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Kunaypa historicity: Conceptual specificity of temporal reciprocity in the Sepik, Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

If we accept that anthropology of history transforms history into a subject of investigation rather than just a form of knowledge and social practice, then the ethnography of history must delve into local ways of thinking, living, and acting. The language of the people is key to gaining insight into the relational and temporal modes of existence of society. Among the Karawari people of Papua New Guinea, these modes play an important role in various aspects of cosmological and social life, all of which are intimately connected to land. The Karawari term *kunaypa* (debt, obligation, duty; moral value and law) underscores the view that relationships at all levels – cosmological, social, national, international – should be based on generosity and reciprocity. It is the undeniable quality of human and non-human agency. *Kunaypa* refers to the specific past (event, being, practice) and at the same time to the specific future. The multiple instances of *kunaypi* (plural of *kunaypa*) lead to multiple intergenerational commitments, as various emplaced historical experiences lie dormant. When these experiences are recalled and concrete actions are taken, they emphasize the interconnectedness, indeed equation, of past and future.

KEYWORDS

Regime of historicity;
reciprocity; language and
temporality;
(in)commensurability;
Kunaypa; Papua New Guinea

In Memory of Donald S. Gardner (1949–2025)

Introduction

Already in the early 1990s, Hartog (2015, 9) defined the term ‘regime of historicity’ to examine two ways of being in time: (1) the way a particular society approaches and reflects on its past (restricted sense); (2) the modalities of self-consciousness that every society employs in constructing time and its perceptions (broader sense).¹ For Hartog, the ‘regime of historicity’ becomes a heuristic tool, a category without content that the historian constructs (2015, xvi–xvii) and that helps him or her articulate the ways in which society relates to the past, the present and the future (and the relations

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between them). The term regime includes (as with food or politics) the notions of gradation, approximation (more or less), a mixture or fusion, and a sense of equilibrium that is only temporary (2015, xv). If the 'regime of historicity', a concept developed by Hartog through his reading of Marshall Sahlins (1985), is conceived primarily as a culturally specific (experiential) form of making history, one wonders what happens when it comes to large-scale generalizations, when cultural variants and particularities, which, as I will show, are of immense importance to societies in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea (PNG), are made to disappear. By labelling European epochs first as past-oriented (pre-French Revolution, which took place in the last decade of the eighteenth century), then as future-oriented (modernity, roughly between 1930 and 1990), and now as present-oriented (presentism), Hartog arrives at sweeping generalizations about Euro-American-dominated regimes of historicity – in the manner of uniformity of certain cognitive issues and assuming a cross-cultural universality – that exclude a large number of life-worlds, societies and peoples. Moreover, Hartog defines epochs by clearly delineating them into past, future and present, as if these temporal categories were absolute, limited and isolated, and did not intermingle and blend.

This European-centred temporality limits the extent to which regime of historicity is useful for analysing societies that have different orders of time. Below I will elaborate on such a case, namely the Ambonwari of PNG. Their dominant regime of historicity is grounded in reciprocal and reversible institutionalized practices, with characteristic inter-generational relations. It will be interesting to see this kind of historicity through the eyes of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, in particular his idea of the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation', as well as their asymmetry ([1985] 2004, 256). As a historian focused on social relations in human life and social temporality, Koselleck acknowledged that '[d]ifferent societies take different views of the relations between their own future and past' (Carr 1987, 199), and asked 'how is the accumulated experience of a given society related to its expectations, hopes, and prognoses' (Carr 1987, 199)?

While Hartog claims that in the Western world, the modern regime of historicity is over and has been replaced by a new regime of historicity, which he calls presentism, Koselleck would see that dynamic as yet another historical expression of how the temporal dimensions of past and future are articulated in terms of the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. In this article, I will discuss how, in local Ambonwari terms, past and future actively intersect and mutually condition each other in people, things, institutions and practices (that are the very shapers of past and future). They are not dialectically opposed to each other, but rather aspects of each other (see Toren 1999).

