

Surprised by Common Sense: Local Understandings and the Management of Conflict on Tobi, Republic of Belau

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Conflict management is only possible in connection with conflict analysis.¹ This analysis may be an explicit, conscious, project; if not, it will be undertaken unconsciously and on the basis of unexamined assumptions. But, willy nilly, an analysis will be made. Just as the participants in a conflict must make it sensible to themselves, so must anyone else who is interested in it. Thus, every outsider involved with the dispute (whether researcher, observer, mediator, facilitator, arbitrator, or judge) carries out some kind of analysis. The question then arises: What prerequisites, if any, exist for a successful third party analysis of conflict? It seems to me that an awareness of the possibility of fundamental differences in deep cultural presuppositions is likely to yield productive understandings. This response raises another, methodological, question: How can the analyst discover the cultural assumptions about being and action at work in a given conflict?

One answer to this question takes advantage of the capacity for introspection and self-awareness that is as much a feature of the humanity that the analyst shares with the parties as is the need to constitute social reality through cultural means. Much can be learned about both sets of cultural presuppositions in use (the analyst's and the parties') if the analyst remains as alert to his or her own internal world as to the actions and statements of the parties. For when the assumptions about being and behavior with which the analyst is interpreting actions or statements are radically different from those that the parties are using in constituting those statements and behaviors, the analyst is bound to be *surprised* at some point in the proceedings. It is this surprise that is the main

methodological resource available to the analyst. If it is attended to, that is, if the analyst investigates this surprise, much can be learned.

The surprise that occurs when one's fundamental assumptions are violated results from the predictive, interpretive, or explanatory failure of those assumptions. In other words, the analyst finds that people are saying and/or doing surprising things, things that are unexpected, things that the analyst had not predicted, things that initially at least make no sense. The effort to make sense of those statements or behaviors provides the opportunity to recognize and rethink one's own assumptions and to "question" the parties about theirs through the use of methods developed in the social sciences.

It is very easy, however, to waste such an opportunity. This happens when one's own assumptions remain unexamined and the surprising statements or behaviors of others are "explained" by the kind of ratiocination that does away with all observed difference by forcing it onto a procrustean theoretical or metatheoretical framework. Procrustes, it will be remembered, was the mythical Greek robber who mutilated his guests/victims by chopping off any of their limbs that were too large to fit in the bed he offered them for the night. As an analytic methodology in the explanation of difference, such a maneuver leaves unexamined the assumptions out of which that "bed" (the analyst's theoretical framework) is constructed. It produces statements that are notable at times for the ingenuity with which they translate the seemingly inexplicable into an expression of the analyst's own theory of being and action. Such statements, though, *explain away* surprising variance as often as they explicate it. In this chapter I demonstrate that a less "imperial" analytic maneuver, one that features an inspection of both sets of differing assumptions, can lead to a deeper level of understanding. To do so I detail the dramatic events surrounding a suspected murder attempt on the remote Micronesian island of Tobi.

In 1973 someone apparently attempted to kill the island's nurse. As a result of that event the islanders held a meeting in which an effort was made to identify the guilty party. Despite this meeting it remained unclear whether anyone did learn the identity of the guilty party, or even if there had been an attempted murder at all. Regardless of its "investigative" success or failure, however, in the estimation of the Tobi-ans the meeting worked very well. From my point of view, too, the meeting was far from a waste; I learned much of value. This chapter describes that discovery process; it is part of a more general argument on behalf of a culturally informed perspective in conflict analysis and resolution.

BACKGROUND

Tobi is a small coral island with a total land area of slightly less than one quarter of a square mile. It lies in the extreme southwestern corner

of the emerging Republic of Belau in what was American-administered Micronesia. Now a state in the Republic, when these events occurred Tobi formed a municipality within Palau District of the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific and, as such, was administered from Koror, district capital and historic center of Palauan affairs, four-hundred miles away. Although closely linked to Palau by political, economic, and (to a lesser extent) social ties, in language and culture Tobians displayed much greater similarity to the inhabitants of the numerous low islands east of Palau than they did to the people of Palau proper. At the time of my studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s there were usually fifty to sixty people residing on the island and another forty to fifty of their fellows living in Eang, the Tobian settlement in Koror.

Political power on the island was split between the traditional chief (who was not present during the events discussed here) and the elected magistrate who was responsible for most government programs and for the collection of taxes. The magistrate's position was created by the Trust Territory government in the 1950s, and the power of the magistrate, as opposed to that of the traditional chief, was usually limited to his official government duties.

Tobi was visited three or four times a year by a government-chartered ship from Koror. This ship was the only way to travel to or from the island. Along with Tobian passengers, it carried representatives of most departments of the District Government, a priest from the Catholic mission in Koror, and an agent or two from a commercial company. During the four or five hours the ship was at the island the government officials attempted to carry out their mandated duties, the priest ministered to this remotest segment of his far-flung flock (all Tobians have been Roman Catholics since their conversion from their indigenous religion in the 1930s), and the commercial agents bought copra from the Tobians and sold them tobacco, rice, kerosene, and other goods not produced locally. Notwithstanding these imports, the Tobian economy was still largely self-sufficient in all essentials, and as such was characterized by relations of generalized reciprocity and a sexual division of labor.

