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Ruatoki North/Waikirikiri area and 23 in Ngahina/Owhakatoro; data were obtained on 181 and 123 individuals respectively. For further information on the survey and some preliminary findings see Benton 1975, 1979a, 1979b. Statistics on the extent to which Maori is known and used in the community refer to the survey sample. The present report is a revised version, augmented by 1978 data, of a paper given at the Second New Zealand Linguistics Conference, Wellington, August 1978.

3. When the proportion of people in a given social group able to understand a particular language falls below 71 percent, that language will become increasingly less useful, as there is a less than even chance that any two people in a random encounter would both be able to either use or understand it. If at the same time a second language is known by 71 percent or more of the population, it is likely to gain ground rapidly. This may help to explain why the shift from Maori to English in many formerly completely Maori-speaking communities has occurred so rapidly in the last decade. I am indebted to my colleague Dr Eddie Kuo, of the University of Singapore, for this insight.
4. Transcriptions are in conventional English and Maori orthography. Examples are accompanied by an English translation of the Maori portions of the text (in parentheses). These translations are as close to the style of the Maori as is possible, and additional explanatory material, where needed, is enclosed in square brackets. In dialogues, speakers are identified by fictitious names (with a unique name assigned to each individual). Proper names in the texts have also been changed to ensure anonymity. The new names have been derived from the same sources as the ones they replace (English given names, English nicknames, Maori transliterations of English names, etc.). Where relevant, the age of the speaker has been indicated in parentheses following the name, and the year in which the recording was made given at the end of the extract.

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WHO SPEAKS HERE? FORMALITY AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER IN MENDI, HIGHLAND PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Consideration of male/female relations in Mendi poses problems for a general understanding of the politics of gender in the New Guinea highlands. Highlands societies are famous in the anthropological literature for sex antagonism and male dominance, and yet, in Mendi, women cannot simply be considered socially subordinate to men. While throughout the highlands, political values emphasise equality, consensus and individual autonomy among men, in Mendi, relations between men and women appear balanced too. For example, in Mendi, unlike the Mt Hagen area (M. Strathern 1972), women have their own exchange partners and may be involved in exchange autonomously from their husbands and brothers (Lederman 1979). But despite their involvement in the daily give and take of pearlshells, pigs and Papua New Guinea currency on a footing apparently equal to men, Mendi women are on the sidelines at large-scale ceremonial prestations. Just like women elsewhere in the highlands, Mendi women are not orators and they do not publicly distribute wealth on these occasions. How are we to understand female reticence at formal exchange events? Are the exchanges in which women participate merely a means to the end of public male distributions, or do they have their own rationale? Have ceremonial, male-dominated events been over-valued by anthropologists, misled by the bustle and fanfare that attend them?

Questions were raised in my mind about the significance of such formal events in Mendi by a very large community meeting, held in late June, 1978, at the main ceremonial ground of the Mendi tribe with whom I lived. The meeting was held, ostensibly, to discuss the organising and timing of Suolol's *sai pombe*, an important parade festival that would signal, to other tribes up and down the Mendi Valley, Suolol's intention to hold a major pig kill in the next year.¹ At the meeting, which I will describe below, the pre-eminent big-man of the locality spoke eloquently, advocating a course of action differing from that of other leaders attending the meeting. His words were very well received and his

last speech closed the meeting. It seemed that he had carried the day. Two days later, however, I was surprised to find people doing the opposite of what they had been, apparently, firmly set on doing at the end of the meeting.

On the face of things, this pattern is a familiar one in anthropological discussions of decision-making, political meetings or "councils", and oratory, especially in "egalitarian" societies (see, for example, Bloch 1975; Richards and Kuper 1971). In consensus-oriented polities like Mendi, effective decisions (that is, ones that make a difference to the people involved) appear to be made in informal contexts, and not at formal public meetings, which frequently frustrate anthropologists either with their inconclusiveness or with their seemingly predetermined outcomes.

In this article, however, I will argue that the meeting mattered, and that the Suolol leader's speeches there were quite effective. Despite their relative egalitarianism—even for the highlands—an ideology of gender hierarchy constitutes the tacitly accepted background of belief for both men and women in Mendi. In what follows, I will show how this ideology is used to structure certain formal meetings so as to give special cultural weight to male, corporate-group action. Effective speechmaking in this context defines and constrains individual action in particular ways that informal discussions do not. This conclusion echoes certain points made by Maurice Bloch in his Malinowski Memorial Lecture (Bloch 1977) about the relationship between formal or ritualised events, "social structure" and the amount of instituted hierarchy, but brings to bear on his thesis material from an unlikely source.

VEILED SPEECH AND THE POLITICS OF CONSENSUS

In his early discussion of leadership and consensus in the eastern highlands of New Guinea, Kenneth Read (1959) noted two "antithetical orientations", perhaps generally present in highlands societies: "strength" and "equivalence". They describe the tension Read observed in highlands political life between assertions of personal autonomy and of the need for concerted group action. In the highlands, this tension is not resolved by the existence of a centralised political authority that can be turned to in disputes and decision-making. The social control of violence, as well as the social possibility of collective action, becomes, in effect, the responsibility of everyone.

