9 Expression Is Transaction: Talk, Freedom, and Authority when Egalitarians Embrace the State

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Participants in free speech debates usually see the very definition of their polity as being at stake in their struggles over what can be said. Yet putting language at the centre of political imagination is not unique to societies influenced by Athenian or liberal framings of "free speech" as a central focus of collective legal concern. For example, until the late twentieth century, Korowai people of Indonesian-controlled Papua were not involved with any state and had no tradition of conflict or conviction around "free speech." Even during the revolutionary political changes they have recently undergone through interaction with the Indonesian state, Christianity, international tourism, and global consumer culture, free speech has not become a significant focus of attention for them. Yet their political order *does* turn on freedom, as they distinctively understand it. And they often define their freedom-centred polity via models of speech.

This chapter contributes to this volume's comparative conversation by outlining main patterns in how Korowai understand politics, freedom, speech, and the connections between them. These patterns are interesting not only because of their difference from "free speech" formations discussed in other chapters but also because of their complexity. They are built upon internal tensions and ambiguities.

In the first half of my account, I discuss past Korowai political order by surveying some patterns of language use illustrative of the polity's definition through images of speaking. A more specific idea I develop is that it is useful to identify three characteristic forms of freedom in Korowai people's lives. One is rejection of being told what to do by others in favour of thinking and deciding for oneself. A second is pushy impingement onto others, but often with collective understanding that the targets bear responsibility for answering relational desires expressed through the violation, and with collective understanding that the aggressor is responsible for repair in the wake of the violation. A third form of freedom is self-restraint or self-lowering, which is also surprising and complex, because it sometimes amounts to active or "free" pursuit of desired effects via disavowing free ability to bring effects about.

I sketch past Korowai political order by describing these three modes of freedom, but also by exploring their interrelations. The three contradict each other, yet also interlock. They might even be different facets of a single commitment. In these and other ways, my account of this ethnographic example develops further a home truth of the anthropology of ethics, the anthropology of exchange, and linguistic anthropology: that people's cultural understandings are often centred not on freedom itself but on a relational complex it is part of (e.g., Laidlaw 2014; Wagner 1974; Silverstein 2003a). This complex might be understandings of what a rule, regularity, given, constraint, or limit is; understandings of what it is to act, choose, create, or violate; and understandings of how these are interdependent, or strangely identical.

Interwoven with this account of three modes of Korowai freedom, the chapter's first half also cumulatively sets out the theme signalled by my title phrase "expression is transaction." This is the idea that Korowai think of speech less as a matter of relations between speakers and their words (such as whether they have the right to say certain things) and more as a matter of speech's effects on addressees, and on speaker–addressee relations.

Following that overview of the old polity, this chapter's final sections look at the changes of the last two decades. These changes were caused by shifts in administrative and financial structures of the Indonesian state, as mediated locally by Korowai people's own political values. Looking at these recent shifts provides more nuanced evidence of the shape of those same political values, even as recognizing those earlier values is crucial to understanding how the changes have taken place. Overall, Korowai dramatically expanded the "self-lowering" mode of freedom, and they began newly accepting relations of verbal subordination out of desire to overcome even more painful subordination in matters of material wealth.

The Polity as "Talk"

An illustration of assimilating the polity to speech is the regular Korowai use of two words that normally have the general meaning "language, talk, discourse, voice, sound" (*aup*, *maüon*) to mean more specifically "conflict, uproar, controversy." For example, people commonly describe someone as "having a big talk" or being the "owner of an uproar" to say that that person has harmed others by marriage, adultery, theft, bodily violence, negligence, or just proximity to a loss. One man said about his relative's death from a snakebite, "I held the entire talk" (*aup sendipto nupto atibale*). He meant that he alone had been the target of others' angry grievances, and he had travelled around persuading them to accept their loss without payment. It is common for an "uproar" to become a hiatus in collective time, with everyone in a region of the landscape pausing their other social plans and travel activities to pay attention only to the

dangers and demands of the conflict. Men intending to elope with a sweetheart might spend months building an extra-high house and laying in supplies in anticipation of the "uproar" expected to follow. Speaking the new lingua franca of Indonesian, Korowai translate usages of the two Korowai general words for "talk," when used specifically in the "uproar" sense, by the Indonesian word masalah, meaning literally "problem" or "offense." (I underline Indonesian words, while italicizing Korowai ones, because of the new lingua franca's important indexical associations with processes of change discussed later.)

Using general words for "talk" this way, Korowai describe political conflict *as* the speech of many people expressing grievances about an event. Often here "talk" is modified by "big, huge" (*xongel*, *baul*, *-tale*), further stressing that what makes something an "uproar" is the *amount* of talking. Discussing specific conflicts, people often speak as if that "uproar" is a character of its own, abstracted from actual people who talk.

Another political quality asserted by this idiom relates to how in speaking of a "controversy" or "big talk," people usually imply that the offender is answerable. This is surprising in light of a more basic characteristic of the same polity, namely, that Korowai reject authority relations, asserting instead that people have "their own thoughts" and act on that basis. Korowai do have a concept of relations of political authority, and the common way it is expressed is by the image of one person "hearing" (*dai-*) or "fulfilling" (*kümoxo-*) another person's "talk," complementary to that other person "giving talk" (*aup fedo-*) or "ordering" (*lanumoxo-*). The image of one person telling others what to do, and being obeyed, is for Korowai a political primal scene, which again illustrates the central place given to speech in the imagining of political life. A stereotype about what would happen to someone who told others what to do was that "they would have been shot." In fact, though, the more common response to pushiness was just to move away. Perhaps the most basic practical form by which Korowai enacted rejection of authority was the everyday practice of living far apart in small, lone households or household pairs, a kilometer or more from any neighbours. People explained this dispersion as helping them avoid others' intrusive requests. Korowai also had no named leadership roles. A further verbal routine in which Korowai express rejection of authority is their common pattern of disavowing knowledge of others' intentions, again in favour of recognizing that everyone has "their own thoughts" and decides things for themselves (Stasch 2008a).