The problem of (in)commensurability

In the introduction to their anthology *Translating Worlds*, Hanks and Severi (2015, 7) write: 'For most field linguists and ethnographers, translation is of limited utility. The empirical evidence for a social or linguistic category or practice must always be from the native language, not from a translation'. Following Thomas Kuhn (2000, 33–34), who borrowed the concept of incommensurability from mathematics, 'to describe the relationship between successive scientific theories' and their vocabularies, Hanks and Severi emphasize the importance of the difference between translation and interpretation, summarising that '[t]he challenge posed by the constant confrontation of 'incommensurable'

(yet translated) paradigms becomes in itself ... a field for ethnographical inquiry' (Hanks and Severi 2015, 7; see Stasch 2015). The lack of familiarity with and sensitivity to local vernaculars (as expressed in jokes, quarrels, songs, anecdotes, rumours, gossip, parables, etc.) and consequently for 'a poetic for histories' (Denning 1991) had resulted in historians of the Pacific being unable to fully grasp culturally specific forms of historical consciousness (Ballard 2014, 97), often in ways that hid the specificities of local grammars of expression and avoided addressing the problem of (in)commensurability. In Hanks' words, 'commensuration is a practical solution to the existential problem of incommensurability. When two languages or systems make distinctions sufficiently different as to make it impossible to intertranslate directly, then one translates via neologism and periphrastic description' (2015, 37).

To paraphrase Hanks, who also talks about the limitations of translation between different registers of the same language, I would say that the asymmetry between different epistemologies and their (in)commensurability actually becomes an inspirational resource for a kind of mutual translation not only of words, but of non-bounded (blended) worlds, which, as Severi argues, includes 'non-linguistic forms of translation' when '[w]ords are translated into images, music into words, and gestures into objects' (Hanks and Severi 2015, 9–10). In the words of Viveiros de Castro, 'the challenge is exactly to construct a commensurability (i.e. reciprocal mensurability) between the concepts in question – concepts that specify worlds, views and whatever else there is to be compared' (2010, 330).

While there are certain universal concepts or 'semantic primes', i.e. elements of linguistic meaning common to all languages, there are of course also many concepts and grammatical constructions specific to different socio-cosmological, ecological and historical life-worlds (Wierzbicka 2021). If we try to find out their specificities, we need to examine the use of certain local concepts in different contexts and at different times. In this paper, I will not address the issue of semantic universality, but rather demonstrate the importance of a particular way of conceptualizing intersubjectivity in a specific region of Papua New Guinea, the Sepik. I want to argue that the psychic unity of people (Wierzbicka 2021, 337) does not consist in a kind of uniformity of the semantic meanings of their concepts and grammatical structures, but precisely in their capacity, or should I say creativity, to be specific in different ways. This also applies to their regimes of historicity.

If we agree that anthropology of history turns history from a form of knowledge and social practice into an object of inquiry (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 207), then ethnography of history necessarily also explores all the linguistic aspects embedded in the local modes of action and knowledge (Telban 2014a) that provide the arrangement of a specific regime of historicity. To analyze these local historicities, one also needs to consider local languages in their relational and temporal modes of existence, which are prominent, for example, in the Sepik, in various aspects of cosmological and social life, all of which are strongly connected to the land. The above-mentioned emplaced practices involve interactions with spirits of the dead, bush spirits, God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and are extended to a larger world of near and distant neighbours, as far away as Australia, Europe and the United States, all of which are 'consumed' and integrated into the local socio-cosmic worlds.

Since lived experience is based on mutual reciprocity, experiential (i.e. perceptual/conceptual) intersubjectivity is created and maintained over time finding its counterpart in

specific grammatical structures and concepts. Such a world consists of a specific socio-cosmic historicity that, in the Karawari-speaking village of Ambonwari in East Sepik Province, PNG, rejects an unchallenged linearity, chronology and uniform prioritization of past, present and future, and even a simple structuring of temporality into these three temporal modes of existence (Telban 1998; 2017). Such a perspective is ‘analytically debilitating’ because different life-worlds (and cultures) ‘synthesise their historical practice’ ‘in different ways’ (Sahlins 1985, xvii). Rather, as is the case with the Ambonwari, different spatiotemporal modes of existence that define (and are defined by) their ‘regime of historicity’, fluctuate back and forth between places and times generating in this way a particular transgenerational sociocosmological life-world. From the perspective of the Ambonwari relational ontology and its specific relation to time (which is different from the relations to time discussed by Hartog 2015), their ‘regime of historicity’ could be called *kunaypa* historicity. The target language into which this neologism, or rather protologism, is to be introduced, is here English.