Andrew Strathern (1975) argues that the use of indirect, allusive language is a tool that makes social control in this social context possible, and his discussion applies equally to the Mendi case. Strathern describes how indirect, "veiled" speech is used in a range of situations, from

children's games and courting songs to ceremonial oratory. This kind of speech can be used to focus attention on the speaker and perhaps thereby enhance his prestige. But it has a further important role to play: "veiled" speech in the context of disputes is used "to express . . . suspicions and aggressive intentions while at the same time not revealing these so openly as to provoke violence or to preclude a settlement" (199). Strathern argues that whereas direct questions, challenges or insults may provoke violence, indirect speech preserves social relationships while still conveying information about the contentious issues. This sort of language "is part of the total set of controls over, and cues about, the aggressive intentions of the parties at the meeting" (193). Elaborate, indirect speech puts a damper on aggression in the context of disputes and makes possible amicable settlements in the absence of a mediating authority.

The political significance of "veiled" speech in decentralised, egalitarian polities, standing in for central political authority in more hierarchically organised political systems, has been widely noted (see, for example, Brenneis 1978; Keenan 1974; Rosaldo 1973). New, "direct" forms of political discourse, associated with the imposition of modern national governments and centrally controlled court systems, contrast with traditional forms of speech which aim, through slowly drawn out discussion, to arrive at a settlement of complex disputes. This contrast highlights the apparent close fit between indirection and egalitarianism. As Rosaldo observed of the Ilongot (Philippines), the differences between direct, "straight" speech introduced by central government representatives, and circuitous traditional speech heard in egalitarian meetings, go along with different attitudes to human motives and truth. While direct speech in the modern context refers to a higher authority (to the courts, to God) as the source of truth and legitimacy, the use of indirect language in traditional dispute settlement refers to the community, and reflects the idea that people are "equal, individual and difficult to understand" (Rosaldo 1973: 221). For the New Guinea highlands, in particular, "veiled" speech resolves the tension Read described between "equivalence" and "strength". The ambiguity inherent in this form of speech makes possible a certain *flexibility* of response on the part of people addressed by it.

But allusive speech is not used in relatively egalitarian societies only. It is also used in hierarchic systems of traditional authority such as that of the Merina of Madagascar. According to Maurice Bloch, formal oratory of Merina leaders is highly indirect. But these allusive speeches *constrain* the response of those who allow themselves to be addressed in this way. Like Strathern, Bloch considers indirect speech as a mechanism of social control, but he describes a very different relationship between speech and

social relationships from that implied by Strathern:

It is because the formalization of language is a way whereby one speaker can coerce the response of another, that it can be seen as a form of social control. It is really a type of communication where rebellion is impossible and only revolution is feasible (Bloch 1975: 20).

Indirect speech, then, appears in a range of political types, and is not associated exclusively with egalitarian societies. Wherever it appears, it merely reflects and helps to support the existing political relations. Thus, its ambiguity serves coercive ends in Merina society and non-coercive ones in Mendi. It might be added that the effect of direct speech also varies with existing political relations. While all direct speech is characterised by some degree of pressure by the speaker for a response, it facilitates modern authoritarian relationships in some cases (Rosaldo 1973), and relationships between equals in others (Brenneis 1980; Bloch 1971). Neither indirect nor direct speech is a political fact in itself.

However, the *formality* of discourse—those special conventions and ritualised restrictions as to participants, place and behaviour which make discourse proper and unquestionable or sanctified because it is “traditional” (see, for example, Bloch 1975, 1977)—may be quite important politically. Like allusive speech forms, formality occurs in both authoritarian and egalitarian societies. While Bloch (1975) is right in stating that that formality in the highlands is not as elaborated as in Merina, still, some Mendi situations are relatively more formal than others. But, unlike the speech forms discussed above, the effects of formality do *not* vary with political type: it will be seen that formality in Mendi is constraining in ways similar to formality among the Merina, even though it is conveyed differently in each case. Indirect speech itself makes a situation “formal” in Merina society. But, in egalitarian societies like those in the highlands where “veiled” speech styles comparable to Merina oratory operate in both formal and informal settings, formality is mostly conveyed by non-linguistic aspects of events, as I will show in the next section.

My consideration of formality will reveal that individual autonomy and flexibility, and competitive balance among equals are only part of the political picture. It also includes sex antagonism and an ideology of male superiority (see, for example, Brown and Buchbinder 1976; Meggitt 1964; M. Strathern 1972). Looking at how access to formal contexts of discourse is restricted—asking who can and who cannot speak here—it is seen that formal Mendi meetings are male, and that women as a whole are excluded. To discover what difference this exclusion makes—what it is that women can and cannot do and how these things are valued—is to

identify the “political” meaning of gender in formal settings.

For the purposes of this article, “political” relations refer not only to the way access to a given set of culturally valued resources is restricted for certain people (or “statuses”) and not others, or the way in which a particular given social order is maintained and enforced; they also refer to the way in which this social order and these valuations are themselves created and reproduced, or denied and transformed. Formal occasions may help to reproduce these valuations and differential restrictions in the face of other values and relationships implicit in informal contexts (compare Bloch 1977). The significant political distinction between egalitarian societies like those in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, and traditional non-egalitarian societies like that of the Merina, may have to do with differences in the relationship between formal and informal contexts within each society.² These assumptions imply that, while attention will be focused on an account of a formal meeting in the present discussion, the significance of that event for an understanding of Mendi political relations cannot be appreciated without also considering the informal social context in which women are active and verbal participants, and to which the apparently “unconstrained” response of men to the big-man’s speeches related. What this informal context is will be elaborated in the next two sections. The existence of such contradictions does not show the meeting up for a fraud. However, it does enable us to go beyond Read’s early hints about the complexity and tension upon which highlands egalitarian politics are built.

