The Language of Sites in the Politics of Space

HILDA KUPER
University of California, Los Angeles

Different approaches have been developed to relate the concept of space to other social phenomena. Some of these approaches are critically examined in an effort to find a theoretical framework for interpreting a wide range of events in which sites, specific pieces of space, were of crucial significance. It is argued that there is a condensation of values in special sites, and that transactions that constitute the totality of social life may be spatially mapped with sites expressing relatively durable social structure. The process of social interaction may be expressed empirically through disputes over sites and symbolically in the configuration of sites.

THIS PAPER emerged as the result of examining several events in my field data relating to political change in Swaziland, Southeast Africa. In each event I became aware of the significance attached to particular sites, special pieces of space. I recognized that these events had their parallels in other countries, and at local, national, and international levels.

I begin this paper with an outline of anthropological approaches to the concept of space, approaches that seemed most relevant to an interpretation of sites; I then present very briefly three field events focused on sites; and I conclude with a discussion of what I call the language of sites in the context of the politics of space.

I

Space is one of those complex concepts that has been approached from different angles and at different levels—philosophical, scientific, and social—and it is obvious from dictionary definitions that the word “space” has a whole range of meanings related to these different approaches. Here it is necessary to point out that the concept of space as defined and developed by philosophers and scientists must not be confused with the experience of space, that is, the values attached through facts of social and personal existence, and that epistemologically we must be wary not to equate space as a feature of the physical (tangible) world, with “social space.”

People everywhere face the reality of space and time, but how they cope with them is a cultural variable, evident in language classification, technology, and ideology; and because members of different cultures structure the same physical phenomena through different perspectives and techniques, we cannot assume that they have a concept of space equivalent to our own. It is our task as social scientists to try to analyze these differences as distinct conceptual models of reality; and I suggest that we might perhaps see sites as points of orientation in furthering our understanding of the meaning of space.

As far as I know, Durkheim, together with Mauss, was the first deliberately to bring the concept of “social space” into sociological theory, although the significance of the general concept of space was part of a continuing intellectual discourse and the significance of locality as a principle in the structuring of social relations had been emphasized (Maine 1861; Spencer 1873; Morgan 1877).

Durkheim's writings dealt with social relations at both the empirical and the cognitive level. At the empirical level he described how the pattern of local organization in simple societies was influenced by
nature's seasonal supply of food, but his deeper concern was to develop, through examining native classifications of their universe, a general theory of knowledge (Durkheim 1965 [1915]; Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]). To him, classification was a universal phenomenon of social origin, derived from the collective representations of a society and "even ideas so abstract as those of time and space are, at each point in their history, closely connected with the corresponding social organization" (1963 [1903]:88).

The different levels of Durkheimian analysis were extended and modified, but it is possible to distinguish the two levels, the one most clearly represented in the writings of Radcliffe-Brown, the other explored by Evans-Pritchard. Radcliffe-Brown focused empirical analysis on arbitrarily delineated localities:

Every human society has some sort of territorial structure. We can find clearly-defined local communities, the smallest of which are linked together in a larger society, of which they are segments. This territorial structure provides the framework, not only for political organization, whatever it may be, but for other forms of social organization also, such as the economic. [Radcliffe-Brown in Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940:xiv]

The limitations and essentially static quality inherent in structural-functional models drove several social anthropologists, heralded by Gluckman (1958) to develop "situational" analyses which became elaborated in terms of "networks" and "extended case method" (Barnes 1954; Epstein 1961; Van Velsum 1964, 1967; Colson 1958). A recent attempt to include the concept of "process" in a more flexible approach to social boundaries, i.e., the "spatial aspect of social structure" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:193), led to the formulation of "social field" and "phase developments" (Swartz, Turner, and Tuden 1966). All these studies, irrespective of differences in emphasis, deal essentially with "systems on the ground," and the thrust of the field is on observable conflict as well as cooperation at different political levels.

The cognitive level of Durkheimian structuralism in terms of spatial analysis was developed and refined by Evans-Pritchard whose study of the Nuer (1940) serves both as a classic of formal structural analysis of the interaction of territorial units, and as a model for considering the ideational elements of "social space." He distinguished between physical, ecological and structural space—the physical being the most concrete and the measurable, the ecological being "a relation between communities defined in terms of density and distribution," and with reference to natural resources, and the structural "as the relations between groups of persons in a social system expressed in terms of values" (1940:190-210).

Since the publication of The Nuer, distinctions between spatial arrangements "on the ground," native classification of such arrangements, and the analyst's interpretation thereof, have been formulated with different degrees of precision in much ethnographic presentation (Leach 1954; Lévi-Strauss 1963). Leach in particular illuminated differences in spatial relations in social structure considered as an abstract model of an ideal society and the social structure of any actual empirical society (1954:15).

The relativity of the notion of space was vividly illustrated by Bohannan, who, with his flair for reversing the social mirror, argued that Westerners have a mechanistic "folk notion" of space, correlated with the development of the sextant and other "scientific" surveying equipment, while people who do not have "the same gadgetry" see it in terms of social relations, kinsmen, time, and effort (Bohannan 1963:44-45).