A good indication of how mentally aware Korowai are of the *possibility* of authority relations is their recent pattern of identifying roles of boss and subordinate as the signature social form of "city people," meaning all Indonesians, international tourists, or other natives of capitalist consumption. In stereotype-laden talk about urban space, Korowai regularly describe its social order as consisting wholly of relations between "heads" and the subordinates who "fulfill their

talk." Here, the Korowai word *xabian*, "head," is newly used to mean "boss" or "leader," in mimicry of Indonesian-language patterns, where previously it was used only to refer to anatomical heads or head-like objects. Korowai fascination with "boss" relations, as a point of knowledge about the alien world of cities, again reflects their heritage of vigilant rejection of authority structures.

I propose that rejection of subordination is a first prototypic image and idea of freedom as Korowai understand it. Hundreds of societies worldwide have historically been organized around rejecting authority relations, as summed up in the models of "anti-state" or "anarchist" societies promoted by Clastres (1977), Graeber (2004), and J.C. Scott (2009), and frequently discussed by ethnographers in terms of "egalitarianism" or a value of "autonomy." I use these last two terms myself in Stasch (2009) and my other earlier descriptions of Korowai political life, but in this chapter I use "freedom" to cover some of the same space. In tension with individualist ideas of freedom in liberal states, an interpretively challenging pattern in ethnographic work on polities of this kind is that their members tend to interweave preoccupation with freedom and social connection very closely.

The scenarios of "uproar" I outlined above are a case in point. In those cycles of rupture and repair, aggrieved people speak frankly and insistently; political conflict is a matter of edgy confrontation between persons with incompatible opinions; and breakdowns result from someone's willful act that others did not want or expect. Yet, even while living far apart, expressing their own wills, and not investing anyone with centralized control, the people embroiled in conflict did often understand themselves to be linked in a coordinated story, such that separate persons felt teleologically compelled to answer to others' calls for repair.

Additionally, episodes of "uproar" themselves present a complication for my claim just now that Korowai prototypically locate freedom in rejecting subjection to other people. An "uproar" is often the result of one person unilaterally subjecting others to his/her will. The fact that this is a well-recognized genre of social process means also that Korowai *do* see persons subjecting others to their will as being a regularity of life. I turn now to describing the general salience of acts of impingement and violation as a second prototypic model of freedom for Korowai, or as a further face of the first one. I highlight how this mode of freedom is often understood to be ambiguously relation-making and relation-asserting, alongside being harmful.

Anger and Asking: Free Speech as Violation

One prominent site of this salience in the old Korowai polity was widespread interpretation of social affairs in terms of "anger" (*xen*). This word is used not only for emotion expressed in speech and facial expressions but also for acts of bodily violence and any aggressive violation of others' desires. To characterize

a person as "angry" usually means that he/she has angry verbal outbursts, *and* hits or shoots people, *and* is pushy in transactions. In relation to objects or animals, "angry" can also mean "sharp," "poisonous," or "dangerous." Speakers often hyperbolically describe individuals, whole social networks, or the entire populace as "unbelievably angry" (*xen bamondinda*). They also explain many specific acts of others or themselves by their "anger" (compare Rosaldo 1980; Schieffelin 1990, 112–35; J. Robbins 2004, 182–214).

Here is one man's 2017 reflection on his history of being socialized into "anger" across his upbringing, an account that is striking for the distance he registers between self and self:

> I had no anger when I was small. But my thoughts said, "Be like your father." Later my relatives told me not to. But it was as though my thoughts themselves kept ordering me, it was as if saying, "Okay you get angry!" … Men don't have anger and strength when they are small. But their fathers show them anger and they become so. People without an angry father don't become angry.

While anger aligns with masculinity, women also enact this quality, even to the extreme of beating or killing someone. Chatting with a woman on her front porch, I watched her casually manage a conflict with her three-year-old son at the same time:

> She smacks him on the back for something. He cries intensely and tries many different ways of smacking her or threatening to. She parries. He becomes intensely plaintive, injured, and distraught at the maternal aggression, but then eventually transitions to laughter in the face of her parrying.

This is a common kind of interactional sequence, and in this case even the young toddler holds a reflexive model of bodily violence's orderliness and relation-making potential.

Many other acts align with "anger" in realizing, in less acutely harmful ways, an idea of freedom as an aggressive impingement into others' lives. Use of second-person imperative verb forms often have this feeling. Another example is "asking" for objects (*nexmo-*), often performed by the bare assertion "Hey, me!" (*nup-e*) or the imperative "Give to me!" (*nu fedom*). Such requests are often expressed in the presence of the desired object and are politically similar to "demand sharing" in the typification of Peterson (1993). Another ubiquitous verbal enactment of freedom is the formula *nayul*, "I don't want to," expressing Bartleby-style refusal in the face of somebody else's offer of food, suggested joint action, request for a gift, or other overture.

In sum, when deciding for oneself is so valued, to act socially is to violate. Everyday requests and exhortations break keenly felt rules of restraint towards

others' property, or towards their space to make up their own minds, while refusals violate the felt desirability of being in concert. This theatricalization of freedom as harm and violation makes "freedom" a funny word for describing Korowai actions. But the theatricalization is refreshing to contrast with liberal models emphasizing the possibility of peaceable exercise of freedom, in which one's freedom only needs to be limited at outer extremes where it causes serious harm to others. By contrast, Korowai emphasize the destabilizing violence of very basic free acts.

Taboo and Avoidance: Good Speech as Unfree

Another area of linguistic reflexivity where there is strong association of free speaking with violation is practices of formal avoidance and taboo. Whatever Korowai are talking about in a given conversation, they are also generally being careful to avoid names of their in-laws, "secret names" of other persons or objects within earshot, and names of occult beings (Stasch 2003, 2008b, 2011b). Since many personal names or "secret names" are common nouns or other high-frequency words, conversations are often peppered with circumlocutions, allowing speakers to say what they need to about some topic without using the most routine terms for it. These circumlocutions index speakers' vigilance about avoidance for the sake of some other person or entity also happening to be present. In reflexive discussions of "avoiding" (*lexap-*), the word people use as its opposite is *ndambelüm*, or "indiscriminate, careless." To avoid is to enact a stance of prudence and carefulness towards one's own actions in relation to others.

