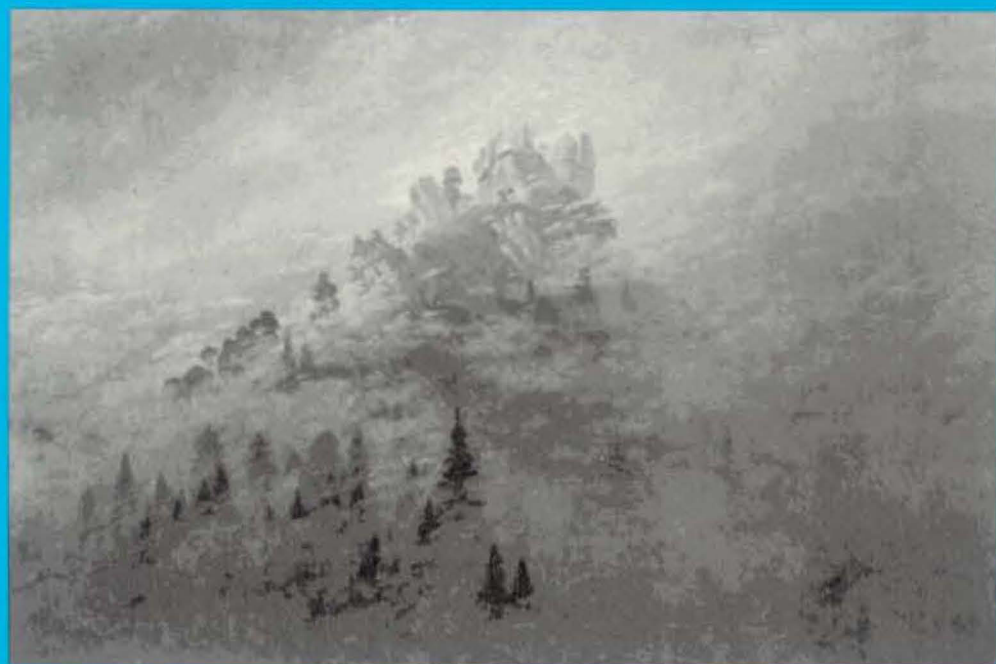


Thomas Bargatzky
Rolf Kuschel
(Eds.)

The Invention of Nature



PETER LANG

THE BELLONESE ATTITUDE TOWARD NATURE

Rolf Kuschel

HE SAW A FINE GEOMETRICAL STRUCTURE,
ORDER MASQUERADING AS RANDOMNESS.
(JAMES GLEICK, 1988:22)

I. Introduction

A prerequisite in understanding one's world, or even part of it, is the ability to combine and differentiate among the almost indefinite number of sensorial stimuli in one's surroundings. To discern between what in a specific historic period and situation is significant and what is not, is the beginning of creating order out of chaos. The way we in our minds cut up and classify the world and combine and intertwine these entities varies from culture to culture, from subculture to subculture and changes to a certain extent over time. The way in which a society has compartmentalized the world, influences its organization as well as it forms the building blocks on the basis of which the individual behaves and understands his world. In order to understand another culture and its members one should start uncovering these categories and unravel the way in which they are mutually intertwined.¹

The study of a totally foreign culture can, in its initial phase, remind one of putting together a jigsaw puzzle with an unknown number of pieces. What in the beginning looks like a seemingly well-defined Gestalt can later prove to be part of a much more complicated whole. Something which at a certain point is perceived as a figure can, just as we know from studies in the psychology of perception, suddenly appear as 'ground' (Rubin, 1921).

One of the difficulties facing any professional observer of an unknown society is how to develop an ability to effectively push aside the culture visor through which he normally sees his world, in order to perceive and

¹ For a discussion of problem solving as an adaptive strategy among living beings and its relation to play behavior see Petersen (1988). For an anthropological discussion of man's search for giving a 'shapeless or undifferentiated world' a stable form, see Radin (1957:248ff).

understand the world as the people he is studying do. This step of going from a kind of aspect-blindness to becoming aspect sighted, to use Wittgenstein's (1968:213-214) terminology, can probably never be fully realized. Such an attempt can rarely be more than a qualified asymptotic approach.

