

# Past is Present – Present is Past

## Time and the Harvest Rituals on the Trobriand Islands

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**Abstract.** – This paper discusses concepts of time on the Trobriand Islands. It illustrates how the Trobrianders refer to time in everyday verbal interaction as well as during the harvest festivals when the society is regulated by a concept of time “where the present and the past are so fused that the present is a mere manifestation of the past” (Bloch 1989: 16). This concept finds its verbal expression in special songs which represent a marked language variety and can be regarded as a form of “ritual communication.” Thus, Trobriand Islanders differentiate between the more mundane notion of time and notions of time expressed in ritual contexts. [*Trobriand Islands, concepts of time, harvest festival, songs, ritual communication, Kilivila*]

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The mind of man is capable of anything  
– because everything is in it, all the past  
as well as all the future.

(Joseph Conrad 1989: 69)

### 1. From Bali to the Trobriands – or: “The Past and the Present in the Present”

In his famous Malinowski Memorial Lecture of 1976, “The Past and the Present in the Present,” Maurice Bloch discusses – in connection with the theory of the cultural relativity of cognition – anthropological theories about the conceptualization of time. He takes, among others, data from Bali as one of the basic points in his argument. Contrary to what Geertz (1973) asserts, Bloch argues – from what he calls “the Malinowskian naturalist perspective” (Bloch 1989: 11) – that “it seems ... misleading to say that the Balinese have a

non-durational notion of time. *Sometimes* and in *some* contexts they do, sometimes and in other contexts they do not” (10). A closer look at these various contexts shows that “in ritual contexts, the Balinese use a different notion of time from that in more mundane contexts and that in these mundane contexts categories and classification are, it may be assumed from Berlin and Kay’s findings, based on cognitive universals” (11). Bloch thus claims that there are two temporal cognitive systems and elaborates on this claim as follows:

... cognition of society, like that of time, is double. On the one hand there is a system used in normal communication based on universal notions of time and cognition, and in which people are visualized in ways which seem to differ little from culture to culture, a system which is used for the organization of practical activities, especially productive activities; and on the other hand there is another totally different system ... based on a stranger and much more culturally specific system of classification ... The presence of the past in the present is therefore one of the components of that *other system* of cognition which is characteristic of ritual communication, another world which, unlike that manifested in the cognitive system of everyday communication, does not directly link up with empirical experiences. It is therefore a world peopled by invisible entities: on the one hand roles and corporate groups ... and on the other gods and ancestors, both types of manifestations fusing into each other ... (Bloch 1989: 14).

He concludes his observations on the Balinese systems in this paper by pointing out that “the Balinese in their ritual communication live in a timeless present, that is in a phenomenological representation of time where the present and the past are so fused that the present is a mere manifestation of the past” (16).

When I first read this paper in 1984, after my return from my first 17 months of field research on ritual communication in the Trobriand Islands, I was struck by the degree to which Bloch’s discussion of the Balinese data would actually map concepts of time I had just experienced in the field – and I was sure that the master of Trobriand ethnography would have highly appreciated this

lecture given in his memory.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I take up the topic so impressively handled by Bloch and discuss aspects of the concept of time on the Trobriand Islands. This paper attempts to present the Trobriand concept of time that is manifested in the most important period in the course of the year, namely in the *milamala*-period with all its harvest rituals and ceremonies. However, before I discuss this concept of time, I will give a brief outline of how the Trobriand Islanders refer verbally to time and to actions in time.

## 2. Time and (Some of) Its Manifestations in the Kilivila Language – or: Past, Present, and Future, Weeks, Months and Moons

As a(n anthropological) linguist I am convinced that a discussion of time, especially of how people in a certain culture conceptualize their present, past, and future in everyday life starts best with a closer look at the language spoken by these people. Here we find, first of all, some information with respect to the question how speakers of this language express “aspects” of time in which an action – to which they want to refer verbally – takes place. Thus, I would like to very briefly outline how Kilivila,<sup>2</sup> the language of the Trobriand Islanders, indicates aspect and tense of a verbal expression.<sup>3</sup>