Men produced foodstuffs from the ocean and women grew taro and other crops in their gardens. Social life centered around the household kitchens of married couples where the products of male and female labor were combined into meals to which people living in households without active kitchens were drawn. These people contributed the fruits of their own activities to those meals and constituted a kind of ready-made clique for the owners of the kitchen. Six exogamous, matrilineal clans divided the population while extensive agnatic and affinal ties wove people together.

The field trip was the sole contact the islanders had with the mission, the traders, and all but two of the government departments. These two exceptions were the Education Department, which had hired and trained

a Tobian as the principal and sole teacher of Tobi's elementary school, and the Department of Public Health, which staffed Tobi's dispensary with a nurse, a native Micronesian. This nurse, a part-Tobian from one of Palau's other outer islands, was the man someone may have tried to kill.

Word of this event was shocking and frightening to everyone who heard it, including me, but I was less surprised when it happened, I think, than I would have been a few months earlier. For by then I had been associated with the Tobians for some time and had come to be aware of the strong currents of hostility and fear that flowed below the pleasant surface of life on the island.

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

At the time of the attack, I had been living on Tobi for six months while I carried out general ethnographic research. Five years earlier I had lived for a year on the island as a Peace Corps Volunteer and I had also spent a total of six months with Tobians in Koror. By now the Tobians' ability to sustain a harmonious and cooperative tone in their social life had become a matter of some interest to me. The longer I spent with Tobians, the more I understood the depth and extent of the many interest disputes that divided them.² The fact that these disputes did not disrupt the cooperative relations upon which social life was built—each person had to, could, and did draw on the labor of everyone else, including his or her worst enemy—was impressive. Further, as I learned of the many antipathies and deep hostilities that characterized the islanders' feelings for one another, I was impressed by the unfailing cheerfulness with which people interacted and the skill with which they used humor and soft words to defuse tense situations. Thus, by the time of the events described here, conflict and conflict-related phenomena had become the main focus of my work. I had collected a large number of stories of past conflicts and had begun to map the dense web of disputes and conflicts to which every Tobian was party.

On Tobi, disputes were generally acknowledged and managed in an extremely indirect fashion. The expression of overt conflict, or even its direct acknowledgment, was resisted because of the Tobian truism that to do so would bring on disaster by endangering the essential web of relationships of mutual support (particularly in the exchange of labor and food) which bound everyone to everyone else. Tobian techniques of conflict management, as might be expected in light of the foregoing, also tend to be very inexplicit and to operate in rather indirect and subtle ways.

Numerous multigenerational disputes over land, political office, and marriage resulted in a network of unacknowledged but universally

known alliances and oppositions. The long-term nature of these interest disputes was a result of the lack of finality accorded to outcomes—no victory was ever complete, no defeat ever final. The small size of the population means that the demographic balance between resource-holding groups (primarily extended families) changes rapidly from one generation to the next. These changing fortunes often led to the inability of victorious families to retain their prizes and the ability of their opponents to reverse their parents' or grandparents' losses. Thus, long-term strategies played a large role in these disputes. This accords well with a general Tobian attitude toward social life that puts high value on the use of well-thought-out plans for the achievement of goals both large and small. Their "strategic orientation" also helps to explain the characteristic indirection and lack of finality in almost every dimension of the social organization of conflict.

I first glimpsed this culturally constituted stance toward conflict in the way in which the game of checkers had been culturally transformed. In its Tobian version, the game was essentially the competitive display of a comprehensive strategy that, used by a local master, was unbeatable. When two such masters played, the outcome was always a draw unless one of them made an error. When a master played a novice, the novice always lost. The challenge to the novice was to learn the strategy. This was difficult because the only people who could accept direct tuition without losing respect were small children. Unless the novice was a child, therefore, he or she had to try to deduce the strategy through quick-witted observation. This could take some time; the masters seemed to take as much or even more pride in their ability to keep the strategy secret through various types of mystification as they did in its actual use.

If the master's opponent was a small child, the situation was quite different. In such a case, after the four or five moves necessary to capture all the child's pieces, the master would explain why each of the child's moves was a mistake. The strategy was never unveiled directly, but the child was offered this instruction as part of the generalized role relationship of child to adult. While it is interesting to note that these children had yet to develop the cognitive capacity to master the strategy revealed in this fashion, another feature of this interaction disclosed much more about Tobian attitudes toward contests and disputes. Masters did not at all "play down" to children in the way that would be appropriate in many American contexts.

In the Tobian view of things there was no need to "protect" a child in a competitive game with an adult; such losses were not thought to be painful. This surprising realization led to one of the earliest insights I developed about Tobian interest disputes: Losses (and wins) were thought to be the consequences of the operation of long-term strategies much more than they were thought to be emotionally laden revelations

of, or judgments upon, some inner self. The latter stance reflects the unexamined American assumptions about persons, disputes, and competitive games which I brought with me to the island.