II. Physical environment

In the present paper I shall deal with the pre-contact attitude toward nature on Bellona Island, a Polynesian Outlier in the Solomon Islands of only 22 square kilometers whose population before 1938 when Christianity was introduced, probably never exceeded 500 - 600 individuals at a time. What makes Bellona an interesting object of study apart from its small size and population, is its long period of isolation. Before the introduction of Christianity in 1938, contacts with the outside world were scarce, both in terms of interaction with other South Sea Islanders and with Europeans and Americans. Ships which called on the island before 1938 only stayed for a few hours or days and their visits did not have any measurable impact on the islanders' traditions or patterns of behavior (Kuschel, 1988c).

Before we enter into a discussion of the Bellonese attitude toward nature let me say a few words about 'the Bellonese' as term. When we speak of 'the Bellonese' attitude toward nature, it sounds as if everybody on the island shared the world view we are about to describe. This is not the case. Though there were no formal restrictions concerning the sharing of knowledge, great differences appeared. Women had very little knowledge about religious matters as did children and neither of them were allowed to participate in temple rituals. Many men lacked depth, solidity and comprehensiveness in their understanding of the surrounding world. They were either not interested or did not have the ability to grasp the intrinsic complexities of the topic.² Those who were the real carriers of knowledge, especially the religious wisdom, were the religious leaders, the priest-chiefs. So, when we talk about the Bellonese attitude toward nature, we refer to

² For a discussion of the distribution of the sociology of knowledge in non-industrialized societies see Keesing (1987).

those men who were the carriers and inventors of the sociology of knowledge.

On sailing toward the island, the ellipse-shaped, uplifted atoll of Bellona looks almost like a large turtle that has risen to the surface of the sea. The steep and densely overgrown limestone cliffs that rim the island are in some places up to 60 meters high. However, seen from inside the island where the two parallel cliff formations along the coast can be seen, the island is suggestive of the hull of a canoe. Though the Bellonese lived on a coral atoll with cultivable soil having a 'carrying capacity' almost twice as large as the size of the population (Christiansen, 1975), and though they were surrounded by the Coral Sea supplying them with an abundance of fish, life was not always easy. They were surrounded by strong forces including:

- Atmospheric turbulence creating cyclones, spreading death and destruction in their dwellings and gardens.
- Sudden gales arising, beating the waters and forcing canoes and their crews into a tarantella.
- Changes in water temperature keeping the fish away from the fishermen's hooks and nets.
- Inexplicable diseases, throwing the population into a state of wild alarm.

Such phenomena represented what Gleick (1988:3) has termed, "the irregular side of nature." They appeared a-periodically, and were thus unpredictable. Such situations created feelings of distress and helplessness.

In addition to such natural events other phenomena also called for explanations like the origins of islands, celestial bodies, trees, plants, fish, birth and death, as well as the origin of particular parts of the human body. On the social level answers were sought to the provenance of certain human values, deviant behavior, etcetera.

How then did the Bellonese attack these 'grand questions', and what kind of cognitive architecture did they develop in answer to these issues? As in many other societies, religion seems to form the cognitive frame of

reference for an understanding and a partial protection against the various unknown forces which influence the lives and activities of human beings.

III. Religion

The Bellonese themselves made a clear semantic distinction between human beings and supernaturals, a conceptual distinction to be employed in the following. In the traditional religion, there were seven different categories of supernaturals: culture heroes, the island's aboriginal population called *hiti*, sky gods, district deities, unworshipped gods, worshipped ancestors, and unworshipped ancestors. An active and lively interaction existed between humans and the supernatural world. Humans could communicate by way of ritual offerings and prayers with the sky gods, the district deities and the worshipped ancestors. The gods were regarded as "anthropomorphic, anthroposocial and anthropopsychic" (Monberg, 1966:36), thus enabling human beings to communicate and socially and psychologically cope with them.³ Due to the very sacredness of the sky gods man usually, but not always, directed his requests to this group of supernaturals through his ancestors. None of the other supernaturals were the object of rituals - besides some minor ones to please the aboriginal inhabitants, the *hiti*. The success of a worshipper's approach to the heavenly abode would show in his prosperity, fertility and protection against major diseases, homicides and major catastrophes.