A more universalistic, and at the same time phenomenological, interpretation was pursued by Lévi-Strauss, who suggested that the study of such specific "spatial phenomena" as the distribution of particular camps, the layout of towns, the network of roads, "permits us to grasp the natives' own
conception of their social structure; and, through our examination of the gaps and contradictions, the real structure, which is often very different from the natives' conception, becomes accessible" \(1967 [1963]:328\). Lévi-Strauss recognized that the correlation between "spatial configuration" and "social structure" may in some cases be obvious, in others evident but not clear, and in others "extremely difficult to discover." His controversial analysis of the Bororo was essentially an attempt to demonstrate that "their spatial configurations reflect not the true, unconscious social organization but a model existing consciously in the native mind, though its nature is entirely illusory and even contradictory to reality" \(1967 [1963]:285\). His assumption was that any manifestation of social phenomena—a mode of marriage, the arrangement of a village—constitutes a language in the sense that it can be reduced to a set of abstract rules and expressed in different models.

Despite the very real differences in the approaches ranging from that of Radcliffe-Brown to Lévi-Strauss, there is a fundamental shared intellectual orientation stemming from the Durkheimian stress on society and social relationships. Social space is analyzed as part of the total system which can be expressed at different levels and through different models of organization. Clearly so-called structuralists have examined the concept of space by different methods and at different levels of interpretation. Some have been concerned specifically with symbols and values evident in spatial arrangements, others with the manipulation of social relationships in territorially defined areas over a period of time, and others with model building. All can be included in the rubric of "structuralist" only because of their orientation towards social relationships and ideologies.

A somewhat different orientation to "space" was pioneered in the cultural approach of Malinowski, who considered space and time essential components of the "context of culture." His theoretical problem was how to get from the basic "biological needs" of individuals—needs shared with other animals—to the observable facts of culturally organized behavior. But he also considered territoriality, locality, propinquity, and contiguity as principles of grouping \(1960[1944]:56\) and demonstrated in brilliant ethnographic detail how people interpreted as well as utilized space, whether in gardening, building or trade exchange. Sites, specified by functional activities, were analyzed as part of every institution, and every institution had its diverse aspects—legal, economic, religious, political, social. His imprint is evident not only in the careful documentations of observed interaction made by students trained in the "Malinowski field methods" \(e.g.,\) Richards 1939; Firth 1936; Evans-Pritchard 1937; Schapera 1938; Nadel 1942; Fortes 1945), but in the extensive literature on the symbolic significance of space \(e.g.,\) Griaule and Dieterlen 1954; Cunnison 1959; Gluckman 1963; Middleton 1965; Turner 1969; Beidelman 1971; et al.).

A more extreme cultural behavioral approach to space is evident in recent studies by cultural anthropologists for whom Hediger, pioneer in animal psychology, not Durkheim, nor Heidigger, is a reference figure \(Hall 1959, 1969; Watson 1970\). The leading exponent, Hall, whose perceptive writings underline the importance of nonverbal behavior in interpersonal and cross-cultural communication, has gone so far as to coin a special term "proxemics" for the "interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture" \(1969:103\). Drawing from experimental work among all animals, he emphasizes the programming of messages to different individuals within each animal species \(Hall 1959, ch. 10\) and organizes models of classification of "proxemic behavior" at three levels—the infracultural based in man's phylogenetic past, the precultural based on perception through the senses, the structuring of space as modified by culture \(Hall 1969\). In dealing with cultural modifications, he distinguishes between fixed

The approach of sociologically oriented anthropologists and behaviorally oriented proxemists appears conceptually antithetical. At its most extreme, the former assumes that society is a system sui generis with its own unique symbols and constituent elements (persons and groups) capable of deliberately changing as well as transmitting culture through organized modes of interaction. The cultural behaviorists assume the existence of cultural systems deeply rooted in biology and physiology. Even when the same terms are used they appear to receive different interpretations. Thus when Radcliffe-Brown wrote of territorial structure, he referred to arrangements of definable rights (political, legal, economic, religious) exercised by persons or groups within a local framework and validated by social means (Radcliffe-Brown 1940:xiv; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940:10-11). Cultural proxemists list functions of territoriality and consider that "it is in the nature of animals, including man, to exhibit behavior which we call territoriality. In so doing they use the senses to distinguish between one space or distance and another" (Hall 1969:128).

Important as these differences are, they should not be exaggerated: the various approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive and, instead of being treated as antithetical, may more constructively be considered as complementary and at times overlapping. At the extremes there are two distinctly different levels of approach to "man"—the individual and his behavior; the person and his relationships. But this particular dichotomy has almost disappeared from recent anthropology, and most studies use both levels in different degrees. Nor is it fruitful to emphasize the distinction between culture and society since both meet at the same point—the individual as a person, the person as individual. The contribution of studies of animal behavior was perhaps most explicitly recognized by Malinowski whose "theory of needs" emphasized the biological roots at all levels of cultural activities or institutions (1922, 1935, 1944); the criticism that this "theory" of biological similarities cannot account for cultural differences is equally applicable to the extreme cultural behaviorists.

