrines and temples, the spoils of war, which are often (as in ancient Rome) exhibited to the populace by the returning victor, sacred relics, and the treasure houses of kings and princes. These "princely treasures" were usually "shut in chests or cupboards which were in turn placed in well-guarded chambers, to be taken out on the occasion of various ceremonies and festivals. After the death of the king, these regalia were paraded around during the funeral procession. . . . It may be concluded that the jewels *were placed on view, and that this was*

their main purpose" (Pomian 1987:29–30, emphasis added). The true value of such objects is most obvious in the case of offerings: "At the same time as they were intermediaries between the here-and-now and the beyond, between the profane and the sacred, such offerings may be present within the profane realm as objects representing that which is far away, hidden or absent." And this, he concludes, is the essential feature of all collections: "They are intermediaries between the viewer who perceives them and the invisible from which they came" (p. 32). That which is invisible may be so for a variety of reasons, but most obviously in two ways: by being very far distant and by having happened long ago. Pomian gives other conditions of being invisible, in particular, "that which is beyond all physical space or expanse, or within a space that has its own peculiar structure, whatever is situated in a time *sui generis* or beyond the passage of time: in eternity" (p. 35), and so on. Perhaps so, but this takes us onto shakier ground. And in any case, in the examples that concern us, the invisibility of the otherworldly is expressed through imagery of distorted space and time.

The invisible with which the thunderbolt, bell, and book mediate is the past. This past is not a very distant one, and it has nothing in it of a mythic epoch and heroic beings who might have lived *in illo tempore*, but the items do establish a link between the present and the period when Te's own priestly clan used to officiate at the ceremony. The bell and the thunderbolt displayed at the Zatönse are said to have belonged to this now-vanished clan; even if the book, too, belonged to it, I doubt that it is the one used in the ceremony. But for the purposes of this display the content does not matter; after all, museums, too, are packed with replicas.

The summoning of the Khangtö estate holders from Tshug also once served a practical purpose—to get the people in question to come and collect the exorcistic effigy. The make-believe that is staged at the village boundary now is the recollection of a vanished time when Te's priests were flourishing and the most prestigious family of Tshug honoured them with its patronage.

The interlude of the Nepali-translating is also a brief, formalized sample of a type of behaviour that had a real function in securing Te's survival at a time when the very existence of the community was threatened. The past is made not only of good times but of traumatic experiences too. The enemy in the case of the Zatönse is not the Nepali-speaking army of two centuries ago but the hosts of noxious influences that live in Te. Access to the village gods—who are also present and invisible—is, as we have seen above, achieved by protracting distance within a relatively small space. Time can be used in the same way: That which is present but invisible can be got at by being treated as if it were located either far away or long ago.

Te-Time and the Tibetan Buddhist Calendar

The perpetuation of the past in the ritual drama of the Zatönse presents no problems for the Tepas because they have no bearing on pragmatic aspects of life. But there are certain institutions that are out of step with the rest of the world and that would cause real confusion if they were not subjected to periodic standardization. The most striking example of this state of affairs is the Tepas calendar. Nepal as a whole provides a rich palimpsest of calendars. The Gregorian system is not as widely used as in neighbouring countries—notably China and India—and is largely restricted to corporations that have direct links with international concerns (banks, nongovernmental organizations, travel agencies, and so forth). The national calendar is based on an archaic Indian model that is now very little used in the country of its origin. Most of the Nepalese highlands use the Tibetan system for time-reckoning. Very briefly, this calendar (essentially Chinese in origin) identifies years by binomials made up of combinations of 5 elements and 12 animals to provide a 60-year cycle. The cycles themselves are numbered in a sequence that starts in A.D. 1027. Thus the year that begins in February 2000 is the Iron Dragon year in the seventeenth 60-year cycle. Parallel to this year is the agrarian year, which begins exactly one month before the official one. Both schemes are used throughout Mustang; very broadly, the former is used for clerical purposes and the latter for events of a more popular character, although the relative prominence of each varies from one community to another. There are 12 months in the year and nominally 30 days in each month. But the calendar is lunar, and the coincidence of the first day with the new moon and the fifteenth day with the full moon can be accomplished only by the appropriate excision and intercalation of dates. Furthermore, the fact that the months are calculated according to the lunar cycle means that a thirteenth month has to be added every few years.