If people fulfilled their duties toward the gods by performing rituals, making offerings and, on the whole, by not breaking too many taboos, in return they expected success in their diverse activities. In some cases an displeased god would let his viewpoint be known to the Bellonese through a medium. If the gods and ancestors lived up to man's expectations, rituals were performed and songs were composed in their honor something the gods valued highly. Likewise, if the gods did not comply with the wishes of their worshippers in a satisfactory way, they were made the objects of verbal attacks in which the people proclaimed their dissatisfaction. One of my informants, a respected leader of rituals, once scolded one of the gods for

³ Santangelo (1989) believes that man ascribes anthropomorphic features to gods, because man spontaneously could conceive of it.

being weak and unimportant, because the god had not provided him with a son. He even stopped performing rituals to this god for a time and only resumed after urgent requests from his kinsmen. In another case a man humiliated his god by flinging a terrifying curse at him, "Shit! Lie with your ancestor!" (*Poi! Ta'o ou sa'amaatu'a!*). An example of a god being rejected forever can be found in Elbert and Monberg (1965:T 155), where a man became so outraged by the conduct of a goddess that he began to worship her brother instead. Ancestors were also dependent upon their worshippers. In case they proved to be too weak to fulfill the wishes of their worshippers, they would fall into oblivion among their equals.

Communication between the sacred and the profane world took place during shorter or longer rituals and food offerings presented by ritual leaders (see Monberg, 1991). An important link in the interaction between the world of gods and mortals were the ancestors. At death the 'spiritual selves' (souls) were believed to travel to the heavenly abodes where they were welcomed by the gods. But they did not stay permanently with the gods. They traveled between the homesteads of the gods and their graves on Bellona, acting as messengers between gods and mortals. "In rituals", says Monberg (1966:98) "they were asked to convey to the gods the wishes of living man for health, fertility, and good fortune." The religion of the Bellonese was marked by a lively interaction between the secular and the sacred world, where people, worshipped ancestors, and gods were mutually - though asymmetrically - dependent on each other. Though human beings were unable to control their gods, they were at liberty to protest and even revolt against them in situations they felt humiliating.

Creation of the world

To the Bellonese their own island had been in existence from time immemorial. According to local oral tradition, the island was formed when a Nerita shell, covered with soil and inhabited by animals, rose out of the sea. Later the Polynesian arrowroot started growing on the island, but there was not enough room for it, as the sky stretched low and heavy across the island. Then, two culture heroes stepped in. The first one, Tangangoa, lifted the sky on to his head and pushed it up on his arms. He stood on tiptoe to push the sky even further, but that did not suffice. The other culture hero,

push the sky even further, but that did not suffice. The other culture hero, Tongangengeba, was taller, and he came to the rescue. He stood on tiptoe and lifted the sky by stretching his arms above his head, but he needed a priest-chief's sacred staff to push the sky sufficiently high to provide enough air and light for the plants (Elbert and Monberg, 1965:T 10).

The neighboring Rennell Island, situated 22,5 km south-east of Bellona, was also created by a culture hero, Mautikitiki. According to the oral traditions Mautikitiki and his two younger brothers went fishing and got an island on their hook. They pulled it up and it became Mungaba, or Rennell Island (Kuschel, 1975:A 8). Though the Bellonese were knowledgeable about other islands in the Pacific, including their supposed homelands 'Ubeangango and 'Ubeamatangi, probably Ouvea in the Loyalty Islands and 'Uvea or Wallis Islands, the stories about Bellona and Rennell are the only two tales in the traditional folklore concerned with the creation of land. Nobody knows when Bellona and Rennell Island originated. When the Bellonese and Rennellese arrived on the scene, their islands had already been there for a long time and were inhabited by a people called the *hiti*.

Bellona and Rennell were the center of the world to the indigenous people. It was surrounded by the firmament in which were the stars. The Bellonese believed the stars were fixed in the sky, some of them being former culture heroes (Elbert and Monberg, 1965:T 62). The natives found their bearings for planting, fishing, and sailing in the stars. It is uncertain whether other celestial bodies like the sun and the moon also were former culture heroes, but since - according to oral tradition - they cheated each other while climbing up a hibiscus tree, one finally reaching the sky and the other falling down into the sea, one would assume they once were regarded as having been culture heroes.