The stress on symbolic behavior as a generative element is built into schemes of structural relationships as well as of cultural development, although social anthropologists would be more prone to analyze observable social distances in terms of enduring social relationships, general principles of stratification, and social values than by analogies of animal behavior. How can one "prove" Hall’s suggestion that human groups (all of whose members surely belong to the same species) can be classified into "contact and non-contact types" in the way Hediger divided different species of animals? (Hall 1963, 1969). But the vocabulary of perception of space that Hall neatly sums up as the "silent language" is also recognized by social anthropologists as relevant ethnographic data, and it was taken for granted that Firth could begin his short book, Human Types, An Introduction to Social Anthropology, (1956), with contrasts in "codes of manners."3

Different indices of social distance may be devised to measure dimensions of spatial relationships. Evans-Pritchard used the terms "distance" and "space" as though they were identical in meaning; analytically it would be more useful to retain "distance" for the specifics of scale, whether measurable by physical, ecological, or structural criteria and retain the term "social space" for a more general notion, incorporating physical, ecological, and structural distance. The concern for greater methodological rigor is increasing (Mitchell 1967; Watson and Graves 1966); but it is necessary to remember that we should follow the advice that we try to make the important quantifiable rather than the quantifiable important.
Of special relevance at the more qualitative and conceptual level is the work of Mircea Eliade, leading historian of religion, who frequently refers to ethnographic data though his approach is from a level somewhat remote from empirical field situations as commonly understood by anthropologists. In his numerous writings, he has developed a model of cosmic space, combining ideas from French sociologists (more especially Durkheim and Lévi-Bruhl) with Jung's concept of archetypes—archaic symbols which recur unconsciously among all humans. Central to this model is the distinction between two types of society—archaic (sacred) and modern (technological and profane)—existentially represented by two different types of individual, religious and secular. The sacred is emotionally experienced as unity and order; outside is the profane, the world of chaos.

For religious man, nothing can begin, nothing can be done, without a previous orientation and any orientation implies acquiring a fixed point. It is for this reason that religious man has always sought to fix his abode at "the centre of the world." If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space [Eliade 1959:22].

Like Durkheim, Leach, and Lévi-Strauss, Eliade is concerned with models and underlying structures, but according to Eliade every society provides its own model of the cosmos characterized by its own sacred "centre"—the axis mundi, the cosmic pillar connecting earth and heaven (Eliade 1961). The importance of this concept will be evident in the events to be described.

Reference will also be made to the immensely perceptive writings of Kenneth Burke, who in A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives (1962 [1945]) focuses on five ingredients of drama—scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose—interrelated elements of drama corresponding to key questions in anthropology: where and when, what and how, who and why. He argues that the scene/agent ratio is governed by a principle of dramatic consistency to the point that the scene itself can become a force in the motivation of the action. His analysis of drama can, I think, be applied to any event, for when an anthropologist talks of an event he is not in fact presenting the event but an account thereof, and the theoretical and technical problem of anthropology is to construct accounts so as to render them comprehensible and comparable with other events in other times and places.

It is clear that there is a good deal of imprecision and confusion in the anthropological use of the concept of "space," and in the assumptions underlying various models involving spatial arrangements both in group and interpersonal interaction. While none of the anthropological approaches that I mentioned deal specifically with the problem which initiated my interest—the meaning of sites in political events—I suggest that by drawing somewhat eclectically but with discrimination on different approaches including that of Eliade and Burke, an examination of sites might provide an additional perspective to the relationship between space and political events.

II

An event can be interpreted as a series of interactions between people interested and involved in a particular issue. Their interests may be similar or divergent, with divergencies of different degrees ranging from almost compatibility to total and irreconcilable opposition. Considering politics as a struggle for power and its rewards in the field of public affairs, political events are by definition a series of more or less competitive divisive interactions. The three events to be described were selected fairly arbitrarily, and many other events from the same period would have served my purpose equally well; they would all illustrate the way key sites are interpreted, and manipulated in political situations by different sets of people at the same times, and by the same people at different times.
In November, 1966, the last phase of colonial rule, a meeting was called by representatives of the Swazi people on behalf of the Ngwenyama, the hereditary ruler, to inform them of the contents of the new constitution which would recognize the Ngwenyama as King and Head of the independent state of Swaziland, a position which from the Swazi point of view he had retained throughout the colonial period. A representative gathering of roughly one thousand subjects gathered at Lobamba, traditional capital (umphakatsi) of the Swazi nation and residence of the Ndlovukati, mother of the Ngwenyama. The people anticipated that the meeting would be held in the sibaya, a large open-air arena crudely glossed in English as "cattle byre," but which is also the site of important national gatherings and royal rituals. Shortly before the time of the meeting, a message came from the secretariat at Mbabane, the colonial administrative capital some fifteen miles away, to say that the Queen's Commissioner, i.e., the highest local representative of the British government, would attend the meeting. After some indecision, the crowd moved from the village of Lobamba to the "Office" of the Swazi National Council, a Western public-works style building about half a mile away and out of sight of Lobamba village. Since the crowd was so large, most of the people squatted outside facing notables who sat on chairs on the veranda of the office. The Secretary of the Nation then informed the crowd that Her Majesty's Commissioner had come to present the Ngwenyama with a medal from the Red Cross. Having done this with full formality, the Queen's Commissioner left, explaining that he had a "very important" duty ahead—the Annual General Meeting of the Red Cross. As soon as he had driven off, the Ngwenyama announced in sisiSwati to the crowd, "Everyone speaks of matters of importance in the place of his own ancestral spirits (emadlotti). We shall move from the site of foreign spirits (emandzawe) to the sibaya." This was greeted with great applause, and we all went back again to the village and into the sibaya, where everyone sat on the ground according to status. The real meeting took place according to customary procedure, and in an atmosphere palpably distinct from that of the "Office."