One comparative point highlighted by the topic of "taboo" is that free speech ideas vary not only in ideas of freedom, speech, and the human polity but also in ideas of how speech connects to other levels of life. One past Korowai speech taboo was a general prohibition of any discussion of divinities, the world's creation, or its hidden foundations. About one type of these divinities, it was broadly thought that they were "angry" and "ashamed," and they could make Korowai sick if offended. Another common sentiment was that the world was likely to flip, flood, or burn following any anomalous event. Other religious practices, including towards the same divinities, were more optimistic and transactionally constructive. But in general, the question of whether people would even be free *to keep living* is often present in Korowai people's minds, and in the near background of questions of freedom in speaking. This tendency to see rules of daily action as life-and-death in consequences partly matches Sahlins's (2017) observation that people who sharply reject relations of authority among humans often nonetheless have experience of domination in their relations with divinities.

Korowai expect taboo or avoidance violations to cause automatic existential damage to the speaker, the named object or person, or the world. This is

different from the interpersonal confrontations or embarrassment that might result from "anger" or "asking." Yet there is consistency across these. People's sensitivity to freely deciding for themselves, and their steady experiences of those decisions violating others' freedom in turn and provoking flare-ups, have likely supported their wider understanding of linguistic representation more generally as an edgy violation, best inscribed within gestures of indirectness and renunciation. Conversely, their ideas about the automatic effects of taboo violations are likely supported by the volatile effects of speech in interpersonal affairs. When speakers do "ask," they often refer to requested objects euphemistically as "a little something" or by another vague circumlocution, or alternatively by a more precise expression that names something much less valuable than what is actually being requested. Above, I outlined some patterns of Korowai expecting or even celebrating brashness as a moral quality of speaking. But a correlative of their sensitivity to speaking as violation, and of their attunement to the ever-present possibility of an outbreak of confrontational demands, is that speakers routinely strike stances of politeness and humility towards their addressees, even when making a brash request.

"Giving Up" as Another Freedom: From Violation to Unity

Korowai expectations of the regular occurrence of "uproar" and "anger" associate speech with violation, while their expectations of "avoiding," "taboo," and euphemistic indirection associate speech with restraint. These two clusters together suggest an understanding of speech and related actions as walking a single edge of the simultaneous potential of violation and restraint. Having already suggested that the violation side of this duality is an important form of "freedom" as Korowai live it, I now suggest that the restraint side is *also* a main form of "freedom" for them.

A good place to see this is the common act of "giving up" or "letting go" (*yaxtimo-*). Korowai perform this through the verb itself, such as by saying *yaxtimale*, "I give up, I let go, I release," but also through one-morpheme sentences such as *lefap*, "done, that's enough," or *yepelap*, "it's fine, nevermind, whatever." Often the resolution of an "uproar" is that the protagonist "gives up" their grievance. Sometimes they do so as a result of being paid, but other times they do it in a spirit of resignation and moving on. One woman explained that the practice of a man giving bridewealth to his wife's relatives is "for the purpose of saying 'it's done'" (*lefap dungalxe*). She meant that, thanks to the payments, the wife's relatives give up their anger about the husband taking her from their lives.

Since "giving up" is a reversal of one's own desires and resolve, when someone performs it out of resignation rather than following a payment, it has the air of something people are *compelled* into. Yet it is also a kind of act that is

performed and narrated by Korowai with such regularity, and sometimes with a clear sense of valued moral or social effect, that it should be recognized as a performance of a kind of mixed, contradictory volition of what might be termed "freedom in unfreedom," or "freedom under constraint." To "give up" is to free an object, person, emotion, or situation from oneself; set oneself free from it; and set a relation free from the impasse it has reached. This is a reset to a different state through sacrificial lowering rather than aggressive impingement.

A telling reflection of how much Korowai engage life in these terms is that "giving up" is prominent in historical consciousness of the recent massive socio-political changes I describe in more detail later in this chapter. For example, Christian conversions or aggregations in villages are described as events of "giving up" anger. What foreigners call "pacification," Korowai describe as "giving up" the killing of witches or other evildoers. Those revolutions have been shaped by transactional sensibilities of small-scale kinship, in which "letting go" is a routine interpersonal move. These patterns are consistent with sensibilities documented by other researchers working in the New Guinea region.

Wardlow (2006) has written of the "negative agency" of Huli women of Papua New Guinea who withdraw themselves from valued norms in protest at others' failings in the terms of those same norms. Knauft (2002) developed a related idea of "recessive agency" to grasp stances of passivity or subordination taken by Gebusi people (also of Papua New Guinea), with the expectation that this would elicit a good transactional outcome from others. In the case of Korowai sensibilities, another prominent feature of their egalitarianism has been that people were fearful or ashamed to stand out as special. Conversely, they expected that highlighting one's lack of possessions, or other acts of lowering, would make others feel moved by love or pity (*finop*) to lift the humbled person up with reassuring praise or with a gift. In connection with name avoidance, we have already glimpsed that performing restraint was a way persons knew their relation to be good. In some areas, Korowai paradoxically considered that acts of self-limitation could be a way to create the life one wanted.

Two points can be appreciated from the juxtaposition of "giving up" with "anger" or "asking." First, these contrasting freedoms do not stand just as unconnected alternatives. It is true that certain Korowai are known for being pushy, and others for being accommodating. The same person might act these different ways in different contexts. But the different qualities also interlock. It is common for one person to "ask" or angrily impose his/her will, in response to which another "gives up, releases." Also common is for a person to "ask" or angrily threaten, then "give up" when others reject the request. Some acts of "asking" are simultaneously an aggressive intrusion and a humbling display of one's own poverty. Rules of verbal taboo are dual in similar ways. Taboo observance is an exercise of the qualified freedom to not act freely in hope of

receiving good outcomes from powers bigger than humans know. Additionally, these taboos enable aggressive enactment of freedom through violation: alongside the careful restraint I emphasized above, Korowai everyday speech practices are also peppered with opposite acts of swearing blasphemously, shouting "hidden names" to damage someone or something in earshot, or purposefully uttering in-laws' names behind their backs to put them down.

