

CONFLICT, MORALITY AND POWER IN A WESTERN CAROLINE SOCIETY

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On the Western Caroline island of Tobi in 1973 I attended a meeting which confirmed much that the inhabitants had told me about political power in their society. I recount that meeting here for three reasons. First, I want to substantiate my informants' statements and to illustrate the kind of event which can lead an observer (and probably also his informants) to create social generalisations. Second, I want to discuss the persistence of certain aspects of Tobian political culture, a persistence which was much in evidence in the meeting. And third, I want to use the meeting to make some general comments about the uses of leadership in small, conflict-ridden societies. In order to accomplish these purposes I shall need to discuss several features of Tobian political culture, especially the relationship between the traditional chief and the elected, Western-style magistrate.

Two interesting characteristics of traditional chiefs have been reported for the low island societies in the Truk culture area of which Tobi is one. The occupants of such statuses are said to exercise their power very indirectly. They are also said to direct most of their official attention to questions of public morality (Alkire 1965:36-7, 1977:48; Lessa 1966:33-4; Spiro 1980:342). In various contexts over the years I have stated that Tobi's chief shares these two characteristics. That is, like chiefs on Ifaluk, Lamotrek and Ulithi, he uses his power, indirectly, to monitor the moral dimension of the public order.

Before taking part in the meeting which I recount in this paper, I had held quite a different understanding of the chief's role in Tobian politics. He seemed a figurehead, remote, elderly and powerless, last descendant of a line of chiefs which arose with the discovery of the island. Real political power seemed to rest with the elected magistrate, active, young and vigorous, occupant of a status imposed on the Tobians by an American administration seeking to democratise Micronesia. During the meeting an event occurred which led me to rethink these matters, a rethinking which concluded with the observation that Tobi's chief did, in fact, hold considerable power, while the magistrate, despite all his

political activity, did not. This meeting, then, was critical in the development of the ethnography of Tobi and thus has a place (however small) in the evolution of our understanding of Trukic cultural processes. Furthermore, a description of the way Tobi's chief exerts his power reveals one of the enduring features of Tobian political culture, a feature intimately related to the exercise of power in egalitarian communities.

The indirect use of chiefly power to guide public morality is an element of Tobian culture which has continued even after many of the social and cultural supports for it have been changed. Its persistence is the result of the Tobians' creativity in solving problems posed by colonisation and modernisation, not least of which were problems caused by the forcible grafting of the magistracy on to their social system. Their creativity, in turn, was made imperative by the exigencies of their situation.

Tobians live in an extremely small-scale society, their ethos stresses both equality and peacefulness and they are caught up in a large number of internecine disputes. For them, and for people like them, adherence to their ethos cannot be achieved by fiat. No superordinate position exists within such societies which can compel tranquillity. What, then, prevents people from publicly and directly acting out those internecine conflicts? This is an old question in anthropology, and the broad outlines of its answer were provided by Max Gluckman some time ago. In this paper I take up his ideas, join them to ideas developed by several other scholars, and apply them to the analysis of that meeting, which was, all at the same time, an example of the achievement of social tranquillity in a small-scale, egalitarian society, an example of persistence in Tobian political culture, and an example of the kind of data which leads me to include Tobi in the list of Trukic societies in which the traditional chief uses his power indirectly and in the service of public morality.

BACKGROUND TO TOBI

With an area of only 60 hectares, Tobi is one of the smallest and most isolated of the inhabited Micronesian islands. Its geological structure is very simple. There is no lagoon; a narrow reef completely fringes a sandy beach which in turn surrounds the coral island. A small village along the south-western shore houses the population of about 60 people. Their taro gardens lie in a reclaimed swamp in the interior, surrounded by coconut plantations, breadfruit trees and sweet potato gardens. The island's highest point is only four or five metres above sea level.

Long-distance voyages in native canoes are no longer undertaken and Tobi's isolation is effectively broken only three or four times a year by visits from small Government ships out of Palau to the north.¹ Over the last 70 years the Tobians have taken advantage of these Government

ships (first German, then Japanese, and now American) to establish a daughter community near Koror, the capital of Palau District.¹ By the early 1970s, 60 people or so (approximately half of the Tobian population) could be found in the Palau settlement at any one time. The rest were on Tobi, 400 miles to the south-west. There was considerable traffic back and forth between the two Tobian communities and most people spent some time in each place. On Tobi, diet and economy were based on locally produced fish, taro and coconuts. Some copra was produced for sale in order to pay for small but valued imports of tobacco, rice and kerosene, but the island was, for all practical purposes, economically self-sufficient.

Tobian culture includes elements both anciently inherited and newly introduced. The Tobian elaboration of the Trukic cultural base has been guided by a number of circumstances. Among the most important of these are the ecological simplicity of their island home, its small size and physical isolation. Massive rapid depopulation early in this century followed by prolonged demographic instability, loss of both political and religious autonomy, occupation by Japanese troops, bombing by the Americans in the Second World War, the imposition of Western-style institutions, the beginning of economic integration into the wider world, and great instability in the policies and staffing of the various institutions which have held power over them; all these are circumstances with which history has recently confronted the Tobians. In meeting these circumstances they have modified their ancient culture considerably. Yet fundamental cultural orientations remain remarkably untouched. Among the most important of those elements are the use of fear in achieving self and social control and the high value placed on practical intelligence, long-range planning, self-reliance, cheerful interactions and co-operative social relations. Perhaps the most important of all continuities is the absolute prohibition on interpersonal aggression. The persistence of this prohibition is remarkable; Tobians obey it with great fidelity even though disputes, hostility and competition are major features of their society. How this happens is the subject of the next two sections. The first discusses the characteristics of Tobian society which lead towards social harmony and the second describes the chief's role in the psycho-cultural management of aggression.

RELIGION, CONFLICTS AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

Contemporary Tobian society is organised into six exogamous matriclans, a single Roman Catholic religious congregation, and innumerable contending interest groups formed on the basis of age, sex, family, resource allocation, political loyalty, and personal animosity.

The matriclans are the most visible element of Tobian social organisation, but they are by far the least important in the creation of everyday social life. That is, although people spoke about these clans quite often (especially to the visiting ethnographer), they acted on a clan basis only when arranging marriages. Clans hold no land and possess no political offices. Of far greater importance in the achievement of sociability are twice-daily church services on the one hand, and innumerable, endless, *sub rosa* disputes on the other.