This is not to say that Tobians did not, on occasion, feel defeat and victory intensely, but this emotional response was not given the cultural validation that it receives in many other, more individualistic, societies. It was especially neglected vis-à-vis that network of covert multigenerational interest disputes that united all Tobians at the same time it separated them.

Other contests revealed other dimensions of Tobian attitudes toward conflict—Tobian ethnoconflict knowledge. For example, a tendency to shortcut competition when it became clear who the winner would be can be seen in both the tendency of runners to drop out of any foot race once a clear leader emerged as well as in the way in which cock fights were always terminated as soon as one of the roosters (much cossetted pets of teen-aged boys) seemed to dominate the other—almost always before any blood was drawn.³

In virtually every Tobian context great emphasis was placed on the maintenance of positive relations with others, no matter what the provocation. And, while a detached cultural stance, one that minimized the emotional component of interest disputes, fit well with this emphasis, it should not be thought that these disputes were, in fact, affect-free. Furthermore, the flow of day-to-day life also gave rise to strong passions, many of them negative.

Marital difficulties, sibling rivalry, intergenerational and cross-gender ambivalence, and the more occasional frictions of everyday life all were evident both to me and to the Tobians. The failure of these passions to penetrate everyday life was for the Tobians one of the great achievements of their collective life. By the time of the attempted murder I had ceased to explain it away as evidence of mass hypocrisy (as my unexamined, taken-for-granted assumptions had led me to); it had become instead an important research problem. As I investigated it I came to believe that this ability of individuals who detested one another (by their own and others' accounts) to cooperate, not only in the day-to-day labor and resource sharing upon which subsistence depended, but also in the creation of a general atmosphere of great good humor and what seemed to be genuine good will, was in fact the major indigenous technique for conflict management.

At the same time, I was learning to see past the easy assumption that the functional requirement of mutual labor exchange, together with the lack of permanent factions due to the ways in which disputes cross-cut each other, somehow "explained" that ability. Instead, I was beginning to understand that this ability rested on a complex combination of a number of factors. These included: (1) the displacement of interpersonal

anxiety and hostility onto evil ghosts (Spiro 1952); (2) a continuous use of the all-encompassing gossip network for indirect confrontation and reconciliation; (3) a constant ritual reaffirmation of the sacred character of the community's collective life through twice daily religious services attended by the entire populace; (4) a political system in which the major, indeed almost the sole, responsibility of the chief was to monitor the flow of daily life and to recall everyone's attention to the collective values of nonaggression and cheerful cooperation when they seemed threatened by the imminent surfacing of conflict; (5) the use of recreational and ritual contexts (dances especially) to symbolize enduring structural tensions and the drastic consequences that would flow from their "real world" expression; (6) a complex "conflict vocabulary" that mapped the local typology of disputes and the escalation and management of overt conflict with great vividness; and (7) a large body of customary rules for the minimization of direct competition, the prevention of face-to-face confrontation, and, when all else failed, the rapid defusing and deescalation of overt conflict.

What I had yet to detect at this stage, however, was the underlying cultural logic that made all the various elements of this combination sensible for the Tobians. The meeting that followed the attempted murder provided the occasion for an episode that surprised me into that knowledge.

It is interesting to note that even without "deep" knowledge of the underlying cultural structure, I was increasingly integrated into everyday life on the island. As one of the island's able-bodied men, I took part in many of its collective activities—not just as an observer (with camera and notebook always at hand), but as a participant. My ability to speak a fluent (if still at times inadequate) Tobian helped in this as did the fact that one of the island's main families had become my "family away from my family." The recent departure of my wife and infant son had increased dramatically the amount of time I spent with my Tobian hosts and the depth of my involvement in their activities.

As I gradually grew more proficient at such male skills as roof thatching, canoe handling, and fishing, I played an ever more active role in the domestic economy of the family with whom I lived. Of course, I never achieved the kind of mastery of these activities that a lifetime of practice gave the other men. One thing I never did learn to do was to climb coconut trees. This meant that I was unable to collect the sap used in making coconut toddy. Toddy manufacture required that a man climb twice a day up into the crown of a specially chosen coconut tree to tap its sap. This sap could then either be given to the very old or the very young as a kind of "health food," or fermented into a powerful alcoholic drink and made the occasion for a party. Along with turtle hunting, tuna fishing, and other male pursuits, toddy production was one of the

major vehicles for the subtle and unexpressed but, nevertheless, very real competition between men. As a non-toddy maker I had no part in that aspect of this competition. On the other hand, I was considered to be an expert in all things pertaining to the modern world, the mastery of which was another arena for male competition. Given the high value then placed on all things American by the Tobians, this meant that I was continually being asked to give advice on the best ways to deal with that world and its increasing demands on the island. Thus, during the events surrounding the attempted murder I was asked over and over again if there was some special American detective technique that could be used.