The political significance of the movement between sibaya and "Office" can be examined in a sociological, historical, and ideological perspective, with the two sites symbolizing contrasted and opposed values expressed in distinctive architectural plans and styles. In the pre-colonial era, i.e., before Boer or British assumed control, the Swazi developed a complex dual monarchy represented by the Ngwenyama and the Ndlovukati. The network of government radiated from the umphakatsi, the largest and most important royal village. Each Ngwenyama also established his own separate village but his first two queens, associated with him by special ritual, always remained at the umphakatsi with the Ndlovukati. A new umphakatsi was founded in each reign on a selected and sanctified site and to it were brought the most ancient and sacred objects, and into the new structures were built tangible symbols—ropes, poles, woven mats—from the previous umphakatsi. Swazi conceptualize each umphakatsi as a continuation and extension of their past; and old sites are remembered together with their founders, and a new umphakatsi is given the name of a historical landmark.

In the period of autonomous rulers, boundaries were flexible and reflected political loyalties; the measure was people rather than land per se. In the colonial regime boundaries were rigidly defined on the ground, irrespective of the people's loyalties.

In southern Africa where boundaries were delimited by the Boer, British, and Portuguese, Swaziland was delimited, without the consent of the Swazi, as a small country (6704 square miles), and approximately half of the Swazi population found themselves outside its borders. Moreover, in 1907, as a result of the Concessions Partition Proclamation, Swazi inside Swaziland were deprived of two-thirds of their land; and
many of the powers formerly exercised by Swazi were explicitly taken over by the new rulers. But, partly because the Swazi were not defeated in open warfare and partly because of the relatively limited attempts at development or even active interference by the few colonial officials, many of the structures and beliefs of traditional Swazi culture persisted with “kingship” (bukhosi) as the central symbol of Swazi identity. The present Lobamba perpetuates the umphakatsi of Sobhuza I, also known as Somhlolo (The Wonder) great-grandfather of the present Ngwenyama, Sobhuza II. Behind the umphakatsi lies a mental blueprint of the hierarchical scheme of Swazi kingship, a kingship in which the sacred and secular were subtly merged. The whole village is laid out in the form of a crescent moon (umkhumbi), or, as “horns of cattle,” curving round the sibaya. People and things of greatest national value are protected by an outer semicircle of huts occupied by ordinary citizens and by the regiments whose barracks (emalawu) are built at the entrance to the village.

The sibaya is always the first structure, and it must be emphasized that cattle have a deeply religious as well as economic and legal significance in Swazi culture (Kuper 1947, 1963). Separated from the outer huts by a narrow lane is an inner semicircle of huts which include the indlunkhulu, sigodlo, and tindlu talabakhulu. The indlunkhulu (literally, hut great) contains the living, cooking, and store huts of the Ndlovukati and also indlunkhulu proper, the shrine hut dedicated to the spirits of past rulers. The sigodlo (from kugodla to keep, to protect) is the enclosure of wives of Ngwenyama. Tindlu talabakhulu (literally, huts of the great) occupy special sites on either side of the indlunkhulu-sigodlo complex. In the original plan two sites were reserved for tinsila (literally, filth, body sweat—the ritual blood brothers) of the Ngwenyama (Kuper 1947). Other national officials have their status and identity ritually “pegged” into the ground.5 The ignorant outsider may see no difference between the huts of a queen and that of her lowliest attendant, but to a Swazi the symbolism of siting is obvious and meaningful.

Though major and conspicuous changes have taken place in Swaziland in recent years, the umphakatsi remains fundamentally the same since I first lived there in 1934. There are obvious changes including the use of some new building materials, more square houses, two public water points, an electric spotlight, a couple of police guard boxes—and also inevitable changes in the demographic composition, but the underlying structure persists; and as long as Swazi kingship (bukhosi) continues, it can be predicted that there will be an umphakatsi, an axis mundi, sacred center of the Swazi cosmos.

Lihovisi (the “Office”), on the other hand, is a relatively new establishment. It had been built after 1950 by the Public Works Department for the Swazi National Council (SNC) when the British succeeded in introducing three Acts, considered by them necessary for the model of “Indirect Rule”—the Native Authority Act, Native Courts Act, and Native Treasury Act. Swazi saw the SNC office not only as architecturally contrasted but ideologically opposed to the sibaya. It was a brick building with an iron roof, and contained only three small offices and a large hall with entrance and exit onto verandas that ran along the back and the front. One office used by two typists and a clerk led from the veranda into the office of the Swazi official who held the responsible position of Secretary of the nation; the office on the other side of the hall served the two Swazi officials who ran the “Swazi National Treasury” which was less than one-tenth of the total revenue.