Day after day, at dawn and at dusk, Tobians join together in their church to reaffirm their faith, thus reinforcing their ties to one another as well as to the supernatural. Their religion and its performance also serve to reinforce the ideology of non-aggression and mutual co-operation which the Tobians share with many fellow Caroline islanders.³ The harmony achieved by this continual resubmission of social divisions to an undifferentiated and thus 'mechanical' solidarity extends back into pre-Christian Tobian history. At that time, though, the content of the religion was purely Tobian and ritual was focused on to the office of chief.⁴ Today, Roman Catholic missionaries, living in Koror and visiting the island only occasionally, have replaced the chief as central ritual actors and occupants of the mediating status between this world and the world of the spirit(s).⁵ Yet even with this crucial difference, religion is still a vital social institution. Of special importance is belief in ghosts, ancient Tobian religious symbols which Tobian Catholicism has revalidated. Melford Spiro has described how on Ifaluk ghosts serve as a culturally constituted defence mechanism on to which people can project socially unacceptable hatred, anger and fear (1952). The same holds true for Tobians and their ghosts. The continued use of ghosts in this manner is the third way (along with daily revitalisation of social ties and daily reaffirmation of the both Christian and Trukic ideology of co-operation) in which the religion of the island serves to maintain the prohibition on aggression and thus acts as one of the components in the Tobian achievement of social harmony. Paradoxically enough, another key component is the existence of social conflicts.

The shifting tide of interest and fortune in the vast array of disputes in which everyone is either directly or indirectly involved serves to tie all the Tobians to one another and prevent the emergence of hostile permanent blocs. The disputes have their origin in resource conflicts. Initially, at least, most of them are about land or women or office. Land is individually held by both men and women and is transmitted down family lines from individual to individual.⁶ Women, especially marriageable women, have been in short supply for some time. This shortage has been exacerbated by the addition of Roman Catholic rules about sex and

marriage to a pre-existing rule dictating clan exogamy and it lies at the heart of much contention between families seeking mates for their men. Offices for which individuals and families struggle include those of nurse and schoolteacher, which are filled by salaried Tobian employees of the colonial Government, and that of magistrate, a locally elected position funded by the Government in Koror.

The disputes about land, women and political office are multigenerational and they divide and redivide the population in such a fashion that virtually everyone is at the same time both ally and opponent of everyone else. This situation fulfils one of three preconditions for unity out of conflict set forth by Max Gluckman in his important essay "The Peace in the Feud" (1956). The other two preconditions are a desire for peace and a recognised moral order, and they also obtain on Tobi. The latter requires the exercise of chiefly power while the former arises from fear of open hostilities.

Even though the disputes appear to an outside observer to have functions of great social utility, serving as they do to generate social unity, to the Tobians they are a source of great anxiety.⁷ This anxiety arises, ultimately, from fear of bad feelings sustained by the disputes.

The total body of disputes form a densely interwoven network. Tobians believe that they are so tightly connected that one dispute could not surface without bringing up the rest. In other words, it is feared that public and open expression of any dispute could not be contained. Not only would the associated distrust, resentment and hatred escape from control, but in the ensuing escalation of charge and countercharge, the whole network of associated disputes would emerge, linked by ties of emotion and kinship, and woven together in memory and secretly held histories. Many thoughtful Tobians were quite explicit about the disasters that would follow such an emergence into the public arena. Voluntary or involuntary exile, murder, suicide, madness, the end of communal life on the island, and even supernatural sanctions in the form of ghostly attacks, were all mentioned by informants as consequences of disputes becoming overt.⁸ This is the dark side of Tobian social life. Its counterpart is the good-humoured tone which the islanders give to every encounter and almost every conversation.

Tobians excel in the art of pleasant social interaction. This is based (in this extremely small-scale society) on the intimate knowledge possessed by each actor of all the other actors in the social field. Their art seems to be motivated by the desire to be thought of both as one who is good at making others happy and as one who is good at (self-)controlling hostile and fearful impulses.⁹

Daily life on Tobi is characterised by a very pleasant cheerfulness.

Good humour, behaviour expected of everyone, is achieved nearly all the time, even in the face of extreme provocation. Very often such provocation grows out of the underside of society, its hidden network or web of interlocking conflicts. Everyone knows that the highly treasured pleasantness is constantly threatened by the conflicts. This knowledge, and the associated dread of what would happen if the disputes were to surface, leads to the second of Gluckman's preconditions, a desire for peace. The third precondition, the existence of a general moral order, brings us to a consideration of the role of the chief.

LEADERSHIP, CHANGE AND CONFLICT

The office of chief is one of the most important mechanisms for preventing and controlling conflicts. The chief serves to focus people's attention on their shared moral order. This is another feature of Tobian society (along with ghosts and non-aggression) which has persisted from pre-Christian times even though other leadership functions have changed dramatically.

There is no reason to suppose Tobian history to have been static or even cyclical before the advent of the modern era, yet it does make sense to suppose that social change was much less rapid than in the 20th century. Since the ecological adjustment to the fragile environment of a small coral island was worked out by the Trukic ancestors of the first Tobians, the original settlers' problem was merely to fit that system to the particulars of Tobi, a task which they accomplished with great skill (see, for example, Johannes and Black 1981). Once this was achieved, adaptive success depended on adherence to proven techniques. Leadership involved not so much meeting new environmental challenges as managing the socio-economic equilibrium (almost as fragile as the ecosystem with which it was in balance). Leadership consisted in obtaining compliance with *moumou* 'tradition' or 'custom'. Since traditional ways of doing things, including subsistence activities, were suffused with morality and spirituality, chieftainship could focus on those qualities, thus fulfilling the third of Gluckman's preconditions.

With the coming of the modern era, though, equilibrium was shattered by the rapid series of major shocks mentioned earlier. These led to a situation in which conservative, backward-looking leadership was no longer advantageous, while at the same time the necessity for achieving social harmony was, if anything, even more acute than in the past. In other words, the two chiefly functions of focusing society's attention on the moral order and managing the socio-economic adaptation no longer neatly meshed.