For example, opening at random Dieter Schuh's authoritative study of the Tibetan calendrical system, we see that the first month of the ninth year in the fifteenth cycle had no fourth day: the ninth of February 1875 was the third day and the tenth of February was the fifth. In the following month—the second—there was no ninth day, but an extra eighteenth day was intercalated in the dark half of the month. The fifth month was doubled. The agrarian year of Mustang, it should be emphasized, differs from the official one only in that the new year falls one month in advance; the dates remain the same. If we are in the fourth agrarian month, the correspondence between days and dates will be the same as in the case of the third Tibetan month (Schuh 1973).

Te has its own unique calendar. Te's year begins one month in advance of the agrarian and two months in advance of the official Tibetan year. All community activities—festivals, meetings, oaths, and so on—are located on the annual cycle in terms of this calendar. But Te's system of time-reckoning differs from the Tibetan

scheme in other respects than the two-month disparity. Most significant, *the sequence of days in the month is not the same*. In a wall inside the temple are two small alcoves containing 30 pebbles. One of the main responsibilities of the steward whose task it is to offer water and carry out the juniper fumigation every morning is to transfer a pebble from one alcove to the other: this device is the official Te calendar. As stated earlier, while a Tibetan month nominally has 30 days, the various intercalations and excisions result in a net reduction; a month with no excised days is a rare event that is dignified by the epithet *dazang*, a “good month.” The Tepas months, by contrast, all have *exactly 30 days with no intercalations or excisions*. An unregulated 360-day calendar would obviously soon fall out of step with the solar year (within less than 40 years New Year’s day would have slipped from midwinter to midsummer), but in fact the Tepas year is annually adjusted to the Tibetan standard.

In the twelfth Tepas month the constables hold a meeting. First they decide whether the year has been short enough to merit a thirteenth month. If so, the end of the year is simply deferred by one month. Although the decision is represented as being up to the constables, the intercalation of a thirteenth month follows the Tibetan sequence. The main difference is that whereas the Tibetan convention calculates in advance precisely which of the months it is that is to be duplicated, in the case of Te it is always the twelfth month.

The beginning of the Tepas year, which is marked by a ceremony in homage to the village gods, falls two months and several days earlier than the Tibetan New Year. In the first or second month the Tepas harmonize their dates with those of the Tibetan calendar. The constables visit the lama of Tshognam with a wooden flask of beer and a white scarf (standard accompaniments to any formal request); they announce that their dates are wrong and ask the lama to correct them. The lama checks his calendar and tells the constables the “correct” date, and the information is duly carried back to the village. Let us say that it is the third day of the Tepas month and the seventh of the Tibetan month. The following morning, when the steward visits the temple, instead of transferring one pebble between the alcoves he will transfer four; the intervening dates are simply scrapped, and the Tepas calendar is back on track. But if it happens that, according to the Tibetan calendar, the next day—the ninth—is excised and the sequence moves directly from the eighth to the tenth, the Tepas will nevertheless reckon this day as their ninth, and the disassociation from the Tibetan calendar will have begun again.

Insofar as it has become a constitutive property of the community, the calendar has fallen out of step with the rest of the world and passed beyond the continuous “reality check” provided by the Tibetan calendar. It is a formalized error that nevertheless determines the timing of people’s activities over the course of a year. The growing disparity in the dates, however, can be endured only for a year.

East and West

Here is an example of a situation in which the absence of any pressing demands for a readjustment has allowed a mismatch to endure *sine die*. Once, while inquiring about the location of a certain gorge, I was told by a Tepas that it was located to the west, near Nawodzong. Since Nawodzong is east of Te, I corrected him. “You mean the east.” I said. “No,” he replied, pointing east, “the west.” The matter was eventually resolved: the hills immediately to the east of Te are called the West; “East” is reserved for the swath of land on the eastern limit of Te’s territory. The appellation “West” with reference to the pastures is, I think, the result of a conservation of an archaism. The pastures in question are east of Te, but they are west of two of the settlements—now long abandoned—from which some of the Tepas clans originally came, and it is the geographical point of view of these centres that has been inappropriately preserved in the setting of Te. “West” in this case is in something of a transitional stage between a descriptive term and a proper name—not unlike the use of the same term in the English language to denote wealthy industrialized nations irrespective of their geographical location. Like other examples of Tepas institutions, the designation of the pastures is an archaism that has gotten out of step with present reality. In contrast to the case of the calendar, there is no urgent need to readjust this obsolete terminology. The Tepas themselves are not bothered by the inconsistency, and the fact that the area is hardly used by outsiders means that there is an insignificant risk of confusion in communication.