In Kilivila we find verbal expressions like, e.g., *binukwalisi* (“they will know”) or *bukupilasegusi* (“You will help me”). They consist of a subject prefix (-*i*- and -*ku*- in the examples given above) with a marker for “aspect” and/or “tense” (*b*-, *bu*- in the examples above), the verb stem proper (-*nukwali*-, -*pilasi*- in the examples above) and a

marker for number (-*si* in the examples above). The verb stem is never realized in this form as a verb in actual speech production. As illustrated by the example *bukupilasegusi* above, with some verb stems it is also possible to incorporate an object directly into the verbal expression, if the object is referred to by a pronoun. This is done by suffixing directly to the verb stem possessive pronouns that indicate intimate inalienable degree of possession (-*gu*(-) in the example); in the plural, the plural marker is then suffixed to this verbal expression.

“Aspect” and/or “tense” (and mood) are either (i) unmarked or indicated by a threefold series of affixes, namely: (ii) *b*-/*bu*-/*ba*-, (iii) *l*-/*lu*-/*la*-, and (iv) *m*-/*mu*-/*ma*- that are prefixed to the subject prefixes. The vowels *u* and *a* follow the consonants *b*, *l*, and *m* to avoid consonant clusters that would not agree with the Kilivila syllable patterns (Senft 1986: 20–22). In what follows I refer to these series of prefixes as series of subject prefixes (and no longer differentiate between subject prefix proper and the prefix marking “aspect” and/or “tense”).

Table 1 shows this system, giving both the subject prefixes (i.e., the subject prefix proper together with the tense/aspect prefix) and the plural markers, but leaving the “slot” for the verb stem empty.

**Table 1:** The Kilivila system of subject- or personal pronominal prefixes (with the markers for aspect and/or tense and the plural indicating suffixes -*si*).

	i	ii	iii	iv
1.Ps.Sg.	<i>a</i> -	<i>ba</i> -	<i>la</i> -	<i>ma</i> -
2.Ps.Sg.	<i>ku</i> -	<i>buku</i> -	<i>luku</i> -	<i>muku</i> -
3.Ps.Sg.	<i>i</i> -/ <i>e</i> -	<i>bi</i> -	<i>le</i> -	<i>me</i> -
Dual incl.	<i>ta</i> -	<i>bita</i> -	<i>lata</i> -	<i>mata</i> -
Dual excl.	<i>ka</i> -	<i>bika</i> -	<i>laka</i> -	<i>maka</i> -
1.Ps.Pl. incl.	<i>ta</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>bita</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>lata</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>mata</i> - <i>si</i>
1.Ps.Pl. excl.	<i>ka</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>bika</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>laka</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>maka</i> - <i>si</i>
2.Ps.Pl.	<i>ku</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>buku</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>luku</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>muku</i> - <i>si</i>
3.Ps.Pl.	<i>i</i> - <i>si</i> <i>e</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>bi</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>le</i> - <i>si</i>	<i>me</i> - <i>si</i>

The first series (i) of subject prefixes is neutral, i.e., unmarked with respect to aspect and/or tense. This series can be used by the speaker at any time in any context, and the verbal expression is completely acceptable and grammatically correct.

The second series (ii) expresses the concept of an incompletive action. This action may happen in the future, or may have happened in the past,

1 I do not want to discuss all the arguments Bloch's paper stimulated (see e.g., Bourdillon 1978; Bloch 1979; Howe 1981; Appadurai 1981; Burman 1981; Munn 1992; Gell 1992) – this certainly would surpass the scope of this contribution. I would also like to note that the dichotomy between “ritual” (“sacred”) and “mundane” (“profane”) actually goes back to scholars like Durkheim, van Gennep, and Leach.

2 Kilivila (also: Kiriwina, Boyowa) is one of the 40 Austro-nesian languages spoken in the area of Milne Bay Province in Papua New Guinea. Typologically it is classified as belonging to the “Papuan Tip Cluster”-group (Capell 1976: 6–9; Ross 1988: 25–27); moreover it is classified as one of the languages with VOS-word order (Senft 1986: 107–112). The Kilivila language family encompasses the languages Budibud (or Nada), Muyuw (or Murua) and Kilivila. Kilivila is spoken by about 25,000 speakers; the majority of these speakers live on the Trobriand Islands.