A second conceptual point underlined by juxtaposition of "giving up" with aggressive modes of freedom is that, across both poles, Korowai understandings of freedom are not centred on individual persons, but rather this value commitment is part of a larger context, including coexisting other values, such as a commitment to relationships. It has been common for ethnographers to formulate dualities like "autonomy" and "relations" to make sense of political communities similar to Korowai (e.g., Read 1959; Munn 1986; Myers 1986; McDowell 1990; Kulick 1992; J. Robbins 2004). Building on that work, in my own writings I have argued that Korowai focalize qualities like autonomy, separation, avoidance, and otherness as the substance of relations, rather than as external to them (Stasch 2009). Consistent with this, we have been seeing here that both "angry" and self-lowering modes of freedom are highly relation-embedded. In fact, thinking of freedom as a social process rather than a condition of individuals is probably an important step towards being unsurprised by Korowai patterns of working with multiple models of "free" action, including some models in which freedom mingles with qualities of constraint or surrender.

An illustration of valuing relations is how often Korowai feel unable to refuse another's request for an object, or how frequently they feel spontaneously compelled to give to someone who has not even asked, despite the desirability of keeping the object for oneself. Here too I will give an example from new economic interactions. An important first mode of engagement with the cash economy for many Korowai has been hosting international tour groups (Stasch 2016). When a tour group stays for several days with a local kin network, often a specific Korowai man takes a central role in performing and mediating the tourism labour. When the visitors depart, this man usually receives an overall cash payment from the group's tour guide, sometimes hundreds or thousands of dollars in value. Often he will *entirely* divide the money out, including to persons who did no work. The man ends up empty-handed himself, despite having worked more than others (see figure 9.1). Similar patterns unfold in the dividing out of butchered game or garden produce. People often explain their compulsion to share by fear of being seen as stingy. But sharers also describe the desire to give as positively motivated by feelings such as "love" (*finop*). Self-lowering is transactionally effective in the first place because others feel moved to respond with giving and equalization. Even when Korowai act assertively to get something, they regularly say it is because they want to "be like

Figure 9.1. Bailum Lemaxa distributing to kin the cash proceeds of an Austrian tour group visit, then showing his own empty hands, August 2017. Credit: Rupert Stasch.

my relatives": the ground of free actions is often a relation-centred desire for what others are enjoying. So, too, as glimpsed in the toddler's transition from blows to laughter, or in the shared feeling that an "uproar" needs resolution, aggression can be understood as relation-making and relation-integral, rather than being outside of relations and fracturing them.

The links between seemingly contrastive modes of freedom like angry violation versus solicitous self-lowering, and between freedom and relations, not only complicate what freedom is but also complicate "power." To see this, I return now to freedom and power *in speech* by looking at ambivalences in Korowai imagery of "telling" and "listening," parallel to the ambivalences about asking and giving just outlined.

"Hear" as "Heed": Rejecting Authority but Valuing Unity

We saw earlier that a prototypic image of political control is one person telling a second person what to do; the second person then "heeds" or literally "hears" (*dai-*) that talk. My emphasis there was on Korowai rejection of this scenario of verbal command as a characteristic expression of their generally egalitarian, freedom-privileging political ethos. However, it is also common for Korowai to view positively the image of someone "hearing the talk" or "fulfilling the talk" of another (*aup dai-*, *aup kümoxo-*). I have already noted that a *concept*

of subordination is implied by the existence of these expressions, as well as speaker-centred ones like *lanumoxo-*, "command," and *aup fedo-*, "tell, advise" (lit. "give talk"). But it is also a recognized and common kind of actual interaction for someone to give another advice, even though doing so is edgy. The fact that the general perceptual verb "hear" (*dai-*) carries a more focused political sense of "listen to, heed, obey" seems to imply a certain prototypic identification of the hearer role with meeting a speaker's desires (and this pattern is common cross-linguistically). Korowai do often express admiration for relations in which one spouse "listens to" another, a son-in-law "listens to" his mother-in-law, a child "listens to" its parent, and the like. The man who narrated to me his own socialization into the regular performance of rage did so after telling me about a time in his childhood when he was almost struck by an arrow his father had shot at his mother for "crossing his talk" (*aup laxabemo-*) rather than obeying. So there is actually a model of marriage as patriarchal subordination of wives to their husbands' orders, coexisting with other models such as spouses determining their own actions, or partners heeding each other mutually.

The expressions "hear talk" or "fulfill talk" are also used to rationalize adherence to a whole order of life. Persons describe themselves as "fulfilling the talk of my parents" to explain why they live on a clan-owned forest territory, build houses, exploit the land as they do, or follow certain kinship practices. They also previously explained collective conventions by saying they are "fulfilling the talk" of a world-creating demiurge, and today Christian faith is expressed as "hearing God's talk" or "hearing the Gospel" (lit. "listening to world talk, listening to cosmology"). These patterns align with the Foucault-influenced academic idea that an entire institutional and material order is a "discourse," as well as with the centrality of "Word" to Christian thinking about human relations with the divine. But the Korowai understandings are importantly centred on the position of hearers, and on their stance of *listening*.

Persons who describe themselves as obediently "hearing" or "fulfilling" other people's talk in these different areas often do so with an affirmative stance of pleasure or rightness. I see this affirmative embrace of "heeding" as a variation on the patterns of self-lowering discussed in the prior section. Writing about Yopno people of Papua New Guinea, Slotta (2023) has coined the phrase "anarchic listening" to describe a cultural climate of people in an egalitarian polity placing intense social and epistemological weight on hearing as an activity. Yopno understand attentive listening to be crucial to acquisition of important knowledge, but necessarily mediated by responsibility for filtering and weighing what is heard, and deciding for oneself what to do (see also Slotta 2014). For Korowai in many contexts, freedom and subordination do seem to flow together harmoniously in the form of persons willingly obeying someone in order to attain a larger condition of equality, joint flourishing, and valued

social coordination. My interlocutors have sometimes explained "fulfilling" another's talk as something they do "from their own thoughts." The emphasis on the hearer's choice in aligning with another's speech is one solution to the puzzle of Korowai stridently rejecting the idea of being ordered about, but also celebrating relations in which one person fulfils the talk of another.

Yet there are also actual contradictions between the Korowai premium on freedom and situations where people perform and experience domination. Relatedly, "listening" or self-lowering are internally contradictory and ambivalent modes of freedom, as I have emphasized. These patterns parallel the ambivalence about speaker-centred freedom of anger or aggressive impingement that we saw in my initial account of feuding as a "big talk": free speaking harms or disrupts as well as creates, equalizes as well as subordinates. The broader tendency across these understandings of speech and freedom is that what people pay attention to as speech's truth is its transactional implications. What qualities of benefit, harm, reciprocity, and repair are flowing between the participants through what they say?