By the time I reached the island, a new synthesis had emerged. Tobians

were living in a bilocal society which was linked together by the Government ship. They had adapted Roman Catholicism to their own ends. They had, I thought, a new leader, the magistrate. It seemed as though the old dispensation had been swept away and the people were coming to grips with the modern world under the aegis of the English-speaking magistrate, an ex-sailor whose Palauan wife brought him ties to the dominant Palauan society. The elderly chief seemed, as I have said, withdrawn and detached from the everyday activity of the island. He also seemed far removed from the stream of proposals for public action which were constantly being brought forth by the magistrate and other young people whose experience with such Western institutions as schools, churches, hospitals and stores was much greater than their elders' and who tended to think that this gave them a correspondingly greater understanding of their island's situation.

Tobians, however, held the view that the chief, and not the magistrate, had power in their society. They gave a great deal of attention to the office and its performance. In fact, it was one of their cultural features about which they were most explicit. The behaviour of the incumbent was constantly (if discreetly) discussed, and many stories were told of the actions of past chiefs. The magistrate, on the other hand, elicited much less social attention. This state of affairs was a little disconcerting because the magistrate was extremely active while the chief, in the 18 months I had spent on the island before the meeting, had not once acted in a public, official capacity. He never gave orders and he lived at some distance from the main settlement, rarely participating in its comings and goings.

When I interviewed him, he was most forthcoming on topics where he could act as a spokesman for the island. History, traditions, customs, myths and family genealogy were topics on which he was happy to give information at length. He showed no interest in the scandal and political gossip which so fascinated other informants. When I pressed him on these matters, he withdrew into vague generalities or silence.

When I asked about him I was consistently told that he was a "good" chief. When I inquired about the basis for this opinion I was told, in a variety of ways, that he did not attempt to interfere in other people's affairs. It seemed particularly admirable to his followers that he did not use his position to obtain economic advantage.¹⁰ One common way to phrase this was to list all the privileges which, theoretically at least, belong to his office. Since the present chief did not take advantage of these, the implied comparison which lay in my informant's answers worked to his advantage. Occasionally people would sing his praises even more directly.

Certain fish are, by tradition, reserved to the chief and his family. If anyone catches such a fish, he must give it to the chief. Rather than insisting on this (such fish are prized for their size and succulence) the chief always requisitioned a small and unimportant fish from the lucky fisherman's haul and let him keep his prize. Describing this habit of the chief's in detail was a favourite way of indicating his humbleness and generosity.¹¹

As well as stressing the chief's goodness, my informants claimed that he was "in charge" of the island. This claim was confusing. It referred to a traditional social arrangement which goes by the name of *hosuar*. Following Tobian English speakers, I translate this term as "in charge". In its essence it refers to a diadic relationship in which the senior person assumes some responsibility for the behaviour of the junior. Its purest instances can be seen in the relation of young child to parent, where the child must gain the parent's approval for any proposed plan. Husbands tend to be in charge of wives, brothers in charge of sisters, older siblings in charge of younger, and adult offspring in charge of senile parents.¹² The arrangement varies with circumstances. Often when both parties are adults it is very much a *pro forma* arrangement. Nevertheless, the claim of one person to be "in charge" of another is always a claim to some rights and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the behaviour of that person. No matter how little power is actually held by the senior over the junior, the latter always clears his or her plans with the former. This is what made it hard at first to understand my informants' claims about the chief being in charge. They seemed to be contradicting their statements about how he never interfered in anyone's behaviour. They also seemed to be contradicted by my observations. For example, in common with almost every other Tobian, the chief occasionally spent three or four months in the Tobi settlement in Koror. It was difficult to detect any difference in the communal life of either place during his presence or absence; social life seemed to proceed at its own pace, whether or not he was there.

The same could not be said of the magistrate. Wherever he was he emphatically made himself felt. The many schemes for public betterment or for compliance with Government regulations, for which he (mostly unsuccessfully) tried to gain consensus, were constantly under scrutiny. If communal work parties were needed, he organised them; if taxes were due, he collected them. He kept the municipal treasury (such as it was) and chaired all the public meetings. Thus, until the meeting described here, I was inclined to discount my informants' claims about the power of the chief. That was a serious error and would have detracted from the accuracy of the resulting ethnography (Black 1977). I had been misled by the vigour of the magistrate, his highly public activities and his relative

knowledge of the outside world. Following the meeting I took my informants at their word and came to note two things. First, the chief did, in fact, have considerable power. Second, my informants' statements themselves were claims to moral stature. These two points are related and together they can further our understanding of the role of leadership in egalitarian societies. First, though, it is necessary to discuss the accommodation which had been reached between the present magistrate and the chief.

The office of magistrate was grafted on to Tobian society at the insistence of the American administration. Initially it generated a good deal of contention. Candidate after candidate succeeded to the post, and each was rejected in turn. Some time during the early tenure of each magistrate a crisis would arise. Invariably these involved an accusation of nepotism and self-interest laid against the magistrate. Equally invariably, the crisis was resolved by replacing him.¹³ The accusations all involved one or another of the schemes which each succeeding magistrate launched to "help the island".¹⁴ Such schemes, often proposed at the behest of the Government, had as their manifest object, the improvement of conditions on the island; but they all sank, often taking with them the current magistrate's political career, both plan and planner victims of widespread distrust.

Achieving concensus for new courses of joint action is extremely difficult on Tobi because Tobians take a rather jaundiced view of altruistic claims made by anyone but the chief. Time after time, plans offered for the island's betterment have failed because of the near universal distrust of those taking the initiative. Only the chief is thought to be a trustworthy source of ideas to help the island because only he is believed capable of altruism. This is a very important dimension of chiefly status and is directly related to the notion of the chief being in charge of the island.

The social philosophy behind the in charge system has it that the senior person in the relationship is in charge because he or she has the other's best interests at heart.¹⁵ I think that much of the contention surrounding the office of magistrate in its early years was generated by the perception that, through their schemes to help the island, the magistrates were trying to usurp the place of the chief and achieve his position as the person in charge of Tobi. The magistrates, for their part, were under considerable pressure to implement various Government policies directed at the "development" of Micronesia. Unfortunately for the planners of those policies, however, to the magistrates' fellow Tobians those policies looked to be either schemes for the magistrate's and his kin's selfish advantage or illegitimate claims to chiefly status, or both.