To the Swazi, the “Office” symbolized their position as a subordinated nation dominated by foreigners. It did not matter that the building was described by a British civil servant as “functional and adequate!” And it did not occur to him that it was insulting to them when he argued that it was of more durable material than “even the indlunkhulu,” or pointed out that it was
“equipped with typewriters and a telephone.” To my Swazi friends it expressed the “colonial mentality,” and they did not compare it to the buildings of the umphakatsi but to the offices and homes occupied by White civil servants. On several occasions the Secretary and different members of the National Council publicly enumerated obvious facts of racial discrimination (lubandlululo)—ranging from the absence of amenities such as lighting and water supplies to the differential rates of pay of Swazi traditional officials and White civil servants.

Discussing the meaning of the move from umphakatsi to lihovisi and back to the sibaya, informants expressed clearly the general theme that it was an assertion of their Swazi identity. This was summed up in a statement by one of the councillors: “We are Swazi and we meet in the sibaya for affairs of our nation.” Ngwenyama’s reference to emandzawe was understood by all. Emandzawe were the spirits of Sotho killed in a battle with the Swazi; in revenge the spirits “entered” the bodies of Swazi warriors. This epidemic of “possession” killed some and made others temporarily mad. One informant gave an interesting semantic commentary: “When we meet in the sibaya to discuss, we must sit down (hlala pansi). We are close to labaphansi (those who are down below), that is the ancestors (emadloiti). We remember them in the sibaya. In the office we sit on chairs (hlala etitulweni) like Europeans (Belumbi) who do not connect with our ancestors.”

The message of the sites in this particular situation was obvious—sibaya and lihovisi though physically close were culturally incompatible; and in terms of social structure the distance between the group represented by the Queen’s Commissioner and that represented by the “Office” was greater than the distance between residents of Lobamba and residents of the most remote of Swazi villages.

My second example relates to a long drawn-out dispute about a site for a building in which the first parliament, consisting of a House of Assembly and a Senate, could hold sessions. The existing Legislative Council established by Order in Council, December, 1963, had been using the office of the High Court at Mbabane. It was made up of twelve persons elected on a National Roll of whom four were Europeans (Whites), four persons elected on a European Roll, eight persons elected in accordance with Swazi traditional methods, four officials (all Europeans), and one nominated member. It was generally an unpopular imposed constitution, and at the first meeting in September, 1964, Prince Makhosini, leader of the Imbokodvo, the royalist party in power, formally requested that it be changed. This was eventually agreed to, and provisions were made for a new constitution, with a duly elected parliament, and a stage of internal self-government prior to independence.

The history of the dispute is very briefly as follows: the Queen’s Commissioner had appointed a committee chaired by the Government Secretary, a British civil servant, to select a site. Swazi members included Prince Makhosini, who informed the committee that the Swazi wanted the building to be on land which would be allocated by the Ngwenyama in the Lobamba district, but the British officials insisted that it be at Mbabane. The Swazi members went along with this reluctantly until the matter came before the full Legislative Council in its final session (February, 1969). Then, to the “amazement” of the Government Secretary (a British civil servant) several leading Swazi members stood up and refused to accept the decision. Antagonism and criticism were openly voiced, and it was only when Prince Makhosini gave an obviously factual and totally convincing account of the negotiations which completely discredited the presentation by the Government Secretary, and drew support from some European Council members, that the British officials recognized defeat. Soon after Independence (September 6, 1968), Parliament was built on a piece of Swazi nation land, near the
“Office,” allocated by the Ngwenyama in the Lobamba district.

While in the first event the sibaya of the umphakatsi was contrasted with the “Office” built by the British, in the second event Lobamba was contrasted with Mbabane and Swazi nation land with White-owned land. The name Lobamba referred in this situation not only to the umphakatsi but to the surrounding area, which included the lihovisi that was the symbol of colonialism in the first event. The variation in the meaning of the term Lobamba indicates the relativity of group identifications. Depending on the context, Lobamba refers to the sibaya of the umphakatsi, to the umphakatsi as a total village and to the district in which it is situated. The folk model of Swazi identification can be described in Evans-Pritchard’s terms: “A man sees himself as a member of a group only in opposition to other groups, and he sees a member of another group as a member of a social unity however much it may split into opposed segments” (1940:137).

Throughout the debate on the choice of site, Swazi members of the Legislative Council emphasized the emotional and historical significance of Lobamba, and the contrast in conceptualization between it and Mbabane was particularly well put by Councillor Prince Masitsela who said:

If you are in possession of something you treasure most, it is our custom to take it to one’s grandmother and enjoy it there. It is a known fact that if you are going to enjoy something delicious, you always enjoy it at home in the protection of your parents and ancestors. If this were enjoyed elsewhere fights might ensue... All of us Swazi regard Lobamba as the home of our grandparents. Possibly Government regards Mbabane and not Lobamba as our ancestral headquarters [Swaziland Legislative Council, Official Report. February 16-March 7, 1967:43].