State Intrusion and Radical Political Change

Over the last few decades, Korowai political order has been fundamentally altered through engagement with the Indonesian state and other new intruding forces and people. The pace of change accelerated in the 2010s. For the next few pages, I set aside main topics of earlier sections of this chapter to describe the broad shape of these changes, and of the wider regional political processes to which Korowai are newly connected. Then I return to the earlier themes to consider how links between speech and politics in Korowai understanding have importantly played into the course of radical change.

Due to difficult terrain and lack of economic incentives, outsiders only began intruding into Korowai space in the 1980s, and at first only in the southwest portion of their overall five-hundred square mile territory. Northern and eastern Korowai began engaging with these new people and institutions still more recently, in the last twenty years. Different Korowai initially felt intense millennial fear and repulsion towards the new outsiders, and today they describe this involvement as having amounted to an epochal break in collective time. The new interactions could be periodized by types of strangers who were most important: the 1980s were a time of Dutch missionaries and Papuan church co-workers; the 1990s and 2000s were a time of international tourists; and the 2010s were a time of Indonesian government officials.

The biggest practical way Korowai engaged with all the new institutional forces was making "villages" (see figure 9.2). They associated this exotic type of space with imported consumer goods, living peaceably rather than jumping quickly to anger, and learning Indonesian. It was Korowai themselves who

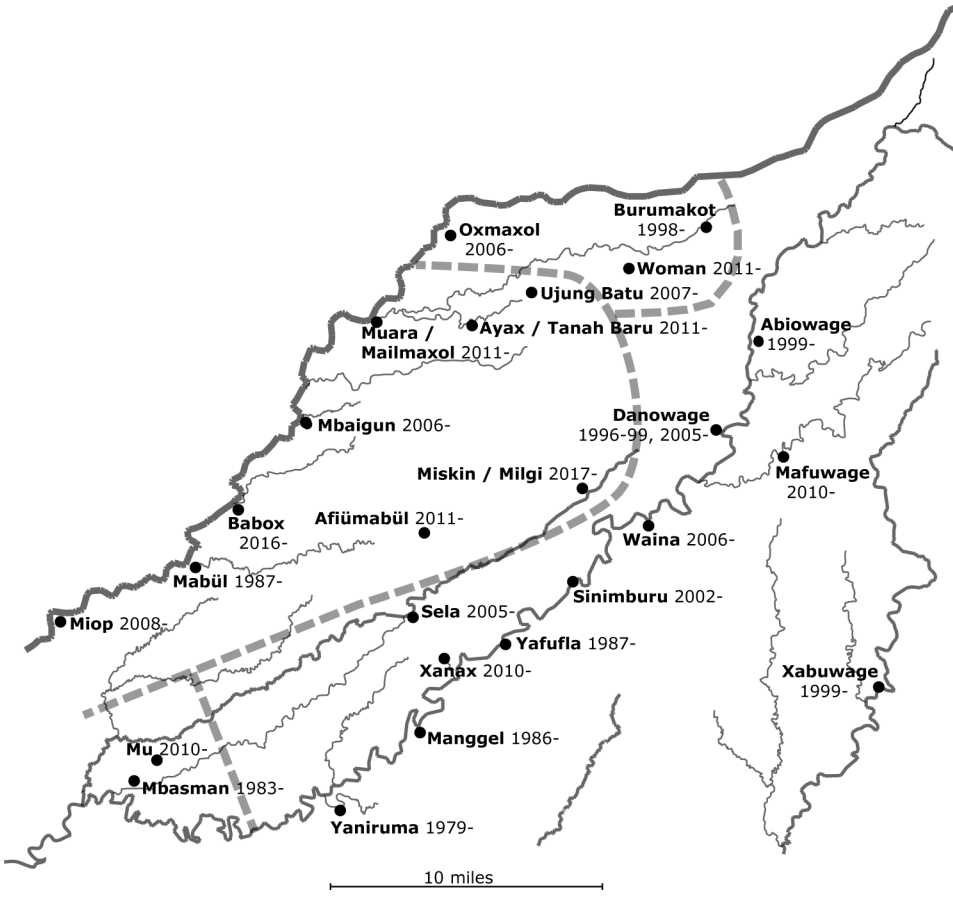

Figure 9.2. Selected Korowai villages, c. 2017. Dashed lines indicate differences in direction the villagers travel to reach their Regency seat. Credit: Rupert Stasch.

took the initiative in forming the new centralized settlements at different times across their overall region. State agents like police, civil servants, teachers, and health nurses rarely visited. In the 1990s, foreign missionaries were absent, and tourists were interested in traditional living conditions rather than villages. Yet while Korowai were the main agents of village formation, they held those villages at arm's length, in keeping with hostility to relations of subordination. We have seen that in their old order, Korowai lived out freedom through geography: they voted with their feet, residing far apart and changing who

they lived with if they felt pushed around. Already in the 1980s, southwestern Korowai saw creating physical villages as entailing a later goal of government recognition of them as *administrative* units, involving installation of a "village head" and other officeholders. But in early years, Korowai often found ways to participate in villages while still spurning authority structures. For example, most people oscillated residentially between villages and the old type of space they call "forest," where small kin groups lived far apart on separately owned clan lands. Into the 2000s, villages were often empty, residents preferring to stay in their "forest" houses. But in recent times Korowai have taken up village living much more energetically. There are now about forty centralized villages found across every part of the region. By the time of my last visit in 2017, 90 per cent of Korowai were living in villages and visited forest territories mostly just on day trips. In tandem with this shift, Korowai also swung from shunning authority relations to embracing them, as I describe below. But first I need to consider the dramatic wider change of Indonesian state structures that has fed into this local shift.