What comes before and what after

Among the patrilineal Karawari, as among other Sepik societies with similar social organization, spatial patterns and kinship structure, the intracultural asymmetry of historicity means that at one point in time the grandparents come before the grandchildren, while at another point in time, the grandchildren come before the grandparents (Telban 1998). Sometimes, for example in a ritual context, there is not much difference between them because they can be identified with each other. After death, grandparents reappear as grandchildren, namesakes or spirits of the dead (Whites) and assume their role of being in the forefront. Thus, for grandparents and grandchildren, the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ are equally important, intertwined and interdependent, bringing each other forth. Spatiotemporally, they can be in front, at the back, or both.

The things and beings from the past (*kanggrain* ‘before, earlier’) are at the front (*kanggian* ‘be at the front’). They have experienced the ways of life before those from the present (*kwasikain* ‘now, presently, soon’; present tense extended into the near future), who have yet to rise or have just risen (*kwasan* ‘stand up, rise, get up’). *Kwasikain* in practice always involves postponing and waiting, two important strategies in the Sepik people’s relationships (Telban 1998, 31–33, 43). *Kwasikain* as expansive present thus denotes a temporal mode of existence that is directed towards another person and involves expectations of realization in the near future. When the Ambonwari refer to the indefinite future, they use temporals *nggok* ‘later, not yet, wait’, and *sambin* ‘later, after’ with the literal meaning ‘after one has sat’. Those who come from the future are either over ‘there’ (*nggun*) at the very back, and still have to wait, or they are already ‘here’ (*saman*), at this point, but still need to wait. Accordingly, there are also two future tenses: one for the present and near future (with the suffix *-ngan/-kan*), for something that is emerging, already known and on its way, and the one for indefinite future (with the suffix *-kir*). There are five tenses for the past. The Ambonwari, like the neighbouring Yimas, use the verbal ‘irrealis’ suffix *-k* for the legendary past. Significantly, the Yimas use the same ‘irrealis’ suffix *-k* also for the indefinite future, articulating that what is behind is also in front, and vice versa (Foley 1991, 236–240; Telban 1998, 46).²

Temporality in Ambonwari is expressed in specific spatial and action terms and the future, as is the case with the Maori (Sahlins 1985, 55), can lie behind. But, as I have argued for grandparents and grandchildren, through acts of reciprocity, the future can also lie ahead. So the ancestors and the past are in front (for a similar spatiotemporal orientation of Australian Aborigines see Rose 2004, 152), while they are also behind through identification with their grandchildren (namesakes). All this can be easily perceived visually and conceptually, not only in the positioning of people in rituals and dances (Telban 1998, 177; 2014b, 95), but also in the encounters of the Ambonwari with Whites who, because of their appearance, activities and wealth, are perceived as their deceased ancestors who were in front when they arrived in a certain wealthy place in Europe, Australia or the United States.

People perceive Whites not only by the gifts they give them, but rather by the way they do things, the way of reciprocity being of utmost importance. The intention is to generate a flow of gifts to ensure the permanence of an ever-expanding spatio-temporality. 'As Munn (1986) has shown, in her subtle account of Gawan Kula ... the ultimate objective of the Kula operator is not the acquisition of wealth as such, or the power which wealth confers, but the transformation of the self into a spatio-temporally expanded form' (Gell 1992, 284).

Reciprocity expressed in the language of relationships

Generic terms such as house/lineage names, names of men's houses, place-names, totemic names and collective kinship terms capture specific groups of people who stand in a particular relationship to a group represented by the speaker. Following the logic that one is many and many are one, an individual can identify with the entire group, lineage or clan. Similarly, he can identify with all his ancestors and finally say, 'I am the first ancestor' (Telban 1998, 152–155). When he thinks of his grandchildren and identifies with them, he can also say, 'I am the last successor'. This is an act of temporalization and identification of a group, not based on some external temporal order or reference to calendrical time. It is a kind of kinship-based spatiotemporality – a 'perpetual kinship' (Sahlins 1985, 47) – that merges a variety of experiential and expectational dimensions of the group. In such a fusion, both spatial and temporal extensions of relationships are brought together into an all-encompassing cosmology.³