3 For a detailed description see Senft (1986: 29–42). The orthography used for the Kilivila examples given are based on Senft (1986: 14–16).

it may have been expected to happen in the past – though it did not happen, or it may be part of a hypothetical event. Thus, a part of the semantics of this series also covers the concept of expressing a statement as irrealis. A verbal expression that uses subject prefixes of series (ii) like *batalivalasi* (– with the subject prefix for 1.Ps.incl. 2nd series, *bata-*, the verb stem *-livala-*, and the plural marking suffix *-si* –) can be translated as: “we would say,” “we should say,” “we could say,” “we can say,” “we may say,” “we will say.” The actual translation of verbal expressions using subject prefixes of the second series of possible personal pronominal prefixes can only be given and justified by reference to the context of the utterance as a whole. This description of the series (ii) subject prefixes illustrates that these prefixes may also express modality. I have discussed problems of adequate analyses of these prefixes in detail elsewhere (Senft 1994).

The third series (iii) expresses the concept of a completed action. This series has quite clear references to past time; it is affirmative or emphatic. A verbal expression that uses subject prefixes of series (iii) like *lelivala* (with the subject prefix for 3rd Ps., 3rd series, *le-*, and the verb stem *-livala-*) can be translated as “he said” or as “he has said.” There are some context dependent cases, where verbal expressions using subject prefixes of series (iii) can also be translated into English with progressive present tense. Thus, the phrase *bogwa lelivala* (with the adverb *bogwa*, “already” and the verbal expression *lelivala*) can be translated as “He said already” or as “He is saying already.” Again, the actual translation of verbal expressions using subject prefixes of the third series of possible personal pronominal prefixes can only be given and justified by reference to the context of the utterance as a whole.

The fourth series (iv) expresses the concept of an habitual action; however, it can also indicate optative or irrealis – actually, it may be more adequate to refer to this series as expressing mood rather than aspect and/or tense. This series is quite archaic and hardly ever used in ordinary everyday language production; if used, it can be interpreted as an indicator of either poetic or humorous style. Thus, the verbal expression *melivala* (with the subject prefix for 3rd. Ps., 4th series, *me-*, and the verb stem *-livala-*) can be translated as: “(oh, he may say (so).”

Considering these four series according to their frequency in actual speech production, it can be stated that the first (i), second (ii), and third (iii) series form the essential framework of the con-

struction of the Kilivila verbal expression. With the four series it becomes quite obvious that they distinguish much more “aspect” than “tense” (Senft 1994). A kind of “compensation” for the lack of a more elaborate system of “tenses” is given adverbially, combining adverbs of time with verbal expressions, like *apaisewa besatuta* “I am working now,” *tau bila nubeyeya* “the man will go tomorrow,” *lova vivila ela ebani yena* “yesterday the girl went fishing.”<sup>4</sup>

Among the Kilivila adverbs of time we find expressions for “now” (*besatuta*), “today” (*lagela*), “yesterday” (*lova*), “tomorrow” (*nubeyeya*), “later” (*igau*), “before” (*oluvi*),<sup>5</sup> “at night” (*ebogi*), “in the evening, in the late afternoon” (*ikwayai*), “at daytime” (*iyam, lalai*), “in the morning” (*kaukwau*), and “at dawn” (*isiga*). I would like to mention here that the Trobrianders refer to “days to come” in the following way: *bogiyu* consists of the noun (or numeral classifier) *bogi* (“night”) and the numeral *-yu* (“two”) and translates as “in two nights” – referring to “the day (!) after tomorrow.” To refer to two or three days after tomorrow one just uses the respective numerals for “three” and “four” and combines them with the expression *bogi*, “night.” Thus, *bogitolu* translates as “in three nights,” referring to “two days after tomorrow,” *bogivasi* translates as “in four nights,” referring to “three days after tomorrow,” etc. This list of adverbs of time should suffice for the purposes pursued here.<sup>6</sup>

The Kilivila lexicon provides us with even further information with respect to the speakers’ everyday concepts of time. With the general confrontation with Western, technological culture, but especially under the influence of the Christian mission the Trobrianders have incorporated the English names for the days of the week (*mandei, tuyusdei, wenesdei, fereidei, sadada, sabata*) as well as the expression for “week” (*wiki*) as loan words into their lexicon (see Senft 1992a). However, there was no need to do this with respect to referring to the concept of month(s). The general Kilivila expression for “month” is the ex-

4 For a critical discussion of my linguistic analyses of the marking of aspect and/or tense in the word formation of the Kilivila verbal expression see Senft (1994).