Unlike other Polynesian societies the Bellonese had no oral tradition about the origin of animals. A few stories concern the transformation of land animals into sea creatures: a snake turned into a black and white banded sea snake; the skipjack and the green turtle, which originally were believed to be land animals, changed their habitat and lived in the ocean (Kuschel, 1975). In all cases the transfers of habitat is from land to sea, it never goes in the opposite direction.

A greater variety exists about the etiology of certain animals' specific behavior, their colors, and their taste. Species specific behavior is mostly related to the interference of culture heroes. The flounder is said to be flat with many bones because Mautikitiki and the flounder had a fight during which the culture hero stamped on the fish and threw his bundle of spears into its body. Other etiological stories explain why the hermit crab carries its turban shell all the time, why the needlefish skips along the surface, why the fruit bat flits to and fro, why the marsh crab has a furrow in the center of its carapace, and why the skink approaches instead of trying to escape fire. In a very few cases gods were made responsible for a characteristic behavior as when a god embodied himself in the small swiftlet. He was too heavy for the small bird and that is why the bird flutters around (Kuschel, 1975).

Culture heroes are also made responsible for the conspicuous colors of birds, like the reddish breast of the fruit dove, the different colored feathers of the graybird and the song parrot, the red color of the honey eater, the black feathers on the tufted back of the white ibis, just to mention a few examples. The bitter taste of a few fish like the parrot fish, the rock cod and the sea perch, is ascribed to the eating of a very poisonous mythical fish. Special attention is given the bad smell and taste of the shark: The culture hero Mautikitiki urinated on it (Kuschel, 1975:A 3).

Comparing Christiansen's list of important animals on Bellona (Christiansen, 1975:Appendix B-4), and Wolff's list of birds (Wolff, 1973) with the oral tradition on animal characteristics (Kuschel, 1975:Table 3) only a small part of the local fauna seems to have been a topic for explanation. The discrepancy is even more noticeable in the area of local flora. The general idea that people always try to account for the traits which are most conspicuous or different does not hold for the Bellonese. In their tradition certain, but far from all traits, are accounted for. No stories for example exist to explain the anatomy of the hammerhead shark, the ray, or the voraciousness of the sea perch, nor do the Bellonese have any oral traditions explaining why the lizard sheds its tail or the flying fox soars in the sky at night. A reason could be that these etiological tales have been forgotten. However, another more culturally relevant reason may be that the Bellonese - unlike Westerners - feel no need to explain everything. They

are content with the notion, that humans are ignorant about a series of matters.

The appearance of human beings

The Bellonese have no tales about the creation of man, nor do they seem to miss it. They even appear surprised when asked for any such tales. Their knowledge about the human body, its functioning and malfunctioning is equally pale. Besides being the architects of certain parts of the universe the culture heroes left a few marks on human beings, like man's flexible joints, or the creation of the vagina and clitoris. The origin of death and the emergence of certain forms of behavior such as the killing of agnates and close relatives were also invented by the culture heroes (for details see Elbert and Monberg, 1965:chapter 5).

It thus appears that a systematic understanding of the origin of the universe and the creation of humankind held little interest for the native population. Whatever was explained was the result of the intervention of culture heroes, beyond reach of memory. Neither the sky gods nor the district deities were involved in the creational process of the universe and humans. This probably has to do with the Bellonese emigration. When they arrived at their new home after a long and dangerous sea journey, they found an entire island full of trees, plants, vines, fish, birds, and other animals. The arriving gods thus had no need to bother about creation.

IV. Major natural events

Major natural events, like conspicuous natural phenomena and disasters, mental diseases, and exceptionally cruel actions were attributed to the sky gods, controllers and benefactors of nature. Since the sky gods were related to nature, offerings to them consisted of raw, uncooked food. They were in possession of great sacred strength (*tapu*), were violent by nature and sometimes unpredictable even toward their own worshippers whom they would kill out of jealousy (Kuschel, 1988b:R 40). Any contact with the power of the sky gods, whatever the reason, was fatal if it did not occur through the established formal channels, the rites. But they were not just cruel and truculent, they were also believed to be benevolent. The sky gods

cruel and truculent, they were also believed to be benevolent. The sky gods provided the Bellonese with garden products, large fish catches, and guests in castaway canoes from overseas.