If we look at collective kinship terminology, we find that *yarim* 'liver', for example, is a generic term for a maternal relative. So, when one says *yarim yambinga krar wapis* 'a maternal relative has cut my hair', we know that he or she is referring to the hair-cutting ceremony that ends the mourning period. In such a ceremony, the maternal lineage plays the decisive role. When one uses *yarima* for a wife, one immediately realizes that the term, although used by her husband, is more a projection of children's perception not only of their mother but of all the relatives from their maternal line. They are the ones who provide care, nourishment and protection. Thus, all women from the maternal line are referred to as 'mothers', and can be addressed by another collective term: *yarimbawkum* 'women from the mother's side' (Lit. 'liver-women'). These terms are used by both female and male children. The relationship between maternal and paternal relatives is one of exchange, with gifts of meat and various items (mats, canoes, paddles, clothing etc.) coming from the maternal group (and the wife's group) and payments in the form of

money and shells coming from the paternal group (and the husband's group). Generally, a variety of collective nouns are used, differing according to the gender and age of the group and the gender and age of the speaker. The Ambonwari distinguish between masculine and feminine, but also between younger and older terms for certain relatives (Telban 1998, 122–3; 2014b, 100). This pertains to both individual and collective kinship designations.

So, apart from using individual and collective notions of kinship, how do the Ambonwari talk about relationships that are necessarily based on either sharing or exchange? One way is to use the verb *wapi-* 'to roll, fold' in a serial verb construction with another verb (when the exchange is not simultaneous or when different things are exchanged).⁴ Another way is to use the prefix *isa-* (when the exchange or sharing of things is simultaneous or when the exchange is of like things). The use of the verb *wapi-* (in a serial verb construction meaning 'to exchange' or 'to replace') can be seen in the following examples: *ama yaka wapiasir minyanma mamyang* 'I exchanged your sister' (before you married my sister and now I have married yours) or *apia yanja wapisur apianan* 'we avenged (exchanged-killed) our man' (before you killed one of our men and now we have killed one of yours).

The prefix *isa-* is used when two parties within a group are involved in a simultaneous action, in which the actors perform the same activities in relation to each other. The reciprocal prefix *isa-* denotes an equal exchange. Thus, when there is constant fighting within a lineage or clan, such times are called *isakrarkir pisinim* 'period of fighting with each other', referring to the simultaneous engagement of two parties, *mbu isakrarkikan* 'they fight among themselves'. For this reason, *isa-*, like the verb *wapi-*, is often used in di-transitive verbs (e.g. *kapa ki-ngga-isa-paypiangar konggrambaninggi* 'we both brought and gave mushrooms to each other'). *Isa-* is also used when there is a simultaneous exchange of sisters in marriage between two groups.

If *wapi-* denotes the difference in things or time of exchange, then *isa-* denotes equality in things or time of exchange. Those who use *wapi-* terms in reference to each other cannot be identified as one and the same; rather, they refer to each other as others or opposites (for example, paternal and maternal lineages, two different clans, two villages, and so on). However, those who are in *isa-* relationships with each other may be identified and merged into oneness in different contexts and ways (for example, paternal grandfather and his grandson, see Telban 1998, 113). Karawari children – even before they are born and definitely from a very early age (see Toren 1999, 6–12, for Fiji) – are not only socialized in *wapi-* and *isa-* relationships, but actively engage with them, creating their own spatiotemporality.

There is another way of expressing unity based on identity. Following the principle that one is many, the Ambonwari use *mbang* 'one' to talk about two or more people identified under a common generic term (e.g. *apia yamining mbang* 'we are of one (and the same) house/lineage/clan', *kapa mbamindikinggri* 'we-2 (you and I) are the same', *mbamindikin* 'same, one kind, of the same kind'). There are special relationships between people, such as between namesakes (*wi mbay* 'one name', e.g. paternal grandfather and grandson), who can identify with each other to the extent that they can represent each other when the presence of one of them is required. Another example of a shared identity is two men/women who are in a *warimbar/warimbima* 'dance partner, exchange partner' relationship and share things with each other, duplicating each other's misfortunes and taking on each other's roles in rituals (Telban 1998, 99–105).

Kunaypa, ‘splinter that is sticking out’