5 I would like to mention here that there are contexts where *igau* can also mean “before” and where *oluvi* can also mean “later.” So far I have no idea how to describe these differences of meaning in a linguistically adequate way.

6 For further information on adverbs of time see Senft (1986: 91 f.).

pression that also refers to “the moon,” namely *tubukona*.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, in Kilivila we do not only find an expression to refer to “the moon” in general, the Trobriand Islanders do also have a lunar calendar with different names for the moons of a year. After Malinowski’s pioneering research on this calendar (1927; 1935) a number of other anthropologists published on this topic. In Malinowski (1935: 50–54) as well as in Austen (1939), Leach (1950), and Damon (1982) we find the names of these moons listed.

During my first 17 months period of field research on the Trobriands in 1982/83 I checked these names (1986: 392). In what follows I list them as they were given to me by my consultants:

<i>yavatamwa</i>	January
<i>geluvilavi</i>	
(also: <i>delivilai</i> )	February
<i>bulumaduku</i>	March
<i>kuluvotu</i>	April
<i>utokakama</i>	
(also: <i>otokakama</i> )	May
<i>inebisila</i>	June
<i>kuluvasasa</i>	July
* <i>milamala</i>	August-September-October
<i>toliavatu</i>	
(also: <i>toliavata</i> )	November-December

While I was eliciting these names my consultants insisted on referring to the period that roughly covers the months we call August, September, and October with the expression *milamala*. Ten years later, in 1993, I wanted to get some more information about this calendar. This time I could elicit the following names for the three months to which my consultants then only referred with the expression *milamala*:

<i>iyalaki</i>	August
<i>iyakoki</i>	September
<i>iyakosi</i>	October

What was puzzling now was that discussing these names with my consultants they denied that the expression *milamala* is actually used to refer to one or more moons (and this explains the asterisk that goes with *milamala* in the list given above). This time I learned that the name *milamala* which literally translates as “become wealthy” is only used to refer to the period of the year, in which the Trobriand Islanders celebrate their harvest. This is

a time of rituals, ceremonies, and festivals which can indeed cover almost three months.

Relying on this information by my consultants means that Malinowski may have made a mistake in taking *milamala* as a name for a moon – and that this mistake was perpetuated in the literature succeeding Malinowski’s publications.

However, I would like to file a caveat with respect to this hypothesis here: I have no idea whatsoever whether the activities of the Christian missions and the impact of school education had any influence on this division of the year. On the other hand, with the only exception of the moon called *geluvilavi* for which I could not find a special meaning, my consultants told me that these moon names either refer to climatic situations with respect to seasonally prevailing winds (*yavatakulu*, *toliyavata*, *yavatamwa* – *yavata* refers to the northwestern trade wind, the wet monsoon) or to the spirits of the dead and – according to Trobriand belief – their visiting of their villages during the period of the harvest festivals (*iyalaki*, *iyakoki*, *iyakosi*) or to the various stages of the growing yams and the villagers’ supply of yam tubers (*Dioscorea esculenta*), the Islanders’ most preferred food (*bulumadaku* [“new yams are very small – yams get rare”], *kuluvotu* [“new yams are still small, but growing”], *utukakana* [“yams are getting big”], *inebisila* [“yams is available”]). By the way, the word for the most preferred type of yams, *tetu*, is also used to refer to the period we call “a year.”<sup>8</sup> The fact that I could find meanings for 11 of these 12 names may indicate that mission and schooling did not have too much influence on this calendar. However, the fact that I could not elicit any of the other names for moons that are reported in the literature (e.g., Damon 1982: 225) – like *kuluwalasi*, *obwatayayo*, *gaygila*, *katubugibogi* – may indicate that the contact with the European calendar system and its names for 12 months may have had at least some influence. Moreover, although it is an astronomical fact that there are years with 13 moons, my consultants just derided me when I hinted at this fact and claimed that every year has just 12 moons. I assume that this is an indication for the fact that during the contact with Europeans, and especially on the basis of schooling, the indigenous Kilivila calendar system with its names for the moons is now in the process of changing into an adoption of the European system with a 12 months calendar – and

7 My consultants deny that the expression *kweluva* is used to refer to “the moon,” as claimed by Damon (1982: 223); they confirmed Austen’s (1939: 238) translation of this term as “garden time.”