Cyclones and gales were the most severe natural catastrophes for which the sky gods were made liable. The island was afflicted by cyclones approximately every seven to eight years. Most of these caused only minor damages with temporary food shortages, but in a few extreme cases, as when the cyclone named after the priest-chief 'Oso'eha ravaged the island in 1911, the situation immediately after was catastrophic. Christiansen (1981:4) writes about the strength and devastation of this storm, "The extremely high winds lasted for a whole night and reached unbelievable force. No trees were left standing, and no houses. Severe droughts prevailed for 2-3 years after the catastrophe. One had an unobscured sight from the one end of the former heavily wooded island to the other, and a lot of people had to sail to neighboring Rennell to survive." For the first six months after the cyclone the nutritional situation was so severe that several people died. Most of them were older people. People with access to the beach collected mollusks, whereas others literally stripped the bush for anything edible. Such cyclones have been recorded both earlier and later than the one described by Christiansen. The Bellonese had no explanation as to why the sky god would send such cyclones. Earth-quakes were also said to be caused by the sky god Tehainga'atua, who ordered one of the minor gods to make the island tremble from the underworld by shaking the aerial roots of a banyan tree (Elbert and Monberg, 1965:T 21; Kuschel 1988b:R 22). According to oral tradition, the earthquakes hardly ever got enough strength and duration to demolish the island, because a famous district deity, the protector of homesteads, intervened and broke the minor god's arms.

Most conspicuous natural phenomena were attributed to the sky gods, such as thunderstorms, considered to be the sign of gods approaching the island, and a firmament clothed in scarlet as a sign of the coming death of an important man. The endless killings which have marred the island for generations, as well as any horrendous and exceptional accident taking place during an attack, were also related to the sky gods. Before an attack a raiding group performed special rituals (*kuba*), in which they requested that

the sky gods weaken the victim and reduce his suspiciousness, enabling them to come within close range and kill him. As one of the last rituals before the attack, the raiders dedicated their weapons to the sky gods. In this ritual, the gods were requested to 'enter' the weapon and aim a lethal blow at the chosen victim. Without the assistance of the sky gods any attack would be unsuccessful. The Bellonese had no clear-cut conception of how their allies from the sacred world 'entered' the weapons, and it appears that they have never occupied their minds with what seems to them a trivial problem.

If unusual and, for society, horrendous behavior was displayed during an attack, for example like the killing of a brother-in-law (Kuschel, 1988b:R 145), signs were sought as an indication that the person had been temporarily possessed by a sky god. When a man during an attack gouged out his enemy's eyes from their sockets it was said that one of the sky gods had been on a killing spree and, arriving on Bellona, had heard the attacker call for assistance. Immediately, the god threw down his own weapons, took the attacker's hands and buried them deep in the victim's eye sockets. One by one, the attacker could then rip out the victim's eyes with his bare hands and throw them on the ground (Kuschel, 1988b:R 106).

Physical deviance like getting twins, having a club foot, or goiter, as well as aberrant appearances like being troubled with many abscesses, small breasts, having red or thin hair, no beard, and other such characteristics were believed to be the results of taboo breaches committed by the mother during pregnancy. Her children then had to suffer from her earlier behavior due to the punishment from the sky god. Human beings who for a lengthy period of time exhibited deviant behavior (Kuschel, 1988b:R 79), like a women shouting invectives at her brother toward whom she was supposed to show decorum in her behavior, were believed to be possessed by one of the sky gods. The same explanation was given for people running around naked or roaming about with their clubs, spears, machete or axes threatening to kill somebody. The usual treatment of mentally sick people was to place them inside a huge wooden fence, ignite a fire outside the wooden posts, while hoping to scare off the gods so that they would leave the diseased. Sometimes, such a treatment could go on for several weeks.

Whatever went right or wrong in the ecological sphere of nature, the sky gods were made accountable. They represented everything contrary to social order, they were married to their own sisters, reversed the social status of gender (the goddess being more ferocious and powerful), ate raw food, and roamed about noisily. The sky gods represented the 'powers controlling the forces of nature' and were thus made responsible for the larger, unpredictable, a-periodical natural events as well as extraordinarily hideous and terrifying human behavior.