A MENDI MEETING

Sai pombe refers to a parade of two or three days’ duration held to announce the inception of the last (approximately year-long) phase of preparations for the pig festival (*sai le*) in Mendi. This series of events extends over about 12 years for any particular tribe. Neighbouring and distant allies are invited to participate in full dress at the *sai pombe*, and are rewarded for doing so with pearlshells and money. This payment is partly in return for payments made to the current hosts when they were invited as guests to the *sai pombe* of their allies, years earlier. Preparations for the parade involve readying sugar-cane and sweet potatoes for guests, renting feather head-dresses, buying tree oil and accumulating pearlshells to be used as body decorations and as gifts for invited paraders, organising invitations and preparing the parade grounds. There is, in other words, a large mobilisation of wealth and energy. Converted into modern Papua New Guinea currency, their final *sai pombe* was estimated to have “cost” the Senkere community and their allies about K20,000 (or approximately US\$29,000 at 1978 exchange rates).

In Senkere, past parades have been marked by a degree of competition between allies, expressed in two ways. First of all, the current hosts may try to surpass the past hosting performance of their current guests in the overall scale of their parade by inviting more contingents of paraders from a wider array of clans. People in Senkere were planning to invite, among others, members of a branch of Suolol who live outside the Mendi Valley in Ialibu, quite a distance away.

Competition may also be expressed in attempts by the guests to set the parade date for their hosts, forcing the hosts into holding the event before they are really ready with their own body decorations and with wealth to give to guest paraders, and so embarrassing them. Thus, 12 years before the meeting in question, some men from two Suolol clans had paraded in the ceremonial ground of an allied tribe, Surup, members of which were planning their *sai pombe* before their own *sai le* pig kill of 1967. This Suolol parade had overtones of a sneak attack since no Surups ("not even a dog!" in some Suolol accounts) were present, having gone off to participate as guests in a parade in another part of the valley at the time. During Suolol's victorious parade in Surup's empty ceremonial ground, a trade store was alleged to have burned down, and ever since, according to Suolol informants, the Surup had hung a tin of fish from the store in the rafters of one of their men's club houses as a reminder of the insult—much as they might have hung up the bones of a prominent clansman killed in battle to remind them of a death to be avenged.

The meeting in question followed several months of heightening discord between members of Surup and two Senkere subclans over a series of recent deaths and sorcery accusations. Surup leaders (partly at the urging of at least one member of a third Senkere Suolol subclan which had sided with them in these disputes) had been threatening for some time to set the date for the *sai pombe*, and had announced that they would parade at Senkere at the end of that week, while even the most eager people in Senkere were arguing for a date two weeks after that. The meeting was called on a Monday to discuss community policy with respect to Surup's intended parade. It contrasted with *ad hoc* meetings which had preceded it in that members of interested neighbouring groups were invited to attend, and that it was announced widely within the Senkere community (indeed, more than 100 people came, an unusually large gathering). It took place in Senkere *koma*, the main ceremonial ground in the area. Some of the shells intended as payment to parade guests were publicly displayed and counted at this meeting, and members of two subclans, whose wild pandanus trees happened to be bearing then, made a harvesting expedition to bring back nuts to bake at the meeting to draw people to it.

The main question to be settled at the meeting was to what extent members of Suolol were going to sanction the almost inevitable Surup parade at Senkere.³ The most important big-man in the community, Olonda, had been arguing for some time that only Surup should parade this time and that Suolol and its other allies should parade later on. A possible explanation for his position was his history of poor relations with Surup stretching back 15 years. The leverage he brought to bear on his side was that (1) he was organising the collection of shell wealth which would be given to Surup *if* they came to the *sai pombe* sponsored by Suolol, and (2) he had taken another initiative, making the long trip to Ialibu to inform the people there when they should plan to come (that is, on a date he wanted, not on Surup's date). He recognised, as did everyone, that he had no control over when or whether Surup came (short of violence, that is). He believed firmly, however, that no one else should join Surup if they came that week, and if they came then he was determined that no shells were to be distributed to them.

On the other side, members of Surup had also met and conveyed to observers from Suolol that they wished their parade to be the final one before Suolol's pig kill. Using their geographic position as leverage, they threatened to close the road to the Ialibu contingent if the latter came to a Suolol parade held after the Surup affair. The few Surup who came to the Senkere meeting arrived late and spoke little. They expressed their group's readiness to parade, and their perplexity at Suolol's state of disunity and unpreparedness that week.

A third position, advocated by Pua (an influential man and subclan brother of Olonda, but no orator), was that some people ought to dress up and participate when Surup came to parade in Senkere, but that a second, Suolol-sponsored parade should also take place later. Some such participation would be a way of admitting good-spirited capitulation by conferring some legitimacy on Surup's parade, and would help to right the balance of intergroup relations.

The discussion preceding Olonda's speeches concerned the preparations remaining for the Suolol *sai pombe*, and a full range of attitudes to Surup's plans. Many outsiders from neighbouring clans expressed confusion over why more Surup were not in attendance (there were only two present, clan brothers of the wife of one local man). They asserted that Surup and Suolol were important allies and, as "brothers", must decide together about when the parade should happen. Several of them commented that dissension like that between Surup and Suolol boded ill for the parade as the purpose of the parade was to strengthen alliances between groups.