The present in Ambonwari is characterized by an alternating temporality that is spatially expressed either towards the future or towards the past. In other words, cosmological time continues so that, for example, new technologies are not only seen as part of hopes and desires towards the future (and someone else’s materiality), but also towards the past, (re)discovering their own hidden and concealed things. Only in this way can hopes and desires become their own through participation in relationships with their own spirits or with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and their origin is known through the ways of their ancestors. This is not unlike the past rituals, songs, dances, tools, weapons, etc. that were borrowed, given, bought, appropriated or simply adopted and modified before and after the arrival of Whites in the Sepik River Basin (Errington and Gewertz 1986, 99, 106–108; Harrison 1990, 20; Mead 1938, 13). All this can be subsumed under a single Karawari term – *kunaypa* (debt, obligation, duty; moral value and law). This *kunaypa* encompasses relationships, connections and interactions through space and time with near and far neighbours. The Karawari term *kunaypa* underscores the view that relationships at all levels – cosmological, social, national, international – should be based on reciprocity (for better or worse), generosity and perpetual indebtedness (with positive and negative connotations).⁵ *Kunaypa* thus characterizes the dominant Karawari ‘regime of historicity’ that, as alluded to above, has also found its way into local forms and perspectives of Christianity, trade and politics.

Kunaypa exists as a physical thing, a protruding sliver of the stem of the sago leaf. It exists as a sensation of the splinter, an image of it and a thought of it. These aspects all stand in their homogeneity – as a percept, concept and attitude – as reminders of the necessity of care and reciprocation. In temporal terms, *kunaypa* stands for delayed reciprocity. In social terms, *kunaypa* exemplifies repetitive moral obligation (e.g. giving food, see below). In political terms, *kunaypa* is the important unwritten ‘law’ of social equality and gender equity, and a warning on how to behave in certain situations. It is the expected quality of human and non-human agency.

To illustrate this, I present two legends about a “‘feeding” relationship’ (Young 1971, 41) between a woman and her brother and a woman and her husband when the distribution of food did not happen as expected. The stories belonging to the women of the Crocodile Clan, complement each other and are always told together. As a source of specific *kunaypa*, they hold moral lessons for behaviour between kinship members and within society in general.

In the first story, an Ambonwari woman named Pingginsimbukmay was preparing sago pudding and waiting for her husband, who had gone hunting and fishing with her father. The two men caught a possum and some fish and returned to the village. However, her husband did not give her any meat or fish to cook and put on the sago pudding. She was angry because this was not the first time this had happened. The next morning, she felt deeply offended and went to catch locusts deliberately in the area where the enemies from another Karawari-speaking village, Konmei, used to go. When they actually showed up and surrounded her, she did not tell them that while her father was from Ambonwari, her mother was actually from their village. That could have saved her. Instead, she was taken to the men’s house in Konmei, where she was

killed. The Ambonwari men from the Crocodile Clan took revenge, but that did not bring her back. Then they said to their sisters: 'When you move into your husbands' houses this ancestral story of Pingginsimbukmay goes with you. When you move into your husband's house, if his way of doing things is bad, if he is stingy, then leave him. This *kunaypa* of Pingginsimbukmay is sticking out. This *kunaypa* cannot be removed. It will continue to stick out. Bad man, leave him! Good man, stay with him!'

In the second story, the husband of a woman from the Crocodile Clan catches a lizard and brings it home for his wife to cook. Her brother was also in the house at the time. However, she did not prepare any food. It was already evening when her husband sent her hungry brother away to return to his house. Her brother, however, went straight to the men's house where he beat a slit drum in a rhythm that announced his sister's death. Everyone said that her *kay*, 'way of doing things', was bad, that she was a stingy woman. By 'killing her' the shamed man ended the relationship between him and his sister.

The two stories were not about fish, possums or lizards, but about the way of doing things. The woman who told the stories, Augustina, explained:

This is what the big women have told us. If your brother or your father comes to your house, give them everything you have. Tell them to come and eat, tell them, 'I have made sago pudding, come. I have made sago pancakes, come and eat'. Women, you must give it (cooked food) to your brothers; and you (brothers) must give it (raw food) to your wives. If the husband is bad, leave him before you have children. You must recognize his behaviour early. You should also give food to others. They will say that Crocodile women are not greedy and stingy, but generous. We do not like to be with women who eat alone. If we were like them, we would be ashamed. These are the stories of our ancestors. This is our *kunaypa*. This is our *kar kay* 'way of life', the way of life of Crocodile women.

In terms of temporality, *kunaypa* refers to a specific past (event, being, action) and at the same time to a specific future. *Kunaypa* can refer to projected revenge: in good times (good relationships) *kunaypa* is dormant; in bad times (bad relationships) it drives people into vengeful actions. The multiple instances of *kunaypi* (plural of *kunaypa*) lead to multiple intra- and intergenerational commitments, as different historical experiences lie dormant in the past. As can be expected, classificatory kinship produces additional classificatory *kunaypi*, that is, additional relational historicities for various individuals and groups. When these experiences are recalled and concrete actions are taken, they emphasize the interconnectedness, even equation, of the past and the future. For this reason, I would say that any '[h]istoricity is a dynamic social situation open to ethnographic investigation' (Hirsch and Stewart 2005, 262).

