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COMMESS: TRADITIONAL AND OFFICIAL FORMS OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Grace E. Morth

Introduction

One of the most often discussed phenomena in anthropology has been that of gossip. Quite recently a controversy has arisen concerning the function of gossip in social relations. Gluckman (1963) views gossip as an "acceptable socially instituted" (313) form of idle talk, the purpose of which is to control disputes and potential conflict situations. He takes issue (1968) with Paine (1967), who feels that gossip is an individualized transactional type of information management. Cox (1970) agrees with Paine and further suggests that gossip also serves political ends in that it can permit "an increase in one's own party's access to power" (89). Katz (in this volume) finds that none of the preceding orientations are mutually exclusive, in that gossip can serve all of these functions. More recently, Abrahams (1970) has discussed gossip as a type of communicative behavior which is performance-centered and which is judged by members of the speech community on the basis of rules governing proper form and content.

While all of these approaches are certainly valid, this paper takes a somewhat different orientation. A discussion of the nature of gossip as it is found in one community will be presented first. Here I hope to show that one assumption which both Gluckman and Abrahams seem to make is not as generally valid as they would suggest. This assumption concerns the dividing line between gossip and non-gossip. Gluckman says that "where the passing of information becomes the central theme of the conversation . . . we pass over the border of gossip" (1968: 33). Abrahams makes a distinction between gossip and malicious talk, the latter being somewhat out of the realm of normal gossip (1970: 297). On the basis of my research, I feel that none of the preceding criteria define the boundaries of gossip and suggest that perhaps there are no clearly definable boundaries in this informal domain. The "passing of information" is an integral part of all gossip although the participants may not recognize it as such. The distinction between malicious gossip and "normal" gossip seems a bit spurious. Gossip is so often scandalous that one could just as well suggest that normal, harmless talk is not gossip. I realize, of course, that there are exceptions to any proposition but with particular regard to Abrahams' paper, it is interesting to note that his research and the research presented here were conducted on the same Caribbean island -- St. Vincent. His findings may be valid for the predominantly East Indian community in which he worked, but they do not seem entirely applicable to other settlements.

A second purpose of this paper is to consider gossip as it exists within a larger frame of reference. Gossip conveys information concerning the activities and behavior of other individuals; comments regarding this behavior are based upon certain traditional codes of values, ethics and conduct. Gossip serves as a form of social control if the system of values also recognizes the impropriety of being gossiped about; it is a means of maintaining orderly social relations between individuals and

between groups. When this mechanism fails to insure order, however, there exist within the sociocultural system alternative ways of restoring order. As Nader says (1965: 23), "how people resolve conflicting interests and how they remedy strife situations is a problem with which all societies have to deal; and usually they find not one but many ways to handle grievances." It is in this realm of the alternative that gossip as a traditional form of social control articulates with official forms. When gossip results in a face-to-face confrontation, the participants can either choose from a set of traditional, sanctioned procedures to resolve the conflict or they can opt to settle their differences by external, official means which are not highly valued by the community.

The research presented in this paper was conducted in the north Windward community of Georgetown, St. Vincent, during June and July of 1971. The techniques employed in collecting data included formal and informal interviews with residents, participation in social affairs, attendance at the magistrate's court, and observation of day-to-day activities and special events.

Georgetown, with a present population of approximately 6,700 (1970 census), was established in 1814 in order to facilitate communication between Kingstown and the north Windward area. From this time until the decline of the sugar industry in the 1850's, the settlement served as a commercial, processing and shipping center for the surrounding estates. The sugar was usually processed in the Georgetown area and then shipped to Kingstown from the Georgetown pier or carried down the Windward road. Although the estates often had their own shops and service facilities, the industries and businesses in Georgetown provided for many of the estates' requirements.

The economic decline was combined with a series of natural disasters and with general peasant unrest. Riots occurred in 1862. In 1896 Georgetown and its immediate area were flooded by the Grand Sable River. In 1898 there was a hurricane and in 1902 the volcano, La Soufrière, erupted. Shortly after this there was another hurricane which demolished the pier-warehouse complex. Georgetown was again the center for riots in 1935, 1951 and 1962. The disturbances in 1962 permanently closed the sugar factory which was the only remaining industry.

At present the town has no major industries and there is small likelihood of future investment. There are many small, privately owned shops which sell basic commodities such as sugar, flour, tea, butter, liquor and perhaps a few drygoods and notions. There is also a woodworking shop, a laundry, a bakery and a handicraft co-operative. With the exception of the co-operative which is part of a government program, these businesses are family-owned and employ no more than five or six people who are usually family members themselves. Some residents own small plots of land in the mountains behind Georgetown where they produce ground provisions for their own consumption and a few banana stems which they sell to the Banana Growers Association. Many others find employment on the Mt. Bentinck, the Grand Sable, or the Orange Hill estates. This employment, however, is often part-time and lasts for a maximum of three days a week when bananas are

being cut, crated and transported to town for loading on the banana boat. A few women take in sewing or work as domestics in the homes of the more affluent. Both men and women work with government construction agencies, particularly on the roads.