V. Minor casualties

Injuries, minor casualties and misadventures like falling from trees, tripping over a stone, loosing one's canoe, even plant diseases were not just something which happened by sheer accident, it needed an explanation. If no other reason could be encountered the Bellonese held unworshipped gods called '*apai*' responsible. They lived mainly in the impenetrable virgin forest, at the coast, or in graves and in contrast to ancestors could not be worshipped. They were the essence of evil and were made responsible for everything which could not rationally be attributed to the anger or displeasure of the worshipped gods or ancestors. From a Western point of view the '*apai*' were made the scapegoats for minor casualties that could not otherwise be explained.

VI. Annoyances in everyday life

The many annoyances and inexplicable events which life is so full of needed an explanation. Especially bad luck in hunting coconut crabs or flying foxes and ill-luck in fishing was supposedly caused by the original inhabitants of the island, the *hiti*. *Hiti* is the name of a historical-mythical population said to have inhabited the island before the Bellonese arrived. In addition to creating irritation the *hiti* were said to have taught the first immigrants how to catch flying fish, to climb with climbers, and how to eat certain roots and fruits. When met by human beings the *hiti* turned into stones. One way of succeeding in fishing and hunting was to outsmart the *hiti* by performing small rituals at the stones believed to be the embodiment of a *hiti*, or to place a puzzle made out of interlaced leaves on the path leading to the

fishing ground or hunting place. The *hiti*, who were believed to be very curious, would then spend a lot of time with the puzzle, trying to separate the leaves instead of bothering the hunter or fisherman (see Kuschel, 1988a:Fig. 13).

VII. Procreation

For many societies the process of procreation has been a puzzle which needed a rational explanation. Where do children come from and how are they implanted in women. In a society like the Bellonese, with no mammals except for whales, bats, flying foxes and the Pacific rat, and no pets which could have provided them with some clues to the relationship between intercourse and pregnancy, this was a serious problem. They nevertheless developed an ingenious idea which could explain not only how children were born within a marriage, but also why some unmarried women got pregnant and why some couples were barren. According to the traditional belief the 'spiritual selves' of unborn children were kept in a store house belonging to the district deity. A man who wanted a child asked his ancestor to intercede with the district deity for the latter to grant offspring to his worshipper. If the wish was granted, the district deity gave a child or two to the ancestor who then planted it in the womb of the woman. The specifics of the 'planting' process were of no interest to the Bellonese. A district god who was very pleased with his worshipper would sometimes also impregnate the worshipper's daughter. Barrenness, on the other hand, was explained as the result of a district god's displeasure with his worshipper's offerings or behavior. Another explanation was that an enemy of the worshipper had performed a ritual to the district deity asking him not to provide the former with a child. In such situations the district deity was confused since one of his worshippers asked for a child while another asked him not to fulfill the wish. A district deity caught in such a dilemma was described as turning his head from one side to the other (*hekeukeu'aki*), unable to make a decision. Since the Bellonese had no idea about the relationship between sexual intercourse and pregnancy (Monberg, 1975), the procreation process was solely explained with reference to the decision of the district gods.

VIII. Protection against natural forces

Living in a world of total instability is inhuman. Humans cannot live in a world while being totally subjugated to uncontrollable forces. Some cognitive means of control must be created, and the Bellonese consequently incorporated in their religious system a group of supernaturals who could protect them against the forces of nature. These were the district deities, descendants of the sky gods. They were called district deities because each clan and subclan, living in specific areas of the island, had their own district god. An interesting correspondence between the number of district gods and the Bellonese level of strain has been noted. According to local tradition, during the 15th and 16th generation, a dramatic increase in conflicts and homicides appeared. At the same time the different agnatic groups on Bellona supplemented and annexed more and more district gods. With an increasing escalation of hostilities among the different groups, earlier group coherence deteriorated and thus created the need for more protection. This is a beautiful example of what Monberg (1966:73) has called "a correlation between the changing world of the district gods and the changes taking place within the social system."

The district gods protected the homes and families of their worshippers. They protected a settlement and its inhabitants against attacks, and their worshippers from diseases, misfortunes, and the failure of crops. A man of importance who always kept his part of the interaction with the heavenly abode, i.e. performed his rituals and presented plenty of food in his rituals, expected to be well protected by his district deity.