In times dominated by death, it happened that one lineage had no male heirs left and could even die out. Therefore, men and women from another lineage (from the same clan or from another clan that already had some kind of fraternal relationship with them) decided to help such a troubled lineage and gave them a boy for adoption (for a fuller discussion of adoption, including the adoption of girls, see Telban 1998, 136–138). This boy then became *kunaypa*, a gift/debt and commitment that could not be forgotten or become obsolete, a 'prominent sliver' until the boy's patrilineal grandson was given to the lineage from which his paternal grandfather came (thus cancelling the long-term debt). This means that gift and counter gift, grandfather and grandson, are aspects of each other; in certain contexts, they even become one.

Kunaypa, simultaneously being a concept and a percept, presupposes that the gift is already embedded in the debt and vice versa. Gifts become debts and debts become gifts. The here and now of the gift ('space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation') transforms into the there and then of the debt (*space of expectation* and *horizon of experience*). They create not only historicity for the yet unborn, but also their futurity. *Kunaypa* is able to transform both gift and debt, i.e. past and future, into multiple, continuous and never-ending relational processes that are not based on a linear conceptualization of progress, but rather on intergenerational relations that move backwards and forwards. In other words, progress (and thus novelty) or 'development' as it is called in PNG has already happened (but Whites have taken it away and hidden it). As an inseparable part of *kunaypa* and its characteristic relational historicity, it only needs to be (re)discovered and (re)turned into local social history.

Koselleck stated that: "'Progress' is the first genuinely historical concept which reduced the temporal difference between experience and expectation to a single concept' ([1985] 2004, 268). Similar to Gregory Bateson's socio-psychological behavioural aspect of relationships called complementary schismogenesis (progressive changes in which greater assertiveness of some encourages greater submission of the other and vice versa; 1956, 176), Koselleck writes about the relationship between experience and expectation in modernity: 'The lesser the experiential substance, the greater the expectations joined to it. The lesser the experience, the greater the expectation: this is the formula for the temporal structure of the modern, to the degree that it is rendered a concept by "progress"' ([1985] 2004, 274). However, for the Ambonwari-like societies in New Guinea (for the Fuyuge, see Hirsch 2021) and regardless of the temporal structure of modernity, the substance of experience is already all-encompassing; all that will be, including change, has already been initiated and achieved by their ancestors.

Kunaypa is the centre of relations within and between villages. The Ambonwari give vital gifts to visitors, both White and Papua New Guinean (politicians, traders, businessmen, anthropologists), making them part of their life-world (and their *kunaypa* historicity) with the privileges of being the same and at the same time the obligations of being the other. One of the most important gifts to a foreigner is a name (as a sign of adoption), often a significant name of an Ambonwari ancestor from the time when the village and its clans were still in the making. The name defines the recipient, makes him or her one of their own and conveys a sense of belonging, responsibility and care. These gifts of names to foreigners also become *kunaypi*, debts that require reciprocity and can remain dormant for a long time. They become an important element of the entangled temporalities of their expanding life-world. As such they form a significant part of the Karawari (and other Sepik) regimes of historicity, linking them to the wider region, the nation state and the world at large.

Conclusion

When speaking of a Sepik community, the 'regime' cannot be applied simply as an external category without content but needs to be specified and filled with values from the beginning. The 'regime of historicity' as 'a tool for creating [a desired] distance, with a view to having a finer understanding at the end of the process of what is close by' (Hartog 2015, xv) should also be seen in terms of reciprocity and reversibility, where a

finer understanding of close by things becomes a tool for creating a desired distance – as is the case with *kunaypa* historicity – for the engaged historian or anthropologist.