There are various service agencies located in the town. The Anglican church has the largest membership and is followed in size by the Methodist congregation. There are other denominations and sects including Roman Catholics, Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentacostal, Baptist, and Shakers (the Converted). The Roman Catholic church runs a day nursery (crèche) for the children of working women. The charge is twenty-five cents a week subject to the woman's ability to pay. The government runs another, smaller nursery. There are also a hospital, library, and three schools: Bishop's College, a government school, and a Roman Catholic school.

Ethnically Georgetown is predominantly Black. There is one large family of Scottish descent and a few East Indian households. Each of these groups views the others with some contempt. The East Indians are called "coolies" by both the Blacks and the White family. The East Indians and the Whites don't want to associate with the Blacks. The Scottish family and several Black families are considered "uppity" by Blacks and East Indians alike. Those Blacks who are frowned upon by other Blacks are individuals who have become successful landowners and farmers, shopkeepers, and/or politicians.

In Georgetown the term which most closely approximates our word for gossip is cōmmiss. Cōmmiss, however, does not adhere entirely to our understanding of the term "gossip" since there are several levels of meaning and significance which are grouped under this one term. Basically, to make cōmmiss means to make talk about other people. (An individual who seems to always be making cōmmiss or who starts a certain cōmmiss item is called a cōmmiss-janga -- cōmmiss-maker.) Everyone with whom I spoke denied that they made cōmmiss. The reason given was that if one doesn't make cōmmiss, others won't make cōmmiss on him. With few exceptions, however, most people do participate in cōmmiss. A basic and perhaps most obvious rule is that the individual who is being talked about must not be present. Secondly, an individual must not make cōmmiss on his family or friends.

Among women the subject content of cōmmiss usually deals with breaches of proper conduct on the part of an individual. A woman's ability to maintain a proper household, to discipline her children, to conduct peaceable relations with her husband or with the man she is living with, and the immoral behavior of young girls in the town are all topics for cōmmiss. Very rarely are men the subject of cōmmiss. Cōmmiss among men is usually restricted to discussion of a man's sexual prowess, his friendin' relations or the number of babies he has made.

In any cōmmiss "session" the talk follows a particular format. For example, two women were sitting together late one afternoon. They were joined by a third woman who exchanged greetings and talk with the other

women. Eventually, Mrs. Louden, the third woman, without giving any indication that she was about to say something special, remarked that "Mrs. Gillin this very day chopped a boy in the head." Although neither of the two women had heard of this event, they did not ask for details or exhibit any great excitement. Mrs. Johnson simply said "True?" ("True" apparently acts as a verbal cue which indicates that more information is requested in order to clarify and perhaps substantiate the speaker's statement.) Mrs. Louden then gave the details of the incident. The woman had chopped the boy because he had said some bad words to her. She had chopped him so bad that he had to go to the hospital for two stitches. Mrs. Johnson then recalled that this woman, Mrs. Gillin, had been married but when her husband died she had married a young boy. "That boy he had been friendly with another girl his own age who made a baby for him. Then this woman she come and bought him away. She bought him a ring an' a suit for him an' she fed him sweets. That woman she led him around. She older, much older and she solid and settled." At this point Miss Raymond laughed and said, "Sweet meats do kill de goat." Mrs. Johnson then narrated another incident involving this woman. "Me sittin' on the porch on evening when this woman she come bawlin' by. Me ask she what distress her so. She told me her husband she sent to get some phensic [a patent medicine]. It took him some time being a Sunday night. He passed by a rum shop to get some an' his friends them inside. He was drinkin' nothin' but talkin'. She come by an' start shoutin' to him to come out. He come out to keep her quiet but she so vex she start going down the road to the police." Mrs. Louden commented, "She stupid; what she think the police them do?" The women then returned to a discussion of that day's event and each of them in turn condemned the woman for "misbehavin' bad."

From this episode certain features of the cōmmess format can be stated. In the first place, one would never be obvious about making cōmmess. Mrs. Louden spoke very casually when she presented her information and Miss Raymond and Mrs. Johnson responded in a similar manner. After this opening, the details of the incident are given. The subject's history is then reviewed. In this case, Mrs. Gillin had at least two points against her: she bribed a young man into marrying her and she wanted the police to handle a matter which should have been family business. Finally, a conclusion based upon the current event and the individual's history is reached. This conclusion reflects a consensus regarding the subject's general behavior.

The information transferred through cōmmess may be, as in the preceding example, rather harmless talk about someone. But cōmmess is also malicious talk. One woman in Georgetown was regarded as a cōmmess-janga. She always seemed to know what was happening and much of her cōmmess was scandalous or malicious. She was particularly malicious when making cōmmess on a certain woman. (This woman had apparently taken away the former's man.) She suggested that this woman had poisoned her husband and had committed other unmentionable acts. When making cōmmess, however, she followed the prescribed rules and the format and even her particularly virulent talk about the other woman was considered cōmmess by my informants.