THE "CRIME"

Early one evening the nurse's teen-aged son came running over to the house where some friends and I were sitting. Gasping and out of breath, he announced that his father had fallen from his toddy tree. He had been climbing in it when a frond broke. Bruised and shaken he had managed to drag himself back to the dispensary. When he got there he told his son what had happened and that when he had examined the broken frond he could see that it had been partially severed by a knife.

We immediately rushed to the dispensary where the nurse and his family lived. Many of the other adults and children on the island had already arrived and during the next few minutes everyone else appeared. There was a great deal of nervousness as the implications of what had happened became clear. People wondered if someone had gone crazy or if an evil ghost had decided to try to claim a human life. He wondered if others besides the nurse were potential victims and if the culprit would strike again. It was then that a story of an earlier case of attempted murder began to be told and retold. It had happened some thirty years earlier, shortly after the island's mass conversion to Christianity. Like the present case it involved an attack by an unknown person. As the story was repeated, first by the elders and then by everyone else, it assumed the status of a kind of template for action. Therefore, it is necessary to recount it here.

An Attempted Poisoning

As the story was told, a Tobian, suspecting from its appearance that something was wrong with the toddy that he had just collected, tested the sap on his dog, which promptly convulsed and died. Deciding that someone had tried to poison him, the intended victim appealed for help to Perfecto, the powerful, if informal, leader of the 150 people then living on Tobi. Since they were now Christians, the old technique for dealing with such a situation (which relied on the use of spirits to publicly identify the culprit) was no longer available.

At the close of communal prayers later that same morning Perfecto asked the congregation to wait on the steps of the church before going home for breakfast. He told them that something serious had happened. All but one of the people did as he asked and soon a meeting was underway to find the person who had put poison in the collecting cup. The one person who did not participate in the meeting was the old brother of the absent chief who, by prearrangement with Perfecto, had remained hidden inside the church where he could secretly observe the meeting. Perfecto began the meeting by telling the assembled crowd what had happened. He then demanded of each man in turn: "Did you try to kill him?" Each man in turn denied any guilt. But when one man, the husband of the intended victim's lover, was asked the question, he betrayed his guilt to the chief's brother, his intended victim, and the men sitting on either side of him by a nearly imperceptible trembling, by a fractional widening of his eyes, by a darkening of his lips, and by a lightening of his complexion. To these men, and perhaps to others, his denial rang hollow in the face of such obvious signs of fear.

Having completed his questioning of each man, Perfecto, much to the surprise of his audience, called the chief's brother out from the church. "Now do you know who did it?" Perfecto asked. "I know!" the old man answered with a shout that caused the culprit to jump. "Good," replied Perfecto, "this meeting is over, you can all go eat now." Everyone went home to breakfast. The man who had found the poison in his cup said nothing at the time but that night he went secretly to the house of his lover's husband and asked if he had tried to kill him. The culprit admitted his guilt, apologized, and presented his intended victim with some of the gifts that symbolize contrition—tobacco, cloth, and tumeric. Perhaps the intended victim did not believe that he was out of danger even after this customary presentation that, as was appropriate, he reciprocated on the following day. At any rate, he avoided future relations with the man who attempted to kill him by taking the next ship to Koror never to return.

This story (as well as the description of the pre-Christian technique) was repeated constantly during the course of the evening following the nurse's fall from his toddy tree. Initially, the story had been known only to the oldest people on the island. As the evening wore on, it became part of the vast body of public knowledge that all Tobians shared and used in the construction of daily life. Many people did not sleep well that night; several groups stayed awake until dawn speculating and telling stories.

Early the next morning the magistrate, the school teacher, and I (at the magistrate's request) went to investigate. The Tobians pointed out that the frond indeed seemed to have been partially severed, apparently with a sharp knife. Furthermore, the other fronds leading up into the tree as well as those in the crown thirty feet above the ground, where the nurse always sat while collecting his toddy, were also partially cut through. Several conclusions were drawn. We thought that the nurse had been lucky that the lowest of the severed fronds had given way on

him. His injuries (a bruised shoulder and a sandy ear) would have been much more severe if he had fallen the thirty feet from the top of the tree and not merely the ten feet from the frond that had given way on him. We agreed that he was lucky that the previous afternoon's spring tide had cleared the beach under his tree of the stones and driftwood that usually littered it. We noted, however, that the culprit was also lucky because that same high tide had eliminated his tracks. Since everyone knows everyone else's footprints, whoever had done this would not have remained unknown but for that tide. The edges of the cut fronds seemed to indicate that a very sharp knife had been used. This led to the belief that the culprit was a man because women do not possess such knives.

The magistrate told us that we would have a meeting to find out who had tried to commit the murder as soon as we had eaten our breakfast and he had finished with his morning chores. So at 9:30 that morning we found ourselves outside the church waiting for everyone to arrive and the meeting to get underway. While we waited the gathering crowd discussed the attempt on the nurse's life. The old people discussed the ways that such situations had been dealt with in the past and, even though they had heard this many times in the hours that had passed since the crime, the young people listened attentively and asked many questions. People also wondered if I knew any special American techniques for discovering the identity of the person who had tried to kill the nurse.