Papua is best known internationally for its indigenous people suffering bodily domination by the Indonesian army and police and economic domination by civilian Indonesian migrants. Korowai people's location far from towns, and outside the reach of state institutions, meant that they had limited experience of these dynamics through the 1990s. However, conditions across rural Papua have been complicated over the last fifteen years, in ways not as well known to global academics and activists, by large policy structures known as "decentralization" and "special autonomy." Decentralization has been implemented across Indonesia, and its most visible form is the prolific subdivision of state administrative units at nested subnational levels of Province, Regency, District, and Village. When I began fieldwork in 1995, Papua's southern plain was one vast Regency, and its capital was located two hundred miles south of the Korowai area. After redistricting, Korowai are now divided between four Regencies, and each Korowai village orients to an elected "Regent" in one of four different administrative centres (see figures 9.2 and 9.3). These centres are all geographically distant, but much closer than the former one of Merauke.[1]

The policy of special autonomy has been implemented in relation just to Papua, with the purpose of dampening and disorganizing separatism. The

1 In 2022, Indonesia implemented in Papua a further major redistricting process at the next-highest territorial level of state administration, splitting a single existing "Province" into four. The four southernmost Regencies shown in figure 9.3 now together make up a complete province of their own, South Papua, whereas previously they were grouped together with twenty-four further Regencies, and their provincial capital was far to the north in Jayapura. This subdivision likewise brings the "Governor" level of electoral politics and funding streams much closer to Korowai than it previously was.

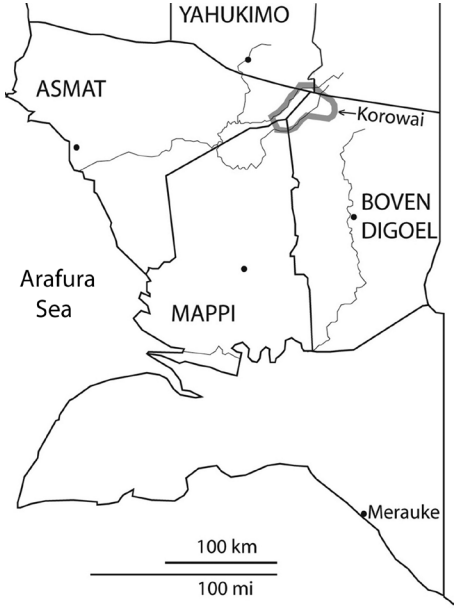

Figure 9.3. Korowai lands divided since 2002 across four Regencies, with Regency seats as dots. Credit: Rupert Stasch.

policy's main practical effect has been increased budget flows to government offices in Papua, and increased access of Papuans to civil servant jobs and elected high offices. Papuans widely say that special autonomy has failed in its supposed goal of improving their lives, such as through provision of health care, education, or entrepreneurial chances. Yet the paid jobs linked to new government administrative units, and the money controlled by those units' heads, have led local populations and their new elites to campaign for establishing their own new Villages, Districts, Regencies, or Provinces (Suryawan 2020; cf. Vel 2007; Eilenberg 2016).

Changes of electoral process additionally meant rural Papuans were newly invited into patronage relations of giving a Regent their votes in return for cash, consumables, and infrastructure, which he controls through the large sums now flowing through his administrative level. Another decentralization program was direct disbursement to villages of annual cash grants equivalent to many thousands of dollars, supporting small infrastructure and stimulus projects on the international model of "community-driven development." Papua is Indonesia's poorest region. The new financial flows implemented under decentralization and special autonomy have meant that many people on Papua's rural super-periphery have gone from cashless deprivation to sometimes having money for major purchases.

The recent Korowai swing almost wholly towards "village" living poses a puzzle of "anarchists for the state." Why would people who programmatically rejected authority relations now embrace them? From the preceding sketch of new Indonesian policies, an obvious answer is that money and consumer goods became suddenly available through state participation. This answer is true but incomplete. In the final sections, I describe how Korowai have actively sought relations of subordination to faraway government heads and adopted divides of ruler and ruled among themselves for the purpose of getting material resources. Importantly, the strength of their desires for new material resources and their ways of trying to get them were shaped by cultural sensibilities of their past polity.[2]

Self-Lowering towards Regents

While government structures have been changing, the new surge of local state formation has still been led by Korowai, who work very actively to make themselves visible on the state's terms. Faraway administrators still know little about actual conditions in the Korowai area. When they make a direct visit, they only come briefly to one of the four most connected villages. It is Korowai who have actively sought administrators' attention, such as by physically opening a village in the first place, compiling lists of residents to present to administrators, and lobbying intermediaries for help getting resources to support the further village-making process.

What most drives this movement towards the state is Korowai persons' profound sense of inferiority to "city people." I saw this self-deprecatory consciousness rise in the 2000s. During early involvement with missionaries, tourists, and Papuan church workers, specific Korowai persons often rejected foreign technologies and institutions, affirming the superiority of their own norms. In the mid-1990s when I first lived in the area as a PhD researcher, I rarely heard anyone voice collective self-deprecation. But across return visits in 2001 and after, I saw the rise of a widespread desire among Korowai that their land become a place of unlimited access to ready-made consumer goods on the model of the life they understand as being enjoyed by faraway "city people." It is difficult to exaggerate the intensity of most Korowai persons' feelings of deprivation and desire along these lines, echoing colonial and post-colonial experiences widely seen across Melanesia (e.g., Robbins and Wardlow 2005). Korowai have elaborated their imagery of city life based on what they have directly seen of city people's travel gear, houses, office jobs, or stockpiles of

2 This discussion parallels the differently-framed and more detailed accounts given in Stasch (2021, 2023).

consumer goods. Stereotypes about that easy life are also based on Korowai experience of consuming some types of new imported goods themselves, when they have access to them. But the feelings of yearning and inferiority are also shaped by prior sensibilities. One of these sensibilities was concern with material objects as media of aesthetic, personal, and relational value. (Notably, payment was very important in past Korowai social life. Current fascination with money builds partly on earlier foundations.) A related sensibility was intense attention to equality between kin. Korowai frequently explain desire for consumer goods as being driven by desire to "be like" tourists, city people, neighbouring ethnic groups, or their own relatives, whom they have seen enjoying those articles.

Korowai have transposed the political sensibilities of their past kinship life into the new macrostructure of their relations with global capitalism. Their expressions of the inferiority of their own lives are grounded in material experience, but also in the egalitarian moral psychology outlined above. This is most sharply illustrated by Korowai interest in client relations with "Regents" (Bupati), which amounts to applying the model of "asking" or "demand sharing" to the state.