Oaths and Law

The interests of the community—as opposed to those of its constituent estates—are protected by law. This is not national or even district law but village law. There are two manifestations of village law which will be singled out for special attention here, since, like the examples given above, they represent different degrees of temporal *décalage* from the reality to which they are meant to correspond and reveal how the collectivity is made to look after its own interests. The first is a corpus of oaths sworn on certain occasions each year by particular sections or the entirety of the population. I shall concentrate here on just one of these, the Sanyor Chewa, which for the sake of convenience may be called simply the Community Oath.

This oath is sworn annually by all Tepas, men and women alike, between the ages of 13 and 60. Each person must bring at least three stones—white, black, and red—to the meeting. The headmen summon the triad of Te’s village gods and then lead the gathering in reciting the verses. When the last clause has been uttered, each person places his or her collection of pebbles on the rocky ground and, taking a large stone, smashes them to fragments in confirmation of the oath.

There are 16 clauses, most of which are fairly obviously concerned with forms of behaviour that have a bearing on the harmony and even the survival of the community. The last clause is a particularly good example: “All those who bring into the inside intelligence from the outside are blessed; may all those who take information from the inside to the outside be punished by the village gods.” Some clauses, on the other hand, seem incongruous:

4. All those who do not steal fodder grass from Tangtsakhu are blessed; may all those who do steal fodder grass [from here] be punished by the village gods.
5. All those who do not steal fodder grass from the reservoir are blessed; may all those who do steal fodder grass from the reservoir be punished by the village gods.
6. All those who do not kill and eat the community's breeding buck are blessed; may all those who do eat the community's breeding buck be punished by the village gods.

Why should the villagers swear a solemn oath not to collect a variety of leguminous plant near the reservoir and on Tangtsakhu meadow? People are not allowed to collect the plant from other places, either, and yet they are not specifically named in the oath as being prohibited. Why are the reservoir and Tangtsakhu singled out for special attention?

The answer, I think, can be found in the first two clauses:

1. All those who do not steal the Rs. 81 from the stewards' hall are blessed; may all those who do steal it be punished by the three village gods.
2. All those who do not steal the Rs. 36 from the stewards' hall are blessed; may all those who do steal the Rs. 36 be punished by the village gods.

A significant feature of the grammar of all the clauses is that, in each case, the verb relating to the prescription gives no indication of time. A more literal translation of, say, clause number 1 would be: “All non-stealers of the Rs. 81 from the communal hall are blessed; may all stealers be punished by the village gods.”

Clauses 1 and 2 are, very obviously, references to particular incidents that took place in the past, and the sums of money are too specific for the case to be otherwise.

We saw earlier that the annual oath taken by the headmen and constables is sworn at *the end* of their term of office. People in positions of responsibility do not make promises about the unimpeachability of their future conduct at the time of their assumption of authority, but they know that, at the end of their incumbency, they will be brought face to face with the gods and made to accept responsibility for their failings. The theft and slaughter of one of the breeding bucks also refers to a specific incident, and so, probably, does the theft of public vetch from two locations. What is significant is that

they have retained this particularity in the wording of the oath instead of being generalized in the form of principles (“May all those who misappropriate public property for private ends . . .”). On a pragmatic level the first two clauses at least are effectively redundant. The literal implication is that anyone who steals a sum of money other than Rs. 81 from the village coffers will not incur divine retribution.

The Community Oath is sworn by all Tepas of working age, and all its clauses relate to incidents or forms of behaviour that have a bearing on the community. It is one of several public occasions that explicitly reaffirm the integrity of the community against the dual threat of the outside world and the private interests of its own constituent members. The ceremonial preservation of historical details is consonant with what was already observed in the context of the Zatõnse ceremony: *past events of a traumatic or otherwise salient nature are preserved, in spite of their obviously anachronistic character, as eternally present occurrences*. In the Zatõnse ceremony, past episodes are treated as objects that are put on display after being reproduced through dramatization. In the case of the Community Oath, events from Te's history are made eternally present by being expressed in sentences which contain no indication of time.

Oaths such as this are obviously something other than an effective legal code. The first eight clauses refer to violations that would be punishable with fines; violations of numbers 9–16 would probably not be so punished (though in the case of number 16 the particular circumstances would matter greatly). The Community Oath has the status of dogma rather than law. Everyone knows that the acts proscribed in the clauses are wrong, and the Community Oath warns people that these things ought not to occur, while at the same time reminding people that they sometimes actually do. The oath is therefore partly pragmatic—because it aims to prevent people from committing certain popular offences to the detriment of the community—and partly redundant, because people know that the acts prohibited are wrong.