When Olonda rose to speak, he reviewed the history of Surup/Suolol

rivalry, simply noting that Suolol had paraded twice during the Surup *sai pombe* 12 years ago. "What will happen now?" he asked the few Surup men present; they did not answer. In this way, he played down Suolol's first, aggressive parade at Surup's place by emphasising that Suolol had also paraded with Surup at the parade that Surup themselves had sponsored afterwards. He implied that Surup ought to do the same, this time. He then addressed members of the other tribes in attendance directly, summarised the discussion, but added his own twist. Only Surup would parade that week because Suolol was not ready. This was because the branch of Suolol living in Kuma, a large community in the north-eastern part of Suolol's territory, had not yet repaid 12 shells which they owed to Senkere Suolol. These were shells that Senkere branch of Suolol had presented to the Kuma branch on the occasion of Kuma's own *sai pombe*, which had been held six months earlier. Just before that parade, a respected member of the Senkere community had died, a death in which Surup and one Suolol subclan were purportedly implicated and which prevented men from Senkere Suolol from parading at Kuma as they would have liked had they not been in mourning. Kuma, as everyone present knew, had to make their repayment if they were to participate without shame. Furthermore, a parade without Kuma was not possible. Co-ordination with the Kuma Suolol in the completion of the pig-kill cycle had been a central concern all year. Without such co-ordination, the pig kill would not compare favourably with other recent ones. This was a principle with which everyone in the community agreed. The point Olonda was making was that, regardless of the readiness of individual Senkere men with their own personal parade decorations, Suolol as a proper *sem onda* (tribe) was not ready to hold its parade that week. There was a general fear in the Senkere community that if the co-ordination with Kuma was dropped in this parade context, it might fail over the pig kill as well, which would be devastating for Suolol's reputation, already damaged by its internal political disputes.

This speech had the effect of galvanising the outsiders, who confirmed that they would parade at the second Senkere *sai pombe*, and not at the one Surup was sponsoring that week. They emphasised that Suolol and Surup are "brothers", that they wanted to contribute to a large and good festival, and that they would help to bring other groups of paraders there. They clearly supported Olonda's position that the parade that week was Surup's affair alone.

Some people present thought the meeting should have ended there, and they raised their shovels to the pandanus nut oven, but they were stopped by others who had more to say. Much divisive talk, referring to intra-Suolol conflicts followed, during which Olonda tried with great

flourish, but no success, to reassert control over the discussion. He repeated his point that the matter was out of the hands of Senkere men. Participants from other tribes strongly supported this argument in their speeches as well, and, after a while—and one final performance by Olonda—harmony was restored. One of the men who had sponsored the pandanus collection applauded, others joined him (perhaps following Western custom), and the meeting ended with the opening of the oven and the distribution of the nuts.

Although there was no definitive summary statement, and no vote taken, it seemed clear (and the discussion subsequent to the meeting confirmed for me) that the parade that week was considered to be Surup's affair, and that no one from the Senkere area would participate actively in the event. If the outcome of the meeting was not completely predetermined, it did seem to illustrate the centrality of the pre-eminent big-man and of speechmaking in shaping collective decisions.

Two days later, on Wednesday, however, I became aware that many men in the Senkere area were busily preparing their wigs and feather head-dresses for the Surup parade. On Monday evening and all day on Tuesday, Pua and others privately argued that people in Senkere should parade with Surup, and as it turned out, they did exactly that. It seemed to me then that Olonda's well-received speeches had had no practical effect, and that the meeting had had no particular importance, despite all the fanfare. People had acted as individuals, and had taken matters into their own hands as events of the moment moved them—a practice perfectly in keeping with the ethos of autonomy I had come to appreciate in Mendi. Not only did more than a quarter of the young and adult men of Senkere Suolol parade with Surup (even going to some Surup localities and accompanying the Surup paraders to Senkere on Friday), but also Pua found a way to make a shell payment to some Surup on Sunday, after the parading was over. At that distribution (a compensation for a ceremonial axe broken during the parade), the Surup—who included two big-men, important exchange partners of Pua's—expressed pleasure that Suolol men had participated with them in the *sai pombe* and satisfaction in repaying Suolol for the latter's previous parade aggression. Most significantly, they agreed, at Pua's insistence, not to close the road to the Ialibu contingent whom Olonda had invited to come to the Suolol *sai pombe* (which took place at the beginning of September, and far outstripped Surup's event in size).

Responding to my expressions of confusion during the following week, Pua explained the outcome to me by saying that Olonda had not done enough "quiet", private lobbying. The implication was that it was in private contexts that practical decisions about action are made, and

not in public meetings. He recounted other times when leaders got up to speak without first turning over the ground privately. His comments and those of other participants in the Surup parade suggested to me the practical importance of informal talk in individual decision-making.

However, these comments did not really answer my questions about what the meeting had accomplished. This was because private and public discussions concern two different categories of social relationship—that of the ‘personal network’ (*iwem*) and of the ‘corporate group’ (*sem onda*, what I have been calling “tribe” or “clan”)—each of which constrains individual action, sometimes in mutually contradictory ways.