In the 2010s, Regents were constantly discussed even by persons who had never seen one directly. Like the iconic figure of "tourists" (*tulis*), the Regent personifies urban consumer prosperity. For Korowai who have visited a Regency seat (Kabupaten), the commerce and infrastructure there represent what they hope their own villages will become. Local talk about the Regent commonly centres on his expected visit. During my 2011 and 2017 fieldwork, I was struck by how many kin networks across different parts of the landscape were preparing for Regent encounters. In 2011, no Regent had ever been to a local village, whereas by 2017 some had made flying visits to the most connected Korowai villages in their jurisdictions. But *rumours* of an imminent visit were a staple of life. Forest-dwelling Korowai travelled to villages based on such rumours, while villagers started new work of clearing vegetation and digging trenches along the visitors' expected promenade.

It is here that I can return to the themes of earlier sections of this chapter by outlining the centrality of *speech* to relations between Korowai and Regents, and particularly the transactional emphasis that Korowai place on speech, involving on their side prominent motifs of self-lowering. The standard script for a Regent's visit is that Korowai receive him with a martial dance procession in traditional dress, which has strongly sonic dimensions in the form of musical chanting of the non-semantic syllables *wo-wai*, punctuated by phases of low ululation and clattering of bundled arrows against bows. This is followed by these local residents listening in assembly to the Regent spell out his material promises to them, often in response to requests listed aloud to him by local spokesmen. The Regent's assistants usually make on-the-spot

cash distributions to offset travel and food costs for the rural persons who have gathered. The encounter's emphasis on the Regent's answerability to villagers' desires rests on a wider understanding that his conferral of resources is a direct quid pro quo for having "given [their] voices" (*aup fedo-*) to the Regent in elections. The Korowai idiom of "give voices" to describe voting is a back translation of wider Indonesian usage, and there is a deeper history across Indonesia of state officials conferring development in exchange for iconic performances of local tradition. Korowai, from their own transactional starting points, find these wider templates very recognizable. An element they amplify is performance of material impoverishment through nudity and other bodily or technological motifs indexing lack and primitivity.[3] They extend to the Regent their cultural expectation that gestures of self-lowering are expected to move others to love and equalization. Also characteristic of Korowai sensibilities here is an understanding of positions of inferiority as also partly positions of strength. The martial processions, adapted from past feast performances, signify "we are from the forest" or "we have nothing," but they are also visually and vocally impressive – and politically intimidating. While Korowai audiences to a Regent strike stances of submissive hopefulness towards his ability to confer wealth, in their background discussions they assert that the Regent depends electorally on *them*, and so already owes them what they are demanding.

Long-distance relations with Regents also turn centrally on language, interpreted transactionally. I noted that submitting written lists of village residents is a major path for seeking state resources. This is followed by the further circulation of written reports that the villagers produce about their activities, and of printed signs sent back by officials for display next to new village infrastructure recording details of its funding. One telling performance of deprivation was the naming of the village of Miskin, founded in 2017. Normally, Korowai villages take their names from a nearby stream, but founders of this village cut to the chase by using the Indonesian word for "poor" or "poverty" (miskin). Their intended audience was the faraway Regent of Asmat, who would understand all the more clearly the deprivation and hope that was their core meaning in making a village. This move, like other acts of verbal self-lowering, had a precedent in past patterns of naming children after conditions of lack, such as "Famine," "Hungry," "Orphan," "Ugly," "Himself Alone," or "Houseless." This

3 Nudity and related technologies now bear an aura of pastness and inferior living, in part through extensive Korowai experience performing them for visiting tourists and film crews. See Stasch (2015) for the text of a Korowai spokesman's oration while giving a government visitor primitivity-marked technological objects and expressing the intention that the government should replace these with corresponding superior consumer goods.

was a way that a child's relatives deprecated their own conditions of life but also evoked positive emotions of compassion in other people who heard the name in use.

This section has traced how Korowai attraction to Regents reflects interplay between the changed state environment and past Korowai thinking about politics and speech. The "Regency" level of government is newly close and rich. People's heritage of intense egalitarian sensitivity in relations with close kin has now led Korowai to feel intense pain about their exclusion from the imagined wealth of city people. Desire to correct that inequality drives their enthusiasm for relations with Regents. At the centre of their overtures towards Regents are patterns of stylized performance of inequality, which Korowai are extending from past everyday kinship into the new governmental sphere. Besides the particular motif of self-lowering, a wider commonality between these Regent relations and patterns discussed earlier in this chapter is that questions of volitional freedom in speaking, and of speech's overall value, are heavily centred on its *transactional* implications. Rather than focusing on whether speakers have rights to say what they think or want, the first focus is on what an addressee will be moved by speech to do: the effects speaking has on what speaker and addressee will be to each other.

Listening to "Heads"

A last shift in power-marked roles that I will discuss is a newly embraced divide between "heads" and "community" among Korowai themselves. This was intertwined in the late 2010s with the rise of transactions known internationally as "community-driven development" and known in local administrative practice as "Village Block Grants" (Alokasi Dana Desa). Korowai call the transactions simply "work" or "wage labour," borrowing the Indonesian word kerja into Korowai-language frames like "take hold of work" (*kelaja ati-*) or "give wage labor" (*kelaja fedo-*). In ten villages I visited in 2017, with varied histories and administrative statuses, there was a striking uniformity of activity. Korowai gathered in increased numbers in villages, where they laboured together at projects like making new lanes, walkways, or permanent-materials houses. Village officeholders worked with intermediaries to report completed work to Regency centres. When grants came through, the leaders divided wages among the workers. To Korowai, the new material infrastructure was incidental to the more important labour-for-money exchange, and to the consumables bought with the pay.

What startled me was the widespread discussion of these activities in terms of an opposition between "heads" and "community" or "populace." The "heads" are men holding posts in the village administrative apparatus, for which they are paid a stipend (honor, *onol*). They tell the "community" what

to do, meaning they organize their labour. Those addressees "hear" or "listen to" (*dai-*) the heads' talk, meaning they obediently do the work. Politics is again centrally imagined as a configuration of speech roles. Untalkative men stay away from these new leadership roles or leave them behind. People speak of "heads" by the Korowai word *xabian*, which I noted above has been newly used for the last twenty years to designate authority roles, imitating the Indonesian word kepala. By contrast with this longer-established pattern, explicit reference to a counterpart group of subordinate subjects is an innovation of the last few years. Speakers refer to the "community" by the newly borrowed Indonesian word masyarakat, and sometimes by the Korowai word *mayox*, "people." In 2017, when I first heard these references to villagers as basically "commoner" subordinates of the heads, it struck me as sharply breaking with past Korowai rejection of anyone's claims to tell others what to do.