8 Thus, there is much justification for calling this calendar a seasonal gardening calendar (Austen 1939).

the former names that referred to “moons” are now used to refer to “months.”

This brief description of how the concept of time is expressed in the language of the Trobriand Islanders should suffice for the purposes pursued here. It goes without saying that these few remarks are far from being exhaustive with respect to a serious linguistic analysis of time reference in Kilivila. However, I hope to have shown that – although there are some idiosyncrasies with respect to the concept of time as it finds its expression in the Kilivila lexicon and grammar – the Trobriand Islanders’ concept of time is not fundamentally different from European concepts of time. The few linguistic data presented above indicate the means with which the Trobriand Islanders refer to time in everyday contexts. They differentiate between actions in the past, the present, and the future, they have concepts of a “yesterday” and a “tomorrow,” they refer to days of the week (though under the influence of contact with Europeans), and they have a concept of a “year” and subdivide this time span in “moons” or rather in “months” these days.

However, as soon as we leave the mundane contexts in which these concepts find their expression in everyday verbal interaction and centre our interest on how the concept of time is expressed and understood in ritual contexts, the picture changes dramatically. Discussing the names the Trobriand Islanders use to refer to “months” and “moons,” I mentioned the *milamala* period and pointed out that this period is a time of rituals and ceremonies. A closer look at these rituals will show that they indeed confront us – and the Trobriand Islanders, of course, – with a different concept of time.

### 3. Time and the Harvest Rituals on the Trobriand Islands – or: Past is Present – Present is Past

For the Trobriand Islanders, the most important event in the course of the year is still the period of the harvest festivals that were first described by Malinowski (1935). This period is called *milamala* – as mentioned above – and, according to my observations on Kaile’una Island, it may last for almost three months.<sup>9</sup> The actual time in which the

9 In what follows I will just centre my description on those aspects of the rituals and ceremonies which characterize this period as something special for the Trobriand Islanders; for a discussion of some of these aspects in connection with research on “ritual communication” see also Senft (1987; 1991: 241–243; 1992b: 81 f.); Eibl-Eibesfeldt und Senft (1991).

Trobriand Islanders celebrate the *milamala* period differs in four geographical districts. The *milamala* is first celebrated on Kitava Island, then – one month later each – in the Northern part of Kiriwina Island, then in the Southern half of Kiriwina and the outlying islands, and finally on Vakuta Island. The consequences for the lunar calendar system of this “staggering” of the *milamala* period is excellently discussed in Leach (1950: 252–256) and Damon (1982: 222–230). In what follows I do not engage in this discussion but briefly describe what is actually going on during this period of the Trobriand harvest festivals.

After getting in the yam harvest, the Trobriand Islanders open the *milamala* period of harvest festivals with a cycle of festive dances accompanied by drums and songs (*wosi*) that are related to the dance cycles.

Based on the decision of the village chief, the important garden magicians, and the expert dancing instructor, the villagers – in a food distribution called *katukaula* – formally present yams, taros, sweet potatoes, fish, sugarcane, and betel nuts to the *baloma*, the “spirits of the dead” (Malinowski 1916),<sup>10</sup> just before sunrise.

Then most men and some girls dress up carefully in their traditional clothes. The girls wear their so-called “grass skirts” (*doba*) that are made out of fibres of banana leaves. The men wear their traditional loincloth (*mwebua*), made out of the bark of the betel palm; however, in addition they also wear “grass skirts” which were given to them by the female kinsmen of their fathers. Although the men in this matrilinear culture are not related with these women, they wear the skirts to honour this group and to show that their marriage has created a bond with these people. Thus, this skirt can also be understood as a sign indicating the good marital relationships between the respective men and their wives – as a woman’s ability to contribute bundles of grass skirt material and skirts to every exchange during a certain mourning ritual is a public statement of her husband’s support and wealth (Weiner 1976: 198) – because the “major responsibility of a man to his wife is to provision her with additional wealth” (197) in *doba*.