Suggestive perhaps of the difference in cultural orientation is the difference in derivation of the Swazi word umphakatsi and the English word “capital.” To translate umphakatsi as “capital” is a distortion culturally analogous to glossing sibaya as “cattle byre.” Umphakatsi is derived from phakatsi, within, the inner, the heart; “capital” of course is derived from the Latin word caput, the head, the seat of intellect. Umphakatsi carries a vital (visceral?) imagery; “capital” conveys the idea of administration and bureaucracy.

My third example of the language of sites focuses on the reactions of different political factions to a rebellious prince returning to the ancestral fold. In Swaziland as elsewhere the nationalist struggle gave rise to political factions, some of which crystallized into political parties. The great majority of the people support the Imbokodvo, created in 1963 as a national movement by the Ngwenyama; the main opposition, drawn largely from workers in urban areas and company towns, support the Ngwane National Liberatory Congress (N.N.L.C.), a party which was critical inter alia of hereditary chieftainship. In 1964 Dumisa, classificatory son of the Ngwenyama, was elected organizing secretary of the N.N.L.C., and became a popular hero by voicing many of the grievances of African workers. He was a leading figure in (peaceful) strikes which ended with the British flying in troops from Kenya. Dumisa was charged by the Swaziland government with committing various offenses, not all directly political, and his case was taken to the High Court at Mbabane. Pending trial he estreated bail and fled the country, visiting contacts in newly independent Africa and elsewhere, including Peking and Moscow. But he returned after a few months, gave himself up, and at the end of serving a relatively short sentence, announced in December 1966 through the Times of Swaziland—the only local newspaper—that he was resigning from the N.N.L.C. to join the Imbokodvo and “serve his King and country.”

This news, which came as a surprise to many, although obviously not to those in positions of highest authority, set in motion a whole chain of meetings, some taking place simultaneously, in discrete places considered appropriate for action by separate interested
groups. Members of the Imbokodvo, wishing to establish his bona fides before accepting him, held meetings at the “Office”; close kinsmen, whose privileges and authority he had indirectly challenged, met in the private enclosure of the Ndlovukati, at Lobamba the umphakatsi; and Congress supporters who considered he had betrayed them held a stormy rally in a public hall in the African township of Msunduza in Mbabane. Dumisa was re-admitted to the Imbokodvo and in a moving ceremony reconciled with the royal kin, but his life was considered to be in danger from some of his erstwhile followers and he was sent out of the country, “for further education.”

The Swazi were not concerned with the legal aspects, which had been dealt with by Western-run courts; had they wished to hold a separate trial, they could have used a different procedure and their own hierarchy of courts. Cases brought on appeal to the capital are tried enkhundleni (locative of inkhundla—a specified area outside the sibaya).

The issues raised by Dumisa’s particular political action were dealt with not in terms associated with the inkhundla or the sibaya, but with the indlunkhulu, the “Office,” and Msunduza Hall. In every homestead, the indlunkhulu is the locus of important kinship decisions; and this applies to the indlunkhulu of the umphakatsi though the private life of members of the royal lineage is of public concern. Dumisa, as every Swazi knew, had the right by birth to go in and out of the indlunkhulu as freely as children sired by the Ngwenyama himself; the umphakatsi was his “home,” the Ndlovukati was his loving gogo (grandmother). It was partly his position in the royal genealogy and partly his political activities that made him a dangerously controversial figure, a source of incipient friction among the princes; it was therefore their right to criticize and question him on his kinship loyalties within the privacy of the indlunkhulu of the umphakatsi and in the presence of the Ngwenyama, the Ndlovukati, and others of the inner circle.

The “Office” drew a somewhat overlapping but much wider audience. The Imbokodvo was nationally recognized as the political arm of the Swazi National Council (S.N.C.); the “Office” was thus the correct place for investigating Dumisa’s application for admission to the Imbokodvo and his previous actions in the N.N.L.C. Here he was questioned not as a “prince” of the royal lineage, but as a politician, and neither the Ngwenyama nor the Ndlovukati were present.

Msunduza Hall, a large multi-functional room, was named after a progressive Resident Commissioner, Ainsworth Dickson, nick-named Msunduza—One-who-pushes-forward; he inaugurated the Progressive Association in 1929 from which the first Swazi political party (the Swaziland Progressive Party) developed in 1959. Many chiefs did not allow public meetings of the N.N.L.C. in their areas and the Msunduza Hall was one of the few places available for any functions, social as well as political. N.N.L.C. leaders had planned a great party to welcome Dumisa on his release from prison; many could not believe he had defected. Among them were those who had made it possible for him to get out of Swaziland and establish contacts with countries whose policies he was publicly rejecting.

In each of the events I have described, individuals played a series of political roles indicated in part by the scenes (sites) in which they appeared. It remains to expound a few general ideas on this approach.

III

A site can be defined as a particular piece of social space, a place socially and ideologically demarcated and separated from other places. As such it becomes a symbol within the total and complex system of communication in the total social universe. Social relations are articulated through particular sites, associated with different messages and ranges of communication. Thus a site can be a cattle byre, a house, a village, a building, a town, a country, and
each conveys and evokes a range of responses. The importance of these sites is not only their manifest and distinctive appearance, but their qualifying and latent meaning. This can be derived only after studying both the social relations and the ideational system of ordering places within the universe of the particular society or group with which one is concerned. Relationships which we label political may replicate, reinforce, or contradict relationships expressed by economic, religious, or other social actions.