Villagers without stipends resent exclusion from "head" roles. Often there is bad feeling about past labour that was never compensated by the heads. Some heads are artfully deferential and self-lowering towards the workers they direct, giving their leadership a kinship-inflected tone. Some also artfully manage money in ways that dull the new economic inequalities of this system. But when I put to Korowai my surprise at the division between "heads" and "populace," they agreed that it ran against their past principles, but they explained matter-of-factly that the purpose of accepting the division was to get money. A basic answer to the puzzle of "anarchists for the state" is that Korowai are embracing one relation of subordination in order to ease the larger, more painful one of collective exclusion from urban consumer prosperity. Under cover of a motive of gaining access to wealth, Korowai are accepting a new speech pattern of some men unilaterally announcing what other people should do.

Conclusion: Expression Is Transaction

The old Korowai understanding of freedom as a matter of having one's "own thoughts" and not being ordered about was part of a horizontal, dispersed institutional and economic order. The last sections of this chapter have described processes of that horizontal social space being newly integrated with vertical geopolitical structures of an altogether larger scale. There are at least two broad trends to how old, already complex Korowai understandings of freedom have been reorganized in that process. One is that in the duality of aggressive versus self-lowering modes of freedom, self-lowering has expanded, while aggressive self-assertion has become a bit less prominent (and in some cases, when it does occur, it has become even more ambiguously amalgamated with self-lowering). Another is that the politics of access and equality in material life has overshadowed issues of subordination in speech. Listeners newly accept the verbal instructions of political bosses when they understand this compliance will enable them to get money.

Elsewhere in Papua and in many cities across Indonesia (where Papuans migrate for university studies), security personnel or Indonesian civilians often violently stifle Papuan speech concerning their own domination by Indonesians and their desires for dignity or freedom in the face of it. The state also uses a law on "treason" (makar) to prosecute persons who question Papua's political integration in Indonesia. Even more widely, state propaganda at all levels – and particularly in the everyday work of police, military, and intelligence personnel – pervasively tags any discussion of issues of social justice or hardship by Papuans with the question of whether someone is "separatist" (separatis), an intensely condemnation- and stigma-attracting category in the wider mass political environment of Indonesian nationalism. Among Papuans in civic life, this results in intense self-restriction of speech and pervasive disparities between speech and consciousness, even among large numbers of Papuans whose actual personal convictions do not pose Papuan independence from Indonesia as the desirable or realistic way that goals of justice might be best met.

Across the last two decades, many Korowai developed the same forms of Papuan nationalist sentiment around this unjust order as are often found among rural Papuans at large. Often they acquired this consciousness through direct experience of ethnicized economic inequality during visits to towns. Other Korowai without wide travel experience acquired it mainly via energetic word-of-mouth reasoning and flow of information in conversation with neighbours or with each other. Many Korowai think of Papuan nationalist and separatist sentiment as something to be discussed secretly and knowingly among Papuans; in some interactions with ethnic Indonesians, Korowai feel intense hostility and mistrust, but again often keep those feelings verbally under wraps. Yet overall, the new Korowai consciousness of this conflict is focused intensely on the conflict itself, such as on material inequality between Indonesians and Papuans, on actual or potential violent fights, and on ideas about landownership and the conditions under which immigrant settlers should ever be present in other people's land. Issues of whether Papuans are allowed to express nationalist views do not rise to the level of being an important, attention-drawing dimension of the conflict, even among Korowai who have lived at length in towns (where coercive control of Papuan speech is more concentrated). I outline here this example of a proper "free speech" conflict just to highlight that discussions of "free speech" norms do exist in the wider geopolitical field in which Korowai live, and might become very important to some Korowai in the future, but they are not currently the kind of issue they focus on in thinking about relations between speech and politics, for the historical and contextual reasons I have set out across this chapter.

Yet Korowai reflexivity about speech, and their ideas of how a polity is made through models of speaking, have greatly influenced the reorganization of their political lives now taking place. A larger lesson of this chapter is thus about

political change in interactions between social formations of radically different geopolitical scales. Namely, when a freedom-preoccupied egalitarian people move towards participation in state structures, this can be propelled not just by the state's features as an external condition but also by how those features enter into the already plural make-up of egalitarian relations in the smaller polity. In my account of the old Korowai polity, I highlighted freedom's complexity, such as the quite different forms it could take within the same people's lives, its cultural distinctiveness, and the contexts within which it was intrinsically defined. Recent embrace of the "head" versus "populace" division is one illustration of those complexities' importance to processes of change. The role divide of "head" versus "populace" has exploded because the image of people being told what to do, and doing it, already existed as an imaginable, attention-attracting kind of social form, charged with ambivalences. Korowai knew it when they saw it, and knew how to do it. Likewise, from a culturally distant position in which government and citizen is one domain of relations, and workplace hierarchy is another, it might be surprising that organizing *labour* for wages would be the type-case of political authority. But Korowai sensitivity to material goods as the deeper measure of people's positions with one another meant this was exactly the wedge-like context in which they could come to terms with a quasi-Hobbesian experiment in voluntary subordination to a ruler. Quite different situations examined by other contributors to this volume also illustrate this principle that a political system's plural, fractured composition is pivotal to how participants in it remake their lives in new contexts.

Acknowledgments

This chapter is based on ten months of fieldwork in the Korowai area in 1995–6, between one and two months each in 1997, 2001, 2002, and 2011, and about three months each in 2007 and 2017, as well as about one year of cumulative experience in Jayapura and other towns. I owe so much especially to those Korowai who shared their views with me in villages and in forest homes I visited in the 2017 fieldwork research that was a particularly focused on this chapter's topics. That fieldwork was possible thanks to financial support from the ERC grant "Situating Free Speech" and a US Fulbright Faculty Research Fellowship. I am very grateful to Matt Candea for his thoughtful, stimulating leadership of "Situating Free Speech," and for inviting me to be an associated researcher. I am equally grateful for the inspiring work and feedback of all other participants in the project's research and discussions, particularly Taras Fedirko for important help at a late stage.