According to Hartog (2015, 18), Europe is facing the end of modernity and the modern, future-oriented regime of historicity. I would say that such a regime of historicity never existed in the Sepik, even when the customary temporality was faced with and complemented by the temporalities of Christianity and colonial government, both characterized by disjunction and irreversible sequence (see Rose 2004, 15–19). I would argue that the concept of modernity and its pertaining regime of historicity fall into the kind of paradigm, which is incommensurable with anything similar in Sepik societies, where reciprocal individual and collective agency was always present. The external world of Whites, including their modernity, has been appropriated and interpreted in the Karawari region of PNG through their cosmology and *kunaypa* ‘regime of historicity’. The concept of modernity regularly used by a number of Western anthropologists and historians (often in the titles of their books) is not really applicable to Ambonwari-like societies in Papua New Guinea (Hirsch 2014, 75–77; 2021, 28–30; Mimica 2014, 59–60, 61 e.n. 17). Subjects and their social selves are largely excluded from this kind of abstract conceptualization, the places where lives are lived are omitted, and the routes of connection between the actual person and an overarching generalizing concept are fundamentally distorted (Jackson 1996, 21–22). By using certain powerful, all-encompassing European labelling concepts such as modernity, for which there are neither corresponding terms in local languages (pace Lipset 2017; Telban 2018) nor habitual patterns of their use, we unconsciously indulge in conceptual colonialism. By imposing these kinds of concepts, an analyst ‘accomplishes conceptually what colonialism sought to achieve politically: to assimilate and identify’ (Fausto and Heckenberger 2007, 27 e.n. 7). Therefore, specific relational percepts/concepts such as *kunaypa*, which are based on intergenerational generosity and mutual reciprocity (including the encounter of multiple agencies and the necessary strategies to fulfil obligations) and the associated back-and-forth oscillation of temporality, need to be taken into account when discussing a specific historicity in Ambonwari-like societies.

Koselleck’s views, which he calls ‘anthropological givens’ ([1985] 2004, 259), experience (‘space of experience’) and expectation (‘horizon of expectation’), are broader categorizations of memory and hope, respectively. For this reason, and because they include personal and interpersonal modes of existence, they seem close to the Sepik perception of the world. Being concerned with ‘merely formal [historical] categories’ ([1985] 2004, 256), Koselleck rightly argues that in the modern Western world ‘[p]ast and future never coincide’, that future cannot be experienced because ‘the presence of the past is distinct from the presence of the future’ ([1985] 2004, 260, 261). However, due to the back-and-forth oscillating disposition of Sepik temporalities and the cosmological, institutional and linguistic intertwining of before and after, of past and future, such a perspective cannot be applied to the Karawari life-world. Firstly, all anticipated novelties are perceived as if they had already been experienced by their ancestors (spirits of the dead). The Ambonwari only need to unveil the concealed experiences of their ancestors, i.e. they follow the *horizon of experience* and the *space of expectation* (expressions that Koselleck ([1985] 2004, 260) still finds meaningful) so that the distinction between past and future disappears. Secondly, both experience and expectation are emplaced and are aspects of each other. It is not only that ‘experience based on the past is spatial

since it is assembled into totality' (Koselleck 2004, 260), but expectations are made spatial too, in names, dreams and numerous *kunaypi*. Reciprocity with the external world, and the Whites in particular, is still in the process of becoming visible and tangible in their everyday lives and, consequently, of being made fully their own.

Notes

1. The earlier version of the paper was prepared for and presented at the conference 'Pasts in the Making', Aarhus, 10 November 2022. It was also delivered as the inaugural lecture of CLASS (Cairns Linguistic Anthropology Seminar Series) on 22 January 2024 at CQ University, Cairns. I would like to thank the editors Ton Otto and Jaap Timmer for their constructive comments. Throughout the article I use the phoneme /i/ which can be heard as the vowel in 'sir'.
2. Among the Murik Lakes people of the Sepik, the ancestral spirits – perceived as parents of both Whites and middle-class Papua New Guineans – are called *yabar*, the term that became, as Lipset (2017) argues, their own term for modernity (but see Telban 2018).
3. This is the logic that underlies the perception of other Papua New Guineans as well as Whites. The logic of 'one is many and many are one', where members of a group can be merged, means that an individual also bears the benefits and responsibilities of others – for example, his predecessors and successors. According to this view and understanding, a single White person (and their real or imagined associates) can be asked to build an airport or a highway and in this way pay the debt of another (*pars pro toto*) in another place and time, even mythical (see below).
4. As Koselleck (2004, 274) writes: 'Concepts of movement ... open up a new future.'
5. Gregory ([1982] 2015, 13) observed long ago that 'the gift economy ... is a debt economy ... What a gift transactor desires is the personal relationships that the exchange of gifts creates, and not the things themselves' (see also Strathern 2004; Viveiros de Castro 2015, 151).

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