One important result of the offences' being classed as moral issues is that the oath cannot be easily modified. These crimes against the community are, by definition, abhorrent to the gods and therefore out of range of negotiation by people. While the rightness of custom and the subject matter of the oaths are beyond question, there are a number of behavioural prescriptions that are not obvious and are subject to dispute. This brings us to the second category of regulation in Te: written law.

Every 12 years, in a Monkey year, the Tepas hold a meeting to examine their existing written constitution. The meeting is called “The Turning Upside-down of the Law.” It continues for about two weeks, and during this period the assembly decides what is to be set down in the new constitution. The assembly in question is the *yupa* gathering, that is, of the senior male members of the estates. Each of the issues is raised in turn, and after a period of discussion the matter is put to a vote. Every person places a stone in the pile that signifies either

support or opposition. The stones are counted, and if the majority votes against the prospective rule the matter is closed; if a majority is in favour the rule is written into the new constitution. Once the constitution has been compiled, the old one is destroyed (unfortunately for the social historian), and the new document is placed in the care of the steward. The last Monkey year fell in 1992, and a new constitution was duly drawn up. The book contains 35 entries dealing with a range of subjects such as natural resource use, communal labour requirements, permitted periods of official mourning, modifications to the duties of village officials, and so forth.

Individualism is the basis of prosperity, but its centrifugal action tends towards the destruction of the community. Opposed to the individual is the collectivity, and because the former is associated with wealth, the latter is characterized by poverty. This is the message of Te's foundation myth, which, as myths will do, presents a picture of irreconcilable opposites. But life in the real world is always a compromise, and the task of the Tepas is to turn the two extremes into a workable dialectic: the community, after all, is made of individuals, but the viability of their estates depends on the existence of the community. There are two ways in which the conflicting demands of the opposites can be met. One possibility is for people to determine a course of action by appraising the circumstances and consequences of every situation in terms of its relative benefits for themselves and for the community. Does the benefit to my household that will be gained by uprooting an *Ephedra* plant from this field wall justify the risk the action constitutes for the stability of the village irrigation system? If I collect an extra load of firewood, is that really going to have a noticeable impact on the state of the community forests?

In Te, trust and altruism tread dangerously close to the threshold of irresponsibility to one's household. The Tepas' creation of a set of rules *pro bono publico* effectively formalizes the disjunction between the community as a set of individuals and the community as a collectivity. During the two-week meeting for the Turning Upside-down of the Law, the Tepas think primarily about how the community might best be sustained and protected. When the meeting is over and the decisions committed to writing, community members can stop worrying about the village as a whole and turn their attention to the problems of their own estates. The edifice is in place, and individuals can enjoy the paradoxical freedom of pursuing their private ends without the burden of ambivalence. One advantage of this system is that it spares individuals the cognitive effort of dealing with moral dilemmas a dozen times a day. The policy amounts to a sort of institutionalized *mauvaise foi*, in which the Tepas limit their own freedom and the range of choices available to them by creating a set of external restrictions.

Literacy and Time Capsules

One of the distinctive features of literacy is the quality of permanence that sets it apart from the more malleable

realm of the oral. The fact that the constitution is, thenceforth, no longer susceptible to change has the effect of "objectifying" (in the Marxist sense) the community from its members and endowing it with a degree of autonomy.

Legal systems, written constitutions, and the like belong to the category of entities that Durkheim called "social factors" (*faits sociaux*), which are defined primarily by their constraining influence on members of a society and their existence outside individuals. Since binding laws are constraining in a more unproblematic sense than other institutions that Durkheim proposed, such as language and psychological factors, we do not need to rehearse the well-known criticisms of the validity of the concept here (see Lukes 1973:12–15 for a summary). What does warrant closer examination is the relationship between the individual and the community that is revealed by the institution of Te's legal code.