Only after much trial and error was the present system worked out, a system in which there is a more or less official division of labour between the chief and the magistrate. Under this arrangement, the chief is responsible for traditional and customary aspects of social life, and the magistrate deals with the administration—with taxes, schools, elections and other “modern” features. “This separation of powers is well known to everyone and informants were quite explicit about it (including the chief and magistrate). In and of itself, of course, such a division of functions does nothing to solve the problem posed by Government-imposed plans to help the island. It restores a degree of clarity to political waters muddied by the introduction of the office of magistrate, but it neither prohibits the magistrate from offering such schemes nor legitimises them. The solution of this structural dilemma is much less public than the division discussed above and, each for his own reasons, neither the chief nor the magistrate ever directly discussed it with me, although they both indirectly confirmed it. Notwithstanding their discretion, this political issue has been resolved and its resolution is based on a further division of political labours. I think that this is largely what my informants had in mind when they talked about the chief’s power. Simply put, this accommodation requires that the magistrate quietly clears each proposal for action with the chief before making it public while at the same time the chief is obliged to use the magistrate to present publicly his own ideas and plans. Magisterial proposals demand a chiefly blessing and chiefly proposals need a magisterial format. In this way ultimate chiefly authority has been preserved even *vis-à-vis* the modern and secular, yet his semi-sacred remoteness and detachment from the world have not been compromised. That detachment, in turn, is crucial to the metaphorical meaning which attributing power to the chief had for my informants. Such a situation is not, of course, unique to Tobi. Raymond Firth describes a rather similar circumstance for the Polynesian island of Tikopia:

Tikopia chiefs do not orate or address public assemblies; they give instructions to their maru to speak for them. They “hand over” the speech to their mouthpiece, and commonly are not even present at a fono where their orders are promulgated. In the presence of his own chief, uncontroverted, a maru of Taumako said to me on this point: ‘it is taboo for chiefs—they hand over to us the maru to do it—the chief is sacred and doesn’t go to the assembly. The maru goes to the assembled mass of the people’. It was emphasized by others too that the chiefs of Kafika, Taumako, and Fangarere never address the people publicly. This of course had the result that should murmurs of dissent or criticism of their decisions or views arise, their status is

not impugned in their presence (1975:35).

On Tobi, as on Tikopia, the status of the chief as a symbol requires that someone else present his ideas to the public.

The preceding discussion summarises the ethnography of political leadership on Tobi. As I have already pointed out, my understanding of these matters resulted from the consideration of an incident which took place during a meeting. The following is an account of that meeting.¹⁷ I then examine the incident for what it reveals about the doing of ethnography, Tobian political continuity, and power and leadership in small-scale societies.

A MEETING ABOUT OBSCENITY

One day word spread that the chief had hinted to the magistrate that something ought to be done about the reckless profanity of the adolescent boys.¹⁸ Everyone guessed that he was disturbed by several recent incidents in which boys had used obscene language in the presence of young female kin. One event in particular was often mentioned at this time. A group of youths had been racing model canoes in the shallows. Even though some girls watching on the beach were in earshot, the boys had spoken (and maybe acted—I was not a witness) obscenely. The flow of rumour and gossip (a constant stream which neglects no event no matter how small) soon swept this news along to the chief. Perhaps one of his female dependants had been there and had complained to him.

A number of items of communal business had accumulated since the last island-wide meeting, so the magistrate simply added the boys' bad language to his agenda and let it be known that a meeting would be held in two days. As is usually the case on Tobi, the meeting's topic was well known in advance, and it was with an air of expectation that people gathered in the meeting house on the appointed day. Everyone was curious to learn how the magistrate would handle such a delicate topic without antagonising the boys, their families or the several old women who viewed the island's social mores with an extremely proprietorial air.

Upon the appointed day and hour, all the people on the island slowly made their way to the meeting house.¹⁹ They seated themselves on the floor around the inside walls of the large simple building, leaving the centre empty save for the occasional child who wandered across from one person to another. The magistrate, a heavy-set man in his thirties, arrived early, trailed by his numerous family. The chief was one of the last to appear and, as he seated himself and his wife a short distance from the magistrate, the meeting got under way.

After the opening prayer and the disposal of all other matters of business, the moment arrived for the magistrate to raise the subject of

obscenity. Up to this time the meeting had unfolded as a typical Tobian gathering. The magistrate had introduced item after item from his agenda. After the initial presentation of each piece of business he had paused to let others speak. People responded to the magistrate, then were interrupted by others who were themselves interrupted. Interrupted people only rarely ceased talking. They simply continued whatever point they had been making in a louder voice. Those not talking listened to all the discussions going on around them, seeking a chance to bring the house down with a joke (usually at the expense of one of the shouters). People tried to stump one another with sequences of questions leading towards unanswerable arguments or objections.²⁹ The one person who did not engage in these verbal manoeuvres was the chief. As was his custom in these meetings, he said nothing nor did he appear to maintain eye contact with anyone. In marked contrast to everyone else, including his wife, he silently and abstractedly gazed out of the window.

Inevitably the preceding discussions had rapidly spiralled off the topic and splintered into many loud and competing conversations. At such a point, if the magistrate had not intervened, the meeting would have simply evaporated as the fissionary process continued. Eventually the meeting would have become a collection of small groups of three or four persons, scattered about the building, talking on a wide variety of subjects, passing babies and cigarettes back and forth and occasionally tossing out a joke for the entertainment of one and all before gradually drifting away to engage in other activities. Implementation of any plan of action would then have awaited a solid consensus certified by magisterial visits to each house over the next few days to gather informal opinion.