Regardless of those precautions inherent in the cōmmiss rules which should insure that the subject doesn't hear the cōmmiss about himself, another characteristic of cōmmiss is that this individual will eventually learn of the talk. By the time any one item of cōmmiss has passed through-out the community and finally reaches the ears of its subject, he may feel that the original event, incident or behavior has become so elaborated and distorted as to be insulting. If this is the case, he will get the instigator's name, usually from the friend who told him of the cōmmiss in the first place, and will then decide upon his course of action with reference to several traditionally prescribed alternatives.

If the cōmmiss-maker and the subject of the cōmmiss were on speaking terms prior to the conflict, they will "settle." This simply means that the two parties will get together, discuss the misunderstanding and generally try to resolve their differences. If the individuals are barely acquainted and/or the subject feels the cōmmiss was particularly unwarranted, he can choose to "cuss." Unlike settling, which is usually done in private, cussing involves a public display. Here each party tries to "cuss no good thing"; each tries to better the other in the use of profanity and in making threats. The confrontation ends when one of the individuals tacitly admits defeat by leaving. The crowd of people which gathers in response to the loud cussing often sides with the individual who seems to be the better of the two in cussing and it is support from this body which may cause one of the parties to quit. Although cussing occasionally leads to a settling of the dispute, more often it escalates to a third alternative -- fighting.

In one instance, a woman who was living in Kingstown came to Georgetown looking for the man with whom she had been living. She supposedly had seven children by him and hadn't seen him in several weeks. After some time she heard that he had married a girl in Georgetown. She went to the girl's house and began to cuss her. The girl came out of the house and answered by cussing the older woman. This continued for at least 10 minutes until the older woman pushed the girl. The older woman had a physical advantage over the young girl so that the actual fight lasted for barely five minutes. When the girl could no longer fight, the woman started up the street in search of the man. She got only a few hundred feet when she discovered that her watch was missing. She went back to the girl and accused her of stealing it. She then ran into the house and began looking through the girl's clothing and down her bosom. The woman then realized that the watch had fallen off during the fight and that the girl hadn't taken it. Before she left, however, the woman took some of the girl's black lingerie and stuffed it down her bosom. The girl ran after the woman, grabbed her lingerie and the two cussed at each other until the older woman was out of sight.

During this scene 30 to 35 people had gathered along the street in order to watch the two women. Most of the support was for the young girl since "she cuss good, yes." The older woman's behavior regarding the watch also caused her to lose favor with the crowd. All of the individuals who gathered around the fight were women. The men remained on the

periphery, laughed and made comments to the effect that "them fight like that, we must be sweet so." Although neither of the women had "rights" to the man since he had a wife on another island, the cōmmess which was made during the days following this event indicated that the older woman was viewed as the troublemaker. The man had not married the girl; the woman was ill-tempered; and it was even suggested that her seven children were not by this man as she claimed.

Of these three possible ways in which a dispute can be resolved -- settle, cuss or fight -- only the latter two are included under a special term. Mélee refers to those public dramas which result from and are a part of cōmmess. Mélee as a public verbal or physical battle is a part of cōmmess in that it is a means of restoring order with the traditional framework. These three alternatives are not equally desirable, however. Settling is the most peaceful way of resolving conflict. Cussing is less desirable and fighting is generally condemned as unseemly. It appears, however, than even fighting is more agreeable than the fourth alternative. This fourth option consists of taking a case to the police and eventually to court.

Albert, a young man of about 24, registered a complaint with the police sergeant. He felt that his neighbors had been "makin' cōmmess on my mother; them say bad things. I don't like no confusion." He had gone to his neighbors and asked them if they had been saying certain things. When they denied it he went to his first cousin and asked if he had been making cōmmess on the mother. He also denied it. Albert decided that he was going to settle it so he asked the sergeant to come out to talk to his neighbors. The reaction to Albert and his plan was one of scorn and derision. "Why that boy and his mother don't handle their own affairs?" "The police them shouldn't be called on that business. What he think the police do?"

The courts, like the police, would seem to be an obvious means by which disputes could be settled. Generally, however, the nature of the cases brought into the Magistrate's Court in Georgetown indicates that individuals rarely utilize this alternative. Court is held every Monday from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., and from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Of the 46 cases that I heard presented to the magistrate, only one involved a charge made against one resident by another. This was a case of attempted rape. The remaining 45 cases resulted from police intervention. Twenty of these were disturbances of the public peace -- fist fights after a night of drinking rum. Twenty-three were for the use of indecent language in public places and two were for theft (coconuts and a pigeon). All but two of these cases involved men.

Summary

Cōmmess is a means of transferring information and a mechanism of social control. In making cōmmess there are rules and a format which should be followed; there is also a fairly standardized subject content for both men and women which serves to reinforce certain traditionally

valued codes of proper behavior. If interpersonal conflict resulting from cōmmess becomes imminent there are ways of resolving this disruption that meet, to a greater or lesser degree, with societal approval. Only in those rare instances where an individual is oblivious to general disapproval will disputes be removed from the traditional realm of resolution and into the official realm of police and court.