Private, informal discussions concern obligations people have to their ‘personal networks’ of exchange partners, though group affairs may also be spoken about in this context. Both men and women, adults as well as unmarried people take part in these discussions all the time. Obligations to exchange partners (who may include affines, cognatic kin and unrelated people) centre around debts and credits in pigs, pearlshells, Papua New Guinea currency, or other items required in marriage and death payments and other minor transactions, but also involve general hospitality and mutual aid, including support during parades. If it was true that Olonda had not done enough private lobbying, then perhaps he did not appreciate the current extent of such personal obligations between particular Senkere Suolol men and members of Surup. On the one hand, had he lobbied intensively, he might have been able to convince or pressure more Suolol men into not parading that week. On the other hand, given the extent of Suolol’s internal conflicts and coordination problems, it is doubtful that his public rhetoric could have been softened in any case. He was consistently concerned about Suolol’s strength and consistently identified his own standing with that of the tribe. It is possible that if he had not argued so strongly for a separate Suolol *sai pombe*, it might never have happened.

Thus, the private lobbying to which Pua referred concerned decisions about personal obligations of Suolol men to their Surup exchange partners, and not any new consensus about the timing of Suolol’s *sai pombe*. Those who participated in the Surup affair were people like Pua who had important obligations to their Surup exchange partners. These people had indeed acted “as individuals”; the point is that Olonda had done his best at the meeting to ensure that they could not, in fact, do otherwise. Even Pua’s pearlshell distribution to Surup did not make the participation of Suolol men anything more than personal, although it did create enough ambiguity to save the face of his Surup big-man exchange partners, and thereby enable them to back down from their threats to close the road.

Public discussion concerns *sem onda* action almost exclusively: large pig kills, war-death compensation payments, large “fertility” cults. During formal, public discussions, attention is focused on the group significance of events, even though the personal obligations of group members to exchange partners in other groups may also be fulfilled at these events. The meeting was not, then, merely a ratification or summation of many individual decisions, nor was it undone by the individual actions that followed. The successful staging and harmonious outcome of the meeting were significant, not so much because they could determine what actions would take place, but because they shaped a particular and widespread public understanding *about the group meaning of subsequent actions*.

These understandings were, of course, considerations in the private decisions for action which people made, and had many practical effects on the lives of both those who paraded that week with Surup and those who did not. At the least, the new timing and the general importance of Suolol’s own *sai pombe* at Senkere two months later (in which most Suolol men participated, including most of those who paraded the first time with Surup) created problems of resource allocation for many people. Men with Surup exchange partners and affines had to manage their debt and credits very carefully in order to be able to participate in two separate parades. Personal exchange relationships were strained, and a few appeared to break down as a result.

HOW FORMALITY CONVEYS GROUP GOALS

Compared with formal meetings in more hierarchic societies (see, for example, Bloch 1975; Richards and Kuper 1971), the Senkere meeting was anarchic and unstructured. There was no “chair” to control access to the floor, no vote was taken, and people were not bound by any of the recommendations men made. In contrast to some formal meetings elsewhere, too, matters of substance, over which participants had some control, were discussed, and opposing points of view were aired directly (compare Bloch 1971). But, like formal, institutionalised “council” meetings in other societies, the structure of the meeting was different from the more common sort of discussions in which people in Mendi engage. The participants, also, insisted that the meeting was different from the smaller, informal discussions about the parade which had preceded and followed it. But, to my knowledge, they did not distinguish formal from informal meetings by citing characteristic *speech forms* associated with each. Rather they explicated the distinction by pointing to the *social context* in which discussion occurred. People referred descriptively to ‘quiet talk’ (*ngail sub*) in a person’s house as being dif-

ferent from talk in the ceremonial ground, before everyone's eyes—something for which big-men are known.

I will now consider how the account of the meeting was reinforced by its formality, and in particular, by the exclusion of women as participants. This will help to explain the particular value inhering in group discussion and the particular compulsion behind obligations men have to clansmen.

In a recent paper, J. T. Irvine (1979) points out that the analysis of formality is often marred by a conflation of its several meanings. Sometimes it refers to increased structuring of the linguistic or non-linguistic "code", sometimes to aspects of the social setting, or to a kind of analysis, or to some mixture of these. Irvine suggests that we analytically separate four aspects of formality which do not always occur together: (1) increased structuring of the codes that organise behaviour in a situation; (2) centralisation of attention at a gathering; (3) increased consistency of the codes used, which gives activity a sense of propriety; and, (4) a tendency to invoke public or social, rather than "personal" identities of the participants. I will consider these features of the Mendi meeting in order to explicate what "formality" is about in this case.

Discourse was "structured" or restricted more than usual in that the assembly spoke about a narrowly defined problem, expressed in terms of *sem onda* 'groups': Suolol, Surup. The topic of this discussion related to collective action on the level of *sem onda* (the *sai pombe*), rather than to action only appropriate to individuals, sets of exchange partners or households (like marriage). In informal contexts, discussion may range over many topics, and refer to anything from personal names and families to *sem onda*.

This explicit thematic emphasis on 'groups' was reinforced indirectly by means of references to eating together (an action which signifies good relations). For example, one minor big-man announced that he could have eaten the pandanus nuts he had harvested in his wife's house (the site of quiet, private discussion). He did not, he explained, because the pandanus is for all the people at the meeting. Other men referred to the pandanus to make a similar point; it was not meant merely for the Surup affines of one Suolol man to share, but for all Surup and Suolol men together.