Since there remained the unattended item of public obscenity on his agenda, the magistrate needed to refocus the people's attention before proceeding. He scooped up a small child and walked to the other side of the room to deposit it with its maternal grandmother and then firmly walked back to his place along the wall to sit (in sharp contrast with his earlier joviality) in patient dignity. It did not take long for the meeting to return to order.³¹ The magistrate then spoke as follows: "Some people on this island are not polite when they talk. Sometimes they say bad words". All nodded and a grave demeanour settled over the crowd. The magistrate next carefully, repetitively and circumspectly proceeded to review the rules governing bad words even though everyone had become familiar with the norms governing their use during the many discussions of this topic in the days leading up to the meeting. It is bad to say bad words in mixed company, especially in the presence of those called sibling of the opposite sex or parent. It is also bad to use such words in the presence of the chief and other respected elders. Therefore, one should

not use bad words in the village or any other place where one might unknowingly be overheard by an inappropriate listener. It is permissible, the magistrate said, to use bad words when there is no chance of offending anyone, such as outside the reef when fishing, or deep in the taro fields when gardening (both single sex activities). He did not mention erotic conversations between lovers, one of the major legitimate contexts for the use of obscenity. Nor did he list the words themselves. During all this the chief politely nodded his approval.

The magistrate kept his gaze fixed on the floor in front of his crossed legs. He was probably trying to avoid giving the appearance of accusing specific people of breaking the rules, even though all knew whose rash speech had triggered the meeting. He was also worried, I think, that if he met anyone's gaze, the two of them, and then the whole meeting, would dissolve into laughter. For seated next to the magistrate, loudly slapping down worn and greasy playing cards in a self-invented game, were several very young children. The obvious organiser and leader of the game was the magistrate's three-year-old son. And with every card he played he screamed out for all to hear his father's favourite English expression "Fuck your mouth".

Despite his son's antics, the magistrate valiantly carried on. He had arrived at the point where, had the topic been different, a general discussion would have taken place. Yet this topic, in contrast to those which had preceded it (taxes and voter registration) did not elicit a single comment from the crowd. This was not hard to understand, for by this time the meeting had become a joint exercise in that special kind of self and social control which depends on the suppression of mirth. The irony of launching an anti-obscenity drive to such a chorus from such a quarter was one of those unspoken jokes which everyone knows everyone else is enjoying. No one dared look anyone in the face.

The magistrate proposed a two-stage anti-obscenity programme. Following the meeting, if all agreed, the young men and boys would be taken to an out-of-the-way place by one of the old men and taught the list of unacceptable words. At the same time, the young women and girls would gather in another spot and be taught the same list by one of the old women. In this way no one would be able to claim ignorance when, having been reported to the magistrate or his clerk for having used bad words in public, they were fined five dollars.

Just as the magistrate began to develop this proposal, and just as a preliminary rustle of movement and throat clearing indicated that at least some of the people were about to respond, everyone's powers of self-control were tested even further. The children's game had by this time broken up, and the youngsters were roaming about as they usually did in

meetings, carrying cigarettes back and forth to their elders, climbing over laps and legs, giggling and talking. One of them, a four-year-old nephew of the magistrate, suddenly strode out into the middle of the floor. He had shed his scanty garments, was naked and for some reason (much speculated upon later) his penis was erect.

Everyone's gaze swung to the island's three unmarried teenage women, all sexually active and all the objects of a great deal of sustained social attention. They were sitting together as usual. At that moment they happened to be leaning out of the window in conversation with someone outside the hall and so did not notice the boy. Everyone watched them as the magistrate droned on in the vain hope of carrying things to a sober conclusion. Sensing that something was going on, the eldest girl turned back towards the meeting. Displaying commendable qualities of self-control (even for a Tobian) she reacted to the sight which met her eyes by simply nudging the girl next to her. As the magistrate later explained to one and all, this was a bad mistake because, as we all knew, this second girl was extremely giddy. The girl seemed to be engrossed in something happening outside the window; she did not respond to the nudge. Her friend elbowed her again, this time quite firmly. With everyone now waiting for her reaction she turned to see what was happening. No one was disappointed.

"Food of the ghost, look at that red stick". A typhoon of laughter swept across the room as she gasped out this filthiest of Tobian obscenities. A genuinely funny moment, this episode remains for me one of the most emphatic instances of the Tobians' bawdy, raucous sense of delight in any and all farcical turns to their communal life.²¹

Laughter echoed back and forth across the room as the boy unconcernedly wandered off and the girl, in her embarrassment, tried unsuccessfully not to use any more obscenity. The magistrate, teary-eyed and out of breath, laughed louder than anyone. Suddenly, though, his laughter ceased. Just as it had dominated the uproar with its volume, so now it dominated by its absence. For he had heard (along with a few others of us seated close to him) a quiet, dry cough from the chief and immediately had fallen silent. With a minimum of nudging and hushing, the rest of the crowd quieted down and the sounds of convulsive hilarity quickly passed away.

The chief's cough, a minimal communication to be sure, was the most direct expression of his power I ever observed. He exerted control by simply reminding people of his presence and thus of their common political culture. He acted to preserve decorum and order and he succeeded impressively. At that moment I began to re-evaluate my response to the many claims about his power which people had made to

me, and to cast aside my previous understanding of his role in his society's politics.

The whole incident had taken no more than perhaps five minutes at most. Now the meeting decorously proceeded as, with self-control, the magistrate resisted the opportunity for bringing the house down again with one of the jokes for which he was well known.²³ For a few moments, the formality and ritual of the meeting had given way to spontaneity and confusion but this had been contained.

The rest of the meeting does not take long to describe. With little discussion and no interruptions, the magistrate's proposal received unanimous support. The final formulation was that anyone (read adolescent girl) who heard someone (read adolescent boy) use a bad word should make a report to the municipal clerk (who happened to be the magistrate's wife) who would then impose a fine of five dollars on the offender. Following adoption of this regulation the meeting broke up into two sub-meetings. One was composed of all the island's girls (including the one who had inadvertently caused all the laughter). They withdrew from the meeting house accompanied by one of the senior women who told them the words they should report. The other sub-meeting was made up of all the island's boys. One of the old men, a recognised expert on words and their usage, listed for them the entire corpus of Tobian profanity. Many people who were neither adolescent nor "instructor" attended the sub-meeting appropriate for their sex where they offered many unsolicited comments. During the remainder of my stay on the island the boys were much more careful in their use of bad words and so far as I know only once did a girl make a complaint.