In addition to the district deities, ancestors were also important in protecting the settlement and its inhabitants. But in contrast to the district gods, the ancestors' interests were highly connected with their agnatic kin in order to ensure the continual existence of the lineage. If the protection failed for some unknown reason or because of a breach of a taboo, extraordinary offerings and rituals were believed to appease the deity or the ancestor. In more severe cases, as when a man was not blessed with children or only had daughters (who were less appreciated than sons), he stopped his offerings to the deity deemed responsible for his misfortune and threatened to exchange him with a more powerful one. If, on the other hand, an

ancestor did not fulfill his duties, he would immediately be deprived of further offerings and another more powerful ancestor would be approached instead. Such a replacement could have fatal consequences for the deposed ancestor, because without offerings, he fell into disgrace in the heavenly abode and was literally 'wiped out'. His 'life principle' was crushed on a stone in the underworld and erased. Thus both parties, the ancestors and his kin, were mutually dependent on each other.

Curiously enough, there was one serious exception to the Bellonese expectation for protection of the settlement and its inhabitants. If a homestead was attacked and its male members killed by enemies, the Bellonese did not blame or make the district deity responsible for neglecting his duty, in spite of the fact that they were believed to protect the homestead. The Bellonese themselves had no plausible explanation of such failure on behalf of a district deity.

IX. Features of Bellonese world view

What then characterized the Bellonese attitude toward nature? First of all it seems that not everything needed an explanation, and that the principle of continuation was momentous. The Bellonese, like some other small-scale tribal societies as the Eskimo (see Hoebel, 1974:69), did not try to explain all the mysteries of nature. "Every plant or star need not be named, not every god needed a father and a mother. Some aspects of life and culture, the circulation of blood, the nature of gravity, or grammar, did not need any explanation at all", as Monberg (1966:118) phrased it. The Bellonese explanation of the creation of the Universe, and the creation of human beings, were fragmentary and lacked coherence. Even vital questions like why district gods did not protect their worshippers in a more effective way during attacks, did not occupy their minds. Thus many aspects of life were left unexplained. Whether this lack of interest was part of their ancient traditional world view or whether some knowledge was lost in earlier generations, cannot be ascertained today. However, the lack of completeness of certain parts of their orientation toward nature, did not disturb the Bellonese as much as it bothered the researcher. Sometimes the Bellonese thought my search for coherence and the lengthy questioning

connected with it was more than irksome. A not unusual comment to my endless questioning of what to me seemed important questions, were brushed aside with the counter-question, "Who knows?"

As stated earlier, the creation of the world did not have any great significance in Bellonese cognition. What mattered was the continuation from the past via the present to the future. Continuity in life was not merely related to the individual but was important to the whole lineage and clan. The mortals of the present had to ensure that the persistence of their agnatic kinsmen would continue in the future. If the patrilineage, subclan or clan was annihilated, the result would be catastrophic, because in the world of light, nobody would be left to relate the deeds of this agnatic group. Likewise nobody could make offerings to and worship the ancestors who in the underworld would be forgotten and finally 'wiped out'. This ever present occupation with continuity appears for example in the Bellonese classification of homicides where distinctions were made between gradual extermination and substantial extermination (Kuschel, 1988a:Fig.39). The principle of continuity is perpetuated by oral tradition. Attitudes toward nature are confirmed and reinforced by consulting the ancient tales.

It seems as if Bellonese society in general was fairly conservative. Major deviances from and changes of the accepted values did not occur. On the other hand the Bellonese society accepted a certain degree of individualism, leaving room for private opinions and interpretations of behavioral norms. The Bellonese had great respect and veneration for the knowledge inherited from their forefathers and thus were reluctant to make major changes in their beliefs about the forces of nature. However, not all men did totally surrender themselves to the supernaturals controlling the world. Some of the more powerful men experienced a form of individual freedom to challenge some of these forces if they worked contrary to their own interest. There are several examples where mortal men purposely violated religious or social taboos, cursed the gods, or even abandoned them, i.e. stopped presenting offerings to them. These actions, as dangerous as they might be to human beings, nevertheless clearly show the great emphasis placed by the Bellonese on individual freedom. The Bellonese' power to create, his demand for fairness, and his defense of honor are strong forces working against the so-called principle of immutability.