All the dancers decorate their faces with asymmetrical designs in red, white, and black colours which are made out of betel nuts, chalk, and charcoal respectively. They anoint their bodies with coconut oil and an essence made out of fragrant herbs and afterwards sprinkle their torsos with yellow

10 I will return discussing the concept of *baloma* in more detail below.

leaves taken from the blossom of a certain tree. They all wear white feathers of cockatoos in their neatly combed hair and armlets made of natural fibres on their upper arms which emphasize the men's muscles and frame the girls' breasts – thus increasing the physical beauty of the persons. Some of the dancers also wear necklaces – the so-called *bagi* made out of the red parts of the spondylus shell –, tortoiseshell earrings (*paya*), and boars' tusks (*doga*). Moreover, some men also wear belts made of small white cowrieshells around their waists, knees and/or ankles (*bunadoga*, *luluboda*, *kwepitapatila*). Most of these adornments do not only mark the wealth of their bearers but also their status within the highly stratified Trobriand society with its clans and subclans (Weiner 1976: 237 f.).

After some final magical rites, where the dancers' relatives whisper magical spells on their body to make them dance more gracefully, the dancers gather at the centre of the village, where in the meantime a group of mostly elderly men, some with drums and some with long sticks, has gathered. As soon as this group starts to sing and drum, the dancers start dancing in circles around them. Most of the songs, the *wosi milamala*, consist of verses with two or three lines each;<sup>11</sup> they are repeated *ad libitum* and they have a very characteristic melody. The singing and dancing may last for more than three hours.

Together with the above mentioned *katukaula* food distribution for the spirits of the dead, the songs and dances mark the official beginning of the *milamala* period of harvest festivals; it is a period of happiness, of conviviality, of dances, of villagers visiting each other, of flirtation, and of amorous adventures – at least for the adolescents and bachelors.

The *milamala* songs are not only sung to open the harvest festivals, but they are also sung in the late evenings, and sometimes they form the transition from one day to the other in the course of the *milamala* period. The songs have a very special feature: They are sung in the so-called Biga Baloma variety of Kilivila, the "language of the spirits of the dead." This is an archaic variety of Kilivila, and it is sometimes also called Biga Tommwaya – "old people's language." Only very

few of the elderly still know the semantic content, the meaning of these songs; however, they are still passed on from members of the older to a few interested members of the younger generation.

These songs are a verbal manifestation of the Trobrianders' belief in an immortal spirit – called *baloma* – that lives in a kind of "paradise" in the "underworld" of Tuma Island (Malinowski 1916). The songs very poetically and quite erotically describe the "life" of the spirits of the dead in their Tuma Island "paradise." According to the Trobrianders' indigenous belief, these spirits can be reborn; moreover, they can also visit their former villages, and they all do this regularly during the *milamala* period. During these visits the *baloma* see whether the villagers living there now still know how to garden, how to celebrate a good harvest, and how to behave even while celebrating exuberantly. "Depending on whether or not they are pleased with what they see, the spirits enhance or hinder the next year's production [of yams]" (Damon 1982: 231).

Therefore, the traditional opening of the festivals with the singing of the *wosi milamala*, with the festive dressing up in traditional clothes, and with the food distribution as an indication of successful gardening and the resulting abundance of food is also a salute to the spirits of the dead; moreover, the singing of the *milamala* songs during the nights of the *milamala* period is done in honour of, and to celebrate, the *baloma*. This is not the only function of these songs, however.

As said above, and pointed out elsewhere (Senft 1991: 242 f.), the *milamala* period is characterized by conviviality, flirtation, and amorous adventures. During such festive periods, social norms, rules, and regulations are interpreted in a more liberal and generous way than otherwise. This may lead to jealousy and rivalry that – if escalating – may even threaten the community. The *wosi milamala*, however, also serve the function to prevent such a development. The songs remind the Trobrianders of the presence of the *baloma* and of the social norms that are valid even for the spirits of the dead "living" in their "paradise." Thus, the guardians of the norms of the "past" are "present" – checking whether this "past" is still "present" in their former villages. The *baloma* must not be offended by unseemly and indecent behaviour – and this includes, e.g., jealousy amongst bachelors. Keeping this in mind, the Trobrianders must control their behaviour – especially their emotions, because nobody would dare to offend the spirits of