They were disappointed when I had nothing to offer. Several people intimated that as Tobians they did have a technique and that I would be impressed by it. They also made sure that I knew how to tell if someone was guilty. They advised me to look for the same signs of fear that were recounted in the story of the attempted poisoning: darkened lips, widened eyes, lightened complexion, and trembling. They also took delight in quietly asking me, just as they asked one another, if I had any idea who had done it. I replied that I did not (which was true) and listened carefully to the tentatively offered suggestions people were willing to give me. Many such conversations had been held since the news of the nurse's fall had spread. At last the magistrate arrived at the church and the meeting began.

THE MEETING

As soon as he was sure that everyone except the nurse (who was said to be too sore to attend) was present, the magistrate began. He asked the men to form a circle and requested that the women sit apart. Three times he carefully and with exhaustive detail described the events that had led up to the meeting. After each recital he paused, looked around, and made a comment to the effect that it was "bad" to have such a thing occur. He pointed to the fact that there were outsiders on the island (the

nurse, his son, and me) and to the possibility that after such an event no other nurse would accept an assignment on Tobi. During this part of the proceedings, the magistrate had what appeared to be the undivided attention of the whole population, including the toddlers and women. He next asked the women if they had witnessed anything the day before that could shed any light on the matter. One by one, the women related what they had been doing the previous afternoon. None of them had seen anything suspicious.

The magistrate then mentioned the fact that only someone with a sharp knife would have sliced the fronds. He turned to the men and asked about some of the teen-aged boys—whom they had been playing with the day before and what time they had come home. As they answered these questions about their dependents (who were all sitting in the men's circle watching and listening), the men started to give details about their own activities during the time in question. None of them had seen anything and all, in effect, denied that they were anywhere near the tree during the time it must have been cut. I took part by recounting where I had been during that time.

The magistrate next let it be known that he had not yet reported the matter to the police and would prefer not to do so. Several of the old women heatedly disagreed with this and he gave way, saying that it would be reported and that he would request that a policeman be sent down on the next ship to investigate. His agreement was only reluctantly given because he was worried that he would have to go to Koror if any court proceedings developed from the case. The old women wanted it reported so that a graphic lesson would be taught to all potential killers. During these discussions, people asked my opinion of the situation and I mostly echoed the magistrate's words. I also took extensive notes of conversations, interactions, and behaviors.

Throughout the meeting, the magistrate used a variety of techniques to alternate periods of focused excitement with periods of relaxed confusion. Following each of the periods of intense discussion and questioning he rather obviously loosened the meeting's atmosphere by ostentatiously rolling a cigarette or asking someone to roll one for him, picking up and tickling one of the small children darting in and out of the group, or some other maneuver that indicated a kind of "time out." Then after a few moments in which people relaxed and discussion began to fragment and go off in various directions, he refocused attention on the issue at hand and began to increase the tension. There were three of these cycles, and each one was more intense than the last.

Each time he called attention back to the meeting's topic he emphatically stated how bad it was that something like this had happened and then went on to make statements about how the fact that there were only a few people on the island meant that we all had to help one another

and about how the fact that there was neither policeman nor court meant that we had to take care of our own problems. He also repeatedly pointed out how hard life would be without a nurse on the island. These sermon-like speeches were aimed at the middle of the circle in which the men were sitting; the magistrate seemed to be taking pains to avoid the appearance that his remarks were addressed to anyone in particular.

I sat next to the nurse's son at the meeting. As the discussion about whether the police should be brought in was being resolved, he leaned over and asked if I had found the culprit. When I responded by asking if *he* had any idea, he furtively nodded toward one of the older men who was sitting by himself. This man's face was immobile, his features carefully arranged in the noncommittal expression worn by all the men in the moments when they were not speaking. He had not said a word thus far and he had placed himself apart from the rest of the people. When I walked over to sit next to him, he nodded at my camera and told me to take pictures of all the people—meaning, I thought, that as far as he was concerned they were all equally suspect.

Once again the magistrate turned to the women and asked two of the teen-aged girls if they had seen anything. The girls, who had not previously spoken, replied with detailed itemizations of their activities during the previous afternoon. Just as it was becoming clear that they had seen nothing which directly bore on the issue, an old man interrupted the proceedings, stating that he had been on the beach the previous afternoon and had seen a set of footprints leading toward the nurse's tree.

Amid the gasps produced by this dramatic announcement and before anyone could question him, the magistrate's wife pointed at a naked toddler on the steps of the church. "Stop that baby," she shrieked. "He is going into the church without any clothes on!" I was sitting in the door of the church so it was I who stopped the wayward infant from committing a minor sacrilege. Since I, as well as others around the church door, had spent the better part of the meeting quietly preventing just such innocent desecration, the cry of the magistrate's wife was almost as startling as the old man's announcement.