Raymond Firth formulated this principle in an excellent way. "Every human society," he said, "seems to be at once unified by the centripetal force of the common interests of its members and riven by the centrifugal force of their individual and sectional interests" (Firth, 1970:108).

The question is, however, how much deviation from the basic beliefs a society can and will tolerate. For a man's actions may not only be dangerous to himself but may endanger his whole family, lineage or clan, and sometimes even jeopardize the whole society. No examples have been collected where a transgression of a severe religious taboo has been punished by the islanders. Wisely, they left the castigation to the gods.

X. Conclusion

In the present chapter I have tried to unravel the Bellonese society's attitude toward nature comprehended as the cognitive map which they developed in order to find meaning in their world, and in the light of which they interacted with their surroundings. The explicit hypothesis was that people need to create order and secure coherence in a seemingly chaotic world, i.e. to transform randomness into patterns of assumed stability. In summary we can say that by developing a system of supernaturals, each being responsible for certain events, the Bellonese had created a frame of reference for understanding and coping with the apparent instabilities of nature. Through religion they created a coherence in their universe. Furthermore, by developing a structure in which supernaturals and mortals were enmeshed in mutually dependent economic transactions (supernaturals were dependent upon offerings and rituals in order to keep their status in the heavenly abodes, and human beings were dependent on the gods' and deities' favorable considerations for their survival) the Bellonese had developed a bilateral - though asymmetrical - strategy of interaction with the controllers of life and death.

Where many scientists in the Western world have searched to find the secrets of Nature by way of hypothesizing the existence of so-called 'laws of nature', the Bellonese in their quest for understanding their environment developed a frame of reference, religion, in order to grasp the workings of the universe. As long as their belief was workable, it did not invite major

revisions. Like Western scientists, or even more than these, they realized the existence of instabilities. But instead of regarding them as monstrosities the Bellonese acquired a tolerance toward 'the irregular side of nature', because they did not need to understand everything in detail.

As noted earlier, the understanding of nature was not the same for men and women, old and young. There were few men, the priest-chiefs, who were the carrier of the deeper knowledge of the ultimate meaning of reality. They were the experts and sometimes important mediums, too. Since knowledge "is a key to power as well as to meaning," as Keesing says (1987), "those who command knowledge use it to control as well as to communicate." It is not surprising then, that the priest-chiefs, who also were high-status men, were the most influential in maintaining, explaining and changing the world. Through intuition - or as the Bellonese would say through the divine messages received while in trance - they had the key to suggest changes in behavior and belief.

Though religion was crucial in the explanation of the force of nature, religion was also the ultimate source for understanding the social reality of life. It was through religion women were excluded from major rituals. They were not thought to be suitable to interact with the religious world, because the gods, it was said, would feel nauseated if a woman tried to address them (Kuschel, 1992). Women were thus regarded as inferior to men. They could not own land, and in the practice of avoidance behavior, it was their duty to keep out of a man's, and especially a brother's way. Thus, all religious, economic, and social decisions were reached by men who had more status and power than women. Religion, then, provided the foundation which consigned women to obey men and restrained them from participating in the ritual and political activities. Beside being explanatory of nature, religion regarded as 'cosmically ordained', also legitimated the schism between the sexes, between the powerful and the powerless. Since the structure of the Bellonese world view was created many centuries ago, we do not know who the human entrepreneurs were but their gender, nonetheless, seems incontestable.

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This book brings together chapters written by scholars providing a wide interdisciplinary background (anthropology, archaeology, comparative religion, art history, philosophy, and biology). It offers both descriptive data on the way non-Western people conceive what Westerners call "Nature", and philosophical investigations into the meaning of this concept in Western thought. The book intends not only to demonstrate how very differently humans think about the elusive concept of Nature, it also tries to show where "primitive" thought and Western philosophy meet.

Thomas Bargatzky, born 1946, is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Bayreuth. He has done fieldwork in Samoa (South Pacific).

Rolf Kuschel, born 1939, is Associate Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Copenhagen and has done ethnological fieldwork on Bellona Island (South Pacific) and in Nepal.