A few nights after the meeting the magistrate's adopted daughter, who had been one of the girls at the window, woke her mother. She told her that a middle-aged man had crept into her room and in the course of a seduction attempt had used one of the bad words.²⁴ On getting this report from his wife the next day, the magistrate realised that the net woven at the meeting had caught a rather bigger fish than intended. After consulting an old man who is the island's expert on words he decided not to impose the fine. "You see", he explained to me, "the old man told us that we could not fine that guy because when he said that bad word he was using it like you are supposed to use it." Hiding a grin, he finished, "After all, that is what the word 'fuck' is for." Since we all knew that the girl's brother had frightened away the would-be seducer with a length of two by four, and that informal but efficient social control would be exerted by the upswelling of gossip and rumour caused by this man's behaviour, the matter was dropped. In any event, as the following section of this paper makes clear, the egalitarian nature of the

Tobian social system made it impossible to impose the fine on such a person.

COUGH AND COMPLIANCE

The failure to impose the fine is best understood as part of a Tobian pattern in which five-dollar fines are continuously being voted to demonstrate the seriousness with which some issue is being taken. Such fines are never actually collected. The reason they are not collected is that there is no position in the society free enough from kinship and other reciprocal obligations to impose explicit and public negative sanctions on adults. That is to say, no one can directly tell anyone who is not a child what to do, and no one can punish anyone who is not a child even if he is senior to that person in an in-charge relationship. The extraordinary egalitarianism of Tobian society makes leadership totally a matter of persuasion achieved indirectly and by example.

The chief's cough during that meeting was a particularly vivid example of this style of leadership. It recalled people's attention to the chief and everyone, including the magistrate, responded. The response can be understood only as political compliance. And an examination of that moment reveals certain features of the relationship between compliance and authority in Tobian society, and perhaps other small, egalitarian societies as well.

When Murray Edelman proclaimed: "Compliance creates authority, not the other way around" it was clear what he meant, but he may have overstated his case (1964:145). He stated this in the context of a discussion of bureaucracies: their staffs, directors, clients and patrons. In such a complex social field there are many opportunities for evasion, deafness, and "missed communications" of one sort or another, so that elders are, to some extent, at the mercy of followers because those followers can always find ways to ignore orders. But in a social system like Tobi's, in which there are neither bureaux, nor departments, and neither classes nor parties, such acts of leadership as that cough leave little room for noncompliance. There was no way to be deaf in that meeting. A failure to stop laughing would have been a rejection of the moral order which the chief was indicating and which Tobians believe separates them from such non-existent "benchmarks" (the phrase is Edelman's 1977:29) as "ghosts", "people of the bush" and "Papuaans". There was no escape for those at the meeting; to remain good, in their own and their fellow Tobians' estimation, they had to stop laughing. Stopping laughing then reaffirmed for themselves and the chief that he was in charge of their society. Their action also validated for me their statements about the chief's role in their politics.

"Seeing how you are heard, reveals who you are" is an aphorism which seems to me to summarise much recent work in socio-linguistics and ethnomethodology. It also aptly points up how ethnography (or at least one style of ethnography) happens. When the chief coughed and everyone (including me) stopped laughing, I saw how he was heard and thus learned which of the at least two possible "whos" (mine or my informants') he was.²⁵ Naturally enough, my informants were proved right (it is their society after all). The chief was, in fact, a powerful person, just as has always been the case on Tobi. And the magistrate was revealed, by his response, to be the chief's agent.

In another, later, work Edelman wrote (1977): "It is language that evokes most of the political 'realities' people experience. The challenge is to learn how language and gestures are systematically transformed into complex cognitive structures."²⁶ Here again, his formulation may need some revision. It is clear that the "complex cognitive structures" having to do with the chief, the magistrate, the need for peace and the moral order in which it can thrive, pre-existed the cough. The cough simply called people's attention back to the moral order via the symbol of the chief. I think verbal performances and cognitive structures are better seen in a mutually reflective relationship than in one in which the cognitive structure is a mere transformation of the word. Furthermore, part of that relationship rests on symbolic processes. Political processes are more than cognitive, for they involve emotional structures as well.

In this paper I have maintained that the chief is a powerful political symbol for the Tobians. Recently two important papers have appeared which further our understanding of the symbolic aspects of leadership in small societies in the Pacific. Taken together, I think they can guide an explication of the chief as symbol.

Raymond Firth, in his latest discussion of Tikopian chiefs, develops the notion that they are possessed of a *numinous* quality (1979). His analysis is complex, hinging on a thorough treatment of *tapu* and *mana*, and I shall not summarise it here, but his description of the chief as numinous is very evocative of Tobi.

The Tikopia, a minute Polynesian community in a much larger Melanesian polity, cling to symbols of that community, especially symbols of a living order, their chief. Though these leaders have lost their former priestly role, their assumption of occasional or approaching divinity, and many of their formal ritual sanctions, the Tikopia still credit them with special mystical quality. . . There is plenty of individuality and dissension among the Tikopia, and plenty of self-interest. But they are still small enough in numbers, and knit closely enough in communication to take a unitary view about the

values of their society and their basic symbols. They are still in agreement about the need to preserve these (p.162).

With the substitution of "Tobi" for "Tikopia" and "Palau" for "Melanesia", this passage summarises the Tobian attitude towards their chief. For the Tobians he is an awesome figure. Like a Tikopian chief, he inspires reverence and respect because he is a powerful symbol of the social order which they hold dear. His ability to move people, to engage them, rests on this. It also rests on a more intimate symbolic equation. To explain this feature of the chief as symbol, I turn to a more psychoanalytically oriented theorist, Milford Spiro.

In a retrospective essay in George Spindler's *The Making of Psychological Anthropology*, Spiro reviews his Ifaluk material (1980). He succinctly sets out the crucial role which Ifaluk's chiefs play in obtaining compliance with the use of ghosts as a culturally constituted defence mechanism.²⁷ He develops the point that the chiefs are successful in this because, to the Ifaluk, the chief stands for the father.

In Ifaluk, the chiefs are moral mentors. At periodic assemblies they exhort the people to do "good", and much of this exhortation is concerned with admonitions to behave in accordance with the ethos of nonaggression The chiefs, to use their own expression, are the "fathers" of their people. Moreover, from observations of the Ifaluk in interaction with the chiefs, and from interviews and test protocols, it seemed as if, reciprocally, the chiefs were, in the people's eyes, benevolent parental figures, whose approval was of vital importance for their self-esteem and positive self-image. Desire for the approval of chiefs, and fear of their disapproval, seemed to be the most important social determinant of the Ifaluk adherence to the ethos of nonaggression."