Apart from these themes and the narrow focus of the discussion, speech at the meeting also differed from everyday talk in that there was more attention to turn taking, and more than the usual emphasis on hearing what certain respected men like Olonda had to say. In general, there was more reference to procedure than in ordinary contexts: to who had or had not been heard from, to what should come next, and so on.

Olonda was the only speaker whose performance was stylised, however. While most speakers either remained seated or stood in place, Olonda used the spatial organisation of the crowd, coming to the centre as he spoke, and sauntering to the far periphery as he finished. The speech of a number of men was "veiled", but this was not a striking feature of a meeting. Remarks were frequently direct and angry, though, admittedly, the situation might have been different had more Surup been present.

The most strikingly structured aspect of the meeting was not linguistic but spatial. The meeting took place in the main ceremonial ground, which is this dispersed community's social centre and the site of large-scale group events like pig kills and pearlshell displays. This fact was explicitly mentioned to set the meeting off from other discussions, even though people find themselves in the area during the course of any normal day and, from time to time, small-scale events may take place there. Adult men sat together in the central area between the pandanus nut oven and the line of pearlshells. Women and young people sat on the periphery. Speakers addressed and came entirely from the central male group which included both members of Suolol and members of the other tribes. While in informal discussions men and women may often sit separately, there is generally not quite so sharp a distinction between male and female groups. Rather, people may sit in groups of friends, and there are usually several separate clusters of men and women.

This organisation created a centre of attention at the meeting. The single line of pearlshells was not only a physical boundary, focusing attention on the men, but also a concrete demonstration of the common purpose of the men of Suolol. The shells were counted together, and individual contributions not identified as such. In fact, many members of the assembly could not accurately report how many shells were contributed by particular people, but only knew the aggregate figure announced by the man who had made the count. During the Suolol parade two months later, these shells were given *en bloc* by a Suolol big-man to a big-man in a group of parade guests, who would later redistribute them to his clansmen. The pandanus oven also focused attention on the men at the same time as it was referred to in speeches to underscore a similar point. Discussion began in earnest when the oven was closed up. When all appeared satisfied that the discussion had ended, the nuts were distributed. This activity directed attention temporarily, and references to the nuts further reinforced messages concerning group co-ordination and harmony.

Women, for the most part, concurred with this focusing by not forming a separate centre of their own at the meeting, but rather, sitting on the outskirts and listening to the talk. Attendance by women was much

lower than that of men. When I asked a few women why they had not been there, they answered with comments like "Why should I? That is men's business", and "I had garden work to do."

"Code consistency" has to do with what conveys a formal event's "seriousness". Few Mendi discussions emphasise "consistency"; most are punctuated with purposely inappropriate contributions such as sexual joking. In contrast, this meeting was quite proper and serious. Restrictions on who might speak and about what they might speak were matched by the location and the focusing features to give this effect. At the handful of such meetings I witnessed during my stay in Mendi, women did not make speeches. A "female" voice is inconsistent, inappropriate. Women do not form part of the primary audience; they are not even addressed.

But what aspect of "femaleness" is being ruled off stage? The social identity of women in Mendi is not narrowly defined in ordinary circumstances. Normally, they are quite vocal, although it is significant that there are no specifically female "councils" nor issues that require collective female decisions and action, unlike the situation described, for example, by Bloch (1971). Mendi women, compared with women in the highlands generally, are unusually autonomous participants in exchanges. As I have noted, they have their own exchange partners and not uncommonly conduct transactions in shells, pigs and other items independent of their husbands. In particular, some of the shells on display at the meeting had been contributed by women, and some of the talk concerned the allocation of those shells. Furthermore, the talk concerned allied groups, that is, the natal groups of many of the resident wives. From these facts, it would seem that women ought to have been involved directly in the proceedings.

Yet they were not. That women's "public" identities are antithetical to *sem onda*-oriented formal occasions is illustrated by the behaviour of one of the most remarkable women in the community. In her late 40s in 1978, Tenpuri had a roster of exchange partners and active debts and credits quantitatively equivalent to the two most important big-men in Senkere, and was, from the point of view of informal exchange, more active than her husband. However, if a pearlshell distribution in the ceremonial ground was in order, or if pigs had to be slaughtered and speeches made, her husband officiated (sometimes accompanied by her insistent *sorto voce* instructions and comments). In these formal contexts, her personal identity as a prominent member of the community was not relevant. Moreover, her public identity was characterised by restriction—by what she could not do, *despite* her desires and abilities. That *any* woman should give shells or make a speech at a tribal gather-

ing—unless explicitly as a "place holder" for a dead or absent male—is not proper in Mendi. Action by a woman, and female imagery in men's speeches, both may be interpreted, or intended deliberately, as an affront. For example, in boasting or challenging speeches during inter-group competitive displays (*tanol tukim pila*), men call their opponents "women" or "our wives" when they claim victory.

In contrast, the participation of men in formal, *sem onda* affairs is normal, appropriate and valued highly. Men, like women, participate in household production activities, and have obligations to their networks of exchange partners. But men, as members of *sem onda*, also have obligations to their "brothers" to contribute to the large group displays. Men may sometimes see transactions with their exchange partners as means to the end of formal group display, and sometimes value the latter over the former. For women, in contrast, network transactions and obligations are ends in themselves because, regardless of how they value group activity relative to network activity, their active participation is confined to their networks.