The written word, as I noted above, offers a measure of immutability that orality lacks. J. Baines, commenting on the uses of government documents in the ancient Near East, noted that "the incorporation of knowledge in a system of writing that endured over a long period led to the need for deliberate reforms because it froze the process of constant adaptation" (cited in Goody 1986: 34). It is possible to look at the matter from a different point of view. Committing laws to writing and submitting the corpus to periodic scrutiny is, in fact, an ideal way of *effecting* social change. The 12-yearly Turning Upside-down of the Law in Te ensures that the community, as far as it is represented in the constitution, never makes the transition from autonomy to hypostasy. After 12 years of being a constraining social factor it loses its status as a collective representation and becomes the property of the individuals who created it. It is brought close again in the sphere where it can be radically changed by the conscious preferences of individuals and, after suitable modification, set apart from them again to get on with its constraining work. The existence of a written set of rules does indeed limit the process of constant adaptation; and even if the alterations made during the periodic revision are radical, they are measured and based on the considered judgements of people who are trying to adapt their own society to changes in the surrounding world of which they are aware. "Constant adaptation" can too easily turn into drift and drift into anarchy.

The dialectic between the community and the individual is staggered; it is the resulting economy of individual psychic effort that makes worthwhile the inevitable mismatch between certain legal obligations and the reality to which they are meant to correspond. The tolerance of the community for this mismatch depends on two factors that stand in an inverse relationship to each other: the degree of the discrepancy and the length of time it endures.

The Community Oath differs from the written constitution in a number of significant ways. First, the language is not the colourless prose in which the clauses of the former are set down but is characterized by the poetic

devices of parallelism and repetition. Second, the number of clauses—perhaps we should call them verses—has a symbolic importance. Third, its solemnization is effected by certain ritual gestures. Fourth, conformity is enforced primarily by the threat of divine rather than pecuniary sanctions. The oath works as a monitor of future conduct only by implication; those who swear it are declaring that they have not *in the past* acted in violation of its terms. Its normative force lies in the tacit anticipation that the procedure will be repeated in a year's time. A feature of several of the clauses that was noted earlier is their extreme specificity. The villagers do not declare that they have not stolen or even that they have not stolen cash or goats; they swear that they have not stolen Rs. 81 and Rs. 36 or *the* goat. The first point to be made is that such specificity is, as Goody points out, consistent with the highly contextualized formulations characteristic of oral societies. Goody suggests that the difference between the specific and general idioms of prohibition can be understood in terms of the Weberian opposition between traditionalism and rationalism, where the latter is marked by its "receptive attitude towards new solutions of problems." Unlike the constitution, which is based on rational appraisal of a situation by individuals, the institution of the Community Oath contains no mechanism of adaptation. It is out of reach. The fate of the Community Oath is consistent with the historical fact that radical transcendence may be a prelude to secularization.

Conclusion

The brief introduction to Te given above referred to the efforts that had been made, over the course of time, to create a viable community. An important feature of this process was the progressive weakening of clan solidarity which deprived these patrilineal groupings of their corporate character and contributed, in the long run, to the emergence of the estates as the main social and productive units. The integrity of the community is threatened on one hand by the rivalry between the component estates and on the other by the risk (at least in the past) of external hostility.

Te exists as a territorially bounded jural entity. It has common land (both cultivated and uncultivated), a common fund, a legal and administrative structure, and a corpus of local rituals. There is, besides, a sense among its members that the community is something more and other than the sum of its parts, and this article has attempted to show the importance of temporal schemes and devices in this process of reification.

Most readers must know people who have left—or have themselves left—their watches unadjusted to a time zone they have recently entered, perhaps to sustain the afterglow of an exotic holiday or to preserve a corner of home in a foreign field. (I once made a difficult journey to western Tibet with a group of Nepalese companions

who refused, for the entire duration of the trip, to advance their watches to Beijing standard time.) We use the word "time" in English to mean both the thing itself, which no one can constrain, and the schemes by which we reckon it. There is nothing that is outside time, and temporal schemes are so intimately linked to the idea of time itself that to endow something with its own peculiar scheme is an effective way of marking it off from the rest of the world. In the case of Te, this distinctiveness is most dramatically illustrated by its unique calendar and its postulation of "cracks" in what Tibetan astrology would see as a seamless fabric.

As we perceive space not as an abstraction but through the disposition of objects with respect to one another and ourselves, so time is apprehended only through events. A distant place may be evoked by a dislocated fragment of it. Chopin, for example, kept with him throughout his expatriate life a container of earth from his native Poland. "The past," in L. P. Hartley's famous phrase, "is another country; they do things differently there" (1972 [1953]:1). A remote time may be made present by displaying something associated with it: ancient objects, perhaps, or the re-enactment of events, or the resurrection of archaisms. The past that is exhibited on these occasions is an inalienable aspect of the community that is inaccessible to the living. It reminds people that this community was there long before them and will survive them and that, although in one way it is the same thing as the people who make it up, in another way it is something entirely different.

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