This is also an excellent summary of how it is that the chief can lead people to act in a godly fashion on Tobi, where the word for father (*taama-or*) and the word for chief (*tamwoor*) profoundly resonate with each other (Quackenbush 1968:154, 179). To use Sapir's term, Tobi's chief is a condensation symbol, evoking the powerful emotions associated with the father in the service of society.

CONCLUSION

The organisational problem faced by the Tobians in recent times can be stated as follows: how can a decision-making structure geared to maintaining its socio-cultural system in homeostasis within a known and more or less predictable environment, be adopted to respond to a very different set of circumstances? The division of labour between the chief

and magistrate is the Tobian solution to this problem. Central to this solution is the preservation of chiefly legitimacy. To speak of the legitimacy of the Tobian chief is to speak of his numinous role as a condensation symbol in organising and focusing moral sentiments.

All three of the conditions specified by Gluckman for "peace in the feud" exist on Tobi. The many disputes which exist cross-cut one another in great profusion so that no permanent factions can form. The desire for peace grows out of the fear of negative consequences of public conflict and the recognised moral order is the ancient peacefulness reinforced by an indigenous interpretation of Catholicism. The chief's role in mobilising the cultural processes leading to adherence to that moral order makes of him the central political symbol.

Gluckman's argument is more subtle than it might first appear. He does not specify the mere existence of a moral order as a precondition for unity out of conflict. That moral order must be recognised by the parties to the various disputes and by the society at large. The culture does not simply "contain" disputes, with the disputants as somehow passive participants. Neither, in small egalitarian communities, are superordinates present who can impose dispute settlements and thus peace. Instead, the disputants must be actors engaged not only with each other but also with their culture." In order for this to occur, some social device must exist for stimulating that engagement. Leadership, on Tobi and in societies of its type, consists to a large degree in acting as that device.

On Tobi, the chief, when he acts *qua* chief, serves through symbolic processes to create that recognition of a general Tobian moral order in which interpersonal violence is prohibited and cheerfulness and Tobian-style godliness are required. When people say, on Tobi, that the chief is very powerful and that he is in charge of their society, they are declaring their adherence to that necessary (in their analysis and in mine) moral order. The process by which the chief calls that general moral order to his people's attention is well illustrated in the meeting about bad words.

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A total of two and one half years was spent with the Tobi people, six months at the Tobi settlement in Eang near Koror and the rest on the island itself. The first stay was as a Peace Corps Volunteer from 1967-68 and the second as a predoctoral researcher from 1972 to 1973. This latter period was financed by an NIMH grant (UPHS 5 TO1 MH 12766). This paper has gone through a number of versions and the case around which it is built appears in my dissertation (Black 1977). I wish to thank K. Avruch, D. Brenneis, E. Gerber, S. Krech, C. Lutz, K. Rosenblum and M. E. Spiro for their many helpful comments.

NOTES

1. Tobi's isolation apparently predates the modern era. Holden (1975) and Eilers (1936),

the two major sources for early Tobi, support the island's oral tradition on this point. Precontact Tobi was not part of any larger social system. Today, in addition to the Government visits, two other classes of ship reach Tobi. Once a year a U.S. Navy vessel visits for a few hours and three or four times a year fishing boats from such places as Taiwan, South Korea and Japan stay for about the same length of time.

The islanders take advantage of the visits of both kinds of ships to trade for cigarettes, flour and other necessities. In return, the American seamen get handicrafts while the fishermen take coconuts, water and an occasional chicken. Also reducing the island's isolation is a two-way radio which (when it is working) links the island to the Palau district communications net.

2. As of January 1, 1981, the District of Palau became the Republic of Palau, with Koror as its capital city. Tobi and the other former municipalities are now states. In Eang, along with the Tobians, live people from three similar islands, all lying south-west of Palau. These islands are Merir, Pulo Ana and Sonsoral. The linguistic and cultural affinities of these "Southwest Island People" (as they are known) are with other low island societies of the Trukic culture area and not with Palauan society, into which they have been injected for administrative convenience.
3. See, for example, Spiro (1952), Alkire (1965) and Lessa (1966).
4. For details of pre-Christian Tobian religion see Black (1978b), Barnard (1980), Holden (1975) and Eilers (1936). Conversion to Christianity occurred during the 1930s.
5. No priest lives on the island. On most trips a missionary from the Roman Catholic mission in Koror visits. He hears confessions, says Mass and regularises any births or deaths that have occurred in his absence. He also tries to help the community with its economic, educational and social difficulties.
6. The exceptions are a few plots held by two or more siblings. Probably co-ownership was more prevalent in a past made poor by dense population.
7. It is also possible to demonstrate that certain features of the disputes are adaptive in other ways as well. For example, the fact that no dispute is ever really settled ensures that a balance between resources and resource holders is maintained even in situations of rapid demographic change. Every resource is subject to multiple claims which are maintained even after the resource is "won" by one of the contenders. As circumstances change and the winning party finds itself unable to fully use the resource, competing claims resurface and the resource is (more or less painfully) reallocated.
8. This list of stereotypical disasters is what one is supposed to be enough afraid of to keep from acting in a hostile manner. Tobian folk psychology is relevant here. As nearly as I can tell, Tobians see fear as the major learned part of self-control. When they attend to questions of motive they seem to think that the "cause" of an action is to be found somewhere in the set of interpersonal relationships of the actor. For them it is not the "objective" gravity of the "cause" which determines the action, but rather the actor's assessment of his action's probable consequences.
9. It is interesting to observe the role of tobacco in all this. It forms an essential symbolic currency which is used in the management of interpersonal relations. Offering and accepting tobacco are acts of no little significance in this society of enthusiastic smokers. They mark an occasion as "happy". This would be all well and good except for the fact that periodic tobacco famines stalk the island. During the tobaccoless weeks just before the boat comes, social life is markedly less active and those encounters which do occur are much more difficult to mark as "happy".
10. An interesting relationship between personality and social structure can be seen here. The present chief is, by disposition I think, a somewhat retiring and diffident person. His likely successor is rather the opposite. When this man becomes chief, it will be interesting to watch any changes that take place in his style and in the norms governing

the role of chief. Related to this is the speculation that in a very small-scale society, norms governing the behaviour (as well as other attributes) of role incumbents are adaptive if they are left rather vague, thus making finding a successor easier, in a small population, than it would be otherwise. This certainly seems to be the case on Tobi, where the norms of behaviour of the chief are quite flexible and where the genealogical criteria for succession can be (and have been) rendered almost pointless by adoption. See Caughey (1980) for a description of chiefly character on Truk.