In Mendi, the male/female distinction can come at times to stand for this group/network distinction and, furthermore, to give group action a positive cultural value. It follows from this, then, that in formal contexts, *not only* are women ruled off stage, but so *also* are the "personal" identities of men. Men who bring up inappropriately personal issues at a meeting concerning tribal affairs are overruled or ignored. At the meeting in question, this was alluded to, for example, in the criticisms made by participants from outside groups concerning why only the Surup affines of one Suolol man had come. The significance of Olonda's speeches has to be seen in this light as well. Olonda's contribution was appreciated and consented to because he had skilfully framed his arguments in appropriate group terms.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EXCLUSION

As Irvine and others have noted, formal political meetings do not reveal much about decision-making processes in either egalitarian or hierarchic systems. As she wrote (1979: 782), formality "has to do with what can be focused on publicly", and so connote the publicly recognised and legitimate social order. In her view, the "organization of these formal meetings reflects political ideology", and not processes by which decisions are made.

Individuals make decisions about action outside formal contexts in Mendi too. These decisions reflect compromises between the obligations and needs individuals have with respect to their exchange partners on the one hand, and their clansmen on the other. But while individuals are free

to make personal decisions about how to balance these obligations, formality is constraining in two ways in Mendi, and perhaps generally in the highlands. First, as Strathern puts it (1979a: 103), assertions about individual autonomy which highlanders make must be understood in their socio-cultural context of morality, judgment and ambition where they "inevitably involve a group context and an evaluation of individual achievement in that context." Moreover, he notes (1979a: 104) that actions during public ceremonial exchanges—a central context for speechmaking in Mt Hagen—"mean something simultaneously and inextricably at both the group and the individual levels." Wherever this duality exists, while a person is free to make personal decisions about action on his own, he will not be in control of this second, group-level, sense in which his actions will also be understood unless he takes part in the process of shaping those understandings in formal meetings. There is some compulsion to participate. Not participating reduces the sphere of control a man exercises to his personal relations, and makes him more like a woman who also exercises control only over personal network relations. But not participating constitutes a choice for a man, because all men have access to the forum where group policy is discussed. Here, all men are on an equal footing, and are different from women.

This leads to the second way in which formality in Mendi is constraining. While there was no individual authority, *all* of the men at the meeting were acting quite explicitly to control who could and could not speak. That no woman tried to speak at this particular meeting reflects their passive acquiescence to the values expressed in the form of the event. This form both demonstrated and validated the (uneasy) dominance of the group meanings of action over those of the network in Mendi, a relationship most potently reinforced by gender symbolism. *In this context of formality*, symbolism devalues both "femaleness" and the individual network transactions of both women and men as it gives special weight to the male, corporate group significance that that action can also bear. There is a compelling redundancy at formal events; talk concerning *sem onda* is reinforced by formality, by those features which focus attention on men, who actively constitute the groups which their "maleness" represents. The particular matters at hand are, in this way, suffused with a familiar and approving glow. Reminiscent of the manner in which authority cannot be challenged in Merina society, this effect cannot be challenged because it is never explicitly articulated. It is, in sum, "veiled" and implicit. What is left unsaid at the meeting is closely related to who could not speak.

It is ironic, then, that the most explicit and frequently reported (but least convincing) expressions of "male superiority" in the highlands

come in those personal contexts where it does not, in fact, hold (where it is not reinforced formally), in Mendi: for example, in talk between husbands and wives. Reactions of Mendi women to these expressions vary greatly, from laughter and scorn to anger and even to divorce. But their reactions do not seriously challenge the cultural source from which expressions of male superiority issue, since they occur in the very same personal contexts in which those expressions are meaningless and inappropriate to begin with. Women in Mendi have no "legitimate" collective forum from which to challenge the existing male social structural ideology, and for the most part, do not express a need for one. Their frustrations over the way in which group events affect their lives are also acted upon in personal setting.⁴

The literature of highlands exchange and politics has been dominated by descriptions of formal groups. This emphasis may accurately reflect explicit political ideology, but may not sum up the entire system of political meanings. If politics refers not only to the maintenance of a particular social order but also to the continuous process by which that order gets defined by both the people who control explicit ideology and people not in control of it (Thompson 1975), then the extent to which the dominant ideology is only passively acquiesced in by women, and not actively shared and supported by them, is significant. In Mendi, women can perhaps more easily leave oratory and group ceremonies to men because their own sphere of activity is positively valued, informally. As I have noted, Mendi women are actively involved in exchanges and discussions which take place in informal, private settings; where networks are positively valued, and where the symbols of gender hierarchy are not relevant. In these informal settings, men and women, especially as brothers and sisters, have many interests in common. In Mendi—although perhaps not so clearly elsewhere in the highlands—these interests find formal, ritualised expression in the marriage ceremony, in which Mendi brides distribute their own marriage payment. The more balanced cultural emphasis on networks and groups in Mendi may partially explain the greater autonomy of Mendi women as compared with Hagen women, and may account for both the greater emphasis on network exchanges relating to marriage and death and the lower frequency of group-level exchanges in Mendi, also as compared with Hagen.

This particular Mendi situation may also be responsible for a less antagonistic relationship between the sexes there than elsewhere in the highlands. However, even those acts of personal rebellion, in which women actively oppose men's definitions of the social order (such as M. Strathern describes, 1972), raise questions about the extent to which male ideology can be understood fully without appreciating how this ideology

is an argument *against* women's ideas, rather than simply a positive, independent statement.