As I turned back toward the meeting, I saw that she had risen to her feet and was about to strike the torpedo shell that served as a church bell. She rang it twice, everyone stood up, the magistrate led us in a recital of a Hail Mary, and we all went home to eat lunch. I was completely amazed by this sudden termination of the meeting. Why was the meeting being stopped just when it seemed to be getting to the point?

AFTERMATH

Throughout the following afternoon and evening people enthusiastically discussed and rediscussed the events of the meeting. Two or three

would gather in an out-of-the-way spot, someone would ask whom the others thought the culprit was, and be met in turn with the same question. Names would eventually be traded off. As the day drew to a close, more and more unanimity was achieved. By the time people started to go to bed everyone agreed that the culprit was the man the nurse's son had pointed out to me during the meeting even though he had shown none of the revelatory signs, nor had he jumped when the old man announced he had seen the footprints.

I was not the only one to watch that man with care in the days that followed. Because his toddy tree was at the opposite end of the village from his home, he had to walk through the village and past the dispensary to reach it. Twice a day he made that trip under the close but disguised scrutiny of one and all. As he passed the dispensary on the first evening after the meeting, he simply kept walking with his head bowed. He did not stop and talk with the nurse as was his usual practice. The following morning he stopped briefly and spoke with some of the people awaiting treatment but did not go in the dispensary for his customary cup of coffee. That evening he spoke with the nurse outside the dispensary in full view of the village. By the fourth day relations between the two men were back on their old footing. They were again spending their evenings drinking coffee, playing cards, and, in general, acting as though nothing had occurred.

Three months later when the next field trip arrived all traces of the incident had disappeared. The policeman who arrived on that ship at the magistrate's request to investigate the crime could find no one who would name a suspect, the severed fronds had grown back, and it was no longer possible to distinguish any alteration in the behavior of victim, suspect, or anyone else that could be linked to the attempted murder. By this time too, an alternative hypothesis had started to gain adherents. When I left the island five months later, most people were saying that it was likely that the nurse, known to be subject to fainting spells, had fallen from the tree by accident and had been so embarrassed at this grossly incompetent behavior that he had climbed back into the tree and cut the fronds himself. Among the factors that led the people I knew best to decide that no crime had taken place were the rock-like normality of the suspect's behavior and his refusal, so far as we knew, to provide an apology to the nurse.

The "decriminalization" of the nurse's fall meant that new explanations had to be sought for the very behaviors that had led people to believe the suspect was guilty in the first place. Everyone could now agree that the reason he had not shown the expected fear signs was that he was not, in fact, guilty. No longer was it necessary to hold to the paradoxical belief that this very lack of somatic evidence of intense fear was an indication of guilt. It had been thought that only someone with

something to hide would have acted the way he had acted in the meeting. Adherents of this view had claimed that he kept himself apart and failed to talk because he was concentrating on maintaining a smooth facade. They had claimed that he had not jumped when the old man made his claim to have seen incriminating footprints (a spurious claim the old man later admitted to have been planned by the magistrate and his wife) because too much time had elapsed between the supposed sighting and that dramatic announcement for the claim to have been true. Originally, people had asserted that the suspect had instantaneously deduced that such an explosive discovery could never have been kept secret overnight. After deciding that he was innocent, it was no longer necessary to consider him so quick-witted. The alleged motives for the crime also had to be reassessed. This did not prove difficult because no one had ever come up with a very powerful motive for the crime in the first place.

Initially, the Tobians had seemed to me remarkably unconcerned with the culprit's motivation. For example, very little of the premeeting speculation focused on the question of who among us had the strongest reason to wish harm to the nurse. It was only after the meeting and after consensus had been temporarily reached on the name of the culprit, that people were willing to discuss seriously why he might have attempted such a crime. After a good deal of searching, people did come up with a list of reasons for anger between the nurse and this man. All the items on this list shared one common attribute: they were all minor, petty irritants common to the relations among most adults on the island. It turned out, that is, that these two men composed one of the few adult pairs not divided by antagonisms over resources.

Although the man we all suspected was implicated in a number of sub rosa, long-term interest disputes, none of the disputes involved the nurse. This meant that none of us could find what we viewed as a sufficient objective reason for him to have wanted the nurse's death. No one could see how the nurse's death would have been to his advantage. Furthermore, since the nurse was also a contender in several disputes, it was obvious that there were others whose interests would have been served by his death. It surprised me at the time that the "motiveless" nature of the crime never appeared to be of much concern to the populace.

This surprise, along with my astonishment at the abrupt, seemingly premature termination of the meeting, led me to trace out the differences in the way my Tobian hosts and I were thinking about these events and the people involved in them. It at last became apparent that an important aspect of those differences derived from the contrasting ideas we were using about human nature. And, as I began to grasp the model of human nature with which the Tobians seemed to be operating, I saw, too, the "common sense" assumptions that underlay Tobian ethnocon-

flict theory and praxis. These assumptions are part of a local theory of the person, or folk psychology.