In discussing any event, it is necessary to understand why particular actions took place on a particular site or sites and not elsewhere; and although the same site may be used for different purposes (as in the examples where the sibaya was used for national meetings, stalling cattle, or royal rituals, and the courthouse was used for meetings of the Legislative Council as well as legal trials), each site conveys a limited range of messages, and can be used only for culturally related activities. In fact it might not be too farfetched to consider a site as a scene in the sense used by Kenneth Burke who, in his analysis of drama, stated: "From the motivational point of view there is implicit in the quality of a scene, the quality of the action that is to take place within... thus when the curtain rises to disclose a given stage-set, this stage-set contains, simultaneously, implicitly, all that the narrative is to draw out, as a sequence, explicitly" (1962[1945]:6-7).

In describing "political events," sites such as a courtroom, a Red Square, Whitehall, the White House can be interpreted as giving an emotional effect, comparable to the power of rhetoric, to the voice of authority; similarly in describing "rituals," temples, shrines, or graveyards may be seen as generating an appropriate quality of sacredness; or in discussing economics, the marketplace, the stock exchange, a bank, provide the impression of substance. In short, there is a condensation of values in particular sites, and transactions that constitute the totality of social life may be spatially mapped with specific sites expressing relatively durable structured interests and related values. Each site may be perceived in terms of social space—physical, ecological, and structural distance—so that there is a relativity of reference points for the groups involved in interaction. The same site may be differently manipulated according to specific group interests, but the total spatial arrangements form a general network of communication.

The process of political interaction may be expressed empirically through disputes over or manipulations of sites, and symbolically in the language of sites. It does not matter whether the site be a cattle byre, a house of parliament, a public hall, or even rooms in a university! Though the process is similar, the range of people and groups affected may vary from a few individuals to an entire nation.

Social space as Durkheim recognized and Eliade reemphasized is never neutral, never homogeneous. Some sites have more power and significance than others, and these qualities need have no fixed relationship to a physical, empirical dimension. Yet since they are often symbolized in tangible forms, including sites on the ground, political influence may manifest itself in bestowing these qualities through the manipulating of forms. Externally the umphakatsi is a sacred center where the cosmic forces converge with the political, economic, and military dimensions into the concept of Swazi kingship and national identity. Internally the umphakatsi is divided into its own sacred and secular sites, interpreted and manipulated for specific purposes by different, but not necessarily opposing, interest groups.

A "cosmic centre" can incorporate physical structures which appear to be contradictory, but the actual structures are less important than the permanent and enduring mental blueprint, an idealized conscious model which guides their layout. A traditional model can, therefore, incorporate into its timelessness, structures from different times. There is no anachronism in a model. The indlunkhulu, focus of past values,
has been illuminated, since 1968, by a vast electric spotlight. There is no incompatibility between the traditional barracks and police guard-boxes installed on the model of the shelters for the guards outside Buckingham Palace. The barracks represent the old modes of protection. The guard-boxes were introduced in 1964 after a period of mysterious fires during the period of turmoil prior to the “first constitution.”

Sites are verbally as well as spatially identified. Implicit in my description of events is the theme that values are embodied in words through which they influence behavior and, as Evans-Pritchard also argued, variations in the meaning of a particular word are not due to inconsistencies of the language, but to the relativity of group values to which the word refers (1940:135-138). The boundaries of sites may be said to fluctuate with oral articulation, and to overlap to the extent that words themselves shift their meaning.

Verbal imagery shapes and is shaped by empirical conditions and it is not surprising that in another culture the axis mundi, labeled umphakatsi, has its key structures shaped in circles, elemental cosmic forms.

Social interactions which take place within and between the inner circle and the outer world do not necessarily involve Lévi-Strauss’ concept of opposition. Opposition only becomes acute when people holding different sets of imagery and valuing different sites are in a single politically defined territory. When one group is dominant it may express its domination by ignoring, neglecting, and even obliterating the established sites of the subordinated people.

The maximum effect of the politics of space is probably evident in countries where colonial powers assumed control and allocated to White settlers the more fertile and healthy areas. The most blatant and deliberate example of this at the present time is the Republic of South Africa where the master plan of apartheid is supported by racially discriminatory Land Acts and a Group Areas Act which restrict rights of domicile, residence, and work by race and ethnic zones.

Analysis of Swaziland events indicated that full desegregation of a colonial society was perceived by the colonized as more than the removal of discriminatory legislation; it requires the reallocation of social as well as physical space; that is, it is not only a redistribution of land and other resources but the creation of new spatial foci (new sites) of national identity.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this paper to interpret a number of field situations in which the question “where” appeared to be a central issue: where a particular meeting should be held, an official building be erected, an investigation take place. In answering the question where, I had perfomce to examine what was involved and how the issues were dealt with. And behind the where, what, and how, lay the question why—why those special sites? And built into the where, the what, the how, and why, was the question that relates to the essence of anthropology—the who—who were the participants in these events, those social dramas taking place in the shifting scenes of history?