However, the importance of formal, explicit political ideology cannot simply be discounted just because informal powers and alternative meanings exist. Consideration of the power of our own explicit ideology of gender hierarchy in muffling certain voices and devaluing certain acts should convince us of this. The point is that we cannot merely note that women are restricted in this context and not in that one, as Irvine argues (1979: 784) when she writes "any restrictions on participation in formal meetings do not necessarily apply to other contexts, which may be the ones where political decision making actually occurs and where political freedom is, therefore, more at issue." These contexts are all part of a single social experience, and have to be examined in relation to one another. More attention needs to be paid to the tension between formal and informal situations—both to the ways in which certain talk becomes inaudible politically and to the processes whereby the formal ideology is eroded and questioned by the existence of alternative perspectives alongside it.

And, if we agree that formal meetings, in particular, have to do with what is recognised and considered legitimate, connoting a social order as Irvine also argued, then the restrictions on participation also inherent in formal contexts may create an asymmetry that is culturally loaded and constitutive of political hierarchy. Such formal contexts and facts about who is included in, or excluded from, them are central to both the understanding and the transformation of political systems.

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NOTES

1. Some background on the Mendi area may be necessary. Mendi fits the central highlands pattern of closely managed pig herds and intensively cultivated sweet potato gardens. Mendi tribes (or "clan clusters" in the terminology of the previous ethnographer, Ryan 1959) may have up to 1500 members, and are "corporate" political units which come together to fight against major enemies, to make major war compensation payments to

allies, and to hold pig festivals. Clans (subdivisions of the tribe, in which membership is generally with that of one's father and of which idioms of unity are "agnatic") are the basic exogamous units, and within each fighting is rare. While the marriage rule disperses ties, one marries one's allies in Mendi. These allies are members of neighbouring clans and tribes with whom there is also a history of sporadic (not systematic) fighting.

Women usually move, on marriage, to the place of their husband. Residence in Mendi is dispersed within named localities, but conceptually centred around ceremonial grounds belonging to the resident clans. The Senkere community referred to in this paper had a population of approximately 350 and was composed of several subclans of two Suolol clans living in three named localities, each with a ceremonial ground. The ground at Senkere was the largest since it had been augmented, 10 years before, when it was decided that it would be the site for the next pig kill. Several other subclans of the Suolol tribe lived in another cluster of localities at Kuma, five hours' walk over a forested ridge in the north-eastern part of the group territory. Still other Suolol subclans lived outside the tribal territory, in Lower Mendi and in other districts of the southern highlands like Ialibu.

2. However, I do not think that what I am calling "informal" experience can be equated with Bloch's "infrastructure" or "practical" activity, at least as those terms are commonly understood. Both "formal" and "informal" relations are culturally constructed, and both have practical effects in the world.

3. Unfortunately, I did not tape the meeting. My account is based on my own and my husband's written notes, taken during the meeting, and on commentaries afterwards by a number of Suolol and non-Suolol participants, including Pua and Olonda.

4. This may be changing already in some parts of the highlands, perhaps especially in the context of missionisation, and economic "development" (see A. Strathern 1979b).

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SHORTER COMMUNICATIONS

ETAK AND THE GHOST ISLANDS OF THE CAROLINES

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Within the orally transmitted systems of navigational knowledge recorded from Puluwat by Riesenber (1972), there are many phenomena listed that are hard to reconcile with the techniques used in oceanic sailing and orientation. These phenomena include the two "ghost" or "vanishing" islands of Kaafiror and Fanuanakuwel, as well as varied items of "sea-life"—a category that includes such diverse items as two-headed whales, groups of *umwole* fish, and frigate birds. The problem under consideration in this paper is: what are the ghost islands and sea-life doing in the oral systems of navigational knowledge? The ghost islands may operate as a communication device, connecting the composite "map" of the world conveyed in the systems of knowledge to the world as it is sailed. The sea-life in one of the systems of knowledge will be shown to have a role in developing the navigational construct of *etak* used during all voyages.

Carolinian navigation has been systematically studied since the major German expedition of 1908-1910, in which the three islands of Puluwat, Satawal, and Woleai were found to have flourishing schools of navigation. As a consequence of this expedition, Sarfert (1911) and Damm and Sarfert (1935) gave comprehensive accounts of the principles of *etak* navigation on Puluwat, the sidereal or star compass, and the *Notinsel* or 'emergency islands' used in *etak* navigation. They suggested that *etak* was a method of measuring the relative distance between islands, and that it used a third island—the *Notinsel*—moving backwards under the horizon stars used in the sidereal compass.

The techniques of actually sailing the big ocean-going canoes (*waa*) were recorded by Thomas Gladwin (1970) and by David Lewis (1972), and it is from these two accounts that we have learned of the perceptual acuity of the Puluwatan *palu* 'navigators'. It appears that training a *palu* begins more or less informally when he first sails on the *waa* of his relatives, goes through formal initiation, and culminates some 10 to 20 years later when he has mastered the techniques of sailing, orientation, weather prediction, and the associated taboos and chants. A large part of the *palu*'s training involves the homing, clarification, and shaping of perceptual techniques. Using no external system of measurement, apart from the magnetic compass (a recent introduction) to maintain direction