TOBIAN FOLK PSYCHOLOGY AND THE MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT

In common with other Micronesian peoples, Tobians hold a markedly interpersonal perspective on the self, focusing much more on the relations between persons than they do on the isolated individual and his or her internal states (Caughey 1977; Lutz 1988). Even when an individual's behavior becomes the subject of intense scrutiny and discussion, this generally remains the case. Yet occasionally, when forced by the logic of events, Tobians do talk about what they call "our insides," that is the private, inner world. When they do they tend to focus on "fear" and its social uses.

In Tobian opinion, an individual is capable of almost any act. It is only "fear," they believe, which makes people exercise control over hostile and antisocial urges. Fear, in turn, is closely related to "shame." Shame at its most intense can lead to such extreme acts as suicide or murder. This explains the cultural logic that lay behind the magistrate's (and before him Perfecto's) meeting. Tobian folk knowledge holds that public recognition of a fault or defect is extremely shameful, the anticipation of great shame is frightening, and fear is always indicated by certain bodily signs. Given this knowledge, the method used in the meetings for uncovering the culprit is sensible. Furthermore, as long as the culprit shares the assumptions, the method is bound to work—if only by making him or her afraid to appear afraid. Also, given these same assumptions, the lack of motivation for the crime was not a problem. It could be said, as indeed it was in answer to my inquiries, that the man we all suspected was a fearless person. A person without fear might do anything, thus placing the entire society at risk. And the meeting that resulted from the crime was, in essence, an attempt to teach, or reteach, fear, not only to the culprit but to everyone else. The entire meeting, including the way it ended, was built on this set of assumptions.

It took me some time to see this because their perspectives differed sharply from mine. I was operating with the hydraulic Freudianism characteristic of both American social science and American common sense.

In the Freudian view of things, behavior is psychologically determined. Fear (stigmatized as "anxiety") is largely dysfunctional and should be overcome; hostility cannot be indefinitely contained by will; a truly motiveless attack is the act of a mad man. Such a view makes the kind of hearing/trial that I took the meeting to be an occasion to discover important truths about motives so that individual responsibility can be

assigned and justice can be done. These were the assumptions that were structuring my expectations and that led me to be so surprised at the way the meeting ended. From the point of view of the Tobians, though, that ending made perfect sense.

Announcing that footprints had been seen was equivalent to announcing that the guilty party was known. In light of the excitement and fear this announcement was designed to provoke, a rapid defusing of the situation was imperative. This was, in the Tobian view of things, the most dangerous moment in the whole event. A direct accusation at this point, either by one of the more excitable members of the crowd or by one of the nurse's close friends or relatives, could have brought on an even worse situation.

The meeting, like Perfecto's before it, was designed to accomplish three things: the identification of a culprit, the prevention of further disruption, and the enforcement of social control over everyone's behavior. The differences between the two meetings resulted from the different weights the two men gave to these goals and this, in turn, was the result of changes in the Tobian setting. The decline in population and the growth of the settlement in Koror since the time of the earlier meeting clearly influenced the way the magistrate ran his meeting and they provide at least a partial explanation for its differences from Perfecto's.

In discussions during and after the events the magistrate made it plain that his highest priority was the prevention of any direct confrontation that he thought would lead to an outbreak of overt hostility and the departure, on the next available ship, of substantial numbers of people. Given the small size of the population, he feared that were this to happen the remaining community would be too small to sustain itself and would soon be forced to abandon the island.

Although the magistrate placed a different emphasis on the goals of the meeting than Perfecto had, he neither abandoned the old goals nor sought new ones. Both men used similar methods to reach similar goals. This impressive continuity in both methods and goals in the face of drastic change in the sociocultural environment is due to the persistence of Tobian understandings about human nature. Both meetings were designed to trap the culprit into self-identification by the production of somatic indicators of fear. Both used the method of creating excitement and tension through the threat of public exposure to trigger those signs. Both intervened at the moment of maximum intensity to terminate the meeting and move the conflict out of the direct gaze of the community. The next steps could only occur privately, as the two individuals involved acted to bring their relationship back to the state in which mutual cooperation and cheerful interaction could be possible.

DISCUSSION

Conceptions of being and action are profoundly implicated in processes of conflict and its management and resolution. Such conceptions, which are an important element of particular, local cultures are themselves inevitably local. It is possible, and sometimes even analytically useful, to strip away the "localness" of a conflict. Any thorough understanding of the conflict itself (and thus any possibility for the intelligent facilitation of its management or resolution), however, is dependent on coming to grips with the set of ideas, assumptions, values, and beliefs about human beings and their conflicts that are in play. Such presuppositions are implicated in disputes in two ways.

People use cultural presuppositions to interpret the past as they construct sensible narratives about their own and others' behavior. One way to think about this retrospective-constitutive use of cultural knowledge is to imagine social life as a fluid and disordered (or at best, only semi-ordered) stream of interaction and communication. We bring order to that stream by selecting "events" that can be linked together in culturally appropriate ways. We make sense of, and in, the social world in which we are so inescapably embedded by creating such narratives. In a situation of conflict, these narratives become the contested discourse that makes sensible the various strategies followed by the parties. All the effort that everyone put into reconstructing the events that led up to that meeting, and the constant negotiation and renegotiation of different reconstructions and interpretations, illustrate this point.