<sup>11</sup> I just want to give one example (out of a corpus of about 200) of these songs:

<i>bakasirasi vaponu</i>	We surmount the waves
<i>bakavamapusi vana</i>	we exchange herbs
<i>bakavagonusi buita</i>	we pick the wreath

the dead.<sup>12</sup> To emphasize it once more, the “past” is present during the *milamala* period, and the “present” during this period is deeply anchored in, and needs to be similar to, the “past.” The singing of the *wosi milamala* assures the community that there is a virtually transcendental power controlling its members’ behaviour and thus warding off developments that may turn out to be dangerous for the community. If we define “ritual communication” as a type of strategic action that serves the functions of social bonding and of blocking aggression, and that can ban elements of danger which may affect the community’s social harmony – within the verbal domain, at least – just by verbalizing these elements of danger – more or less explicitly – and by bringing them up for discussion (Senft 1991: 246), then these songs are a special form of “ritual communication.”

The important function of the *wosi milamala* with respect to rituals in the Trobriand society becomes evident if we take into consideration that they are also sung after the death of a Trobriander and during the first mourning ceremonies (Weiner 1976; Senft 1985). The Trobriand Islanders believe that the *baloma* of dead persons stay with their relatives for some days before they go to Tuma Island.<sup>13</sup> This eschatological “fact” is the link between mourning ritual and harvest festival. On the basis of this belief the function of these songs in the mourning ritual can be interpreted as follows: The songs – especially those songs that describe the carefree “life” of the spirits of the dead in their Tuma “paradise” – may ease the *baloma*’s grief of parting; moreover, the songs should also console the bereaved, reminding them of the fact that dying is just a “rite de passage” (van Gennep 1909), a transition from one form of existence to another. Here the songs remind the Trobriand Islanders that

the present as well as the future is anchored in the past; moreover, for the *baloma*, the spirit of a dead person, the future is not at all different from the past.<sup>14</sup> Life in the Tuma underworld is always the same. There is just a present. After a few days in the Tuma underworld the *baloma* forget their past; and it is only when the *baloma* get tired of their carefree life in Tuma and think of getting reborn that a future opens up for them.

Referring to this common knowledge coded in the community’s religious superstructure, the songs sung in the Biga Baloma variety of Kilivila contribute to channeling and controlling emotions during the mourning ceremonies and to maintain the bonds between members of the community that is stricken with grief for a death, because they permit a “distanced reenactment of situations of emotional distress” (Scheff 1977: 488). This quote summarizes Scheff’s attempt to define the concept “ritual,” by the way. We can summarize that the *wosi milamala* are not only sung at extraordinary occasions, but that they themselves can also be regarded as an extraordinary form of ritual communication which secures the construction of the society’s social reality on the basis of its norm-controlling and bonding functions. Moreover, this form of ritual communication also preserves in a very specific way culture in oral tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Before I discuss this point further, I just want to finish the description of the *milamala* festival with a brief remark on how the end of this period is officially and publicly marked. As to my observations of the complete *milamala* period in Tauwema village on Kaile’una Island the festivals

12 I want to point out that the concepts I am reporting here are conceptualized by the Trobriand Islanders in this way. I report what my consultants told me about the *milamala* festival, the *wosi milamala*, and the *baloma*; therefore, my description is *emic*: it presents the Trobrianders’ own point of view.

13 I want to point out that the Trobriand Islanders do not distinguish between the *wosi milamala* sung during the harvest festival and the *wosi milamala* sung during the mourning ceremony; on both occasions they sing the same songs. However, during the mourning ceremony these songs are not accompanied by drumming. Moreover, I have to emphasize that the Trobriand Islanders cannot see any contradiction between dead ancestors and living spirits. For them, the *baloma* is just one eternal “form” of existence: once a part of a person, the *baloma* represents the immortal spirit of this dead person, and in future, probably, a – reborn – part of another Trobriand Islander (see also Malinowski: 1916).

14 For another interesting linking of “past” and “present” on the Trobriands see Weiner (1988: 53) who points out that “the similarities of seclusion for birth and mourning ... suggest that death and birth ... are linked together in a more deeply meaningful way.” Weiner (1988: 163) also comes up with the following interesting hypothesis: “At birth, the regenerative part of a *baloma* spirit re-creates human life in women, and at death, women re-create these beliefs materially by acknowledging and removing all the debts that went into the work of making a social person.”