I stated earlier that the events were rather arbitrarily selected but the presentation in terms of content and sequence indicated that there may have been an awareness of basic structural similarities and generalized processual stages that intuitively guided my selection. Each event revealed a wide range of social facts (common things and concepts) expressed in the language of sites. Ultimately the classification was a replication of the complex social classification embodied both in an enduring system and in historical change. It included rank by pedigree (a dominant classification within the traditional system), stratification by race (characteristic of the colonial situation), and opposition between political parties (in the period approaching national independence). The system of classification was not itself spatial but expressed in the language of space.
I deliberately excluded discussion of the complex interaction of space and time but some remarks are appropriate because of the nature of the events which are set in temporal as well as spatial contexts, and the extension of this type of analysis applies also to concepts of time. Thus, at least two levels of time appear parallel to this approach to space—the one could be described as the condensation of events into enduring structures across time and the other as sequential time in terms of historical interaction. The first is evident in the cycle of Swazi capitals and the network of native villages while the second is seen in the shifting, and conflicting, positions of Swazi and Europeans in the development of governmental institutions.

Though I had no preconceived theory into which I wanted to force my facts, and no specific propositions I was seeking to test, I found that a selective use of writings by structural and cultural anthropologists brought an intellectual order into the events, and that by focusing on the sites (Burke’s “scenes”) at which the action took place it was possible to “make sense” of the events in a particular perspective. The concept of “the politics of space” emerged in manipulating the language of sites—pieces of “social space.”

NOTES

1 I wish to thank the National Science Foundation for a grant (1966-68) and the Guggenheim Foundation for a Fellowship (1969-70). The first version of this paper was presented to a graduate seminar at UCLA and subsequently delivered at the Southwestern Anthropology Association, Tucson, 1971. Comments were appreciated more particularly from Thoko Ginindza, David Kuby, William Lakeland, Jan Minnick, Beth Prinz, William Rittenberg, Professors Leo Kuper, Max Gluckman and Sally Moore.

2 Since completing this article, Max Gluckman drew my attention to his discussion of space in The Ideas in Barotse Jurisprudence (1963:129-141). His approach is somewhat similar to my own but his interest is different and he deals specifically with the symbolic significance of space in the legal relationship of man to land as immovable property. My focus is more directly on various meanings of sites in the context of complex and conflicting political interactions, and at a general level I would argue that the past is written into sites not because land is fixed and permanent and distinct from movable property, but because new sites can be established both to replicate and to develop relationships and because a range of concepts—political, economic, and religious, etc.—are carried through and over land in sets of symbols, including sites.

3 While the label “proxemics” is new, the field contents are not; there would be as much, or as little, justification for putting a circle round all the behavior of man in regard to the structuring of space as there would be to make an anthropological package of time—for which one could coin the appropriate term “tempotics”: and provide equivalent opportunity for such cross-cultural measurement as punctuality, diurnal and nocturnal routine, long/short, sundowner/nightlighter!

4 Eliade is a Romanian who, after attending the University of Bucharest, spent three years studying Indian philosophy at the University of Calcutta and the techniques of yoga at the ashram of Rishikesh. During World War II he served as cultural attache in London and Lisbon, and after the war lectured in the department of the History of Religions at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Sorbonne (the same institute as Lévi-Strauss). Since 1956, Eliade has been in the U.S.A. Between the concepts of Eliade (Homo Religioso) and Lévi-Strauss, (Homo sic!) I perceive both “oppositions” and “transformations,” although Lévi-Strauss does not refer to the writings of Eliade, and Eliade refers more frequently to Durkheim and Lévi-Bruhl, and both Eliade and Lévi-Strauss might resent the comparison!

5 In the ritual of building and securing a homestead against harm (kubetsela) a specialist (inyanga) stakes pegs (tikhonkane) of special wood into the site.

REFERENCES CITED

Barnes, J. A.

Beidelman, T. O.
Bohannan, Paul

Burke, Kenneth

Colson, E.
1958 Marriage and the Family among the Plateau Tonga of Northern Rhodesia. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Cunnison, I.
1959 The Luapula Peoples of Northern Rhodesia: Custom and History in Tribal Politics. New York: Humanities Press.

Durkheim, Emile
1965 The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. New York: Macmillan. (First published in 1915.)

Durkheim, Emile, and Marcel Manns
1963 Primitive Classification. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (First published in 1903.)

Eliade, M.

Epstein, A. L.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E.

Firth, R.
1936 We, the Tikopia. London: Allen and Unwin.

Fortes, M.
Fortes, M., and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Eds.

Gluckman, M.
1958 Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand. Rhodes Livingstone Paper No. 28. (Reprinted from Bantu Studies, 1940, and African Studies, 1942.)

Griaule, M., and G. Dieterlen

Hall, E. T.

Kuper, H.

Leach, E.

Levi-Strauss, Claude

Maine, H.

Malinowski, B.

Mitchell, J. C.

Morgan, L. H.
Nadel, S. F.  

Radcliffe-Brown, A. R.  


Richards, A. I.  

Schapera, I.  

Spencer, H.  

Swartz, M. J., V. W. Turner, and A. Tuden, Eds.  

Turner, V. W.  

Van Velsen, J.  


Watson, O. M.  

Watson, O. M., and E. D. Graves  

Wilson, Monica  