The use of local common sense about humans and their conflicts in this retrospective fashion is complemented by its use in projecting behavior and its consequences into the future. People involved in conflicts make use of cultural presuppositions in order to predict future states and actions of the self and others involved in the conflict and to script behavior accordingly. This prospective-constitutive use of cultural presuppositions underlies the creation of both conscious and unconscious strategies for behavior and their implementation and modification.⁴ The argument about whether to call in the police was in essence an argument about the future course of the case, and was predicated on differing projections of the future state of relations on the island.

Understanding the common sense that is being used retrospectively and prospectively by disputants is thus crucial for any understanding of the dispute itself. If and when third parties are involved such an understanding is a necessary prerequisite for any intervention that is to have more than a random choice of success at resolving the conflict. When the analyst or intervenor is socially and culturally distant from the disputants, the first step in this process is to recognize that an un-

familiar common sense about people and their disputes may very well be a crucial component of the conflict at issue.

A difficulty may occur when the intervenor or analyst, unaware of the local nature of his or her own presuppositions, unconsciously assumes that they are shared with the disputants. Attributing universality to one's own cultural presuppositions is probably one of the most common assumptions about assumptions or metaassumptions made by humans. Such an assumption, even when wrong, may not *always* be a problem since misunderstandings at this "deep" level may be quite irrelevant to either interaction or relationship. For example, as I noted above, I had become relatively well integrated into the community's life even though I had not noticed how differently my hosts and I thought about psychological reality. My unconscious metaassumption—that they shared my assumptions—did not seriously interfere with this integration. When issues of conflict management arose, however, this metaassumption proved a serious impediment to understanding what was going on.

This leads to the observation that when issues of conflict management or resolution are involved, an outside intervenor's assumption of universality may have quite damaging results. Changes in behavior (or at least the *interpretation* of behavior) of one or more of the parties is what intervention is designed to achieve. Since cultural assumptions of the type discussed here are one of the most powerful determinants of both behavior and its interpretation, clarity about them in the context of conflict management or resolution is essential. Although my role in the events described here was not that of an intervenor, the many misunderstandings that hindered my interpretation of what was going on (from my continuous misunderstanding of the story of the earlier case to my surprise at the way the meeting ended) are a sobering reminder of how unexamined assumptions of universality can lead one badly astray.

The management of aggression and, especially, interpersonal violence, is a significant problem in small, close-knit groups. The inhabitants of an island such as Tobi live in a world more closed than most, a world in which both space and cooperation are at a premium. In such a world the expression of hostility through violent behavior can set in motion a sequence of events that will disrupt the harmony necessary for communal existence. Based on their indigenous understandings of human nature, the Tobians have created a sociocultural world that allows them to make their ability to cooperate in achieving pleasant, cooperative social relations, their main technique for managing conflict. This case, although not a dispute in the sense we commonly assign to that word—after all, who were the disputants, what was the dispute about?—nevertheless provides a particularly rich example of the mobilization of those un-

derstandings. Before I could learn what this case had to teach me, however, I first had to learn from my astonishment at the way it ended.

Surprise can be used as a methodological tool to lead to an awareness of the analyst's own fundamental assumptions, the ways in which they differ from others' assumptions, and then perhaps to a deeper understanding of the cultural presuppositions at play in any given situation of conflict. And it is through such an understanding that conflict can be analyzed so that it becomes sensible to all participants and, hence, at least potentially amenable to management or even resolution.

NOTES

The research upon which this chapter is based was undertaken with support from a NIMH Grant (UPHS 5 TO1 MH 12766). I wish to thank B. D. Webster and my coeditors for their useful suggestions. I have described the events at the center of this chapter elsewhere (Black 1976, 1979). I choose to re-present that case here in order to develop the argument for a culturally informed perspective in conflict analysis and resolution. I will build upon my two earlier discussions of the case in which I used it to illustrate the characteristics of Tobian behavioral routines (1976), and to describe the evolution of a Micronesian dispute-processing procedure as well as to probe questions of conflict management and reconciliation in Tobian society (1979). This case can sustain reanalysis both because it is very well documented and because, like any complex human reality, it resists a complete and final mapping.

1. If one distinguishes between conflict management, thought of as processing of conflict for socially useful ends, and conflict resolution, which involves the transcendence of conflict, the case under discussion here is an example of the former.

2. By "interest disputes" I mean contexts over the control of resources. Land is the fundamental resource; marriage and political office provide avenues to its control.

3. In their characteristic pattern these cock fights also demonstrated a high degree of both fascination with and discomfort at possible physical confrontation between men. The high-pitched laughter and near frantic excitement of the teen-aged owners contrasted strongly with the rather apathetic behavior of the roosters as they were pushed at each other. It is also of interest that the bigger boy was always announced the winner (Geertz 1973).

4. See Geertz (1983) for the classic statement of the importance of this kind of knowledge for understanding behavior and interpreting meaning.

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