15 I want to note here that there is no tension between the function of the *wosi milamala* as a form of ritual communication as described here and the fact that the language used in these songs is only understood these days by a very few people. Although most Trobriand Islanders no longer know what is actually said in these songs, they still know why they are sung and what they are all about; in other words, the “situative” meaning of these songs within the rituals is still clear to all Trobriand Islanders. We may compare this situation with the fact that the classic Catholic mass had many Latin parts; the congregation used these expressions adequately during mass, though most of the parishioners did not know how these Latin phrases translated into their mother tongues.

end with the villagers', especially the youngsters', chasing back of the spirits of the dead to their Tuma underworld by throwing stones, sand, and even rotten coconuts and yams towards the invisible *baloma*. The "past" which was present up till then in the consciousness, in the life, of the Trobriand Islanders is thus chased away. This rite that finishes the festive *milamala* period clearly signifies that ordinary time with its clear separation between "past," "present," and "future" will take over again.

#### 4. The Times They are A-Changin' ... Two Concepts of Time on the Trobriand Islands (and Elsewhere?)

I started this paper with some of Bloch's considerations with respect to the concept of "time" in mundane and ritual contexts in Bali.<sup>16</sup> Then I attempted to present a brief picture of what concepts of time we find in the Trobriand Islands. After presenting data on how the Trobrianders refer to periods of, and actions in time in everyday verbal interaction, I tried to show that during the period of the harvest festivals the social construction of Trobriand society is regulated by a concept of time "where the present and the past are so fused that the present is a mere manifestation of the past" (Bloch 1989: 16). This concept of time finds its verbal expression in a special text category of songs that moreover represent a specially marked and labelled language variety. My discussion of the functions of these songs resulted in the conclusion that they can be regarded as a special form of "ritual communication." This result somehow closes the circle of arguments presented. With respect to the Trobriand Islanders, as well as with respect to the Balinese, we have to differentiate between two notions of time – and it is the more mundane notion of time that has to be mentioned as existing besides the notions of this basic human concept expressed in ritual contexts. I would like to emphasize this fact once more in Bloch's words. He ends his Malinowski Lecture as follows:

<sup>16</sup> It would be interesting to further develop Bloch's theory with the aid of the material presented here. It would be especially interesting to further discuss assumed universals underlying ordinary speech and culture-specific "ritual time" and to research how the two types of conceptualization of time are influencing each other. However, this would certainly go beyond the scope of this paper.

Unfortunately many anthropologists, fascinated as usual by the exotic, have only paid attention to the world as seen in ritual, forgetting the other conceptualization of the world which their informants also hold, and which is denied by ritual communication. They have presented as cultural variation what are in fact differences between the ritual communication view of the world of the people they study and *our* everyday practical one. In doing this, and unlike Malinowski, they have confounded the systems by which we know the world with the systems by which we hide it (Bloch 1989: 18).

I take this point as essential for anthropological and ethnolinguistic research. We have to clearly differentiate between the various levels at which we make our observations on which we base our generalizations about "the culture" and "the language" of the people we study. Just imagine what kind of idea about the concept of time Papuan anthropologists would get in their European fields if they would only take the celebration of a traditional Catholic mass as the basis for their inferences on "The concept of Time in Rome" ...

This paper is based on 23 months of field research on the Trobriand Islands in 1982/83, 1989, 1992, and 1993. I want to thank the German Research Society and the Max-Planck-Society for their support in realizing my field research. I also want to thank the National and Provincial Governments in Papua New Guinea and the Institute for PNG Studies for their assistance with, and permission for, my research projects. I express my great gratitude to the people of the Trobriand Islands, especially to the inhabitants of Tauwema; I thank them for their hospitality, friendship, and patient cooperation.

In our European societies birthdays usually occupy a distinguished slot within our annual schedules. In 1996, Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Wickler celebrates his 65th birthday. I have always admired his capacity to be deeply rooted in the history (or the past) of his field, to be highly influential in its present developments, and his opening up new paths for future research. Therefore, I would like to dedicate this paper to him.

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