11. A man who claims to be the true chief of Tobi, who lives in Koror and who leads a tiny band of followers in a prolonged rearguard action against his victorious opponent, uses this same behaviour as evidence of the chief's perfidy. He claims this generosity to be merely a trick to disguise the many ways in which his enemy is economically exploiting his people. These charges are not taken very seriously by anyone else except various Palauan political figures who try to take advantage of the situation.
12. One of the most widely used provocations in disputes is to give the other instructions in how to do some task he or she is doing. Even though the instructions might be given in a pleasant tone, both parties recognise this as an aggressive act, which treats the target as a child. Conventionally, in communal projects in which a large number of people are engaged, everyone yells directions at everyone else.
13. In some other places in Micronesia, chiefs ran for and won the magistracy. On Tobi this did not happen for at least two reasons. The chief derives his legitimacy from his place above or at least outside the everyday hurly-burly of social life. To subject him to a vote would be to endanger his legitimacy. I am also not sure if the present chief thought he could win an election during those years when the political struggle surrounding his succession to the title was at its peak.
14. "Ideas to help the island" is a subclass of the Tobian category "idea", a borrowing from English which describes a plan to achieve some end. See Black (1977:253-275), for a discussion of this feature of Tobian culture.
15. A good deal of the bitterness to which the in charge system gives rise results from people's refusal to grant that those in charge of them do, in fact, have their best interests at heart.
16. See Gladwin for a description of a similar accommodation on Puluwat, another Carolinian low island (1970:20).
17. Tobian meetings are "cultural scenarios" (Scheffelin 1976) or "cultural productions" (MacCannell 1976): bounded and staged improvisations in which broad rules are followed but the actors are given considerable room for personal expression. Such situations are, as both Scheffelin and MacCannell point out, ideal for doing ethnography.
18. I think public obscenity is probably a cyclical phenomenon on Tobi. The main offenders against public decorum are boys in the 10 to 15 years range. As these boys become sexually active, the predominantly sexual orientation of the corpus of obscene words and expressions begins to draw their attention. Seeking to impress (mainly each other I think) they begin to use more and more obscene expressions in ever more shocking ways. Eventually, as was the case here, an "incident" occurs. A public outcry is raised and the atmosphere is cleansed until the next crop of boys demonstrates incomplete socialisation and maturity.

Compared to vernacular English, Tobian contains words for a much more detailed "mapping" or description of virtually every feature of the external genitalia of both sexes, in all states of arousal. All of these words are obscene and are not to be used in the presence of people with whom one stands in a respect position. Other "bad words" include borrowings from English and Japanese, words for certain sexually connotative sounds (as well as the sounds themselves), words for various overtly sexual acts and one term which can best be translated as "show off". This term, the only "bad word"

- which does not refer to a body part or its functioning, names the behaviour of those who change the way they normally act in order to try to impress someone of the opposite sex. This word is not only an insult, it is offensive and people who stand in a respect relationship with one another should not use it in one another's presence.
19. After about three-quarters of the population arrives for a meeting an amusing pattern appears. As each late person arrives he or she quickly takes a mental roll-call, determines who is not yet there and then loudly asks: "Where's so and so? Haven't they got here yet? They are always late!" or words to that effect. By doing this they focus attention away from their own tardiness and on to someone else's. I have occasionally seen this tactic used in such American contexts as faculty meetings. The difference is that on Tobi everyone who is late uses it at every meeting. The only exception is the chief, whose habitual tardiness may be role related. In any event, he neither uses this tactic himself nor is his name ever called out by others who do.
 20. An English borrowing "*stuck*" is used to describe the position of someone led into such a trap. The Tobian term for capsized is also used.
 21. In another paper I have described in greater detail the magistrate's control of another, much more serious, meeting (Black 1978a).
 22. I should also note that their ribald sense of humour is an important cultural counterpoint to the fear and caution mentioned earlier.
 23. Yolanda and Robert Murphy have pointed out that in the small-scale Amazonian society that they studied everyone was famous (1974). This is also the case on Tobi. There is a kind of marginal differentiation of personality within the Tobian community in which various people specialise in various traits for which they become known. One of the magistrate's specialties is making jokes.
 24. This was not an attempted rape, but rather a failed try at one of the accepted (by both sexes) patterns for acquiring a lover.
 25. In Werner and Manning's (1979) terms, this is an example of "tough-luck ethnography", meaning one never reaches real closure in ethnographic understanding. I suppose one could (with apologies to Clifford Geertz) call field research in which such a complete misreading of the native's political system occurred: "thick ethnography". Karen Rosenblum placed me in her debt by passing along the aphorism quoted in the text.
 26. Another of Edelman's ideas which repays consideration in the Micronesian context is that: "where bargaining resources are equal, participation produces real influence on who gets what. When they are strikingly unequal, . . . , participation becomes a symbol of influence that encourages quiescence, rather than substantive gains for the powerless" (1977:121). Anyone familiar with the course of the negotiations between representatives of the President of the United States and representatives of various Micronesian political entities over the future status of Micronesia can recognise the truth of that observation.
 27. In Spiro's comments on his material he speculates upon the effect of the introduction of the magistracy and the conversion to Christianity (both of which occurred on Ifaluk after his period of research) on the functions played by the institution of the chieftainship. The Tobian material suggests that Trukic societies can weather such innovations without undergoing fundamental change.
 28. A. A. Leontiev pointed towards the same concept when he wrote "Communication is not so much the interrelation of people in a society, but is primarily the interaction of people as members of a society" (1975:339).

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